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WOUNDED WORDS: TRANSLATION AS THERAPY

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Abstract

This paper looks at translations of texts written about the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947, specifically at the challenges in translation of Punjabi texts about partition into English. It seeks to examine the role of translation in reconstruction and healing of wounded identities – both individual and collective when the ganga-jamnitehzeeb of the region was cleaved into two.

Millions of people were rendered homeless during the violence that accompanied the political division of the homeland and were forced to flee to an unfamiliar environment. Their mother tongue suddenly became alien in the new surroundings causing them a further loss of moorings. Writings testify to the trauma of the lost inheritance of culture and language. The loss of their language is a recurrent motif in the refugees' lament about the lost homeland, even as their tongues adapted to the new language to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

However, once the business of rebuilding lives was taken care of, the imperative to recreate one's cultural identity could not be ignored; and it had further to be translated into the new medium of communication. The embedded culture of the refugee found expression in the transposed culture and language while conveying the sense of loss. Their dilemma was somewhat similar to the situation of Kamla Das, the Indian English poet, when she said, "I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one…." Dreaming in one language and articulation in another created a dissonance in the personal and public persona, thus heightening the strain of transferring these nuances into another language. However, translation attempts to negotiate these tensions; and language, initially a barrier for the refugees was transformed into a bridge. This enabled both their healthy integration into the new community and to construct and preserve their past. This translation was not only to fill a personal and collective void, but to educate succeeding generations about their past heritage.

The role of the translator in this context becomes particularly challenging. While expressing, with apparent felicity, the thoughts and ideas of the

source language, the translated text has to also convey a sense of inadequacy of the target language as a medium of expression. Translation in such instances cannot be a flat rendering of the source language into the target language; while transferring an understanding of the source culture in the target language, the translator is also required to convey what is lost in translation; yet still to be able to evoke all that is lost. The paper aims to look at the negotiations that a translator engages in to evoke the empathy that the original text demands from its readers. It is useful to debate whether the process and product of translation becomes a tool of resistance against, or of collusion with, the metanarrative.
However, translation attempts to negotiate these tensions; and language, initially a barrier for the refugees was transformed into a bridge.

I

This paper looks at translations of selected fiction written about the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947 to examine the role of translation in reconstruction and healing of wounded identities – both individual and collective – when the ganga-jamni tehzeeb of the region was cleaved into two.

For a considerable time after the partition, the silence was more deafening than the voices recording the gory events, till the imperative to voice the unspeakable became overpowering. The prism of fiction offered sensitive writers a medium to record the dehumanized times. Literature about the partition is found in Punjabi, Bangla, Urdu, Hindi, English, Sindhi among others. Inevitably as the literature around the partition grew and became increasingly nuanced in the expression of the range of experience, it depicted various shades – from the run up to partition by delineating the discordant elements that gradually deepened the divide amongst the different religious communities, bore witness to the vicious violence engendered by partition that left millions devastated, journeyed along the tortuous migration to a supposedly safe homeland, and watched the rebuilding of lives with all its indignities and humiliations to a gradual acceptance of their new lives and aided the attempt to forget the brutality suffered in the past by recreating a nostalgia for a shared, harmonious past. Thus, literature captures that devastating time in all its nuances, and presents a kaleidoscopic picture of the event of partition. In recent times, in fact, literature about partition has acquired substantial legitimacy as scholars have used it to fill in the blanks left by the historiography of the event.

Millions of people were rendered homeless during the violence and people were forced to flee their motherland to an unfamiliar environment. So Hindu and Sikh refugees poured into India and Muslims refugees flooded Pakistan. Initially refugees received sympathy but later it turned into indifference, and even hostility. The uprooted populations grappled with a deep-seated sense of loss and victimhood to come to terms with their bleak present even though they had reached their purported 'homeland'. The refugees struggled to fit in, and when they gradually found their feet in the new land, their need to recall the past became pressing (also to address concerns of the present). Nostalgia for what was left behind jostled with bitterness that despite having suffered so much; adequate compensation both in material terms and in terms of acceptance and empathy

was wanting. All this became a part of the heritage of a community (and of nations) – a record of its wounded history and painful migration.

