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FLAVOURS OF OTHERNESS IN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Among the pleasures of reading the English translation of a non-English text is the way an essence of the latter, a cultural-literary trait specific to it, homes in into the speech-sound network of the former. The story, 'Comrade', (Krishna Sharma, 'Indian Literature', 278, Nov-Dec 2013) translated by Neeraj Sharma from Dogri, provides this pleasure. (1)

The translation, one cannot help noting, is often loose. The opening lines, for example: 'The town was situated on the bank of the river Ganga and I was a stranger to the people of this place. Last night I came here for the first time.' (2)

Is 'here' the river bank or the town?

Then, '...I came out and started walking along the corners of the footpath. The street passed through the houses with muddy courtyards and thatched roofs'. (3)

Do footpaths have corners? Does a street ever 'pass through' houses?

Yet, despite these shortfalls of phrasing, the translation, on the whole, invokes the feel of socio-literary realities not native to the translating language – or target language, to use the formal term. And from this factor of an underlying disconnect between the language and the narrative substance, rises a compelling urge within the reader to visualise the non-English original, transcribe it, and thereby show the continuities between the writing and the written about.

The original could be in any language of the sub-continent. The cultural/historical criss-cross of these languages ensures the basic reflection of the reader's compulsive urge to re-cast and re-found by an act of re-translation its –the original's-- non-English moulds of feeling and perception.

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Take para four of the translation. It is an example of easy interaction between the two languages: of a measured, smooth donning by the target language of the narrative spirit of the parent language – Dogri, in this case. This two-way, complementary projection of substance and content gives the whole writing a bi-lingual, bi-tonal feel, which is an essential feature of the parallelising, synonymising drives central to all translation activity. para 4, lines 3-8, of page 112:

'Taking the bat he struck the ball towards the boy standing at the very beginning of the row. The boy took the catch very easily, but the next boy could not. Likewise, Pandey-jee offered the ball to each of the boys

standing in the row. Those who could not take the catch were consoled by Pandey-jee. This was a simple but good method to impart such a vital training to the beginners’.

The translated lines invoke their non-English origins so smoothly and spontaneously that the question of whether they replicate or are replications of the original becomes secondary. The temper and the actions being portrayed in the sentence, being recounted in it, are so relaxed, and so good humoured, that they recall without effort the tone and spirit of a very current, in- vogue Hindi idiom, traceable to the late Nirmal Verma. They drive the reader to casting them into this idiom: an idiom streaking out of its lingual bounds into a state of applicability to human nature, abstracted from cultural/lingual distinctions and origins.

‘Balla uthaakar unhoney ball ko line mey sabsey pahley khadey ladkey kee or uchchalee. Ladka bahot aasaanee sey katch pakad payaa, par uskey baad key ladkey sey nahee huaa. Baaree baaree Pandey-jee line ke har ladkey kee traf baal uchchalee. Jinsey naheen pakda gayaa unhey bhaarpur saantwanaa dee. Bilkul saadaa par ekdam badiyaa tareekaa ththaa itnaa mahatvapoorna shikshaa deney kaa.’

What the exact wording of the Dogri original of that passage above is, as I said, not the point here. The point is of the credibility, of the easy acceptivity and absorption by the English top coat of Neeraj Sharma, the English translator, of the tone of the non-English fibre/ temper of the original: of a prose-tone risen from a deliberate, studied stance of un-emotionalism – a dramatic un-emotionalism, one can say-- which makes a dramatic emotional impact. The voice of this un-emotionalism is not dour, as it is in some English writings –say, in those of the Angry Young Men-- of deliberate un-dramatising.

The late Nirmal Verma, as I said, seems to be the progenitor of this stance. I find in the word ‘uchchalee’ the essence and temper of this stance. The word gives tether to the urgent, action-filled, forward-moving quality of the sentence: it unifies the many motor actions described in it. There is ‘balla uththanaa’ (raising the bat) to begin with: next, there is the fine-tuned action of taking aim and propelling the ball towards a particular boy in the row. The image and sense of centred, precision-packed activity produced by the sentence is relaxed, given a let-up, by the measured use of the word ‘uchchalee’.

