

# POETRY AND THE WAR ON TERROR: THE CASE OF SYED TALHA AHSAN

*Pietro Deandrea*

In May 2013 public opinion was informed that the British army in Camp Bastion (Afghanistan) held some ninety native prisoners in inhuman conditions, arbitrarily and indefinitely, as a result of a government decision to extend exceptional measures to all detainees. Predictably, the news stirred much shock and debate<sup>1</sup>, showing another appalling side of the involvement of the UK in the American War on Terror based on exceptional measures. Commenting on President Bush's 2001 special laws, Giorgio Agamben identified in the state of exception, "state power's immediate response to the most extreme internal conflicts", a structural element of continuity between the techniques of government of modern totalitarian states and the "so-called democratic ones [...] a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism."

Agamben's juridical and philosophical analysis shows that the state of exception "tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics"<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, in the past decade the exceptional practice whereby people can be detained without evidence and trial has been practised on British soil, too, thanks to a specific Act involving Britain and the US:

In 2003 a new Extradition Act was fast-tracked into UK legislation without a formal consultative parliamentary process, scrutiny or debate. [...] the UK would be expected to extradite any individual to the US on request, without the need for the US to provide prima facie evidence (only to invoke reasonable suspicion), and thus

<sup>1</sup> E. GIORDANA, *La Guantanamo di Sua Maestà*, "Il manifesto" 30-5-2013, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> G. AGAMBEN, *State of Exception*, translated from the Italian by Kevin Attell, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 2005 (2003), pp. 2-3.

without allowing the individual called to challenge any evidence provided by the US in a British court of law<sup>3</sup>.

In the face of this breach of national sovereignty, supported firmly by both New Labour and the later Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, a hotly-contested debate ensued in Britain. The 2003 Act sounds to many as “the legal equivalent of rendition”<sup>4</sup>: it seems clear that the War on Terror operates not only as a suspension of the law, but through the production of law itself<sup>5</sup> (often going against international law on human rights)<sup>6</sup>.

The fall-out of this policy on everyday life might be hard to grasp for the general public. Perhaps some individual stories help clarify this point and, with respect to this, Syed Talha Ahsan’s case is certainly emblematic. Born in 1979, a graduate at SOAS in London, he was accused of having supported Chechnyan and Aghani fighters (before 9/11) under an online alias, through some websites with servers partially located in Connecticut. He was described by his family as deeply upset, in the aftermath of 9/11, by the War on Terror, and non-violently campaigning against detention in Guantanamo. Arrested in July 2006 in his house in south London, he was held in prison in Britain until October 2012, and eventually (after some appeal trials and popular campaigning) extradited to the US, his trial due in March 2014.<sup>7</sup> Ahsan is a British citizen of Bengali origins who, throughout his

<sup>3</sup> N. KAPOOR, *Extraordinary Extradition: Racial (In)justice in Britain*, in AA.VV., *The State of Race*, edited by N. Kapoor, V.S. Kalra and J. Rhodes, Houndmills, Palgrave, 2013, p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> D. GREGORY, *Vanishing Points: Law, Violence, Exception in the Global War Prison*, in AA.VV., *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror and Political Violence*, edited by D. Gregory and A. Pred, New York, Routledge, 2007, quoted in N. Kapoor, *Extraordinary Extradition*, pp. 186-187. Agamben (*State of Exception*, p. 21) similarly points to a current practice of having “exceptional laws issued”.

<sup>6</sup> G. PEIRCE, *Dispatches from the Dark Side: On Torture and the Death of Justice*, London, Verso, 2010, quoted in N. Kapoor, *Extraordinary Extradition*, p. 185.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. TAYLOR, *Talha Ahsan: Behind Bars for Six Years without Charge and Family Losing Faith in the Rule of Law*, “The Independent” 6-9-2012, <[www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/talha-ahsan-behind-bars-for-six-years-without-charge-and-family-losing-faith-in-the-rule-of-law-8113730.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/talha-ahsan-behind-bars-for-six-years-without-charge-and-family-losing-faith-in-the-rule-of-law-8113730.html)> (accessed 1 September 2013); I. PATEL, *The Impossible Injustice of Talha Ahsan’s Extradition and Detention*, “The New Statesman” 21-2-2013, <[www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/02/impossible-injustice-talha-ahsan%E2%80%99s-extradition-and-detention](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/02/impossible-injustice-talha-ahsan%E2%80%99s-extradition-and-detention)> (accessed 1 September 2013).

ordeal, has never been interrogated by British authorities; prior to his extradition, he had never set foot in the US. His story constitutes living proof of what Nisha Kapoor writes: “the War on Terror is used to sanction an interminable state of exception, where the near-permanent militarisation of civilian life is justified as a necessary safeguard”<sup>8</sup>.