Writings about the Partition testify to the fact that the loss of homeland was not the only wound on the psyches of the refugees. The loss or denigration of their language is a significant part of this sense of alienation, and a recurrent motif in the refugees' laments. The supposedly secure homeland was an alien place where the language that people had always spoken became unacceptable, even as their tongues tried to adapt to the new language to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. As Frantz Fanon notes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, to be cut off from one's mother tongue implied a damaging loss of connection with one's culture of origin. Bhisham Sahni's Hindi short story, '*Mujhe Mere Ghar le Chalo*', translated as 'Take Me Home' recounts the story of a forlorn old man who takes a train to India. He is alone as his family had already left by an earlier train and he has no idea where his family would be. He has no clue as to who he is or where he is headed to. He begins to babble like a child, demanding to be taken home. The other passengers try to help him and ask him about his family and home. "In any case the addresses of all the refugees seemed to have gone drifting down some abyss and who among them knew what lay ahead?" (Sahni, Saint 3). An old woman comes to sit beside him and speaks to him in his dialect. "The old man seemed to be waking up from a deep and weary sleep. He stared at the old woman's face and then suddenly broke down and began to sob uncontrollably" (Ibid 4). His mother tongue, turned suddenly alien in the new surroundings had caused him to feel as if he had been cut adrift from his physical moorings and now he feels comforted when he hears some kind words uttered in his native tongue/dialect.

Thus, once the business of rebuilding lives had been taken care of and the imperative to recreate one's cultural identity had been attended to, it had further to be translated into a new medium of communication and dissemination. The embedded culture of the refugee found expression in a transposed culture and language while transmitting the sense of loss. Their dilemma was somewhat similar to the situation of Kamla Das, the Indian English poet, when she said, 'I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one….' Dreaming in one language and articulation in another created a dissonance in the personal and public persona, thus heightening the strain of transferring these nuances into another language. It led to split identities, the burden of which the sagging shoulders of the refugees had to carry. They wanted to hold on to the memories of their original land and language with its distinctive accent, diction and vocabulary, yet had to adopt the new dialect or language as their mother tongue was considered uncouth and had become the butt of jokes in the new homeland.

To illustrate this, one may mention an anecdote narrated by Joginder Paul, an Urdu writer. He recounts that when he went to Pakistan on a visit, his friend, Muhammad Ali Siddiqui, a fellow-writer in Urdu showed him the transplanted cultures of Amroha, Gorakhpur, Meerut, Mahilabad and Lucknow. Ali asked him: 'Your whole Lucknow has walked away here into our Karachi, hasn't it? I wonder what's left there? 'The Punjabis,' I told him, 'who insist on speaking their Urdu in Punjabi!' (Paul, 113).

Reverse settlement in Lucknow of Hindustan has seen non-Muslim Punjabis and Sindhis making it their home. It has changed the character of the city. In Attia Hosain's English novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Ranjit says to his friend Saleem who returns to India for a visit: "[…] you

took our language and our manners, and we were brought a cacophony of sounds that grate the ears, and manners that sear the soul" (Hosain 301).

In fact, the narrative of learning and adopting the new language is often presented as the pragmatic approach (even while lauding the mother tongue). It is a recognition of the present ground reality rather than continue to be bunkered in nostalgia. Refugees tried to learn the native language of the place they had migrated to. Specially the younger generation, born or brought up in the new haven, found it natural to speak in the new tongue and adapt to the new culture.

