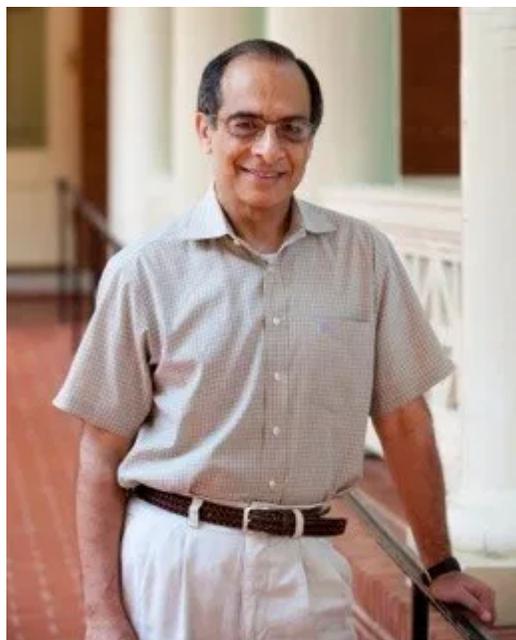


INTERVIEWS

What a Difference a Word Makes: A Conversation with Pakistani Poet and Translator, Waqas Khwaja

| by Kimberly Nagy

Pakistan-born poet, translator and professor, Waqas Khwaja.



Waqas Khwaja

Waqas Khwaja and I met at The Asia Society during the PEN World Voices Festival after he had finished leading a panel featuring _____, a far-reaching collaboration and translation project including Pakistan's seven languages (Baluchi, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Pashto, Seraiki, and Sindhi), forty-four poets and fifteen translators, for which Khwaja also served as translation editor.

With a cerebral and gracious air, Khwaja had explained the context of each poem to a packed room while listeners of all backgrounds, including myself, bent their heads in rapt attention. I wanted to find out more about the man who managed such a vast project and fascinating collection of poetry with seeming ease, the translation of which seemed to necessitate an important blend of linguistic awareness and cultural delicacy.

Many months later, I asked Khwaja (who, in a separate interview for the Asia Society, pointed out that translators often serve as ambassadors) about the difficulties of this translation process, and he explained, "Of course, in my introduction, I do admit that it is impossible to have a perfect translation. But I really feel that it is nevertheless a responsibility, an ethical issue...to do justice to each person...to each poem."

Justice is a word that informs Khwaja's life and background in a number of ways, from his twelve-year career as a lawyer in Pakistan to scholarly work that untangles the cultural and linguistic legacy of imperialism, and extending to translation work that aims for extreme fidelity in conveying poetic voices from every corner of Pakistan.

Before Khwaja completed his Ph.D. in English Literature from Emory University he practiced law in Lahore, Pakistan, and wrote about politics in a regular column, among many other essays, articles and publications. About his acute awareness of the legal system and politics in Pakistan on top of a wide-ranging literary career, Khwaja shrugs off his accomplishments, "These interests are very much part of what makes my particular psyche or way of thinking. They are a part of who I am."



From right to left: Waqas Khwaja, poet Niyi Osundare (Nigeria), fiction writer Celso Roman Campos (Columbia), and fiction writer/playwright Felipe Valenzuela (Guatemala)

Khwaja has published three collections of original poetry. The latest work, (2007), focused on the displacements and violence following the Partition of India in 1947. He's also edited three anthologies of Pakistani literature, (1986), (1988), and (1992), which contain his translations of prose and poetry from Urdu and Punjabi. Khwaja's original creative work as well as his translations of poetry have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, among them , , , and

Khwaja first traveled to the United States on a literary scholarship through Emory University in 1979, where—at the encouragement of the faculty who liked his work—he pursued his Ph.D. in Victorian fiction. But when he reached the final stage of completing his dissertation, he found that he needed to stop.



Waqas Khwaja with poet Alexander Tkachenko (Russia)

"I felt that I knew nothing about the literature of Pakistan," remembers Khwaja. "Coming to this stage of my studies in British and American literature made me aware of what I might have been missing out on in my own country. I wanted to explore it before I finished writing my dissertation."

In 1982, Khwaja resumed his legal practice in Pakistan, and pursued literature on the side. Teaming up with a couple of other writers, he began a local writer's group two years later, which included emerging and established writers from different backgrounds (Punjabi, Urdu, Pashto, English and American). "We met fortnightly in a forum that focused on engaging deeply with each author's work. It really caught on and grew quickly. We became known outside the country." The group began to produce an informal kind of anthology of work read at its meetings, which grew into a formal magazine called



