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Atiq Rahimi's Exophonic Entanglements: Multilingual and Multimodal Poetics

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Abstract

In 2008, first-generation Afghan migrant novelist-artist Atiq Rahimi published his first translingual work in French, *Syngué Sabour: Pierre de patience*. This article interrogates his multilingual and multimodal aesthetics across his translingual oeuvre. In his exophonic novel *Les Porteurs d'eau* (2019), Rahimi valorizes a polyvocal and culturally diverse Central Asian history. The Prix Goncourt-awarded author introduces Afghanistan's past and present beyond its intracultural challenges. The epitome of the Rahimi-esque aesthetic is the author's publication *L'Invité du miroir* (2020), which acts as a revolt, a transnational dialectic crossroads where multilingual fiction meets classical Persian calligraphy and nonfiction to explore the human spirit.

Keywords

migration – translingualism – exophony – calligraphy – war – memory

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Mon calame se balade,
comme pour suivre l'errance de mes mots,
l'exil de mon corps.
Il se balade d'une époque à l'autre,
d'une terre à l'autre...

RAHIMI, 2015: 148

My reed pen is wandering,
as to follow the vagrancy of my words,
the exile of my body.
It wanders from one era to another
from one land to another...¹

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Introduction

Atiq Rahimi's translingual² fiction reflects a high degree of cultural hybridity, multilingualism, and multimodality, especially in his transgressive and trans-cultural narratives that trace the sense of uprootedness and alienation.³ In his literary and visual translingualism, Rahimi develops his creative medium and language, where different cultures collide and result in reciprocal enrichment. His resistance to monolingual and homogenous cultural identities—whether

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all translations are mine.

² With his publication *The Translingual Imagination*, Steven G. Kellman offers a theoretical concept for “the phenomenon of authors who write in more than one language” (ix). Due to war, exploitation, and discrimination, as well as related consequences of colonialism, a new wave of authors have published works that have created the canon of translingual works (Kellman 6). Adrian Wanner argues for a fluid and rather indefinite definition of translingual authors: “The identity of the translingual writer is best seen as a conscious and ongoing positioning in solving both the author and the interpretive communities in the former and current countries of residence” (5).

³ Nasrin Qader notes that Rahimi is already known as a writer for “experimenting in each work with techniques and narrative styles” across his Persian/Dari publications (116). In *La Littérature Afghane: Identité, Alterité et Engagement*, Outhman Boutisane, who has studied Rahimi's work extensively, defines Rahimi's transgressive work as “fiction autobiographique” [autobiographic fiction] (68). Boutisane argues that Rahimi's narratives are strongly influenced by his experience of migration and exile.

within Afghanistan's national border or when negotiating redefinition of the Afghan self within exilic dynamics—offers a fruitful ground for cross-cultural discourse on traditional definitions of genre, forms, artistic styles, and religious philosophies. With his translingual publications, Rahimi contributes to the artistic landscape of contemporary Francophone literature, and with his multilingual strategies, he marks his positionality as a translingual writer who belongs to a non-hegemonic community. Rahimi claims that “in a foreign language, one must create one's own language.”⁴ In his avant-garde work, Rahimi has created his own language across various modes, which are combinations of either several or different linguistic signs and signs in nonlinguistic modes. Rahimi's literary and linguistic strategies culminate in works that have the “power to reflect complex and ambiguous realities” (White 15). Rahimi defines his hybrid creative identity by not affiliating with stagnant religious or ethnic paradigms (Amiri 204). While Islamist ideologies spread in Afghanistan before the “anti-Soviet *mujahidin*” (Green 20), the Taliban has persecuted any other religious minority beliefs and destroyed their traces. Rahimi's translingual writings interweave Persian/Dari and, at times, Arabic, Kinyarwanda, Sanskrit, and Hindi terms and expressions with the French language. Although monolingual French readers generally cannot differentiate between transliterated characters of Persian/Dari, Hindi, Sanskrit, and Arabic terms, multilingual expressions translate into the multicultural representation of Afghanistan. In his preface to *Three by Atiq Rahimi* (2009), Rahimi claims that “[...] adopting another language meant choosing freedom, not betrayal!” (xiii). Rahimi's definition of “freedom” entails embracing more scandalous content in his translingual works and radically experimenting with his first language while redefining Afghan ethnic and gender norms.

Within the framework of this article, I will focus on Rahimi's recent works *Les Porteurs d'eau* (The Water Carriers) (2019) and *L'Invité du miroir* (The Guest in the Mirror) (2020).⁵ By challenging hegemonic monolingual spaces, Rahimi's linguistic practices disrupt French language norms and regularities, and thus result in a transformative literary and linguistic act. This paper will attempt to answer the following questions regarding Rahimi's translingual fiction and nonfiction: Which languages and cultures does Rahimi highlight in his transgressive work? How does Rahimi use linguistic experimentation to inscribe postcolonial experiences, heterogeneous memories, inclusive identities, and exile in his writing? How does his multilingual and multimodal bricolage

4 Unpublished interview with Atiq Rahimi (August 2021).

5 I study his work from the perspective of an academic and fellow member of the global Afghan diaspora.

challenge Afghanistan's cultural memory, thus proposing more diverse identities and histories? How does he introduce ethnic minorities?⁶

I claim that both publications, *Les Porteurs d'eau* and *L'Invité du miroir*, can be considered his most creative and political pieces: In *Les Porteurs d'eau*, Rahimi has also become more critical of his first language. Like exophonic writer Yoko Tawada,⁷ who experiments with linguistic peculiarities of her second and first languages, Rahimi turns to Persian/Dari and explicitly questions its sense and validity, expressing traumas in exile and ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. The result is exophonic texts that are underlined by mystical dynamics. With *L'Invité du miroir*, Rahimi created his most avant-garde writing, which was inspired by Rwandan oral literature and writings as well as classical Persian calligraphy, to reflect on transnational experiences of trauma.