Although it may sound exemplary (and a warning for all British citizens), this story is unique for a number of reasons. The one I want to reflect upon here is related to the topic of the present volume. Ahsan’s award-winning poetical production is worth reading and studying not only for its documentary quality of testimony under the claws of institutional injustice, but also for its subtle ways of unveiling the most disquieting facets of his ordeal, the implications of which reach well beyond his personal misfortunes.

The pages that follow are a double-text selection of some of his poems, both published and (yet) unpublished<sup>9</sup>. The image of the empty mirror in “Life Sentence” alludes at how the state of exception is capable of sweeping off individuals, making them incorporeal to public opinion. The “gaping hole” quoted in the poem is magnified and multiplied in the following “Mind the Gap”, a bitterly ironic take on the Kafkaesque (but legal) lack of evidence supporting the charges against him – an apparent paradox hinted at in lines 4 to 6.

“This Be the Answer” is a proud response to the anti-Muslim humiliations inflicted by a British gaoler. It gestures at the documented tortures that made the news not so long ago, expressing a sense of dignity that is at once of religious nature and profoundly human. This poem also points at one appalling facet of the debate over extradition triggered by the 2003 Act: Nisha Kapoor demonstrates how, in institutions and in the media, the preoccupation that dominated the debate had to do with the possibility that *white* Britons might fall victim to the extradition process<sup>10</sup>. She especially shows this to be true through a detailed analysis of the case of Babar Ahmad (whose story

<sup>8</sup> N. KAPOOR, *Extraordinary Extradition*, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> “Life Sentence” (p. 18), “Mind the Gap” (7), “This Be the Answer” (19-20) and “Return to Exile” (9) are taken from SYED TALHA AHSAN, *This Be the Answer: Poems from Prison*, foreword by A. Anwar, Edinburgh, Radio Ramadan Edinburgh, 2011. “Snowflakes”, “Grieving”, “Love at the Edge of a Pond” and “On a Foreign Plain” are still unpublished.

<sup>10</sup> N. KAPOOR, *Extraordinary Extradition*, passim.

has been following the same pattern as Ahsan's<sup>11</sup>) and concludes: "the intricacies of the debate on extradition showcase the return to explicit and blatant racism"<sup>12</sup>. Vron Ware identifies in this institutionally racist reaction a typical pattern of our time dominated by the War on Terror:

the undertow of white supremacy [...] determines a predictable response to all manner of insecurity. [...] As the military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan become more desperate and futile, members of the government repeatedly vent their anger on Muslims within the UK, directing public attention to the potential disruption that they represent to some imagined harmonious British way of life<sup>13</sup>

Relatedly, Didier Bigo theorises the concept of the ban-opticon dispositif as a transnational system of exclusionary practices based on exceptionalism, the profiling of foreigners aimed at their containment, and the normalization of those who are not excluded<sup>14</sup> – including, I would add, the acceptance of injustice as in Ahsan's case. According to Bigo, these special laws "install in the heart of the present time the idea that we are living in a 'permanent state of emergency'"<sup>15</sup>.

The problems concerned with having to negotiate between cultures surface in Ahsan's poems "Return to Exile", where he presumably describes a difficult journey back to his Asian origins, and "Snowflakes", centred again on the feeling of immateriality that characterises his life in Britain. The mournful atmosphere of "Grieving" (winner of the 2012 Koestler Trust's Platinum Award) is followed by the forbidden feelings described in "Love at the Edge of a Pond", where once again authority (though of a different kind) is indicted.

Finally, "On a Foreign Plain" is concerned with another source of suffering in Ahsan's personal story: his battle against the Asperger's syndrome that he was diagnosed with in 2009. This certified condition did not help his case in legal courts, and did not help him out of six years of imprisonment in the UK and one year in Connecticut – and a

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 190-193.