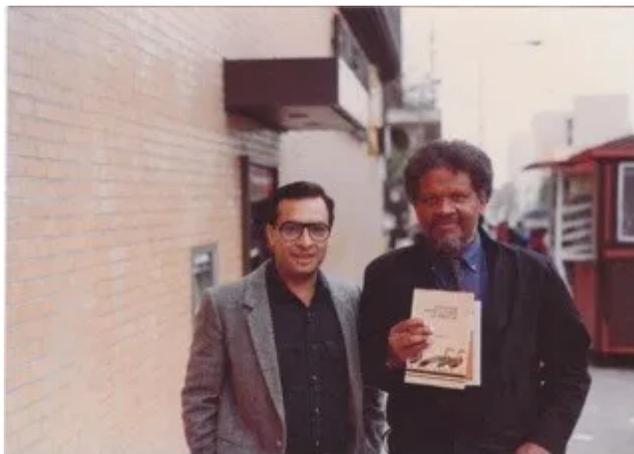
Front row: Shin Tong-Choon (Korean poet), creative non-fiction writer Dr. Anil Awachat (India), Waqas Khwaja, fiction writer Celso Roman Campos (Columbia), journalist Suchart Sawadsri (Thailand)

Back row, right to left: fiction writer Jaroslav Veis (Czechoslovakia), novelist Marie Nimier, and novelist and fiction writer Mohammad Magani (Algeria)

Following publication of his first major work in the field of translation, Khwaja was invited to participate in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1988, where he was the first author from Pakistan. "It was a wonderful opportunity to meet writers from all over the world. It was also just the impetus I needed because it reminded me of my love for literature."

After a 12-year hiatus, Khwaja returned to complete his Ph.D. at Emory University. But in 1993, a month after he took his Preliminary Exams, his mother died in a car accident on a pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. Khwaja immediately flew to Saudi Arabia for the burial of his mother and then to Pakistan to be with his father as he recovered from injuries suffered in the accident.

It wasn't until 1994 that Khwaja returned and finished his dissertation in May of 1995. That very day, he received a job offer from Agnes Scott College in Georgia, where he is a Professor of Literature.



Waqas Khwaja with Ishmael Reed, American poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist

WRR: Before getting your Ph.D. in literature, you trained as a lawyer. How did you envision your career as a child?

Khwaja: I wish I had known from the very beginning that I wanted to be a writer. I had no sense of this, except I remember the thrill of reading poetry at school. I went to St. Anthony's High School, where Irish brothers and very dedicated local Christian teachers taught us, and they were very good. I remember reading this poem by Wordsworth, "Daffodils." When the teacher asked everyone in the room to write a poem, I modeled mine on that poem.

Of course, my poem was not about the daffodils; it was about a boating experience on a lake. And I remember only the last two lines I wrote. I read the poem out loud to my father. The last two lines were: "Suddenly the boat turned into the water/And out, in its place, came an otter." And my father said, "Well, this doesn't sound very good. How 'bout a smiling otter?"

And, you know, that one word sparked my interest in what language could do. Otherwise, a very ordinary couple of lines. Something happened with the suggestion of a single word that transformed the line into poetry. I could not look at poetry with the same eyes anymore. There was something that made words magical.

WRR: The right word.

Khwaja: Perhaps it was the right choice of words or the right adjective. It was a peculiar use of an image. But this "smiling otter" seemed to spark that line for me. I don't remember writing much poetry after that while I was in school until my senior year. Then, I joined Government College, Lahore. During the first two years, I wrote a lot of poetry and educated myself about rhyme and meter. I was writing in rhyme and meter a lot, or in blank verse. I had no idea of free verse. A little booklet of mine was published in 1970 when I was barely eighteen.

WRR: What was it called?

Khwaja: A rather juvenile, sentimental, book called "Scattered Flowers," and the poems were of course heavily influenced by all the less complimentary features of British romantic poetry, diffuse, gothic imagery, rocking, seesaw rhythms, striking self-dramatization. A few years later, early one winter morning when no one in the house was awake yet, I would take up on my motorbike the last surviving bundle of unsold books that the publisher had surrendered to me and dump them in the canal that ran through the suburbs of the city. At the time it was published, however, I thought I was doing something very different and unique when not anyone I knew was writing poetry. I quickly discovered many people that were, and they welcomed me into their literary circles.

And this is how I met Taufiq Rafat, who was widely acknowledged as the leading English-language poet in the country, and who is, in many ways, the person who started the whole conversation about this idea of what we call "Pakistani Literature." He was a very unassuming person, but a remarkable poet. It was he who introduced the concept of the "Pakistani idiom" to the satellite of aspiring poets around him and promoted the view that English-language poetry written in Pakistan should engage with local Pakistani experiences, not the experiences that someone would have vicariously in let's say the Lake District, or some such place or era in England.

WRR: How else did Rafat influence you?

Khwaja: In 1977, late in his life, he published a collection of poems called "Arrival of the Monsoons." I would rate it as one of the biggest literary events in the history of English-language publication in Pakistan. There are people today who have made somewhat of a name for themselves outside the country as poets, people like Moneza Alvi and Alamgir Hashmi. But Rafat started it all. He's still the standard in many ways of what can be and what needed to be done in the area of English-language poetry in Pakistan to open up the way for succeeding generations of aspiring poets. Daud Kamal, a professor of English at Peshawar U, and Zulfikar Ghose, the University of Texas creative writing professor, novelist, and poet, are perhaps the two exceptions among poets who started writing before 1970 who do not show Taufiq's influence in their work but developed their style and sensibility on their own.