II

Before going further it would be useful to reflect on the language situation at the time of partition because language had thrown up peculiar issues post-Partition. Urdu was the tongue of the elite classes in the United Provinces; and that is where the Pakistan movement received its major impetus from. In pre-independent era, the discourse of Hindi/Urdu divide had taken religious overtones (which is another story by itself). Urdu had become identified with Muslims due to being written in the Perso-Arabic script and had been adopted as the language of the proposed Pakistan, even though the rural Muslim population in those areas spoke in the regional dialect, Bhojpuri. As Rahi Masoom Reza's Hindi novel, *Adha Gaon*, translated into English as *A Village Divided* shows, students of the Aligarh University, who are members of the Muslim League come to convince the village folk to vote for the League. The Urdu speaking 'black shervanis' (from the Aligarh Muslim University) had no resonance with the neighbouring Bhojpuri speaking villages. These men's chaste Urdu is like a foreign tongue to the villagers, as is the chaste Hindi of the Congresswallas. Abdul Alim, a visitor from Benares, who brings the message of the Qaid-e-Azam, expects the village folk to rally around the idea of Pakistan and shouts a loud slogan of 'Nara-e-takbir', expecting it to be answered with a resounding 'Allah-o-Akbar', "but the audience was completely nonplussed. They weren't familiar with this – apart from Moharram's 'Bol Muhammadi – Ya Husain!' they knew no slogans" (Reza 120-21). However, once Pakistan was made, Urdu was imposed as a national language in both wings of the newly-found country. The multi-linguality of the western wing of Pakistan, the lived reality of the people all over the region, was threatened with the imposition of one language – Urdu – that in one sweep marginalized the other languages – Punjabi, Sindhi, Pushto, Saraiki, Balochi, among others.

Urdu, despite being the national language of Pakistan, was hopelessly inadequate in its purported agenda of uniting all the Muslims. Since it had been spoken mainly among the upper crust in the United Provinces in India, it had no resonance either in Punjab or in Bengal. Urdu speaking people, who migrated to Pakistan were regarded as mohajirs and, therefore paradoxically, not good Pakistanis. Natives of Pakistan did not speak such Urdu, so they had both a sense of inadequacy and affront that the mohajirs should speak such good Urdu, their national language. This was one of the barriers between the natives and mohajirs.

Joginder Paul's Urdu novella, *Khwabru*, translated as *Sleepwalkers*, is about the predicament of migrants like Nawab Kamaluddin Mirza, better known as Deewane Maulvi Sahab, who flees from Lucknow to Karachi with his family. The novella debates the issue of language through the words of a native Punjabi in Pakistan, Fakir Babu, who admits to his fear of being chastised by the mohajirs for the incorrect usage of the tongue, so much so that it leads to the conversation

being stilted. "Your pure Urdu makes me nervous. [. . .] when we start talking to you Urduwalas we forget what we want to say and we end up speaking like you. But, what is the use of speaking chaste Urdu when what you want to say remains unsaid? [. . .] If you ask me, I have no qualms about corrupting my tongue" (Paul 27).

In Punjab, Urdu and Punjabi had been the languages for the population, irrespective of religion, but the strident discourse to promote Urdu as a Muslim language was matched by an equally vociferous bid for Punjabi. In west Punjab that went to Pakistan, Punjabi was sought to be marginalized to impose Urdu. Moreover, Punjabi was written in Nasta'liq script that came to be known there as the Shahmukhi script. On the Indian side of Punjabi, coterminous with Punjabi emerging as a separate language of the Punjabi/Sikh identity, it was promoted in Gurumukhi script, the script in which the sacred book of the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth Sahib* was written. Over a period of time, due to the mutual unintelligibility of the scripts, the Punjabi community as a whole could inherit only a truncated literary culture. In India today, Urdu, despite being one of the 8th Schedule languages, seems almost endangered, except in some parts of Uttar Pradesh.

Equally ironically, non-Urdu speakers in East Pakistan were also regarded as inadequate Pakistanis. In East Pakistan, carved out of the Bengal Province, Bangla had been the mode of communication and culture on both sides of the border. But after the creation of Pakistan, Bangla was replaced by Urdu. The attempt to dominate the Bengalis and the crushing of their language, Bangla was a very strong factor in the rise of an anti-government movement that culminated in the formation of a new nation in 1971, Bangladesh (or the 'Land of the Bangla').

III

The role of the translator in this context becomes particularly challenging. While expressing, with apparent felicity, the thoughts and ideas of the source language, the translated text has to also convey a sense of inadequacy of the target language as a medium of expression. Translation in such instances cannot be a flat rendering of the source language into the target language; while transferring an understanding of the source culture in the target language, the translator is also required to convey what is lost in translation; yet still to be able to evoke all that is lost.