Rahimi (b. 1962) is a Paris-based award-winning novelist, photographer, and maker of both feature films and documentaries on Afghanistan.⁸ Rahimi originally turned to creative means, specifically writing, to contend with his brother's death. He grew up in an educated household surrounded by canonical European and Persian literary works. His mother was a schoolteacher, and his father was the governor of the province of Panjsher and a judge at the supreme court in Kabul (Fournot and Moro). In Kabul, Rahimi attended the French school Lycée Esteqlal and remembers the following challenging conditions as a teenager: "The French language represents a climate, a home without a father and the

6 By using the term "minorities," I refer to people in groups who were pushed to the margins due to conditions that were systematically, socially, and politically constructed.

7 Rahimi's use of multiple languages makes his translingual oeuvre an example of what Yoko Tawada has dubbed "exophonic" writing (Stockhammer, Arndt, and Naguschewski 13). Tawada coins the neologism "exophony" in the title of her book *Exophony: Journey to Stepping out of Mother Tongue*, describing it as exploring different sign systems and creatively dismantling languages (Tachibana 153). The term "exophony" has its roots in the Greek language and consists of the prefix "exo-" (outside) and the morpheme "phonic" (voice) (Stockhammer, Arndt, and Naguschewski 14).

8 In the late 1990s, Rahimi started publishing his Persian/Dari narratives with the Iranian publishing house Éditions Khavaran. Both works, *Khâkestar-o-khâk* [*Earth and Ashes*] (1999) and *Hezâr khâna-ye khvâb va ikhtinâq* [*A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*] (2002), narrate intergenerational loss and gendered oppression in a war-torn society. In 2002, Rahimi returned to Afghanistan to capture his country of origin with an antique wooden box after the fall of the Taliban regime (*Les Retour Imaginaire*, 2005). Apart from a range of documentaries such as *À chacun son journal* (1998), *Zaher Shah: Le royaume de l'exil* (2000), *Téhéran, 10 secondes plus tard* (2000), *Nous avons partagé le pain et le sel* (2001), and *Afghanistan: Un Etat impossible?* (2002), Rahimi also directed the film adaptation of his narratives "Terre et cendres" (2004) and "Syngué sabour: Pierre de patience" (2012). Rahimi's latest film feature *Notre-Dame du Nil* (2018) is based on Scholastique Mukasonga's novel of the same title. In 2022, the opera *Shirine*, which was written by Atiq Rahimi, was performed at the Opéra de Lyon (Danesh).

time in which Mohammad Da'ud Khan overthrew the monarchy. In these circumstances, I learnt French" (Amiri 2009). While he clearly benefited from being influenced by prose and poetry, Rahimi experienced a difficult early adulthood in Afghanistan.⁹ In fact, he lacked a role model and suffered from his father's absence due to his military duties, imprisonment, and subsequent exile to India (Rahimi and Rahimi 37–38). Rahimi stayed with his father in India for a few years, which to date has had a strong influence on his creative endeavors, and returned to Afghanistan, where he enrolled at university before he was forced to seek refuge. Since 1984, Rahimi has lived in France, where he graduated from the University of Rouen and started publishing in Persian/Dari¹⁰ (Fournot and Moro). In 2008, he was awarded the highest literary prize (for a novel) in France, the Prix Goncourt, for his first French narrative *Syngué Sabour: Pierre de patience*, which *Le Figaro Culture* praised for its style and described as a "livre de poète, bref, d'une écriture sèche, avec des phrases courtes et rythmées" ["poet's book, short, dry writing, with short and rhythmic sentences"] (*Le Figaro*).

Rahimi's *Les Porteurs d'eau* (2019) narrates events that occurred only on March 11, 2001, the day the Taliban destroyed the two Buddhas of Bâmiyân. In the novel, two narratives alternate recounting the lives of two protagonists: Tamim and Yûsef. Once Tamim obtains French citizenship, he changes his Afghan name, Tamim, to a westernized version, Tom (208). Tom, who leaves his Afghan wife, Rina, and little daughter, Lola, behind in Paris, drives to Amsterdam to start a new life with his Catalan lover, Nuria. However, she never meets him at the agreed location, and he suddenly finds out that she is a second-generation migrant from Afghanistan. The second protagonist, Yûsef, is a water carrier in Kabul, whose profession is crucial since it has neither rained or snowed in a year. He falls in love with his sister-in-law, Shirine, whose husband left for Iran and cut all contact. As a devout Muslim, Yûsef suppressed his emotions and was in denial, until his friend, a sage Buddhist, Lâla Bahâri, pushes him to admit his feelings. By way of Yûsef's experiences, the reader learns about various ethnic and religious minorities living in Afghanistan.

While shooting his latest feature film, *Notre-Dame du Nil*, which is based on Scholastique Mukasonga's novel of the same title, Rahimi kept a diary and published excerpts in *L'Invité du miroir*. Rahimi steps further away, geographically speaking, from Afghanistan, but thematically still remains within the subject of

9 Unpublished interview with Atiq Rahimi (August 2021).

10 I refer to Afghanistan's language as Persian/Dari to reflect the regional and historical context: "In Afghanistan, although Persian (officially renamed *dari* in 1964, but still commonly called *farsi*) is the official language, the national language is Pashto, and there is no official restriction on the use of other languages" (Spoonier 89).

political turmoil and trauma by addressing the Rwandan genocide. In his multilingual narrative, Rahimi engages with the Rwandan past genocide and claims, against widespread beliefs, an ongoing genocide on Afghan soil at the hands of religious fundamentalists. The story takes place ten years after the Rwandan genocide, around the start of the trial for crimes committed during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The intradiegetic narrator sits next to a blind and deaf man by Lake Kivu. Another character is a girl who swims and collects different words from the bottom of the lake. The loss of these words was caused by European settlers and Christian missionaries in Rwanda. A woman without a shadow, which indicates that she survived the genocide, is also present. Throughout this poetic story from the perspective of an Afghan narrator, Afghanistan's social issues are connected to African past states of hostility and persecution with ethical and artistic sensitivity, which Rahimi captured in his personal handwritten diary entries and exographic works, including different examples of calligraphy.