WRR: A kind of aesthetic standard.

Khwaja: Yes. But also in terms of the varieties of local themes and subjects he treats in his poetry. It is with Taufiq that we in Pakistan broke away from the 19th century romantic tradition and embraced the modern and contemporary sensibility. It is with Taufiq that the idiom of poetry in Pakistan changed from the quaint and ornate to the plain, precise, richly evocative language of colloquial speech. So I came into contact with Taufiq and his circle of poets, and I learned a lot. But I was never a part of that group. I had an array of interests, my own life, playing cricket (I was very passionate about that sport), reading history and philosophy under the guidance of a scholarly uncle (Lt. Col. K. A. Rashid), writing articles, stories, and poems for literary editions of newspapers, and of course, studying literature, both as a subject in college and on my own. But Taufiq Rafat also happened to be a neighbor at that time. We had one-on-one conversations, which were far more to my liking than the group meetings. That's when I really felt that I wanted to be a writer, but I still didn't know what kind of a writer. I did express myself in poetry, but I was also writing articles and short stories.

WRR: Were you reporting at the same time you were practicing law?

Khwaja: When I was practicing law, and that was several years later, I was writing Op-Ed pieces, not reporting, for the regular papers. I wrote regularly on political, social, or cultural issues in my weekly column "My Word." And every couple of weeks or so, I

would write a book review, a critical assessment of a writer, or an article on local history, a festival, or a literary event for the Sunday literary edition of a national paper or for a monthly magazine. For about a year, I was also associated with the [redacted] as their economic analyst and reporter writing investigative reports and articles on economic and trade issues; you know, imports and their impact on local manufacturing, problems of management and production in local industries, export dividends of let's say fruits and vegetables and how they could be expanded, inquiry into the failure of the textile industry units, protocols, practices, and projections of the Management Association of Pakistan, assessment and evaluation of the yearly budget, and so on. And all this was part-time work that I somehow managed despite running my law office and pursuing my professional engagements as a lawyer.

WRR: You also studied pre-engineering, and so studied mathematics. Are literature and mathematics two very different disciplines in your mind?

Khwaja: No, they are related. In fact, when I started studying English prosody, I realized how important the syllabic count was in conjunction with the weight and value of words. Meter is very much dependent on that. No verse is free. Even so-called 'free verse' has its own imperative constraints and contours.

I actually did not do very well in math in my high school. Frankly, I could not understand my teacher, Mr. Price, who spoke with a lisp and in such a low voice as if only to himself, very well. So when I started college, I resolved to do better, and studied math on my own. My parents expected me to go into engineering. I had found Calculus and Trigonometry very difficult in high school, but studying them on my own night after night, I began to make sense of them. I felt enormously satisfied and relieved when I got top grades in math for my F.Sc. I put myself through the discipline of learning on my own and it has served me in incalculable ways throughout life. In some reflexive and tacit way differential calculus, trigonometry, algebra, and geometry have all helped me to gain an implicit understanding of the structure and dynamics of writing generally and poetry in particular.

WRR: How so?

Khwaja: Whether formal or free, every poem has its own rhythmic discipline, lyric patterning, verbal texture, and acoustic design. These may be consciously achieved, but the best results would occur, I believe, only when they are unconsciously produced. The study of math has somehow helped me to internalize this sense of implicit design. Then, it has allowed me to focus on exactitude... Words have to be precise, neither more nor less in a poem.

A poet must know the exact meaning and connotations of the words used and so on. Words are slippery things. You can't just use any word that comes to mind. You have to think about how a word sounds given the entire passage, or whether it fits a certain kind of rhythmic pattern that is not overt, but implicit. Whatever I've been able to

achieve craft-wise in my poetry comes from my training in mathematics. I would recommend that everyone study mathematics seriously at some point in their lives. It's a thrilling subject in itself, but also integral not only to poetry, but to art, music, and the life of the imagination itself. Then, logic and reasoning – because they persuade you to be careful, precise, accurate, and so realize an imaginative experience or world equally seductive and credible in these qualities – are as essential to the creative process as that which is intuitive, revelatory, and symbolic. The slightest aberration, a misplaced or absent comma, punctuation where none is needed, one word that apparently means the same as another but has a misaligned connotation, can ruin the entire effect.

WRR: Which really speaks to the potential problems with translation. In the first line of your introduction in _____ you write, "we inhabit a world of translations." You bring up the fact that we translate not only with language, but all of our experiences in any given day. I'd love to know your boiled down philosophy on translation.

Khwaja: I do see translation as a struggle to get as exact and precise as one can. Translation, actually, is a double burden. Everything that we do, in many ways, is a translation, an idea in our head that we translate into words or action. We just don't realize that we are actually translating, which is instinctive.

If you take somebody else's words and then try to translate them, there is now a double process at work. It is somebody else's words and they are going to be filtered through your mind and then you are going to express them in another language. In my introduction, I do admit that it is an impossible task.