The translator needs to negotiate the two languages and sensibilities to evoke the empathy that the original text demands from its readers. Addressing the complex relationship between the text, translator and the reader, Susan Bassnett, well-known translation theorist, asks if the translation should be faithful to the author or to those who cannot read the original language. She provides the answer herself and says that translation is all about negotiating, negotiating the world of the original author and the world of the reader.

The translator has to make conscious choices about translation strategies that she wishes to employ. Would she wish to employ 'foreignization' or 'domestication'; i.e. whether to move the reader or the book. In the former the text is left alone and the reader is moved towards it. In the latter, the text is moved closer to the reader who does not have to make any special effort to understand the text. In the case of an event like partition, it is important that the event is kept within its context and not deterritorialized. Therefore the foreignization technique seems to be more viable. The challenge is to choose the *mot juste*, the right word from a quiver of synonyms.

The profusion of dialects in Punjabi, or any other Indian language for that matter, makes the task almost impossible in another language. If we adopt different dialects/variants of English, it would kill the culture-specificity of the source text. Unfortunately, most translations into English tend to flatten the callouses that add depth to the original text. The paradox is that most literature is a rich exposition of the dialects in that language/ that the dialects only add to the richness of the literature. Yet these linguistic 'callouses' are marginalized. Salman Rushdie's 'chutneyfication of English' holds as many lessons for translation practices as for Indian writing in English. 'Englishes' are now widely accepted as local fragrance and flavour seeps into the target language.

IV

Over a period of time, scholars and readers have been able to access partition literature written in different languages. Intra-translation among these languages has added multiple dimensions to our understanding about the event. However the overwhelming presence of English as the dominant, elite language has ensured a greater reach for literature written in English as compared to literature in regional languages. As the scholar, Shantha Ramakrishna says, "With the English-speaking elite class in a dominant position, English is still perceived by many as the metanarrative capable of providing unifying denominators and translations from one Indian language to another are often carried out through the mediation of English" (Ramakrishna 20). Most translation work today is happening from bhashas to English. The reverse flow is relatively meagre. It is a fact that now a "reader of one Indian language can often read a work in another, if at all, only through English translation" (Chaudhuri 36).

This attention on decoding Indian experience through translation of the richly endowed regional literatures into English serves as an attempt to bring particular regional texts into the mainstream 'canonical' literature when we speak of 'Indian literature' because an inextricable strand in the hierarchy of the languages is the privileging of certain languages, and certain dialects within each language to construct a 'standard'. An important issue is to decide by what parameters a work of art is to be judged for 'translation-worthiness?' It is important to note that translation of texts from a particular language to another would be based on addressing present social or economic concerns as that would guide choices of 'publication-worthiness'. And as Meenakshi Mukherjee says, 'The politics of translation lies not only in who translates which text for what purpose, but also in the reception of these books because readership is determined by the position the source language occupies in the real or imagined hierarchy of power and prestige'.

André Alphons Lefevere, a translation theorist, discusses how translation can be viewed as a form of rewriting and has a vast amount of potential influence because it is able to project the image of an author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin. Any text produced on the basis of another has the intention of adapting that other text to a certain ideology or to a certain poetics, and usually to both. Thus, power, ideology and manipulation may govern the selection, reception and acceptance or rejection of literary texts. (The motivation for such rewriting can be ideological (conforming to or rebelling against the dominant/preferred poetics). e.g. Edward Fitzgerald, the 19th century translator of the Persian poet, Omar Khayyam considered Persians inferior and felt that he could 'take liberties' to 'improve' on the original; and at the same time make it conform to the expected Western literary conventions of his time.)

V

While talking about the accessibility to partition literature, it has been Urdu literature that has been the most widely translated, and therefore, most influential in shaping perceptions about the event. Writers like Saadat Hasan Manto's tortured eruptions or Intezar Husain's nostalgic lamentations have dominated the literary landscape, and they were perhaps among the first to be translated into other languages. Punjabi literature on the partition was relatively unknown till quite recently. There is a great amount of Punjabi literature about partition, but it seeped into public consciousness through translation only much later.