In his recent exophonic works, Rahimi challenges definitions of French literature and the publishing industry through creative and artistic means, thus opposing contemporary French translingual literature, which has predominantly been "more about the demonstration of potential or the indication of cultural complexity than the actual performance of new literary possibilities" (Forsdick "French Literature" 219). Although Rahimi delights in 'high literary' style, he also deploys creative means to communicate alterity to his readers, celebrating his linguistic diversity. Yoko Tawada's exophonic writing centers on linguistic conundrums in the German and Japanese languages and specifically contains "*linguistic experimentation* and observations about language" (Yildiz 111; italics added). Rahimi's interventions are of a similar nature, introducing an alternative definition of literary and creative language in French with hybrid forms of French prose and redefining the norms of Islamic sacred practices of calligraphies, and adding to the list of contemporary experimental migrant writings by François Cheng and Shan Sa. To the extent that Rahimi's work makes use of what Shuangyi Li, writing about the historical novels of translingual writer Shan Sa, describes as an "effect of a striking aesthetic *étrangeté* (both in the sense of 'strange' and 'foreign')" ("Translingualism" 121), it contributes to our understanding of postcolonial translingual narratives writ large.

Multilingual and Multicultural Entanglements: Marginalized Voices and Cultural Memories

In contrast to his Persian/Dari narratives and his first translingual works, Rahimi's recent French texts incorporate and visually highlight foreign languages

through italics and diacritics for words not only in Persian/Dari but also in Arabic,¹¹ Sanskrit, Hindi, and Kinyarwanda. Afghanistan's pre-Islamic cultural traditions and ancient languages are the settings for their contemporary publications. I will further explore Rahimi's creative and humorous use of foreign expressions as well as the limitations of languages when used in narratives set either in exile or in Afghanistan. The Buddha statues symbolize Afghanistan's polyvocal and culturally diverse Central Asian history at large,¹² which is on the brink of being entirely destroyed since the Taliban regime returned to power in 2021. Additionally, translated excerpts from Chinese travelers signify the focus of Central and East Asian culture.

Rahimi's multilingual texts go beyond a mere 'exotic factor' since he positions himself by foregrounding Afghanistan's non-Islamic belief systems and cultural minorities. Terms kept in Persian/Dari and Hindi are, in these instances, inaccessible: as Adrian Wanner writes of translingual writer Andreï Makine, "[w]ithout the benefit of an explanation, a reader [...] is left guessing the possible meaning of the word or utterance" (14). Like Makine's unglossed Russian terms, Rahimi's French publications with predominantly Persian/Dari words left unexplained have an "exotic" [...] quality' for readers (14). Across most of his translingual narratives, lexical items in Persian/Dari, a language rooted in the Perso-Arabic alphabet, appear in forms of transliteration, which reflect the "character-by-character mapping of a Persian word" using the Latin alphabet (Karimi et al. 255). Alongside Persian/Dari disruptions in his translingual texts, Rahimi's *Les Porteurs d'eau* ends with unglossed words, but in Hindi. Shirine initiates intimacy whispering "*Pâni do, pyâr!*" [Give me water, my love!] (Rahimi *Les Porteurs* 283). Her words, without a translation, are contextualized with the narrator's description of both characters' tender affection toward each other while both words "*pâni*" and "*pyâr*" were translated at different moments (260, 279). In Rahimi's work, certain foreign terms also fulfill a poetic function, such as the multilingual imperfect rhyme combining French with Persian/Dari: "*ashks dans son mashk*" ["tears in his *mashk*/[water] bag"] (46).

Apart from selected lexical items, Rahimi's text reflects the country's multicultural history and present. The epigraph in *Les Porteurs d'eau* is a translated excerpt from a travel report by Hiuan-tsang, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim

11 In Rahimi's Persian/Dari and French work, Arabic expressions are used in a religious context indicating characters' Islamic faith.

12 The artistic representation of the Buddhist faith, which introduced the human form of Buddha statues, appeared in Gandhara in the first century AD (Dehejia). The Central Asian region of Gandhara stretched over northeastern Afghanistan including Kabul to Pakistan (Dupree 274).

in the seventh century, on the magnitude of the two Buddhist statues and their devoted monks in Bâmiyân, which reflects Afghanistan's diverse cultural roots and interconnectedness of Central and East Asian history. The reader is invited as a cultural archeologist to uncover Afghanistan's widely demolished historical artifacts throughout history. During excavations across Afghanistan in the early twenty-first century, European archeologists like Jules Barthoux reported attacks and destruction of Greco-Buddhist sculptures by locals motivated by either mullahs or greed (Fenet and Green 142). Buddhism-related terms in Sanskrit are mostly spoken by Lâla Bahâri, who lives in the grotto close to the spring, where Yûsef regularly collects water. Initially, the reader trusts Yûsef's knowledge, who claims that Lâla Bahâri is Hindu, which is a religious minority persecuted by the Taliban (Rahimi *L'Invité* 26). Once Lâla Bahâri eventually states that he is a Buddhist (262), the narrative includes more religious terms including Sanskrit. When Yûsef is on his way to finally meet Shirine to act on his feelings, the final Sanskrit term appears: "chaque statue de Bouddha, chaque *asana* des dieux amoureux" ["every Buddha statue, every *asana*/pose of the gods of love"] (283). In *L'Invité du miroir*, Rahimi includes foreign words from a language that is not spoken in Afghanistan: Kinyarwanda. According to Rahimi, Afghan society could come to terms with their crimes against humanity if they learned a foreign language and culture. In his glossary, Rahimi includes the Kinyarwanda term *Gacaca*, which he defines as the space where perpetrators can seek forgiveness from affected families and communities for their heinous crimes after the 1994 Rwandan genocide (184).

Rahimi creatively approaches his multilingual writing by drawing on Persian literary traditions as a source of humor. While his target reader is monolingual and part of an insular cultural and linguistic environment finding his/her way through the multilingual maze, Rahimi has recently switched to a more playful exchange with his reader. He explores the use of a comical tone and includes some offensive content in his writing, while still connecting to classical Persian poetic traditions. In *Les Porteurs d'eau*, Tom, who is one of the protagonists living in exile, remains a rather tragic character struggling with his sense of self. He ostensibly quotes classical Persian poetry to his young Catalan illicit love affair, Nuria:

*Az dahânat mitchasham roghané siir,
Az sinahâyat, kochtélé siir,
Az kossat, firnié siir.*

118

From your lips, I lick garlic oil
 From your breasts garlic milk
 From your pussy garlic custard.