But, at the same time, there is a responsibility that comes with it. If I am going to translate somebody else's words, then I have to be faithful to the mind, to the perspective, and the feelings and emotions of that person. If I say, "Oh, it doesn't really matter. I think this particular phrase fits so comfortably or nicely here, why don't I use this to make the poem seem really interesting?" Well, I can't do that.

I really feel that this process is a responsibility. It is an ethical issue that when I am translating somebody else's work, I must do justice to that person...justice to the work. That means looking and looking and looking for the right word and rhythm, the right kinds of sounds and so on, not to – in any way – distort the imagery that the other person is using. I have seen poets who follow the path of translating the imagery into it's meaning, for explanation, when they translate. That may be all very good for them, but I think it's doing an injustice to both the language of the translation and the [original] conception of the person who [first] imagined certain kinds of images and certain kinds of sounds and so on.

WRR: You instructed translators not to explain too much, because most poets want their images to speak for themselves and for the reader to come into their world.

Sometimes an explanation can take them out of that important world.

Khwaja: Yes, that is what I suggested. The idea was that if the image wasn't doing its work, then the poem was probably not succeeding. The image may be from a different culture or may have different connotations or meanings there, but if I am trying (as a person reading it in another language) to make sense of an image, which I find difficult to understand, I will be forced to use my imaginative powers, my reading powers to do that. I think that this is why a poem is successful in the first place. It is not entirely the author who is creating that magic for you. It is the receiver of that art who participates in the act of creation, in the act of imagination. So part of this was the recognition of the reader's autonomy too. The reader needs to engage with this on his or her own terms and not expect everything to be given and simplified for them. Some readers could be misreading, but don't we misread poems in English as well or in any other languages that we read? Misreading is as much a part of reading poetry or the written word, as what we call accepted or "correct" interpretation. No interpretation is final or authoritative or definitive.

WRR: When you came on board as translation editor, the poetry had already been chosen for the anthology. You were brought on to arrange the translations. I am just wondering how one walks into an anthology of this scope. What was your first thought on how you would manage it all?

Khwaja: I thought it was a formidable task, because of the multiple languages that were concerned; not only that, but because the selections were made by somebody else. I acknowledge in my introduction that, in the final analysis, I am glad that I did not make the selections. My selections would have been colored by what I would have thought could have most easily been translated into English and I would have fallen into the same pitfalls I'm advising other people not to fall in.

When I was first approached by Eastern Washington University Press, the Director, Ivar Nelson, asked if I was interested in doing this, and mentioned that several of the people he had interviewed had mentioned my name and said, "if this guy is willing to work on it, then we are ready to take it on." This was quite some news to me. I didn't know that there were people generally who thought that I had the skills to see such a project through.

So I felt fortified right there, because there were people who believed I could do it. I said, "Send me the manuscript. Send me the names of the poets and the poems." Then, to my dismay, I discovered that several prominent poets were missing from the selection. I wrote a long email to Ivar detailing the problems with the selections along with a list of poets that I felt should have been included in this anthology, and I believe he forwarded that to the NEA and to Mr. Iftikhar Arif, who had compiled the selections in the first place and was, at that time, the Chairperson of the Pakistan Academy of

Letters. And I must say that out of the twenty-something names that I had suggested, Mr. Arif agreed to include only four in the original roster of poets he had selected.

WRR: So only four of the twenty-something names?

Khwaja: Yes. And when I looked at the manuscript at that point, I saw that there was no standard print form for the texts. For Pashto and Baluchi the printed script was quite different from the usual Persian lettering used for the other languages of Pakistan. Because both Pashto and Baluchi use a form of Arabic script, however, I found that I could recognize some common words and expressions, but no more than perhaps ten percent in either language. The rest was totally impenetrable to me. So how would I handle this? This was a huge issue. How would I find the right translators for these languages?

It was a daunting task to find good, accurate translators for any of the represented languages anyway. But for regional languages like Pashto, Baluchi, and Sindhi it was all the more difficult. The available pool of translators for other languages, though not large, is adequate at least because there are speakers and writers of those languages who are comfortable in one and sometimes two other languages, Urdu and English – which I am most familiar with – other than their own. But it was very difficult to find people who could do justice to Pashto and Baluchi, and I ended up using several translators for each of the poems in those languages to get as close to the original meaning and experience as was possible. The translators I used were given instructions to provide different kinds of translations: a literal prose version that accurately provided the basic meaning and maintained the lineation of the original poem, a poetic version, however stilted, that gave a sense of its rhythmic structure, again remaining faithful to the lineation, and one that specifically provided an explanation of the imagery and allusions in the poem. In a couple of instances I even had Urdu translations done where the textual meaning was unclear.

Once past this stage, I put together parts from two or three different translations that I got from several people and cobbled what to me appeared to be a likely version of the original poem out of these. The translators had neither met nor seen each other's translation, but I shared the final version individually with all parties involved and got their approval before finalizing it and crediting it as a joint effort by various translators. I would be on the phone with the translators for several hours at a time, discussing differences in translation, the precise meaning or connotation of a word or image, to ensure that the final version was accurate and that they approved of it, before I felt that we had done the job. These translations were very difficult to handle and I remained in great trepidation about them for weeks on end.