Writers, sensitive witnesses of those devastating times, depicted reality as they saw and experienced, filtered through their imagination and contemplation. Writers in Indian Punjab would have seen violence committed by their own co-religionists. In addition, they would have heard tales of violence inflicted on the refugees from the other side. Or writers themselves as victims would have seen violence committed by the 'other' side, and then as refugees, experienced the inequalities meted out to them in their new homeland. Inevitably that would shape their perspective about the events witnessed and, at times, participated in. Most texts tend to show violence on 'this' side of the border as retaliation, and instead focus on the helpless victims of violence on 'that' side. Certainly an acknowledgement of violence 'this' side of the border was unavoidable in the interests of the aesthetics of writing fiction. One-sided lamentations over the violence committed by the 'other' community could not merit artistic literary critical appreciation but nor was it aesthetically authentic to try and balance the violence on one side by an equally gruesome account of the violence on the other side by using "elegant, even-handed parallelism which is considered obligatory for "non-communal" accounts of communal violence" (Rai 322). What was important was to create a nuanced and sensitive text rather than thrust either a sort of artificial impartiality upon the narrative or allow it to degenerate into what Alok Rai calls a 'pornography of violence' and succumb to the temptation of titillation.

Punjabi fiction about partition constructed a metanarrative about the event that looked at the beleaguered Sikh and Hindu community as the victims who were driven out from their fertile lands and prosperous businesses and forced to start life again from scratch. For example, Gurmukh Singh Musafir's stories ('*Khuda ka Ghar*', '*Allah Wale*', '*Khasma Khane*') about the partition also show a hapless populace caught in the destructive tornado unleashed by forces beyond their ken – the British, Indian leaders etc. Individual acts of violence are presented without attributing intent or responsibility to the perpetrator. Even where violence by one's own people is presented, it is shown as outsiders inflicting it or as momentary aberration.

Mainstream partition literature, in order to bring in a healing touch ignored some corrosive stories so that the process of forgetting and forgiving could begin. Subconsciously that helped writers to develop an empathy that they bring to their writings. Writers were at pains to show how the violence that the 'other' committed was matched by 'our' violence and went on to suggest that since we were all equally guilty of being perpetrators and colluders, we all must be equally willing to start afresh. Their writings can be viewed as a kind of selective remembering of partition in order to propagate a therapeutic ethic.

Translation, too, became a means of therapy to heal the wounds inflicted by cataclysmic events like mass-scale violence and migration in 1947 which witnessed unprecedented violence against

the minority communities, forcing millions to flee their native land in search of a safe haven. Muslims from East Punjab, West Bengal and other parts of India were forced out into Pakistan, while Hindus and Sikhs were chased out of Pakistan. A metanarrative was constructed that consciously or unconsciously worked as a balm for the hurting community.

Translation may be looked at an act of assertion of the relevance of writing in the source language. It is an affirmation of the concerns and issues raised in the cultural group of that language that need to reach the world beyond. The translation of Punjabi literature into English aims to disseminate Punjabi literature, and through it, Punjabi identity, to a wider audience, accessible through English. Therefore, the choice of texts for translation becomes very significant. It is useful to debate whether the process and product of translation of partition texts becomes a tool of resistance against, or of collusion with, the metanarrative. One feels that it serves ultimately to perpetuate and strengthen the dominant discourse and feed stereotypes of a culture and a people by being lauded as a 'representative' or an 'authentic' text. Even if certain resistant voices are acknowledged, it is more a case of 'appearances', validating Ashis Nandy's point of 'manageable dissent' (that Mahatma Gandhi exploited so brilliantly). The more radical dissent is subsumed in the politics of translation.

Initially translation from Punjabi may be viewed as an act of homage. Translating high priests of Punjabi literature, the translator was more like an acolyte who reverentially took up texts of Punjabi doyens like Nanak Singh, Gurmukh Singh Musafir, Kartar Singh Duggal, Mohinder Singh Sarna – Punjabi writers who recorded the gory reality as they witnessed them first hand. Thus translation becomes a self-conscious act; a powerful tool of assertion of identity of a specific community. And just as literature was complicit in building a narrative of, and for the community, translation of partition texts becomes a self-conscious act of assertion of a *recreated* identity and of the relevance of their way of life. A desire to present oneself to the audience in a particular way is appealing; almost irresistible. This translation was not only to fill a personal and collective void, but to educate succeeding generations about their past heritage. This enabled both their healthy integration into the new community and to construct and preserve their past.