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup> V. WARE, *The White Fear Factor*, in "Wasafiri", 22 (July 2007), pp. 51, 55.

<sup>14</sup> D. BIGO, *Globalized-In-Security: The Field and the Ban-opticon*, translated from the French by A. McKnight, in AA.VV., *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference (Traces: A Multilingual Series of Cultural Theory and Translation*, no. 4), edited by N. Sakai and J. Solomon, Aberdeen (Hong Kong), Hong Kong University Press, 2006, pp. 110, 132-138.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 135.

prospective life sentence in solitary confinement in one of the infamous and much-criticised supermax prisons in the US, if he is found guilty. As yet another form of institutional racism, in October 2012 (ten days after Ahsan and Babar Ahmad were extradited), the British Home Secretary Theresa May cancelled the extradition of Gary McKinnon, a *white* Briton accused of cyber-related crimes, falling under the same 2003 Act, and diagnosed with the same Asperger's syndrome as Ahsan<sup>16</sup>. Only seven days before this decision, she declared at the Conservative Party conference: "Wasn't it great to say goodbye – at long last – to Abu Hamza and *those four other* terror suspects?"<sup>17</sup>

Syed Talha Ahsan is to be seen as part of a wider issue, arguably as the tip of an iceberg. Despite the limited outrage created by his case, being a British subject contributed to make him less invisible than the foreign nationals detained and extradited to the US as terrorist suspects and whose cases were not debated in Parliament<sup>18</sup>, and than those refugees, asylum-seekers and economic migrants that are increasingly criminalised by institutions. Generally speaking, the War on Terror is dangerously contributing to the construction of

a semantic continuum [...] situating the struggle against terrorism at one end and the reception of refugees at the other end of the continuum [...] the construction of the image of the enemy within by intelligent services, such that their profiling applies to certain groups of foreigners resident within a country itself [...] the control of any citizen who does not correspond to the *a priori* social image that one holds of his national identity (e.g. the children of first-generation immigrants, minority groups...)<sup>19</sup>.

It is time, as Vron Ware writes, to demand "a more inclusive and open public debate about the country's role on the world stage, and the internal effects of a catastrophic foreign policy"<sup>20</sup>. Ahsan's poems might help give flesh and blood to this incipient problem. At the time of writing (September 2013), he is still in a Connecticut prison, and I

<sup>16</sup> N. KAPOOR, *Extraordinary Extradition*, pp. 194-195.

<sup>17</sup> I. PATEL, *Impossible Injustice*.

<sup>18</sup> N. KAPOOR, *Extraordinary Extradition*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>19</sup> D. BIGO, *Globalized-In-Security*, pp. 115-116, 119

<sup>20</sup> V. WARE, *White Fear Factor*, p. 55

like to think of him remembering two lines from his poem “Scatched on a Wall” (not included here):

like a piece of paper, folded and folded over again,  
I am stronger, less easy to tear.

### *Acknowledgments*

I wish to thank Talha Ahsan and his brother Hamja Ahsan for giving me permission to publish Talha’s poems. These pages are dedicated to their endurance in the face of grief. [www.freetalha.org](http://www.freetalha.org)

Eight poems by Syed Talha Ahsan

*Traduzione di Pietro Deandrea*

*Life Sentence*<sup>21</sup>

to kill  
is to erase an image  
off a mirror:

swift glance &  
side-step,

no body

just a gaping hole  
upon an indifferent world

*Mind the Gap*

( ) until proven ( ),  
( ) and ( ),  
anti-( )

some allegations  
the firmer denied  
the greater proven,

the chasm between  
( ) and ( ) widens,

jump it,  
don't fill it

<sup>21</sup> For the English text of all the following poems, © Syed Talha Ahsan.



*Condanna a vita*

uccidere  
è cancellare un'immagine  
da uno specchio

rapido sguardo &  
farsi da parte,

niente corpo

solo un buco spalancato  
su un mondo indifferente

*Mind the Gap*

( ) fino a prova ( ),  
( ) e ( ),  
anti-( )

certe accuse  
più fermamente vengono smentite  
e più sono dimostrate,

l'abisso tra  
( ) e ( ) si estende,

saltalo,  
non colmarlo.