WRR: So this translation...was there also someone who published regional translations? In other words, from Pashto to Urdu?

Khwaja: The project was submitted to the NEA by the Pakistan Academy of Letters, which is an organization similar to the National Endowment of the Arts, government funded and government controlled, whereas the NEA is not quite that way. The Pakistani Academy of Letters publishes a number of journals every year and several issues of those journals in which they print in separate issues both English and Urdu translations from the regional languages. The translations are often woefully inadequate, carelessly edited, or badly written. I am sorry to say that often the translators don't know the language in which they are translating.

WRR: Right.

Khwaja: Whether the translations are done in English or Urdu, there is not enough skill and experience, and little expert oversight to ensure that they read as finished poems in the language of translation. Thus, when the Pakistan Academy of Letters staff suggested some translators, I wondered, given the background, could I use them for this anthology? I was lucky to find a person in Karachi who had a reasonable command of basic English, a good grasp of Urdu, and a decent familiarity with Baluchi and Sindhi. I actually asked him to provide absolutely literal translations in Urdu and English of texts I referred to him, then I moved on to the next stage where I consulted other identified readers who knew the poem or poems to ensure that the translations were accurate before I proceeded to give them poetic form. In the process, I began to acquire some facility in reading Pashto texts, but certainly not in a way to claim any kind of competence in comprehending them. But there would be words or images, or a sequence that I could clearly pick and find that this was not represented in the translation. Invariably, discussions with the translators would prove fruitful in such instances.

I would call them up and say, "Look. You know it says this in the original, but nothing of the kind appears in your translation." They would, in turn, try to explain more nearly what it meant or acknowledge that they had overlooked it. We would go over the text in a very detailed, nitty-gritty way.

WRR: So you were behind the scenes, intimately with every single poem line by line.

Khwaja: Oh, absolutely. This is why I think Pennie Ojeida, the Director of International Activities, National Endowment of the Arts, greeted me at the end with the words, "We appreciate that you've gone over and beyond the call of duty." I did not do this because I specifically meant to go way beyond the call of duty; I did it simply because it was a thing worth doing. It's an old saying: if a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing well.

WRR: Agreed.

Khwaja: I really loved the work. I loved the fact that I had the opportunity to bring Pakistani literature before the American readership. If I was going to be superficial or do a bad job of it, what was the point of even starting out on the project?

WRR: I wondered if you could explain some of the difficulties of translation, for instance, syntax. I love the example you give in your introduction that sometimes a translation literally renders a line incomprehensible. For instance, when you said, “My enemy has sent me this message’ turns into ‘My enemy has me to this message sent have’.”

Khwaja: Yes. That is just one example. When you look at the languages represented in the anthology, these languages have a syntax that is very different and rules of grammar that are quite distinct from English. I've mentioned that in the introduction. It doesn't quite work in concord with the subject, object, predicate structure.

Well, the other part, one seen rather negatively in English speech and writing, is that a lot of these languages naturally seem to rely a lot on the “passive voice.” In English this may be seen as a sign of bad writing. You don't want to take away the voice completely, however, because that would misrepresent the temper and style natural to these languages. But if you over-use the passive voice, that would not go very well with a readership used to seeing that as a negative feature in writing.

It is necessary to keep in mind that the passive structure is actually very important to the poetic experience of the language cultures presented in this anthology. I have retained it, hopefully judiciously, throughout, even if it maybe leads to a slightly awkward reading experience in English. You could say, “Why isn't a particular situation or action expressed in the active voice?” But that's precisely the point—things are seen as happening to a person rather than a person having the volition to be an active agent, you know? And there are a variety of reasons for this perception, belief, cultural convention, if you will.

WRR: That's a very interesting point.

Khwaja: So that passive structure became an essential aspect to be kept in mind. Besides that, the line is the unit of sense in these poems, the more modernistic ones as well as the ones in the classical tradition of the ghazal or rhymed verse. In English, the meaning may be constructed over several lines that syntactically complete the sentence. But in Urdu, Punjabi, and other languages included in the anthology, the line is often an independent clause in itself, and it is the accretion of these independent clauses that provide the rhythm and the poetic experience. English poetry, on the other hand, may make more frequent use of run-on lines.

Generally speaking, that is not the way poetry in South Asia, in the languages that are represented in the anthology, is constructed. With that understanding comes the recognition and appreciation that the rhythm of the poems in these languages depends on lineal necessity, that it establishes itself from the way the lines are constructed as independent units of sense. So could that be reflected and retained in the English translations as well? Moreover, the rhythms and the metrics of source

language and target language are quite distinct from each other. How feasible would it be to attempt to bring the rhythm of the original poem into its translated version?

