

**‘Ijc Anonkoh efac fyfno ikrfb’:
Language, Translation, and Identity in Kamila Shamsie’s
*Broken Verses***

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The work of the Anglophone Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie (b. 1973) is characterized by a sensitivity to language, as is seen in her novels’ frequent use of puns, allusions, and wordplay. Her 2005 novel *Broken Verses*, as mentioned in Rana Dasgupta’s (2005) review, relies on similar linguistic strategies in its ‘delight in words and all their shades of meaning,’ which are apparent in the diverse ways the novel utilizes different linguistic codes from dictionary definitions and crosswords to crypted writing and poetry. This novel, however, thematizes language in a further manner, as in it language and translation come to play a crucial role and translation emerges as a way of reconstructing the traumatized identity of its protagonist and redefining her relationship with the past and its politics.

A novel set in Karachi in the early 2000s, *Broken Verses* focuses on the life of the 31-year-old Aasmaani Inqalab, a university-educated research assistant at a local television station. Aasmaani is the daughter of the nation’s feminist activist Samina Akram, whose mysterious disappearance 14 years earlier has traumatized her. Combining elements of the mystery story with Aasmaani’s attempt to come to terms with the loss of her mother and the slightly earlier death of her mother’s lover, the national celebrity figure and revolutionary poet Nazim, the novel foregrounds ideas of language and translation as ways of addressing post-colonial identity and its formation. Their role is seen most evidently in the series of letters written by an unknown person using a code known only to Aasmaani, her mother, and the deceased Poet. During the process of translating the letters, which turn out to be fake and written by her boyfriend Ed (Mir Adnan Akbar Khan), Aasmaani is forced to encounter the events of her past and choose between alternative narratives of the past. In so doing the novel links the process of translation with questions of history and language, as well as with the reconstruction of identity. Thus the notion of translation, approached in Shamsie’s novel through cryptology in particular, is concerned less with linguistic operations than the transformation of identity. In other words, by translating the letters undermining her existing narrative of self, Aasmaani is forced to translate herself from the past to the present and assume a different identity position. As I will show in this essay, in

Shamsie's novel, language and translating are means of problematizing the protagonist's identity and showing how she has to negotiate between the past and the present to form her identity. Through translation, as Aasmaani's story emphasizes, it may be possible to carve out a new narrative of self, one that may be able to work through the traumatic demands of the past.

While post-colonial scholars have studied translation and translations in various ways, a central thematic has dealt with questions of power and domination in relation to various colonial and post-colonial contexts. The emphasis has been on the crosscultural effects of translation: what happens when texts from one culture meet another? As scholars such as Bassnett and Trivedi (1998: 6) have suggested in their discussion of nineteenth-century colonial translation, the translations of the era are historically and politically located and promote the value(s) of European culture. Venuti (1998: 178) suggests that the relationship, however, is not one-directional, but the location of translation(s) in the between cultures can also be seen to open up spaces for resistance and hybridity.

This is also the basis of the view of Homi K. Bhabha (1994), whose discussion of translation defines the concept less as a transmission of texts than as a more general aspect of his theory of hybridity. In so doing Bhabha promotes what is known as cultural translation where human beings with their values go through a process changing their outlook and identity (see Buden et al. 2009: 196-219). For Bhabha, translation is an effect of his Third Space, an interstitial site of liminality and in-betweenness creating qualitative changes and new identities, open to various migrants and diasporans inhabiting various borders and locations between cultures and nations:

The migrant culture of the 'in-between', the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability; and in so doing, it moves the question of culture's appropriation beyond the assimilationist's dream, or the racist's nightmare, of a 'full transmissal of subject matter'; and toward an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference. (1994: 224)

Following Bhabha, post-colonial translation has been understood as a process transforming texts and identities. Bill Ashcroft has suggested that it is language as such that functions as Third Space in post-colonial texts: since language lacks 'a simple correspondence between signs and referents,' reality cannot be simply translated into words but such an attempt remains 'in the Third Space of enunciation in its provisionality and untranslatability' (2010, 161). For Ashcroft (2010, 161), this space is peculiar to post-colonial texts since their space is one of between cultures.