Tom performs his supposedly classical ghazal, consisting of his self-authored simple and impromptu lyrical verses, which would be considered sexually explicit and vulgar in Afghan circles. On a superficial level, Rahimi created a poetic piece in Persian/Dari on corporeal desires, but essentially he follows classical Persian poetry traditions written by thirteenth-century Persian poet Sa'di Shirāzi. In his monograph-length study and translation of Sa'di's work, Homa Katouzian claims that Sa'di was known for his "intensely physical" ghazals (11). By leaving the poem unglossed, Rahimi challenges the asymmetrical power relationships between the hegemonic culture and marginalized communities, which have faced moments of inaccessibility. In contrast to viewing this as an instance of linguistic impediment, Jane Hiddleston and Wen-chin Ouyang argue to study the potential of such disruption rather as a "form of co-creation based at once on partial understanding and on [the readers'] own creative imagination" (6). Within this context, an alternative reading of the untranslated poem is possible: The reader can appreciate the poetic creativity by reading out the transliteration of the poem. Instead of the author's auto-translation, Rahimi puts the poeticism of his transnational interjections in the foreground and asks his reader to reply to Roman Jakobson's question "What makes a verbal message a work of art?" (350). The reader can possibly explore the answer to this question by phonetically performing the poem, still appreciating the intensity created by the gradually reduced amount of syllabus, and the anaphora can thus appreciate its aesthetic values created by multimodal and trans-cultural strategies.

In *Les Porteurs d'eau*, Rahimi further contributes to this discourse while not linguistically challenging French, but by detailing the limitations of his first language in exile. When drafting his separation letter addressed to his Afghan wife, Tom contemplates the absurdity of his first language, Persian/Dari, which he does not use anymore: "Persuadé que sa langue d'origine ne se prêtait pas à exprimer ses conceptions de la vie" ["Convinced that his native language did not lend itself to express his conceptions of life"] (Rahimi *Les Porteurs* 76). Rahimi, like the protagonist, cannot rely on his first language to express his wishes and desires while in exile. This remains a shared sentiment: that only first-generation migrants comprehend and claim untranslatability to even their closest companions. Tom, who performs the obscene poem in Persian/Dari even rejects Nuria's request to translate: "[T]u avais répondu que ce serait trop compliqué [...] c'était trop lyrique et romantique,

avec des symboles impossible à traduire" ["You had replied that it would be too complicated [...] it was too lyrical and romantic, with symbols impossible to translate"] (118). These comments underlining alienation between text and reader are linked to the function of untranslated lexical items that "signify the difference between cultures, but also illustrate the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts" (Ashcroft et al. 63). In Rahimi's texts, narrators and characters underline the complexity and limitations of translations, going beyond the lexeme itself and highlighting the intricacy of "cultural concepts."

While this is a valid claim, since it is addressed on several occasions in the novel, Tom, who had an ongoing affair, appears as an unreliable character. He embodies a deceitful and lost character, who is just a shell of his so-called "*afghanité*" ("Afghani-ness"), which the narrator pointed out early on in the narrative with comments like "déguiser en citoyen français, il reste pourtant toujours de la paille afghani à l'intérieur de toi" ["disguised as a French citizen, yet there is still Afghan straw inside you"] (Rahimi *Les Porteurs* 34). Tom, as the "faceless" Other, struggles with his sense of self and position in a hostile environment created by a mediascape in which he, according to gender theorist Judith Butler, is depicted as "symbols of evil" (Butler xviii). Hamid Dabashi's *Brown Skin White Masks* (2011) builds on Frantz Fanon's concept of the epidermalization of inferiority in a colonial context and characterizes the contemporary migrant natives from a predominantly Muslim country with a "very much white-identified [self-image]" (15). In Tom's case, he attempts to overcome his feeling of alienation, which is riddled with self-hatred and inadequacy, by assimilating into French society. Nuria, his Catalan young and educated love affair, is the personification of Western culture; her rejection of Tom via a scribbled note equals the European refusal to fully embrace and accept migrated marginalized communities, who feel lost. Rahimi's publication is timely because it reflects the experiences of people seeking asylum and the humanitarian crisis in relation to responding to their plight; he also responds to the absurdity of exilic lives when adapting to Western cultures, and the generational shifts within diasporic communities. In my interview with Rahimi, he also shared his astonishment that the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance allowed the distribution of his Persian/Farsi translation of *Les Porteurs d'eau*, hinting at the comedic fact that they probably had not done a thorough job of reading his novel.¹³

13 Unpublished interview with Atiq Rahimi (August 2021).

Rahimi's introduction of a diverse cultural memory¹⁴ and the contemporary coexistence of multiple languages resist ideas of linguistic and cultural purity sustained by political ideologies in Afghanistan. While religious and political extremism causing the destruction of Afghan non-Islamic artifacts remains at the center of *Les Porteurs d'eau*, it is nonetheless a unique perspective on the fate of individuals belonging to these oppressed religious and ethnic minorities (Dinley). Words in Hindi and Sanskrit are then more than foreign lexical items creating a linguistic amalgam; they are a concoction of blended genres and various marginalized cultural spaces. Rahimi thus challenges a predefined, static, and binary definition of the marginalized Other, as well as the idea of cultural and linguistic homogeneity. Rahimi pays homage to persecuted minorities throughout history, since even during the reign of Amir Abdul Rahman as Emir of Afghanistan "hundreds of thousands of Hazaras and Shiites fled from central and western Afghanistan" (Bezhan 120).¹⁵ In fact, Afghanistan's colonial history contributed to a fractured Afghan self: it covers foreign colonialism (Great Britain, USSR) and internal ethnic colonial rule by the Pash-tun elite over various minorities (Hyman 299). Rahimi's act of cultural transfer of knowledge from the Pre-Islamic and Persianate world introduces historical, linguistic, and cultural frames of reference into a new 'relational space.' Borrowing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizomatic model, Édouard Glissant defines Creole identity formation as rhizomatic, thus "located in relation prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also *in relation*" (18; italics added). This rhizomatic identity is "linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures" (144).