Then there is the question of postponement of meaning. How do we postpone the sense, or the predicate, as it is, of a sentence in these languages? Obviously, in poetic discourse, the order of words and point of disclosure of syntactic intent are important for the poetic experience. Is it possible to retain that when the source language and target language are so different in grammatical structure and sensibility? Should this feature be reflected or retained in some way?

There were issues of these kinds that I dealt with and to a large extent, tried to resolve by maintaining the structure of the original. You see, the grammar could not be maintained. The syntax could not be maintained. And yet, could I formulate it in such a way that what comes as a sudden surprise in the line—the sudden little point of luminosity in the line—would occur in the same way in English? Some of the translations have been successful, judging by the audience's reactions, because where the original poem and the translation were read one after the other, it seemed that the people responded to the translation almost in the same way as they did to the original.



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WRR: You write, “the arrogation of both the privilege and power to translate into English often works in one direction, to the detriment of the text translated.” I thought that this was an important point and I wondered if I could ask you to talk about that problem a little bit more and some more solutions to that problem.

Khwaja: What is behind all this is that we need to become more accommodating both as literary translators, disseminators of artwork or words, and as readers. If I'm moving halfway towards a reader by translating a poem in the language of the reader, I also expect that reader to move to that halfway point so that we have a middle ground where we can have a conversation.

If I transform the poem or the text in such a way that it doesn't have evidence of being translated from another language, then I am not doing a service to the original text and I am not doing a service to the readers. The readers actually find that their most easy and comfortable positions are being massaged for them and so they are fine with that. They will not make an effort, and why should they? I think we have to move out of that comfort zone and find a place where we can have a genuine dialogue, a genuine conversation. In terms of the translations in _____, it was important not to impose stereotypical views or expectations of a Western audience on the poetry.

For instance, a publisher's editor at Eastern Washington University Press objected that I was not uniformly using the word Allah whenever God was referenced in the poems. She wanted to make a clear distinction between God in the Western tradition and Allah as some kind of a deity the Muslims worshiped.

Her assumptions reflect the classic stereotyping that the popular imagination of an average American would be prey to. In her mind, in a predominantly Muslim country like Pakistan, there could be just one word, and one word alone, to signify the Divine being, and that was Allah. What she was of course unaware of was that there is a whole array of names by which God is referenced in the country, the usage in each case has political, social, and cultural implications. There is the Arabic, word "Rab" which is also widely used in Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi. Then there is the word, "Daata" which is used in many of the languages represented in the book. The word "Khuda," which is perhaps most frequently used to refer to God, is Persian in origin. And there are the words "Parwardigaar," "Rab-ul-Izzat," "Khudawand-Kareem," and so on. So Allah is only one word out of many for God that Pakistanis use, and each of these words or expressions, as I have suggested, emphasizes a different quality or aspect of, and so a different feeling about, the Divine being.

WRR: What you describe speaks to how complicated it can be to grasp the realities of another culture beyond our stereotypical assumptions.

Khwaja: Yes...This is the kind of world we are living in. When I say this is a one-way activity, it is a one-way activity in so many different ways. It suggests that the means of publication, the means of dissemination, and the means of interpretation are all largely under Western control. This is no longer the age where imperialism is practiced by setting up colonial governments in the countries that are now called "third-world" or former colonies. But another kind of imperialism remains in place, even though the States or the countries that established colonial empires have left those colonies. That is the kind of imperialism that is now being practiced long-distance—from the metropoli of London, Paris, Washington, DC, New York, you name it. It is still very much in place, though in a changed and mutated form.

WRR: I think that that type of cultural legacy of imperialism leaves assumptions in people's minds as you're suggesting.

Khwaja: One of my editors was very upset that I criticized Sir William Jones (an 18th century philologist) in my introduction for his implication in the imperial project. I am, frankly, a great admirer of Sir William Jones and his skill as a literary translator. He translated many texts from Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit and introduced these texts to the West. He wrote a wonderful essay "On the Poetry of the Eastern Nations," in which he argued that the poetry of Europe had come to a dead end and that it could learn much from the poets of the east, like Saadi, Hafiz, Jami, and others.

The essay was published in 1772 and along with another, "On the Arts Commonly Called Imitative" that he wrote in the same year, had considerable influence in helping to initiate the Romantic movement in England. This was a good 26 years prior to the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads, which is officially seen to mark the inauguration of British Romanticism. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge were influenced by Jones, as were Shelley, Byron, and Moore.

But as a scholar, I can't shut my eyes to the other side of Jones' work and its intent. He wrote hymns to Indian Gods and Goddesses in which he employs the device of an older man, an ancient Indian Brahmin, talking to a younger person about the passing away of the golden era but with the satisfaction, in a blatant reference to the British presence in India—that a "younger, more energetic, and just people" have arrived on Indian territory to not just restore it to its past glory but to take it to new heights of prosperity and achievement.

One of his biographers, Michael Franklin, reminds us of the "metropolitan destination" of these poems where they would not have been acceptable without this affirmation of British legitimacy and superiority in India. It's a very important phrase and I quote that in my introduction. The "metropolitan destination" of his work, not just the articles and the poems, but also the translations. And so, even in the translations, he fudges, modifies, and transforms what he considers to be too open, and what would be seen as obscene or vulgar in Europe or in England.