And then, there is the no less fine-tuned act of consoling the boy who misses the catch. The consoling is a precision act no less than the act of hitting the ball, of making the contact of bat with ball an impact of maximum effect.

Farther, the rendering, to repeat, is my own. And it is in a language not the original. But again, the point is not of specificities of that kind, of who the author of the rendering is, nor what the language of the original is. The point, firstly, is of the easy evocation by the English text of a non-English mode of perception, of a turn of mind. Secondly, more important and germane to this essay, it is about the urge that sweeps the reader to vocalise, articulate, somehow decipher, this non-English beat in the voice timbre of the English translation, and give it tongue, form, cogency.

We could start by some further statements about the overall mood of the story –as reflected in the English, that is. It is of a pervasive melancholy. The first person narrator, the ‘I’, is in a state of drift. His sense of belonging, of connected-ness with people and the whirr of living, have become faint, distant. He is not a drifter, even if he is in a state of drift. He is not indifferent to ties. In his very state of isolation, he is alive to, is nostalgic about, the ties of family, friends, habitat, and all the emotional anchorages that these make for, in a person’s passage through life with fellow humans.

No. No drifter he is even if drifting. And nor is he a dissenter in the strict sense of the word, even if dissenting. A dissenter, by definition, is one who actively, in a spirit of committed-ness, dedicated-ness, engages in polemics and disputation with non-dissenting majorities.

This kind of intellectual activism is no part of the make- up of this dissenting protagonist. He is given to deriving, and does derive, consolation from the verbalising of his disconnected state. This kind of verbalising, as said before, is the hallmark of a particular stream of writing in Hindi letters. The physiognomy of the writings of Nirmal Verma, for example, the writer most closely associated with such intensely evocative, emotion-laden, yet dry-eyed narration of a sense of inner imbalance, is formed by their—the writings’-- collected detailing of this state.

Take this extract from 'Ek Shuruat' (A Beginning) in his collection of stories, 'Jaltee Jhaadee' (Burning Bush). (Bharatiya Gyaan Peeth, New Delhi 3, First Edition 2008)

Lagta hai jaisey ek lambey arsey sey ham dono isee tarah khaamosh baitheyhain. Ham dono kee pahchaan bahut sankshipt hai. Channel par kartey huey steemar par parichay huaa thaa – aiaa parichay jiska oopree taur ey koi tuk aur arth naheenn hota, jo shuru honey sey pehley hee khatm honey lagtaa hai. Landan sey Praag .. ek lambee raat aur poora din. Mai dubaraa is raastey sey vaapas laut rahaa hoon. Sardiyon kee pheekee dhoop aur uththti,dagmagatee lahron kaa ppehnyil jvaar. Sochtaa hoon saagar ek svapn hai, dabdabaataa svapn.

We come alive to a pressing sense of the reality of space felt by the narrator, a feeling, almost, of kinship with it, a brotherhood, one is tempted to say. And from this sense of brotherhood with space, he derives his own sense of self definition, derives the sense of his own being-ness. Space divides the two people figuring in those lines: space in many forms, in the form of time, for instance, in the shortness of it. The two have known each other for just one long night and one whole day, crossing the sea from London to Prague and back. This shortness of time emphasises the inherent lack of togetherness in acquaintanceships such as theirs: acquaintanceships that end before they have begun.

