

Problems in Translating Poetry

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Translation is, no doubt, a very fruitful field. Translators are rightly called as 'cultural mediators'¹ but at the same time translation is a painstaking task. Each genre, namely poetry, drama, novel and short story, presents specific problems while translating from the SL to TL. Of these genres, poetry is said to be the most difficult to translate. In this paper, I would like to discuss some of the problems that I faced while translating a simple poem from English into Urdu.

Eugene Nida has defined translation as:

Translation consists of producing in the target language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, firstly with respect to meaning and secondly with respect to style².

The definition itself hints upon the two broader areas that pose problems for a translator – meaning and style. In prose, it is comparatively easy to produce the meaning of the ST in the TT but in case of poetry it becomes difficult because poetic language may have several layers of meaning. It seems quite impossible for the

translator to do justice to all the levels of meanings of the ST. Keeping the contextual meaning of the poem intact is another problem. Sometimes the TL provides a number of equivalent words for a word from the SL. The choice of the closest equivalent becomes a task to be done with utmost care in such situations. In some cases literal or word-to-word translation hurts the aesthetic value of the TT. Here the translator has to give more importance to the sense of the ST than to the word.

Another aspect which increases the problems of the translator is the style of the ST. Here again, poetry takes the lead. The form of the poem is the first thing. It is not necessary that the forms of poetry in the TL should correspond with that in the SL. While translating Urdu Gazal into English, for instance, translators do not find any equivalent form in English and hence have to depend upon the English sonnet which seems closer to Urdu Gazal.

Further the traditions in the field of translation make a new translator stop and think. While translating poems, as it has

been observed, some translators do not follow the form of the ST and the TT is given in free – verse. In the translation of the poetic dramas, at some places poetry is used and at others prose. Commenting upon this an Arab translation scholar, Mohammed Enani³ says that prose is the best choice while translating a historical drama which is written in poetry because prose gives a clear idea of the historical facts when narrated. Then comes the problems of stanza structure, rhyme patterns and metrical patterns.

Apart from the difficulties related to meaning and form, translators also have the challenge of translating the tone of the SL poet. Ismail El-naggar⁴ has pointed out that ‘no one can argue that a poem has only one tone or that there is a real or intended tone’. In addition to this the various figures of speech used in the ST again creat a ‘danger zone’ for the translator. He/she has to have a soft corner for the meaning of the ST and sacrifice the figures of speech like alliteration, onomapoetic if it becomes impossible. Now let’s see the translation of Uma Parmeshwaran’s poem, ‘What Kind of a Place?’ which goes like this.

Kounsa JahaN Hai Yeh ?

Kis JahaN me le aaya, mujh ko mere
beTe tu ?

KhiDkiyaaN jahaN saari band haiN
sada rahtiN

Aur Ghar ke darwaze bhi sada
mukhafil haiN ?

Koi ranGgoli ka naqsh bhi nahiN hai
sjo

Kah sake, “SuwaGat hai” ?

....

Hai majhe khushi beTe

Dekh kar tujhe aise

Bal bacche sab tere

Par laraz main uThi huN

Haath jab milati hai, teri biwi mardoN
se

Aur paraye logon ki, biwiyoN se tu
beTe

Phir bhi hai khushi mujh ko teri har
taraqui par

Itni dur se mujhko tu yahaN pe le aaya

Aur Ghar, motar, sab dilkashi jo
dikhlaya

Par maiN is hava me to, saaNs le
nahiN sakti

Jis me kal ke khaNoN ki,

Ab bhi badbo shamil hai

Dekho pakwaN hota hai aik kare
rozana

Kam yeh nahiN beTa, sirf chhuTi ke
din ka

...

Kholo khiDkiyaN beta

Main to huN suna karti, zindaGi ki
awazeN

Subha ko parindoN ki

Shab ko barkha badal ki

Na ke bhaTiyonwale, khadkhadate
pankhoN ki

Aur na sansanahaT in GarmGarm
jhokoN ki

Aur na GiDGiDana yeh, waashing
mashinoN ka

....

Kholo khiDkiyaN beTa

Aur mujh ko jane do, suraj-o-hava ke
Ghar

MakhiyaN pasina sab, haiN qubul
Mujh ko par

Yeh makaN nahiN beTe, yeh jahaN
nahiN beTe.

...

While translating the poem did not face much problem with the form of the ST and TT because the poem is in free verse itself so the same form was followed in the TT. The first line of the poem *What kind of place you've brought me to, son?*⁵ has been

translated as *Kis jahaN me le aaya majhko mere beTe tu ?* In this line instead of using 'jaGa' for 'place' the word 'jahaN' is used as it has a wider scope. The lines: *And no rangoli design on porch / To say, please come in?* have been rendered as *Koi ranGoli ka naqsh bhi nahiN hai jo / Kah sake, "SuwaGat hai"* The use of a Hindi word 'SuwaGat' seemed relevant in the context of 'ranGoli'. In an another line *Though my hairs do stand on end* instead of the word-to-word translation giving the sense of the line is preferred as *Par laraz mein uThi hu N* because 'laraz uThna' seems an appropriate phrase for the situation.

The two lines: *With yesterday's cooking smells / going round and round* are given as *Jis men kal ke khanoN ki / ab bhi badbo shamil hai*. Here, no doubt, the meaning of the ST is transferred in TT but spreading of the smell 'round and round' in the house is missing. Similarly, while translating the line.

Not a Sunday work alone

Due to the limitations of the meter the literal translation of 'Sunday' as 'Itwar' is not done. Instead of it the phrase 'ChhuTi ka din' is used

Kam yeh nahiN beTa sirf chhuTi ke din ka
In another line to maintain the poetic quality of the line the translation of the

word 'wind' is avoided and the word 'badal' which is equivalent of 'cloud' is used

of rain and wind at night (ST)

Shab ko barkha badal ki (TT)

The sound effect of the lines

Not the drone of the furnace fan

and hiss of hot blasts

and whoosh whoosh of washing machine

is maintained to a large extent

Na ke bhaTiyoNwale khadkhadate
pankhoN ki

Aur sansanahT in Garm Garm jhoNkoN ki

Aur na GaDGaDana yeh washing mashioN
ka

but in the last line the English word

'washing machine' became unavoidable because we hardly find the Urdu word for electronic equipments in general and here for 'washing machine' in particular.

In the translation of the line

And let me go back to sun and air

due to the demands of the TT, instead of 'suraj aur hava' 'suraj-o-hava ke Ghar' is used

Aur majh ko jane do suraj-o-hava ke Ghar

In the concluding lines of the poem, a minor change is done and the line is extended to maintain the continuity of the

thought and to make the idea more clear specific images of 'makaN' (house) and jahaN (world) have been used – instead of just the 'repetition'.

Even sweat and files and all,

But not this, not this.

is translated as

MakhiyaN, pasina sab haiN qubul majhko
par

Yeh makaN nahiN beTe, yeh JahaN nahiN
beTe.

In the process of translation, the ST gets modified to some extent but we have to agree with Ismail El-Naggar when he says that it is easier to translate from the foreign to native language than from the native to the foreign language.

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