The Punjabi community has been one of the most widely proliferated of the communities across the world. Due to the particular historical circumstances and the geographical situation of the region which saw continual invasions; and thus an on-going exposure to different cultures, the Punjabi character evolved to assimilate widely divergent thought, a more flexible outlook, and a far more inclusive and tolerant culture. Coupled with the pride that Punjabis take in their cultural heritage, this has led to a peculiar code of value system in the diasporic Punjabi. On the one hand, to move out into unknown territory is already not without precedent, on the other hand, to retain the distinctive Punjabi identity, it is necessary to conform to certain parameters, that in themselves may not be particularly conformist.

Thus there is an anxiety to prove themselves as fully assimilated in the host culture to host members, but internal tension to retain one's distinctive 'Punjabiat' remains. The tendency would be to use empowering texts to be projected for consumption rather than one that reinforced stereotypes. Punjabi fiction has tended to valourize the so-called spirit of the Punjabi character – grit, valour, a larger-than-life image of the Punjabi. This feeds stereotypical notions of the distinctiveness of experience as felt by a region, while eliding over the disjuncts or

ruptures in the smooth tapestry as poor literature, and thus not worthy of translation. Inevitably awkward memories – callouses of the psyches – were sought to be suppressed or transformed.

The politics of retrieval prevented dissenting voices from being widely disseminated. Interestingly, a short Punjabi story highlights this fact beautifully. Gurdev Singh Ropana's self-reflexive short Punjabi story, '*Sheesha*', translated as 'The Mirror', illustrates the revisions made to narratives that make them laudatory to one's own community. A foreign scholar is visiting the author to the latter's hometown. The author, basking in the wonder exhibited by the scholar, praises various facets of the Punjabi character. A site of the massacre of a Muslim kafila during the 1947 cataclysm that the author had recreated in an earlier story written by him, '*Hawa*', assumes a different significance when the scholar comes to know about the cold-blooded massacre of thirty Muslim infants. The foreign scholar realizes the unspoken complicity of the entire village in the act as they chose to rationalize the ghastly event and erase it from their collective memory for what it was – an act of unspeakable evil. Now the author is no longer able to justify the noble character of the Punjabis, that he had praised so lavishly. The writer excuses himself by saying that he had forgotten about it and acknowledges to himself that he had been concerned about showing the Punjabis in a favourable light, and perhaps that had been a unconscious reason for not including that incident. To acknowledge such an unspeakable, non-narratable depth of evil that the writer grappled with; to confront such a heinous fact about one's own community was itself traumatic. Such stories are too "corrosive to the moral order" to be repeated as Lawrence Langer says about the memories of the Holocaust, and a "moral quarantine" is imposed (Antze and Lambek 189) Partition tales, similarly, became selective in their retelling, due to the fear (and shame) of either meeting incomprehension or revulsion. Such facts were not ignored by translators and publishers while deciding the fate of texts that were to be translated.

Translation needs to also become an act of self-reflexivity. The imperative to retrieve drowned voices that break the mould cannot be over-emphasized. In order to fulfill the destiny of our literature and merit true appreciation, the authentic voice of a literature needs to be felt. This will happen only if the nuances of its various shades and tones are depicted. Rather than concentrate on the building up of an imagined heritage, to explore it in all its colours would be a greater service to the literature in that language. If we believe that translation furthers the cause of both the source language and the target language, then for true service to the cause of both languages, it is imperative to archive multiple voices.

This is not to argue that presenting translations of marginalized or unpopular voices is the only worthwhile activity. This is only to argue that to endow the source language (in this case, Punjabi) with the recognition that it deserves, it is imperative to build a body of translations that are nuanced, multi-vocal and encompass the rich diversity of thought present within the source culture. Anything less will detract from its genuine voice and its ability to resonate with the readers.

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