WRR: I see.

Khwaja: Now, Jones avowedly believed very strongly in liberty, freedom and self-determination for all people on this planet. But he writes in a letter to a friend that the Indians don't qualify for this. That they are by nature and habit used to despotism, and that it would be a cruel injustice to them if they were given the right of self-determination.

So I brought up these points in the introduction and while I acknowledged that he was a fine translator to the extent that he was faithful to the text, I recognized that even a person of this stature succumbed to the demands and constraints of the imperial

project. The publisher's editor wanted me to remove those remarks, and there was some unpleasantness as a result of it, but in the end the critique stayed in place.

WRR: You are also pointing out from the historical perspective, Jones's cultural influences as well...how he was influenced by a host of beliefs. I noticed that some of your research is on Sir William Jones.

Khwaja: I'm writing a monograph on him, because I am fascinated by his work. It is a work of significance that I think has not been properly foregrounded even in the west. The influence he had on the Romantic movement, and on the frenetic fad of the Oriental tale, needs to be acknowledged and properly traced and recorded. His willing participation in the imperial project in India, and the harm it caused, is also a subject that needs to be investigated and brought into prominence.

WRR: You wrote in your introduction about the idea of the "rasa" or flavor of poetry as well as overt fidelity to each word or phrase. I'm wondering what you think about that concept and how that played out in the translations.

Khwaja: Well, I do believe the rasa is at the heart of poetry, the essence that suffuses the whole, but it does not mean it should come at the expense of fidelity to the original text. Let's be faithful to the text and still maintain the rasa. It could be very well argued that it is the overt details that produce the rasa as much as they are suffused by it. And there are people who said, "You know, it really doesn't matter if you are exact or precise regarding the original text or not. Maintain the rasa. You can get the flavor. That's enough." And they've done translations that have been pretty popular. I am not going to pretend that they are not popular, that I myself have not enjoyed those poems. But, if you're talking about translations, then the other aspect is equally important. It has to be faithful to the original.

WRR: You are a poet as well as a translator. Describe how you approach writing a poem, say, versus writing an article or essay?

Khwaja: Writing is an act of total absorption, whether it is a poem one writes or a scholarly essay or a piece of fiction. But while I concentrate on developing an argument in writing an essay or an article, and need to do research and marshal facts and details that would support my point of view and develop arguments to engage with those that don't, the writing of a poem is more intuitive, more reliant on associational ideas and images. It may start from an image, or a single line that insistently repeats itself in my head and goes off in a direction all its own. In fact, that is the crucial difference, a poem leads me to feelings, insights, and perceptions, to destinations that are not preplanned but discovered in the act of following, traveling with the impulse of the poem, its words, its sounds, its images, its suggestions. That leads and shapes my mind as it goes. It is as if another energy force takes over from somewhere deep within or outside, I wish I knew where so it could be persuaded and coaxed into activity more often, more regularly. The article or scholarly essay is an act

of will, contoured and shaped as an argument that may persuade the intellect, the minds of others.

WRR: What's next for you?

Khwaja: I have explored continually changing oral renditions, folklore, of the past from the Middle East and South Asia, the significance or intangible value of fragmentary remnants, narratives, and artifacts from ages gone by, cultural and historical happenings that represent watershed moments for a people or a nation, the displacements and derangements attendant on migrations, forced or otherwise, personal emotions of love, of confusion, betrayal, and alienation.

A political and ethical engagement has driven, it appears to me, all that I have written. Now I have become interested in human psychology as it operates within multiple, often clashing, milieus, irrespective of politics or ethical considerations. To record revealing moments in the lives of ordinary people I have known that make them distinct and memorable individuals. In the dabs of color, that is, that make up the whole painting. My poetry has been too much about the passing away of things. Perhaps I could write about what subsists and remains. Perhaps, in writing about things that are evanescent, that pass away too quickly, I was also writing about what is valuable and dear in life, what needs to be held on to. I don't know. I shall find out as I go along. Stylistically too I am trying out some new strategies with inter-language, syntactic restructuring, breaking up of words, discovering sources of imagery in areas other than I have drawn upon so far.

As to scholarship, there are a couple of projects that I have before me. One that I am working on currently is a reevaluation of the work produced by British administrators and functionaries of the East India Company, William Jones included, in the domain of Oriental studies, in the period between 1750-1800, translations from Persian and Sanskrit texts, preparing a compendium of laws for Hindus and Muslims, writing grammars for learning Persian and other local languages, dissertations on the Hindu religion and prevalent customs, the whole enterprise of the Asiatic Society, its aims and objectives, and the scholarship done under its patronage. This was a key period in the history of the subcontinent where the political and military power in the region was appropriated by the British in a calculated and deliberate way. My study of the "scholarly" and creative work done by British administrators and military adventurers investigates its deep implications with the imperial project and the far-reaching consequences this has had in estranging succeeding generations of "educated" Indians from the living traditions and customs of their own country by alienating them from local speech communities and imposing on them narratives of their past in a foreign language privileged, endorsed, and disseminated by the imperial regime.