When introducing Yûsef, one of the protagonists in Rahimi's *Les Porteurs d'eau*, the text details his responsibilities as a water carrier: "[...] Yûsef est hélé par la maîtresse de maison qui lui demande à voix basse d'apporter aujourd'hui deux *mashks* d'eau [...]" ["Yûsef is hailed by the lady of the house who asks him in a low voice to bring two bags of water today"] (44). Yûsef knows the secret subterranean path to the cave spring hidden under the hill Bâghbâlâ (45). The hills provide the sole access to water, but this is also a historical location, where

14 According to Jan Assmann, a society's need for "unity and peculiarity" can be drawn from the "knowledge" that cultural memory offers (130). Jan and Aleida Assmann introduced a new typology, as collectives can remember either the recent or distant past. The term "communicative memory" is a social group's short-term memory; however, the notion of cultural memory relates to the late past (185).

15 According to media reports, the Taliban regime still continues with their destruction of cultural artifacts and ethnic persecution (O'Donnell).

a castle was built: Emir Habibullah's royal Bâghbâlâ palace, where he stored historic artifacts such as "Greco-Buddhist sculptures; ancient coins, both Islamic and Pre-Islamic [...]" in the early twentieth century (Fenet and Green 140). The narrator refers to various folkloric legends of how Yûsef has access to the source where he collects water, to which he sometimes adds that Yûsef tells the dragon who lives in the cave stories about the city, moving it to tears: "[...] il le fait pleurer, et ainsi recueille-t-il ses larmes – *ashks* dans son *mashk*" [he makes him cry, and so he collects his tears—tears in his [water] bag] (Rahimi *Les Porteurs* 46). Yûsef, a heroic character, when getting ready to leave home takes his "gros *gopitcha*" [large *gopitcha*] (43), which could be a reference for any "big" item, even a weapon. At the bottom of the same page, however, the term is repeated in a clause that alludes to it being a garment: "[...] il se couvre de son *gopitcha* [...]" ["he covers himself in his garb"] (43). The reader has thus uncovered parts of a "riddle" (Forsdick *Victor Segalen* 123) and will understand that the Dari lexical item belongs to the hypernym "garment." However, readers are still unable to decode that this article of clothing, "*gopitcha*," is a folkloric garment traditionally worn in rural areas, since Yûsef's ethnic belonging will only be later disclosed within the text as a "Hazara" (Rahimi *Les Porteurs* 83). These strategies underline, according to Charles Forsdick's analysis of Victor Segalen's work, the "customary reaction to the exotic—the systematic decoding or absorption of its difference" (123).

With his multilingual and cross-cultural works, Rahimi reinstates Afghanistan's cultural heritage¹⁶ in exile. In his preface to the bilingual dictionary *80 mots d'Afghanistan*, Rahimi considers Etienne Gilles's selection of Persian/Dari words. The curated list, which reflects Afghanistan's linguistic and cultural historical richness, was inspired by French NGO workers in Afghanistan. Rahimi details that these seemingly ordinary terms and expressions, which have penetrated Afghans' minds and daily vocabulary rather synthesize diverse spatio-temporal philosophies: "Ces vocables révèlent la quintessence même de cette terre qui se définit par une symbiose extraordinaire entre l'Inde, la Grèce, la Perse, l'Arabie, l'Angleterre" ["These words reveal the quintessence of this land, which is defined by an extraordinary symbiosis among India, Greece, Persia, Arabia and England"] (9). His exophonic writings reflect a creative interpretation continuation of archeological efforts to uncover the country's historiographies, which also intersects with philosophical and religious practices. After the Taliban destroyed Afghanistan's cultural property, for example, the Bâmiyân Buddhas in 2001, and celebrated their victory, the interim govern-

16 The terms "cultural heritage" and "cultural property" both lack a unified definition, since the parameters for international UNESCO conventions differ (Gottlieb 614).

ment of Afghanistan and the international community debated whether the Buddhas should be reconstructed (Gottlieb 619–20).¹⁷ In the middle of cultural grievances and political discussions, Rahimi revolts against destruction by capturing the catastrophic consequences to communities within Afghanistan and abroad. Building on Francesca Orsini's research of local multilingual literature, Dima Ayub's expanded literary research on the translation of a multilingual Arabic novel includes a "multiplicity of linguistic *and* cultural traditions" (186; italics added). Rahimi's *Les Porteurs d'eau* challenges fundamentalist ideological adaptations of Afghanistan's cultural memory by acknowledging Bâmiyân's historical and cultural legacy of pre-Islamic Afghanistan.

Multimodality: Blank Spaces and Calligraphies

When engaging with Rahimi's literary fiction, the reader usually encounters multimodal meaning-making strategies. Rahimi claims that he is involved when it comes to the specificity of page layouts, especially regarding the arrangement of sentences and the creation of "white spaces."¹⁸ He further explores multimodal meaning-making with the depiction of modern Persian/Dari letters and the Latin alphabet as inspired by classical Persian calligraphy. Rahimi's *L'Invité du miroir* takes the theme of genocide as a memory beyond cultural and national borders, connecting Rwandan with Afghan trauma in the form of multimodal classical Persian and exo(phonic calli)graphic works.

In Rahimi's translanguaging texts, the reader will encounter many blank spaces, due to the specific page layouts. Nina Nørgaard directs attention to the multimodality¹⁹ of narrative texts, claiming that "contemporary literary texts [...] make use of a variety of semiotic modes such as typography, graphics, color, layout, and visual images for their meaning-making" (115). These blank spaces

17 According to scholars of ancient Buddhist philosophy in Asia, the start date of Buddhism is ambiguous. After the seventh century, Islamic conquest started to spread across these areas. Parts of Afghanistan were essential to the religious practices and expansion of Buddhism, particularly during the Kushan empire (Gaulier et al. 1). In Bâmiyân, in the fifth and sixth centuries, the colossal statues, which are assumed to be the standing "Buddha Lokanatha (the Lord of the world)," were built before the expansion of Islam (Gaulier et al. 22).