This state of a basic disconnect between person and person, person and environment, is what 'Comrade' by Krishan Sharma is also about. Its physiognomy gets suggested strongly, characteristically, in the section of the story where the co-protagonist of the story, Pandey-ji, comes in for portrayal-in-the-round. His wife enters the picture.(4) The house of his son, from whom he and his (Pandey-jee's) wife are estranged, figures in the setting of the story. The grandson, born of this estranged son, comes over to the playground for ball-catching practice. Pandey-Ji has not told the boy of this relationship. The full picture of a man's life in-the-round –a grihasti's-- householder's—life, sanctioned as a writ, legitimate stage in the development of a man—emerges from this assemblage of domestic details. The assemblage, in essence, is just that –an assemblage: a put together of details without connecting tissues. It lacks form, for Pandey-ji is not the steering, controlling figure of that formation come about. And yet, even this false appendage gives him the identity, standing and reckon-ability associated with the formation. True, his wife is not a false appendage. His union with her has stood the test of time. They are together in coping with the animus of their son. But this together-ness of husband and wife –of patee-patnee—gets fore-grounded, gets sanctified, ratified, as an axiom and unbreakable factor of life. Pandey-j emerges as a bastion of stability, a positive force undeniable, however beset by ill-luck, however scarred by age, by the passivity induced by retirement and the has-been air that settles on him like an aura – the aura of non-aura.

It is this ever-lasting quality ascribed in cultural mores to the formal union of man and woman that the writer invokes. The reader gets the invoking. And, along with the narrating protagonist, the 'I' of the story, the writer's alter ego, the reader comes alive to the full force, ethos and ascriptions of the tie.

The make- up and chemistry of the protagonist's involvement with socio-human ties, his simultaneous feelings of desire for and wariness of close ties with fellow humans assume a cultural ground support and applicability in the reader's mind. They become typified. And once this generalising occurs, the reader can stand in for the narrator. The two can speak in mutually synonym-ising tones.

The full generic and author-substitutive potential of the story comes across markedly in its latter portions where, except for the narrating 'I' all the characters have made their exits from the scene. Pandey-jee, and his wife who had come looking for him, have gone home. A mantle of silence lies over the scene now.

This silence calls for exploration. It is as much the aftermath of sound as a state fully inherent in or natural to the setting. The Mahakaushal Express (5)has crossed the bridge. A 'forceful sound', 'thall-thala thall' lies reverberating in the air. From the eddies of this sound, like driftwood from the heart of waves, Pandey-jee's voice rises, and asks the narrating 'I' to come with him to the bank of the Ganga. 'Please come', he presses without undue pressure. But there is a quiver to his voice that dramatises the narrator's own history of stoically accepting let-downs from trusted fellow men and women. The two histories of forbearance coalesce, a genre of writing based on conscious understatements gets established in the reader's literary- scape. Ghost-writing by the reader for the writer follows easily.

The multi-layered quality of the silence mentioned above comes in for what can be called a panoramic expression cum portrayal in those penultimate sections of the story that unfold on the banks of the Ganga to which Pandey-ji and the first person narrator have walked up, following the former's very ardent yet courteous request. The ritual actions on the banks of the river are buttressed and given dimension by its invoking of a standing inner thirst. It gives a dimension of perennial-ity, of an ever-lasting-ness, to the actions and the scene. A group of widows, the text says, come to the river for their dip in its waters. They are poor, bare-footed, ill-clothed, faces swathed in chronic sadness. But the ever throbbing pulse of joy at the dip in the waters of the river suffuses their faces. The idea –or concept—of a just-below-the-surface, transforming joy is marked in the narrative tone. The tremors of this idea waft over to the breathless, shaky-seeming chants of the late-arriving priests farther up the bank. Smiles seem to break through the film of remorse on the faces of the late-coming priests: remorse for their lateness. Joy is an irrepressible constituent of the atmosphere pervading the river bank.

This sense and feel of a divine, un-vanquish-able tranquillity continues up to the scene showing Pandey-ji buying wheat balls to feed the fish, from a girl selling them.(6). He buys less than what the girl expects him to. Her face falls. But in the very next sentence or two after, the reigning phlegmatic temper of the narrative takes over. Pandey-jee is shown throwing the balls of wheat into the waters of the river, his eyes burrowing into the ripples, eyes intense, searching, not knowing for what.