My discussion of the role of translation in Shamsie's novel will start from the novel's treatment and thematization of language and continue with an analysis of the various ways in which translation functions in *Broken Verses*, both

concretely – including Aasmaani’s translation of the coded letters – and symbolically as the translation of her position. What I will emphasise is that through this emphasis on translation the novel seeks to problematize the possibility of the maintaining of fixed and clearly defined meanings and identities.

The construction of Aasmaani’s identity in Shamsie’s novel is excessively linguistic. Aasmaani is very sensitive to language, which is seen in her frequent puns and wordplays and in her father’s naming of her as a ‘scrabble girl’ (2006: 178). Her sensitivity to language is also apparent in her comments on the linguistic behaviour of other characters, Ed in particular. Her dislike of his nickname is at the same time a critique of his Americanized identity. This can be seen when Ed introduces himself at the station as ‘Mir Adnan Akbar Khan [...] But my friends call me Ed,’ he uses ‘mock-grandiose tones’ and receives a sharp response of ‘Nicknames and friendship rarely go together’ (2006: 9) from Aasmaani; on another occasion the narrative underlines Ed’s use of ‘a Hollywood drawl’ and thus appears to criticize the undesirability or inauthenticity of his apparently Americanized identity (Shamsie 2006: 191).

The importance of language to Aasmaani is further shown in that even before learning to read, she is attracted to language, and her colouring of a performance poster is described as if it were a way of mimicking writing: ‘I was young enough to regard the alphabet in terms of shape rather than sound, and I loved the way my hand curved into the bends of “S” that appeared not just once but twice in Shehnaz Saeed’s name’ (2006: 51). Similarly, her awareness of the ambivalence of language and the provisionality of meaning is evident when she discusses her response to the name chosen for her by her mother. As the following passage shows, she both comments critically on her mother’s political naming of her daughter, refusing her set of values, and contrasts that with her stepmother’s aesthetic explanation:

Aasmaani Inqalab – my first and middle names, self-important trisyllables that long ago pushed my shorter surname off everything except the most official documents. My mother’s choice, my name. My mother had made all the important choices regarding my early life; the only thing she left to Dad and Beema was the actual business of raising me. Aasmaani Inqalab: Celestial Revolution. Such a name never really admits the notion of childhood. But Beema used to whisper in my ear, ‘Azure.’ Aasmaani can also mean azure. An azure revolution. (2006: 3)

The two distinct names signify two aspects of Aasmaani’s identity: the bitter part remaining in the shadow of her disappeared mother is juxtaposed with the care and comfort provided by her stepmother Beema.

The novel further locates Aasmaani in the instability of language. By using the trope of the dictionary, it emphasises the importance of exact definitions and meanings instilled in her by the Poet, an idea which is supported with the importance of the encyclopaedia for her current job as a quiz show researcher at

the television station. As the passage below shows, the definition of the word *current* shows the impossibility of fixing the meaning because of the intervening power of the metaphor:

I walked over to the boxes of books which surrounded the empty bookshelf in the living room, and opened the one marked 'REF.' On the top was the dictionary I'd had since I was a child. I closed my eyes, opened the book, and ran my fingers down the page. Opened my eyes. My finger was halfway down the definition of COMBUST. I flipped past CONTRA MUNDUM and CORUSCATE and CUMULAS until I reached CURRENT.

[...] Currents. I knew something of them already.

I knew the currents of the oceans include the Agulhas, the Humboldt and the Benguela, I knew currents move in gyres, clockwise in the northern hemisphere and anticlockwise in the southern hemisphere. I knew the Poet had told me, years ago, that if we could only view the motion of currents as metaphors for the gyres of history – or the gyres of history as metaphors for the motion of currents – we'd know the absurdity of declaring the world is divided into East and West. I knew my mother's voice at the beach, cautioning me against undercurrents. (2006: 24)

