

AHMAD SHAMLU *Describer of the Indescribable*

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What can I say about our country's greatest poet? Critics have written, and write, volumes on Shamlu's poetry so I leave to them the deeper analyses of his work. To avoid repeating worn phrases, I shall speak of my personal understanding and experience from years of contact with Shamlu's poetry.

First and foremost, Shamlu rescued me at a time when all said and written about Iran dealt with fundamentalism, intolerance and hostility towards art, literature and culture. I, along with thousands of other Iranians, was deeply upset over how unjustly our country's brilliant literature and art were treated. I am speaking of the present, not of that which is appreciated throughout the world and known as the great literature of Persia, that of olden days.

People have been familiar with Persia's great classical writers, such as Omar Khayyam, but knew almost nothing of current poetry. I determined to translate some samples. And whom should I select if not Ahmad Shamlu, the greatest of poets, our pride? Our country's leading cultural figure?

*Shamlu was not easy to translate, but I was eager to build a little bridge between this country, Sweden, and the poesy of my homeland. So it began. With the aid of my dear friend and Swedish teacher, Carin Leche, and with the help of Iranian friends who were more familiar with Shamlu's poetry than I, I threw myself into translation work. I gradually discovered that Shamlu gave me a goal, hope, work with his poetry lifted me out of depression and strengthened my self-confidence in exile. After the translations had been published in the magazine *Ord & Bild* and the collection "*Allomfattande kärlek*" (*All-embracing Love*) came out in Swedish, I noticed that Shamlu's poetry helped readers to a better understanding of me and my background, it was as though he described the indescribable within me and many other Iranians. That was my reward.*

**We stand
outside time
with a bitter dagger
in our backs
no one speaks with no one
for silence
with a thousands tongues
speaks**

In another poem he describes a world where one talks to the jasmine by cutting it down.

My second reward was that work with his poetry taught me much about

rhythm and melody in language and of the music in poetry, an understanding I increasingly appreciate.

One day some years ago, I was rung up by a lady who introduced herself as the wife of one of my colleagues. She told me her husband had died two days before. I knew of the cancer which had struck when he was about forty and of his two-year struggle against it. My colleague's wife asked permission to print an excerpt from one of Shamlu's poems in the announcement of his death. Her husband had been very fond of Shamlu's poetry and had copied this poem by hand:

**Perfect existence
because you continue in your absence
and your absence
is the undeniable presence of the miracle**

Saddened by my colleague's death I listened to her, astonished. She said that for the family, Shamlu's poem seemed a testament from the dear one who had died.

How can an author on almost the other side of the world write a poem which can become the testament of a Swede? It must be about something special, something unique. Shamlu must speak of something shared by all mankind, recognizable, which touches readers wherever they may be.

But who is Shamlu? The poet, whose pseudonym is Bamdad (which means dawn) was born 74 years ago in Tehran. Shamlu published his first collection of poems when he was only 22 years old. He has now been writing poetry for more than half a century and published 18 collections of poems. Altogether he has written over a hundred books, amongst them some which have not been granted permission to publish. He is a toiler neither age nor sickness can hinder.

He is versatile, writing in prose as well as poetry. He writes for children in prose and poetry, books which are very popular amongst both the young and adults. He has been Chief Editor of several literary journals, which have been the best in the country's journalistic history.

He is also a philologist. His enormous work "The Book of the Street", a collection of popular traditions, customs, usages and sayings, is planned to be published in a hundred volumes. Shamlu began to collect material young. He grew up in different towns around the country as his father was an army officer. This has certainly had a bearing on his interest in and knowledge of people's lives in Iran, the different ethnic groups, dialects and traditions.

He has published studies on classical authors such as Hafiz. And he is a gifted translator. He is a cosmopolitan, he belongs to the whole world, the world is his home. Since he holds Lorca to be the world's finest poet, he translated "The Blood Wedding" into Persian; it is why he has translated and introduced Haiku poetry.

One of Shamlu's poems is called "To the Poet Issa". After a fruitless search in encyclopedias I asked a Japanese friend if she knew of Issa. "Yes, but how can it be that an Iranian poet dedicate a poem to a 19th century Japanese poet who was master of Haiku poetry?" she asked in surprise.

Yes, Shamlu is related to everyone. In a poem to the imprisoned Nelson Mandela he says "all who love are related" and asks him:

*reach me your hand in trust
you, neighbor of pain*

...

*sing a song with us in trust
you, neighbor of pain*

Shamlu has translated Chinese tales, he has translated Saint Exupéry so we Persian speakers can delight in reading "[Le petit prince](#)".

His other specialty is to read poetry aloud, and not only his own works. His interest in Iran's classical literature leads him to read aloud Hafiz, Mowlana Rumi and Khayyam. He has also read Lorca's poetry in his own translations. Cassettes with his readings are found in their millions in Iranian homes. Listening to Shamlu's readings one understands poetry the better.

There is much to tell about Shamlu and his poems, how he sides with the weak, that he does not bend to power, that he loves mankind, and so forth. But I confine myself to say that I enjoy Shamlu's poetry because it takes me on a voyage of discovery into mankind's inner life, it gives me knowledge of myself, my surroundings, the whole world.

Quite simply, Shamlu's poetry helps me to become a better person.

AM gave this speech in Älvkarleby, Sweden, on June 5, 1999, when she received the Stig Dagerman Award on behalf of Ahmad Shamlu.

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