WRR: What's the accomplishment you are most pleased with in your literary career?

Khwaja: The three books of poetry I have published so far are all that I have to show for what may be termed my literary accomplishment.

WRR: You teach 19th century British literature, Romantic prose and poetry, Postcolonial literature, and poetry writing, and I'll bet you serve as a mentor for many lucky students. How do you think they would describe your teaching approach?

Khwaja: I have thought a lot about the subject over the years, and this is all that I have been able to come up with: Teaching, in a paradoxical way, is a self-defeating exercise—it serves only to enlarge an awareness of one's ignorance. Not only does it rely heavily on learning from those one presumes to teach, it's objective, to my mind, is to eliminate in the long run the need for a teacher. One is thus obliged to learn particularly when one professes to teach, and this "learning" only emphasizes a sense of one's inadequacy before the vast domains of knowledge.

WRR: And how does one best teach literature (and poetry writing) in the age of texting?

Khwaja: People who care will sing and write poetry, plays, stories. They will read as well, for the pleasures of reading, once you have known them, cannot be replaced or duplicated by other options that are available given the technology we have. But this may be my myopia only. Consider, though, print culture has not canceled out or eliminated the oral. Texting may produce new kinds of writing, new technologies may offer new ways of talking about ourselves and the world we live in, new kinds of "literature," but creativity and imagination, which make the world so interesting, so thrilling, so fulfilling, so inclusive and accommodating, I may add, are not going anywhere if we are to survive in the ecosystem that is our planet and the many universes that we sense, we know, are around us, within which we are but a speck of dust and no more.

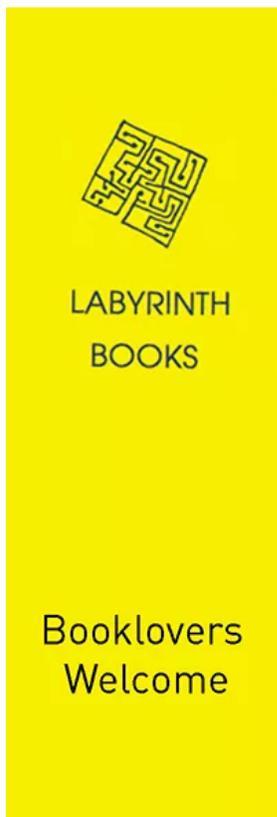
It is so miraculous, when we think about it, isn't it? This speck of dust with creative aspirations, aspirations that keep us sane, that keep us connected to our fellow beings, to the worlds we inhabit. So, "teaching" literature depends on being alert to and aware of the creativity and newness that "texting" brings into the classroom.

WRR: What do you see as your greatest challenge in teaching and poetry writing?

Khwaja: The challenge of encouraging people to loosen up, to be themselves, to reconnect with themselves, to not be constrained about pleasing this censor or that, this professor or that, this critic or that, to not be hampered by rules that others may have found convenient, to not be afraid to fall flat on their face, to stop forcing their will on the poem they are writing.

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KIMBERLY NAGY

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In 2006, Kimberly Nagy founded *Ujib Pj cpPctgu* with [Joy E. Stocke](#); and in 2009, they founded Wild River Consulting & Publishing, LLC. With more than twenty years in the field of publishing, Nagy specializes in market outreach and digital media strategies as well as crafting timeless articles and interviews. She edits many of the writers who appear in the pages of Wild River Review, as well as clients from around the world.

Kimberly Nagy is a poet, professional writer, and dedicated reader who has interviewed a number of leading thinkers, including Academy-Award winning filmmaker, [Pamela Tanner Boll](#), MacArthur Genius Award-winning [Edwidge Danticat](#), historian [James McPherson](#), playwright Emily Mann, biologist and novelist, [Sunetra Gupta](#) and philosopher [Alain de Botton](#).

Nagy is an author, editor and professional storyteller. She received her BA in history at Rider University where she was influenced by professors who stressed works of literature alongside dates and historical facts—as well as the importance of including the perspectives of women and minorities in the historical record. During a period in which she fell in love with writing and research, Nagy wrote an award-winning paper about the suppression of free speech during World War I, and which featured early 20th century feminist and civil rights leader, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

Nagy continued her graduate studies at University of Connecticut, Storrs, where she studied with Dr. Karen Kupperman, an expert in early contact between Native Americans and the first European settlers. Nagy wrote her Masters thesis, focusing on the work of the first woman to be accepted into the Connecticut Historical Society as well as literary descriptions of Native Americans in Connecticut during the 19th century. Nagy has extensive background and interest in anthropological, oral history and cultural research.

After graduate school, Nagy applied her academic expertise to a career in publishing, in which she worked for two of the world's foremost publishers—[Princeton University Press](#) and [W.W. Norton](#)—as well as at Thomson, [Gargrgrnl _j Gt cqmPK_e_xg c](#), [Routledge UK](#), and [Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic](#).

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