18 Unpublished interview with Atiq Rahimi (August 2021).

19 Theo van Leeuwen suggests a wider context and concludes his study of speech acts with: "*Genres of speech and writing are in fact multimodal: [...] written genres combine language, image and graphics in an integrated whole*" (10). According to Gunther Kress, a multimodal study of meaning-making communication in print goes beyond the language and includes visual modes like color, layout, size, and other factors (79–98).

create moments of silence, which indicate the inadequacy of language to express traumatic experiences during war or in exile. Rahimi's writing style captures the catastrophic consequences of war when only fragments of self and memory are left. The reading experience constantly oscillates between these two extremes: moments of silent mourning and moments of hectic tension imitating conditions under duress.

In the introduction to Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* (2010), which is the English translation of *Syngué Sabour: Pierre de patience*, Khaled Hosseini characterizes Rahimi's literary style as a symptom of political history: "The years of factional infighting were some of the darkest of the last thirty years in Afghanistan, and in Rahimi's sparse prose, the era comes to life to devastating effect" (274). In *Poetik der Migration* (2009), Eva Hausbacher states that migrant authors predominantly publish "(Kurz-) Prosa und Essay" ("short prose and essay") (119). Rahimi is part of the 'trend' toward shorter prose, but his brief narratives also reflect his distinct style in its expression leaning on poetry. In fact, Atiq Rahimi emphasizes the influence of poetry on his prose writing: "J'ai grandi dans une culture où la poésie l'emporte sur tout, où l'on ne parle que par images et symboles. C'est pour cela sans doute [...] que je n'écris jamais vraiment des romans" ["I grew up in a culture where poetry prevails over everything, where we only speak through images and symbols. That is undoubtedly why [...] I never really write novels"] (Bouchy 7). Rahimi's style has been globally praised as poetic, as Mohammed Aïssaoui states in his book review of *Les Porteurs d'eau* "Avec [Atiq Rahimi], la poésie n'est jamais loin" ["With [Atiq Rahimi], poetry is never far away"] ("Voyage"). Across all of Atiq Rahimi's narratives, prose writing is interspersed with poetry, as exemplified in the following quotation from Rahimi's *Les Porteurs d'eau*:

Que le temps s'arrête.
Que Yûsef reste toujours sous le *sandali*.
Que Shirine dorme éternellement au chaud.

40

That time stands still.
That Yûsef always stays under the *sandali* [heater].
May Shirine sleep forever warm.

In his novellas and novels, particularly in French, the narrative at times breaks the flow with indented paragraphs of poetry. These types of textual arrangement are, according to Jean Cohen, no longer prose, as "[...] *une page de vers se distingue d'une page de prose par sa composition typographique. Après chaque*

vers, le poème passe à la ligne” [“a page of verse is distinguished from a page of prose by its typographic composition. After each verse, the poem skips to the next line”] (57). Due to Rahimi’s condensed writing style, readers engage with texts that do not offer all the answers. This is typical for poetry that, according to Paul Éluard, tends toward brevity: “Les poèmes ont toujours de grandes marges blanches, de grandes marges de silence [...]” [“Poems always have large white margins, large margins of silence”] (77). The reader of Rahimi’s works is obliged to ‘read’ these blank parts of the pages and engage with the un verbalized trauma when contemplating during these breaks.

A stark contrast to his poetic writings and long pauses created by white spaces is Rahimi’s fragmented and dynamic writing. In Rahimi’s prose, intricate and flowery language appears superfluous; thus, it is replaced with simple sentence structures and short main clauses. Postmodern multimodal aesthetics is also visible in Rahimi’s syntax, which Nørgaard, in her analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), characterizes as “staccato effects of short sentences” (120). This stabbing effect resulting in high tension is already visible in Rahimi’s first translingual publication *Syngué Sabour: Pierre de patience*. The text creates a tense reading experience as its minimalistic aesthetics establish a daunting diegetic space. It also reflects the nameless female protagonist’s nervous state while awaiting her husband’s anticipated recovery from his coma. Despite Rahimi’s change from Persian/Dari to French, Rahimi’s typical brief sentence units remain prevalent in both languages. His dynamic writing alternates between complex syntactic units and simple sentences, also called “one-clause sentences,” which even consist of only one word (Leech and Short 176). The first paragraph of Rahimi’s award-winning first translingual work, which inspired *L’Invité du miroir* (Aïssaoui “L’Invité”), reflects the tense atmosphere in a war-torn society:

La chambre est petite. Rectangulaire. Elle est étouffante malgré ses murs clairs, couleur cyan, et ses deux rideaux aux motifs d’oiseaux migrateurs figés dans leur élan sur un ciel jaune et bleu. [...] Au fond de la chambre, il y a un autre rideau. Vert. Sans motif aucun. Il cache une porte condamnée. Ou un débarras.

RAHIMI *Syngué Sabour* 13

The room is small. Rectangular. Stifling, despite the paleness of the turquoise walls, and the two curtains patterned with migrating birds frozen mid-flight against a yellow and blue sky. [...] At the far end of the room is another curtain. Green. Unpatterned. Concealing a disused door. Or an alcove.

RAHIMI *The Patience Stone (Sang-e Saboor)* 280

This paragraph is an example of Rahimi's distinctive syntax, which Emily Goldstein characterizes in her close reading of Rahimi's work as "[...] short, rhythmic, emotive and visually stirring [...]." In this example, the succession of simple sentence structures reflects the cold and ruthless nature of a war zone. Generally, Rahimi's narratives consist of a large number of brief and elliptical sentences as well as a gradually smaller amount of Persian/Dari expressions across his translingual publications, hence reflecting a polyvocal society. In his comparative reading of Rahimi's French narratives and translated Persian/Dari text, Boutisane further claims that Rahimi's style consists of short sentences, which express his aspiration to violate classical writing traditions (*La Littérature Afghane* 63). This break with tradition is further evident in Rahimi's contemporary adaptation of classical Persian calligraphy.