In addition to this passage, the novel comments on language and its characteristics on other occasions. First, language open to ideological manipulation as seen in the different responses to the death of the Poet: while the government – who appear to have been in charge of his death – want to commemorate his death by 'declaring a national day of mourning for that "flower of our soil", the opposition decide to mourn the death of their "voice of resistance"' (Shamsie 2006: 37). Second, the novel, as the passage quoted above suggests, comments on the characteristics of language by using the metaphor of the sea. Its undercurrents are dangerous and disruptive, working against the intentions of the subject and resisting control. In this sense the idea of the current as articulated in the novel resembles the post-structuralist idea of language and the constant deferral of meaning known from the thinking of philosopher Jacques Derrida (2004). Unsurprisingly, language is defined in the novel by the Poet and his circle 'as a living, dangerous entity' (Shamsie 2006: 61). In a similar vein, the sea (of language) in the novel is a dangerous element haunting the protagonist throughout the novel as the likely site of her mother's suicide – an unexpected loss of her fixed identity as mother. While the opening chapter reports of a dream in which Aasmaani fails in saving the life of a stranded mermaid, the final chapter shows her writing her mother's name in the sand and then taking the sand to the sea, accepting her loss. At the same time she abandons her fixed construction of her mother, shown here in the way the frail letters signifying her dissolve and are consumed by the water:

I take the block of sand in my palms and walk forward until I am knee-deep in the cold, clear water. The bright winter sun throws a net of silver between the horizon

and me. I bend my back and lower my cupped hands just below the surface of sea. Her name and the sand stream out between my fingers, dissolve into the waves, and are carried away. (2006: 338)

This view of language as an unstable site is supported in the Poet's discussion of his love for classical opera where incomprehension of language adds to pleasure. In other words, as the passage below suggests, language is unable to provide solid, fixed meanings in the manner of music – the cognitive recognition of words and their intervening meanings is an obstacle:

Here, here, he'd say, listen, and he'd make me sit through as much as I could bear of *Carmen*, *The Ring Cycle*, *Otello*, *Madama Butterfly*, or whatever it was that he was listening to at the end of a session of writing. But what do the words mean, I would demand, and he'd shake his head. Never learn Italian, he warned me. Why do you think I prefer opera to qawaali? They both have the same degree of passion, but with qawaali I understand the words and that ruins it. As long as you don't understand the words of opera you can believe they match the sublime quality of the music, you can believe words are as capable as music of echoing and creating feeling, and you need only search hard enough, long enough, for the right combinations to create that perfection. Before the babble of Babel, Aasmaani, people spoke music. (2006: 177)

This suspicion of language and communication can be examined in the light of Jacques Derrida's (1992) essay on translation where he also, like the Poet, talks about the Tower of Babel. In this essay Derrida discusses the problem of universal language, suggesting that the dream of Babel is an attempt to create a unified foundation narrative:

In seeking to 'make a name for themselves,' to found at the same time a universal time and a unique genealogy, the Semites want to bring the world to reason, and this reason can signify simultaneously a colonial violence [...] and a peaceful transparency of the human community. Inversely, when God imposes and opposes his name, he ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism. He destines them to translation, he subjects them to the law of a translation both necessary and impossible [...]. (Derrida 1992: 226)

This view supports my reading of the Poet's (as well as the novel's) view of language as one semiotic meaning-meaning, not totally controllable by humans. While the dream of a shared language, imagined as one of music, is appealing in its lack of intervening language, the reality is one of languages and translation, where no one tongue is able to capture all possible meanings, and where translation and interpretation cannot be avoided. To quote Derrida, 'Translation becomes law, duty, and debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge. Such

insolvency is found marked in the very name of Babel: which at once translates and does not translate itself, belongs without belonging to a language and indebts itself to itself for an insolvent debt, to itself as if other' (1992: 226).