*This Be the Answer*

A prisoner on his knees  
scrubs around a toilet bowl  
and the bristles of the brush  
scuttle to and fro  
as a guard swaggers over  
to yell rather than ask—

Where is your God now?

And the prisoner still on his knees  
his brush still cleaning answers:

He is with me now, gov.

My God is with me now  
hearing and seeing,  
whilst your superiors  
when they see you, do not look at you  
and when they hear you, do not listen to you

My God is risen above the heavens  
and closer to me than my jugular vein,  
whilst your superiors no different to you  
allow you no further than the desk

My God wants me to call Him  
whilst your superiors demand you knock

And when I go towards Him a hand span,  
He comes to me a yard  
and when I go to Him walking,  
He comes to me running

Ignorance is cured by knowledge  
and the key to knowledge is to ask.

Less now the exclamation  
and more a question mark,  
the guard sulks away,  
and a prisoner on his knees,  
still, as if in prayer.

HMP Long Lartin, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2008

*Sia questa la risposta*

Un prigioniero in ginocchio  
strofina il bordo di un water  
e le setole della spazzola  
saltano qua e là  
mentre una guardia arriva tronfia  
ad urlare, più che domandare—

Dov'è il tuo Dio, adesso?

E il prigioniero sempre sulle ginocchia  
la spazzola sempre a pulire risponde:

Lui è con me, capo.

Il mio Dio è con me adesso,  
sente e vede,  
mentre i vostri superiori  
quando vi vedono, non vi guardano  
e quando vi sentono, non vi ascoltano

Il mio Dio è aldilà del cielo  
e più vicino a me della mia giugulare  
mentre i vostri superiori non diversi da voi  
non vi fanno andare oltre la scrivania

Il mio Dio vuole che Lo chiami  
mentre con i vostri superiori voi dovete bussare

E quando mi avvicino a Lui di un palmo,  
Lui viene a me di un metro  
e quando da Lui cammino,  
Lui viene a me di corsa

L'ignoranza si cura con la conoscenza  
e la chiave per la conoscenza è domandare.

Adesso meno esclamativo  
e più un punto di domanda,  
la guardia se ne va imbronciata,  
e un prigioniero in ginocchio,  
ancora, come in preghiera.

Prigione di Sua Maestà di Long Lartin, 26 giugno 2008

*Return to Exile*

The inky waters skim fingers stretched  
overboard a boat ferrying me  
along on a humid morning;

the chugging has started of throats clearing,  
devotees chanting and traders hawking,  
competing for attention of multitudes  
emerging from verdant banks

Like *jelabis*<sup>22</sup> lifted from boiling vats,  
faces crackle at my fumbling vowels.

Only the flitting nightingale with the clipped wings  
that day beheld the foreign hum at the door.  
She listened with me, as scissors gobbled around  
my starving ears, to a song playing on the radio:  
my bib could have been its lyric sheet;  
the bird's silence a rough translation  
and a single tear my understanding.

It's ok, it's unexpected I know.  
I am not escaping. I am returning.

<sup>22</sup> Deep fried Indian sweet.

*Ritorno all'esilio*

Acque d'inchiostro sfiorano dita tese  
oltre il bordo di una barca che mi traghetta  
in un mattino umido:

lo scoppietto è iniziato tra schiarirsi di gole,  
canti di devoti e grida d'ambulanti,  
in gara per l'attenzione di moltitudini  
emerse da rive verdeggianti

come *jelabis*<sup>23</sup> levati da un ribollire di tinozze,  
i volti crepitano per le mie goffe vocali.

Solo il fuggente usignolo dalle ali tarpate  
quel giorno osservava il mormorio straniero alla porta.  
Ascoltava con me, mentre forbici s'ingozzavano attorno  
alle mie orecchie affamate, una canzone alla radio:  
il mio bavaglino avrebbe potuto essere il suo lirico spartito,  
il silenzio dell'uccello una rozza traduzione  
e una singola lacrima il mio comprendere.

Va tutto bene, non era previsto, lo so.  
Non sto fuggendo. Sto facendo ritorno.

<sup>23</sup> Dolce indiano fritto nel grasso.