Atiq Rahimi's multimodal fragments of fiction—inspired by Rwandan oral literature, nonfiction, and nonlinguistic signs in *L'Invité du miroir*—allow his artistic transcultural engagement, resulting in Rwandan and Afghan multidirectional memory²⁰ of crimes against humanity. Rahimi's multilingual writing adapts to the multimodal axis of communication by refashioning Persian traditions. Following Mahdijeh Meidani's study of the multimodal meaning-making of classical Persian calligraphic letterforms (96), I argue that Rahimi's adaptation of traditional Persian calligraphy is equally multimodal, and not just merely abstract art forms. Since no transitional justice has been practiced in Afghanistan, its society lives within the culture of "*vengeance aveugle et interminable*" ["endless blind revenge"] (Rahimi *L'Invité* 184). Rahimi draws out his first language's cultural and linguistic limitations since it does not offer the language to address and overcome past and present gender and ethnic injustices. With his work, he explicitly refers to the consequences of Afghanistan's civil war and calls out the systematic and targeted destruction of its population: "[...] *on commet le génocide des femmes, / des poètes, / des sages, / des amoureux...*" ["we commit the genocide of women, / poets, / sages, / lovers"] (50). Here, Rahimi addresses the consequences of a dictatorial regime strictly following religious fundamentalism, which he also addresses in the following exographic work. In *L'Invité du miroir*, the girl, who swims to the bottom of Lake Kivu, searches words in Kinyarwanda to describe horrific events and surroundings related to the Rwandan genocide again. The three Persian/Dari words depicted in the calligraphy in Figure 1 do not belong to that collection

20 To understand the articulated connection between two "histories of victimization," I refer to Michael Rothberg's theory of "multidirectional memory," in which he addresses a variety of traumatic memories of past crimes against humanity, whether genocide, slavery, or forced displacement during times of war, and puts them into a constructive dialogue (2).

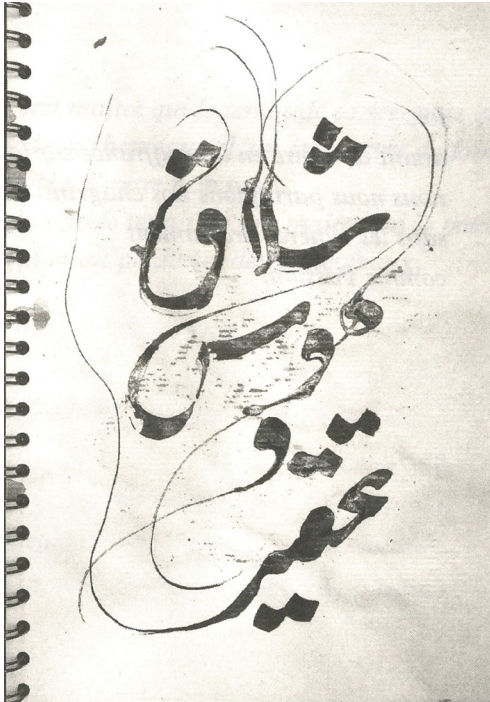


FIGURE 1 Atiq Rahimi, *L'Invité du miroir*, 138; [lashing, lust and humiliation]. This calligraphy is composed by Atiq Rahimi himself.

L'INVITÉ DU MIROIR © P.O.L EDITEUR, 2020

but are inspired by her selection. It is rather the Afghan narrator who meditated on genocide against Afghanistan's population.

Here, Rahimi incorporates his calligraphic drawings inspired by classical Persian calligraphy (36, 88, 138). Unlike his handwritten French and Persian/Dari diary entries, Rahimi's calligraphies of Perso-Arabic and Latin characters required the use of the appropriate tool for Persian calligraphy, the classical "reed pen (*qalam*)" (Meidani 65). In his Persian/Dari calligraphies, Rahimi follows Nasta'liq's²¹ calligraphic traditions with tilted letters such as "س، ت، ث، ق، و" and "ی".²² He further pays attention to the typical placement and design of the

21 Nasta'liq calligraphy is a convergence of "two types of calligraphy (or styles of writing), namely, Naskh and Taliq" (Meidani 100).

22 For comparative purposes, I consulted the Nasta'liq style depicted in Mahdīyeh Meidani's monograph (*Persian Calligraphy* 25–29, 33–36, 49, 128). I further studied several Nasta'liq calligraphies created by Imād Al-Ḥasanī from the early seventeenth century (ARCH Foundation).

dots. Yet, Rahimi's dots in his Nasta'liq-inspired calligraphies do not always follow the textbook form with the curved right side visible in Mahdīyeh Meidani's detailed study (28–29). Rahimi's calligraphies show mostly purely angled, square dots. Despite adhering to traditional letterforms, his creative adaptation of classical calligraphy is visually captured for every Persian word, as they all end with an upward thin line instead of curved edges. According to Nasta'liq style, which is considered "prone to intricacy and indulgence," artists follow curved hand motions rooted in mysticism (Meidani 274–304).

Engaging with Afghanistan's horrific past and present atrocities via the discussion on the Rwandan genocide allows Rahimi to reconnect with ancient traditions. Rahimi's creative work can be compared to what Shuangyi Li illustrates in his pioneering study of Franco-Chinese literature: "Such an agenda is not exactly preoccupied with poetic forms but *forms of poetics*, visual and literary, across calligraphic and novelistic works" (46; italics added). Rahimi's cross-genre expression establishes a communicative system between the author, his literary work, and his readers that does not always accommodate monolingual readers, as his work has its own merit in its artistic sense. Rahimi's diary excerpts include Persian intersigns, whether in its authentic sense in his own handwriting in Persian/Dari or its artistic and meditative sense in classical Persian calligraphy. The traditional act of calligraphy captures moments of reflection, which are considered sacred in Persian and Arabic imagery as calligraphies depict the divine (Boutisane "Atiq Rahimi"). While in Rwanda, Rahimi contemplated human suffering in Afghanistan and Rwanda and entered a dialogue with the divine on theodicy.