The emphasised instability of language is closely linked with the topic of translation, which is addressed in Shamsie's novel in various ways including the use of untranslated words, acts of linguistic translation, and cultural translation. As a post-colonial text, Shamsie's novel uses untranslated words to signify cultural practices and objects with no equivalent in English. These include, for instance, terms referring to clothing (dupata [2006: 4], shalwar-kameez [4], kurta-shalwar [205]), dishes (pakora [11], biryani [42], seekh kabab [186], jalaibee [161], haandi chicken [266], chapli kabab [266], daal [266], raita [266]) and practices of eating (iftar [43], sehri [161]), and religious, political, and aesthetic terminology (eid [193], jirga [171], maulana [283], ummah [285], qafia [199], radif [197], qhazal [199]). Their effect is to provide a sense of cultural difference (and a related sense of the exotic) and to emphasise the gap between the reader and the text (see Ashcroft 2010: 176-7). As Joel Kuortti (2009: 4) has suggested, the decision not to italicize non-English elements in a post-colonial text, as is the case in *Broken Verses*, seeks to equate the writer's (here Pakistani) and the intended reader's (here Anglo-American) cultures with each other. This strategy, however, creates a sense of foreignness in the text, which is further emphasised in the novel by incorporating (twice on the same page) an Arabic phrase from the Quran in the text: 'the repeating line from Surah al-Rahman, beloved of calligraphers for its variedness and its balance' (2006: 5).

The novel approaches translation also through the letters sent to Shehnaz Saeed from various places with no sender's name. What first appears as 'some foreign language' suddenly turns into something else when Aasmaani remembers the code devised by her mother and the Poet that enabled them to communicate during the latter's incarceration. The shock in her response derives from the fact that she has never come to terms with their deaths in suspicious circumstances – are they alive after all these years?

I turned. My feet were heavy lifting themselves off the bare floor and my body sluggish in the response.

I reached the paper, lifted it up.

Ijc Anonkoh efac fyfno ikrfb.

The letters stepped out of their disguises – haltingly at first, but then all in a rush and swirl of abandon – and transformed into words:

The Minions came again today. (2006: 35)

As the letters allegedly originating from the Poet held hostage in an unknown location are false, and finally revealed to have been written by Ed, they appeal to Aasmaani since they contain items of knowledge that others should not have, and thus generate hope of their survival. Aasmaani, in fact, becomes obsessed with

them and begins to believe in the narrative of hope that they provide. The following passage reveals her attempt to retrace the Poet's language and mind, voicing her need to reconnect with the unmourned past as well as with her mother and the Poet:

I picked up a felt-tip pen, and traced the twirling letter on to the overlying paper. It took much longer than I would have thought to follow every line and loop of that intricate hand. I began to feel as though I were replicating an abstract painting, each stroke of my nib inscribing my inability to understand how a mind could conceive of those shapes and combinations. What was I hoping for as my pen moved in and out of curlicues? That the act of tracing would bring me closer to whoever wrote these sentences, allow me to slip between the words and understand the mind that placed them on the page? (2006: 36)

The issues of translating concepts and cultural translation are further addressed in the novel through its presentation of a reported 1982 interview with the famous actor Shehnaz Saeed, an old friend of Aasmaani's mother. She is shown to comment on her performance in an Urdu-speaking production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* during a festival in Italy. When the journalist – who has no command of Urdu – suggests that the Italian word '*sprezzatura*. The illusion of ease with which the most gifted artistes [sic] imbue their most complex performances' (Shamsie 2006: 32) is apt to describe the performance, and inquires whether she is able to name performers with similar qualities, Shehnaz Saeed responds by using another Italian phrase, *grazia*, and uses one of Samina Akram's public speeches as her example of such a performance, thus moving from the sphere of art to that of politics:

A: I can think of a number of actors. But, correct me if I'm wrong, there's an Italian word which is applied to performances with a level above mere *sprezzatura*.

Q: You mean *grazia*. I have to say, I'm impressed.

A: Yes, *grazia*. Divine grace. The feeling that something out of this world is happening through the performer. You can admire *sprezzatura*, but in the presence of *grazia* you feel actually honoured, you feel you've changed. You've glimpsed something of the immortal mysteries. (2006: 32)