This basic construct of placid everyday activity without-- on the exterior-- versus an aching philosophical/metaphysical churning cum quivering within, in the interiors of the mind, continue to the end of the story. All the characters constituting its terrain exit. Flower seller, Pandey-jee, his wife, and even the articulate persona of the narrator fade from the immediate scene. Only the pervasive, yet indefinable disquiet of the narrator is left, evoked by his brooding profile.

This wordless yet speaking image into which the story condenses unfurls instantly into familiar literary terrain: familiar images of protagonists not *alienated* from their surroundings, but in a state of an irremediable-seeming disconnect from them: protagonists hungry for human ties, but not for family moral codes: one is liberating, the other is binding, and thus constricting. Trapped between legitimate desire and a fore-knowledge of what desire hardens into, they are standing figures of eloquence and muteness, voice and non-voice.

A gallery of fictional protagonists, conforming to that state of being, flashes into the reader's mind-scape. Nirmal Verma, as the founding father of this species, rises for his bow. But specificities of founders' names and writing genres recede in the reader's mind: only the utter viability of the protagonists' state of being grips it, followed by total empathy. Proxy-ing for the writer is easy, if not inevitable. The reader, by extension, proxies for the writer.

Let me perform this proxy-ing exercise upon the concluding sections of the story where the narrating protagonist is shown a one doomed to life-long , beyond help suffering, suffering become existential, become inseparable from his living. Pandey-jee and his wife have left. The narrator muses: (from line 5, para 4, page 116 to end of story.)

The full anatomy of the narrator's make up and stance of resistance emerges etched, forever-seeming, like a feature of the landscape, from those lines. A feel of sound-speech like running water or rustling wind rise from the stance. The reader gives accompanying tongue and voice to this sonograph—like a child modulating its voice and tongue to an elder's. And, in an instinctive act of transcendence, the language of this articulation is Hindi. It could be Tamil, Marathi, Kannada – any other language of the sub- continent. It is Hindi in this case because the original is in Dogri, and a northern alternative seems appropriate. But the point is that the English gets shed. And an instinctive act of translation, of re-lingual-ising, (or de-lingual-ising?) occurs.

Here's how this act gets done by me:

'Mai poora samajh nahee paayaa, par mujhey lagaa ki mujhey Pandey-jee sey kuchch eershaa ho rahee hai. Maaloom naheen kyon mujhey pahlee baar apnee aawaraagiree khoklee aur dikhawaa lajee, baghair matlab kay.

Thhodee dur jaakar pandey-jee ko jaisey kuchch yaad aa gayaa. Vey rukey pal bhar, mud kar meyree or dekhaa aur phir aagey badh gayey. Dono ko mainey apney ghar jaatey dekhaa. Jaldee hee dono ojhal ho gayey. Ab mai unko dekh naheen sakhaa. Par reyt pr unke paon ke chhaap saaf deekh rahey ththey. Mai aur udaa ho gayaa, ki merey paon taley sirf ryt ththee, pooree dhartee pooree dhartee par chhaayee huyee – kaheen sookhee, khee geelee, oopar sir key garam chubhtee huee sooraj kee kirnen’.

I do not know, as I said, what the Dogri is, not knowing the language. But a word for word reproducing of the original, as I have also said, is not the aim of my rendering – it ought not to be of any translation! I am driven (a) by the a-typical quality of the breakaway behaviour of the protagonist: (b) by its difference from the assertive-aggressive temper associated with protest writing in English: and simultaneously, its evocation of a melancholic, isolating non-conformism familiar in Hindi letters.

If my rendering of the passage, as done above, evokes this sense of precedent-ed-ness, of an anterior literary context, I would see it as a worthwhile enough job, I would say.

Notes:

1. 'Comrade'. Krishan Sharma. (author of Dogri original, 'Saathi'.) Translated by Neeraj Sharma.'Indian Literature 278. Nov-Dec 2013.
2. Ibid. Lines 1-3. Para 1.
3. Ibid. Lines 1-4. Page 110.
4. Ibid para 4,lines 3-8, page 112.
5. (Ibid) From para 5 to para 6, page 114.
6. Ibid page 115. Paras 5-6.