Rahimi's creation of exophonic texts also includes the creative multilingual and multimodal process, during which the reed pen interacts with the French language, thus becoming part of the meditative process. His Nasta'liq-inspired calligraphy is also visible in its avant-garde form, as French words are presented according to Persian calligraphic aesthetic (*L'Invité* 36, 60, 104). These French terms, which are masked in foreign traditions, appear as Persian symbols at first glance. These acts of auto-translations exemplify the various modes of a multilingual writer, where different linguistic and artistic traditions culminate in creative exchanges and such forms of creative expression encourage transcultural discourses and cross-boundaries collective mourning. With his transgression, Rahimi dares to creatively redefine and adapt Persian traditions to contemporary lives in exile, while suggesting similar moments of contemplations with French lexemes when creating his multilingual calligraphies. Rahimi adapts classical Persian calligraphy by using Latin script to fit transnational experiences and dialogues on genocide. Rahimi's multilingual meditation of racial inequalities artistically captures the interaction of Per-

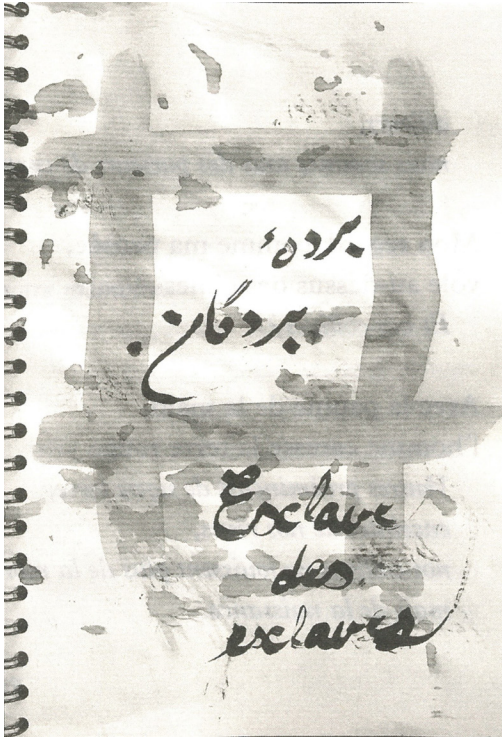


FIGURE 2 Atiq Rahimi, *L'Invité du miroir*, 104; [slave of slaves]. This calligraphy is composed by Atiq Rahimi himself.

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sian/Dari and their auto-translations in calligraphy (36, 104). The power balance is reversed; it is the Latin script that migrates onto the classical Persian meaning-making canvas, thus creating a transformative and creative synthesis for realities in exile. The traditionally elongated Perso-Arabic letter “ی,” used when ending a word, found its equivalent in the Latin letters “e” and “s,” when appearing as the last letter of a word (104).

In addition to writing about moments of “horrific surrealism,”²³ Rahimi includes bilingual calligraphy addressing traumatic past and present. For instance, the storyteller questions his reality “Où suis-je? / Dans son cauchemar, à lui? / Ou lui, / dans mon cauchemar à moi?” [“Where am I? / In his night-

23 Omid Tofghian's hermeneutical schema he calls “horrific surrealism,” inspired by his translation of writer Behrouz Boochani's work, encapsulates the act of writing while living in inhumane living conditions (“Translator's Tale” 367; see also Tofghian “Horrific Surrealism”).

mare? / Or him, / in my nightmare?" (95). In the calligraphy in Figure 2, Rahimi offers insight into his exographic engagement with racial injustices.

Following this calligraphy, the narrative offers context: The Rwandan man, while crying without tears, addresses Noah's curse "*Nous sommes esclaves de l'Esclave, / enfants maudits de Noé qui a enraciné notre « race »*" ["We are slaves of the Slave, / cursed children of Noah who implanted our 'race'"] (107). In his transgressive work, Rahimi's French and Persian calligraphic explorations become gradually more expressive and dramatic, reaching their transcultural and multilingual climax in both calligraphies depicted in Figures 1 and 2 (104, 138). His peculiar condition of comprehending and expanding creative possibilities of his first language through an artistic lens effectively challenges binary definitions, since his multilingual work creates new inter- and intracultural spaces for honest discussions to come to terms with a society's traumatic history. Afghanistan's tribal animosities impede its citizens from different ethnic groups from talking about the historical oppression and persecution of marginalized Afghan tribes. In Rahimi's work, cross-fertilization between different linguistic signs and signs in nonlinguistic modes on one page introduces a cross-cultural mystical meditation and moments of contemplation with his readership. Comparable with his multimodal decisions of page layouts and transcultural calligraphies, Rahimi's multilingual strategies across his translingual novels interact with the reader in the same mode: utilizing the visual aspects of non-European languages.

Conclusion

Although Rahimi's translingual publications largely embrace grammatically correct French, his multilingual strategies still creatively disrupt his text using Indo-European and Semitic languages as well as classical Persian calligraphy. With his multilingual ruptures of the French language, Rahimi appears as a cultural mediator whose literary work certainly illustrates the plight and pain of persecution, migration, and exile while creatively challenging the linguistic purity of the French language. With his philosophical and creative writings, Rahimi not only upholds ancient Persian traditions but also challenges rigid rules of Nasta'liq calligraphy to fit his current multilingual reality while engaging with past traumas abroad. Rahimi's avant-garde multilingual and multimodal oeuvre further ruptures the traditional European rhetoric of prose and thus invites his readers to rethink limiting ideas of generic concepts. Rahimi's work voices the plight of various ethnic minorities suffering from political instabilities across Central Asia, which affected Afghans in exile across generations.

Rahimi's multilingual texts are not only a reflection of a linguistic amalgam but a concoction of blended styles, traditions, and various marginalized cultural spaces. The complexity of Rahimi's transcultural, multimodal, and multilingual entanglement can be fully grasped by tracing his contribution to Afghanistan's cultural memory and his experience in exile. Rahimi's literary style and identity are a convergence and confluence of politics and cultures from the current destruction of Bâmiyân's Buddhist heritage and the persecution of religious minorities to classical Persian literary customs. By engaging with Afghanistan's intercultural differences, Rahimi introduces a heterogeneous cultural identity of a society that has suffered under the oppressive system established by the Taliban regime, while avoiding stereotyping as a native informer.

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