What is significant in this passage is that here the novel links the notion of performance with transformation, defining its effect as a translation of self and an 'immortal mystery'. In so doing it shows that translation is both linguistic, explaining the meaning of the concept in English, and cultural, an effect of an encounter. This is what Jenny S. Spencer, drawing on Judith Butler's comments on cultural translation, suggests when she writes that 'the subject is both constituted and transformed in the moment of contact that both solicits, and offers, recognition of others. Without translation, a transformative encounter with

otherness cannot occur' (2007: 391). While the Italian critic, lacking knowledge of Urdu, remains at the level of *sprezzatura*, the crowd united by Samina Akram is transformed through their experience of *grazia*. However, this is not merely an effect of language but rather one linked with the mystical moment of coming together in the encounter, being recognized as and translated into a member of a political community in the way suggested by Butler: 'To ask for recognition [...] is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other' (2003: 31). Aasmaani, however, unable to accept her mother's death, considers herself abandoned and repeatedly rejected by her, as seen on several occasions including her interpretation of the meeting reported by Shehnaz Saeed above: 'That was my mother's greatest cruelty. She allowed you enough time to luxuriate in her *grazia*, and then she went away, leaving you with the knowledge that you would never feel anything like it again and you would certainly not produce it yourself' (Shamsie 2006: 33). Feeling abandoned by her mother and traumatized by her disappearance and apparent suicide, Aasmaani has never been able to come to terms with her loss. When this is read in the context of Butler's claim that mourning is not merely individual, but as members of community we are always '*beside ourselves*' (Butler 2003: 14; italics original), Aasmaani's inability to mourn her mother's death is more than a personal choice. It appears to be based on her rejection of the community her mother stands for as a feminist icon, and its political activism. In other words, by refusing to mourn her mother, she refuses to join those who do so and their political community.

Unlike in many post-colonial novels addressing translation, its main function in Shamsie's novel is not to remap the transformation of identity in the conditions of diaspora and dislocation. As the novel's emphasis is on Aasmaani's translation of the coded letters for personal reasons, rather than on translation in the space between cultures, the trope of translation is deployed primarily as means of bridging the different parts/sites of its protagonist's self with the aim of working through her family trauma, a narrative strategy that Shamsie has utilized in her earlier novels. For instance, in *Salt and Saffron* (2001) the family trauma is located in the context of Partition and leads to the unification of the protagonist's family (see Nyman 2009: 109-25; King 2011: 150). In *Broken Verses*, the need to resolve the past is evident in both Aasmaani's inability to mourn the deaths of her mother and the Poet – the bond between Aasmaani and the Poet has been particularly strong as since childhood she has identified with him by calling him Omi, i.e., 'Old Me' (2006: 40). Similarly, her internalized sense of her mother's alleged rejection is approached in the novel through her constant self-questioning that takes even the form of quiz show questions:

Who, or what, would I need to be to make her stay this time?

- a) *member of parliament*
- b) *a political quiz show researcher*

c) *capitalist corporate girl*

d) *translator of obscure Urdu diaries by day, party animal by night*

Answer: this is a trick question. All depends on who she is now. (2006: 187)

The problems linked with the translation of identity can be discussed in the context of what Rey Chow (2008) refers to as the melancholy turn in cultural translation. Basing her argument on Judith Butler's and Anne Cheng's work on melancholia as the normative identity's mourning over what is culturally denied from it, Chow suggests that such a view

makes it possible to hold onto the notion of a certain original condition (language, literacy, culture) while advancing the plait that this original condition has been compromised, injured, incapacitated, interrupted, or stolen – in a word, lost. This twin rhetorical move of essentializing-cum-deconstruction, asserting paradoxically both the existence of an original and its irrevocable loss, both as a lost object and its continued spectral presence leads to an inexhaustible theoretical productiveness. (2008: 572-3)

Mourning is, then, an element that plays a role in the translation and transformation of self. This is also the case in Shamsie's novel where mourning prepares the path to new identity. One example concerns its representation of the Poet's narrative poem 'Laila' in which Laila loses her lover Qais and desperately searches for him. As all attempts to discover Qais fail, Laila translates herself into her lover by 'adopt[ing] his manner of speech, his gait, his dress, his expressions in order to keep his characteristics alive' (Shamsie 2006: 49). In so doing she, while mourning her love, also performs both the lost original and keeps it alive in the present. Chow suggests that a potential way for the translator-cum-melancholy mourner to recover the past is to '*go native* – to restore to such a native or original condition [...] its unfinished life experiences' (2008: 573; italics original). In the case of colonialism, Chow suggests that the critique of the representation of 'the native original as barbarism' may reconstruct the translator not as a traitor (e.g., the myth of Cortez's translator Malinche) but as a 'faithful melancholic' (2008: 573). Melancholia, it is suggested, is a 'form of affirmative cultural redress and repair' (Chow 2008: 574).