*snowflakes*

there are now coming up to seven billion people in the world  
each one like a snowflake  
they say each snowflake is unique  
i wouldn't really know  
i've never seen a snowflake up close  
let alone compare two  
but while i shiver here alone  
i look up at the xmas shoppers  
they are very much like the snowflakes  
each one oblivious to the other

*fiocchi di neve*

ci siamo ora avvicinando a sette miliardi di persone nel mondo  
ognuna come un fiocco di neve  
dicono che ogni fiocco sia unico  
io non saprei dire  
non ho mai visto un fiocco di neve da vicino  
tanto meno ne ho paragonati due  
ma mentre tremo qui da solo  
levo lo sguardo a chi fa lo shopping di natale  
assomigliano molto a fiocchi di neve  
ognuno inconsapevole dell'altro

*Grieving*

(i)

If I was the comb in your hair,  
a bracelet on your wrist, the henna on your feet

there would be no need to mourn

when the poetry of your blood has paused  
we stand here by your tomb  
and when I turn back  
like a yolk  
in my fist  
her small hand

(ii)

Tonight the sheets scorch me

the house is bloated in its emptiness

wherever I search for you  
I erase your presence

I stare at my hands like a murderer

when in the darkness  
I hear kitten steps

a handle clicks  
and like a ball  
bouncing down the stairs

the name only you could have given me



*In lutto*

( i )

Se io fossi il pettine tra i tuoi capelli,  
un braccialetto al tuo polso, l'henné ai tuoi piedi

non ci sarebbe bisogno di affliggersi

fermatasi la poesia del tuo sangue  
siamo qui alla tua tomba  
e quando mi volto  
come un tuorlo  
nel mio pugno  
la sua manina

( ii )

Stanotte le lenzuola bruciano

la casa è rigonfia del proprio vuoto

ovunque io ti cerchi  
cancello la tua presenza

mi fisso le mani come un assassino

quando nel buio  
sento passi di gattino

una maniglia scatta  
e come una palla  
che rimbalza giù per le scale

il nome che solo tu avresti potuto darmi

( iii )

If you were the comb in my hair,  
a watch on my wrist, the sandals on my feet

there would be no need to mourn

holding her to me  
your bones jostle within  
and unknown to her  
I cling on for dear life

( iii )

se tu fossi il pettine fra i miei capelli  
un orologio al mio polso, i sandali ai miei piedi

non ci sarebbe bisogno di affliggersi

stringendola a me  
le tue ossa si agitano dentro  
e senza che se ne accorga  
mi aggrappo a lei per rimanere vivo

*love at the edge of a pond*

love in defiance of them  
is a love unblessed

rolling back the tears  
we recognise the pools  
still in our eyes

unzipping our fingers  
with only the last leap  
of shock between the tips,

we will need to depart

put on your hat, turn up your collar  
we will turn on our heels  
no more these coincidences  
walk on and don't look back

at an empty bench and breadcrumbs  
once an excuse

*amore sul ciglio di un laghetto*

l'amore che li sfida  
è un amore non benedetto

ricacciando le lacrime  
riconosciamo gli stagni  
rimastici negli occhi

slacciando le dita  
con soltanto l'ultimo balzo  
turbato dei polpastrelli,

sarà necessario venir via

mettiti il cappello, tirati su il colletto  
volteremo i tacchi  
basta con queste coincidenze  
continua a camminare e non voltarti

verso una panchina vuota e briciole di pane  
il pretesto di un tempo

*On a Foreign Plain*

This voice within  
Silent I hear  
May not have an accent  
But is as foreign under my skin  
As an arrow.

The grammar and syntax sound  
But the unidiomatic grates.

Calligraphy to a blind man,  
Music to the deaf, I am

At rest, a rock  
Throbbing in a fist—  
    Released,  
        A kite

    When Dr. Asperger finished his paper  
Until the bombs stopped falling,  
It remained unread.

*In una landa straniera*

Questa voce dentro  
In silenzio la sento  
Può non avere accento  
Ma mi è straniera sotto la pelle  
Come una freccia

Grammatica e sintassi suonano bene  
Ma il non idiomatico stride.

Calligrafia per un cieco,  
Musica per sordi, io sono

A riposo, una pietra  
Pulsante in un pugno—  
    Lasciato andare,  
    Un aquilone

    Quando il dott. Asperger terminò il suo saggio  
Fino a che le bombe smisero di cadere,  
Esso rimase non letto.