When Shamsie's novel emphasizes Aasmaani's problematic relationship with the loss of her mother and describes her emerging ability to mourn, it brings that in contact with her role as a translator. What the translation brings to life is the spectral voice of the poet as articulated in the letters addressed to a potential reader: 'Samina, are you even still alive?' (Shamsie 2006: 262) and 'If someone is reading this, it must be you' (Shamsie 2006: 111). Through reading and translating the letters revealing intimate memories of the love between the Poet and Samina, Aasmaani, to use Chow's terms, enters a process of 'moral striving for justice' (2008: 573). She tries to find out more about the deaths and whether

they have really happened by examining written accounts and first-hand reports and visiting archives in the hope of locating the truth of the Poet's death. Yet the spectral voice, the alleged original, appears to be a fake one, created by Ed on the basis of the Poet's letters to the South American writer Rafael Gonzales:

The Poet wrote to him about everything. Poetry, politics, food, childhood, your mother – always your mother. It was one of those friendships between men. [...] Every sentence construction, every literary allusion, every shift in tone that you read in those encrypted letters is in here. I took the content of one sentence, forced it into the structure of another. Took a story your mother told me, transposed it onto the stories he told Rafael [...] All I did was imitate him. The distinctiveness of his voice was what made it easy. That, and your desire to believe. (2006: 318)

As a result Aasmaani's fantasies collide with the reality, forcing her to realize the truth. Upon recognizing that the military murdered the Poet and that her mother committed suicide, she can finally mourn for them. At same time, however, she is allowed to perform what Chow refers to as 'second-order mourning' (2008: 573) or what Butler (2003) discusses as collective mourning. While she has previously been unable to mourn, she now learns to mourn with others, a process where she mourns for the loss of her loved ones but also for what they represent, a potential political community based on the principles of democracy and equality, as imagined by her activist mother. Through mourning for her mother and the Poet, as well as their values, Aasmaani can be seen to translate herself into a new identity allowing for ethical reflection and an acceptance of politics, as indicated in her decision at the end of the novel to re-embark on media work, storytelling, that will promote the legacy of the feminist and pluralist values of her mother and the Poet:

That's what they did, Omi and Mama: they gave meaning to the world when it seemed senseless [...] But if [...] the ways in which we apprehend the world are merely synonymous with the stories in which we feel most comfortable, then this is a story I am willing to claim for the world. And one I'm determined to spread. (2006: 335)

As the passage suggests, this new position, achieved through mourning that helps her work through her traumas, is different from her mother's activism but shows how she is now able to promote change. As Shamsie has put it in an interview, 'What Aasmani [sic] realises is that what counted most was that initial incredible stand they took and that you can't expect them to have done everything, to have fixed the world [...] Instead, you have to say, "I'm the child of that. They did what they could. Now I have to pick it up and move forward"' (Cilano 2007: 158). In other words, as the novel suggests, and also its author hints at, the translation of Aasmaani's self in Shamsie's novel is ethical as well as cultural, not merely

personal, and clearly linked with promoting a politics and ethics based on collectivity.

In this essay I have argued that the representation of language and translation in Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* is intertwined with the identity of its protagonist. As Aasmaani is located in language and translation, both of which are processes where meaning is constantly deferred and always under negotiation, her identity appears to undergo a process of translation. During the search for an explanation for the events leading to the deaths of the Poet and her mother, a process involving the translation of the mysterious coded letters, Aasmaani learns to give up her former idea of the past and encounters its traumatizing effects. Accepting the fact that she can mourn the death of Omi and Mama plays a crucial role in the translation of her past identity into the new one, a process where bitterness and refusal to take a stand are transformed into an ethical self with a sense of responsibilities in the community.

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