

Iqbal's poetry, and Khushwant Singh's fit of pique

On this website there recent appeared a remarkably peevisish review by Khushwant Singh (<http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20080121&fname=Books&sid=1>) of a two-volume work by Mehr Afshan Farooqi called *The Oxford India Anthology of Modern Urdu Literature* (OUP Delhi, 2008). I want to talk about a few of that review's particular complaints, and then move on to a project actually invited by the review itself: a comparative examination of two poems by Iqbal that have been translated in significantly different ways.

At the start of his review, Khushwant Singh makes a great show of believing that it's an extraordinary honor to be published by OUP, like being "married to a duchess"; he claims to be "green with envy." But since OUP India has also published several of his own books, these protestations of envy make little sense. (They're obviously some kind of rhetorical device, but what are they designed to achieve?)

He then proceeds to complain that Prof. Farooqi's view of the history of Urdu literature is one that he's never heard of. His own view is that it was "the mixing of Turkish, Farsi and Arabic speaking soldiers in the armies of Muslim invaders with Braj and Daccani speaking Hindu soldiers in military cantonments that evolved into a new language called Urdu, meaning Camp. It was also known as Rekhtaba [sic]." This recipe-like view (take one cup of Persian, one cup of Turkish, one cup of Braj, pour them into an army camp, and stir) was the classic British colonial prescription, going straight back to Fort William and Gilchrist, and is no longer (if it ever was) anything like the scholarly consensus. In Prof. Farooqi's view, Urdu began in fifteenth-century Gujarat, flourished in the Deccan, and then moved north. Any reader of another well-researched and amply documented OUP work, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (OUP 2001), will know that the evidence supports Prof. Farooqi's view.

Khushwant Singh's second major objection is that Prof. Farooqi hasn't included -- in a volume explicitly devoted to "modern" poetry -- Ghalib, Zauq, and Zafar. He declares this omission "mystifying." His reason? "All three were alive in 1850," the year from which Farooqi takes her departure. Such a criticism is itself pretty mystifying, and there really doesn't seem much need to discuss it.

The rest of Khushwant Singh's review is devoted mostly to complaints that Prof. Farooqi has used unsatisfactory translations (many by South Asians, including her own). To chastise her, he endorses the work of an oddly assorted group of westerners: Edwin Arnold, John Brough, Edward Fitzgerald, Victor Kiernan, William Radice, Gordon Roadarmel, Gillian Wright. Why them? "The point I make," he says, "is that one has to be emotionally involved with English to convey the original's essence."

There are at least two problems with this assertion. First, the claim that a good translator has to be a westerner, or at least "emotionally involved with English," gets us nowhere. A

translator's personal "emotional involvement" with English is both unknowable and irrelevant; and what with so many South Asians living abroad, these days it's even hard to define "westerner." A translator needs to know Urdu well and English very well, and to know something about English poetry, and to have some kind of effective word-sense -- conditions that are not ethnic or emotional, but literary and craftsmanlike.

Second, the idea that any translation can "convey the original's essence" is even more unhelpful. Translations always require sacrifices -- the question always is, what can be sacrificed, and what must be preserved? Are we willing to accept at least some paraphrase and padding, to have English meter and rhyme? Are we willing to accept at least some awkwardness, to have close fidelity to the text? Are we willing to accept radical "transcreation," in order to have (someone's version of) "the poem Iqbal would have written, if he'd been writing in English"? To such questions there can be as many answers as there are translators (and audiences). The only moral obligation properly borne by a translator is "truth in labeling": translators should tell the reader clearly and accurately what they're doing.

Finally, with truly enjoyable candor Khushwant Singh wraps up his critique: "To this litany of negatives I add my personal grievance at being totally ignored. My translation of Iqbal's 'Shikwa and Jawab-e-Shikwa' (OUP) is now in its 14th reprint." In case we haven't sufficiently taken the point, he mentions several other works of translation by him that are not represented in the current anthology, and concludes, "I have reason to feel aggrieved." I'd like to believe that he's writing with a wonderfully self-mocking sense of humor, but the whole peevish tone of the review suggests that he when he says he feels "aggrieved," he means it.

Let's take a look then at what obviously seems to him to be an example of good translation: his own version of Iqbal's famous "Complaint" to God. Here is the first stanza of Iqbal's "Complaint" (1911) in two versions: first in an utterly, clumsily literal translation by me, then in Khushwant Singh's translation:

[FWP:]

Why would I incur loss, would I remain forgetful of profit?

[Why] would I not think of tomorrow, would I remain absorbed in the grief of yesterday?

[Why] would I listen to the lament of the nightingale, and remain nothing but a hearer?

Fellow-singer! Am I too some rose, that I would remain silent?

I have my courage-instructed power of speech/poetry

I have -- dust be in my mouth! -- a complaint against God.

[KS:]

Why must I forever lose, forever forgo profit that is my due,

Sunk in the gloom of evenings past, no plans for the morrow pursue.

Why must I all attentive be to the nightingale's lament?

Friend, am I as dumb as a flower? Must I remain silent?

My theme makes me bold, makes my tongue more eloquent.

Dust be in my mouth, against Allah I make complaint. (Singh 1981, p.28)

This is a very fair sample of Singh's translation style throughout the poem; for one more instance, let's consider the last stanza of "Complaint":

[FWP:]

May hearts be torn by the song of this solitary nightingale
May hearts be awakening through the sound of this very bell
That is, may hearts be alive again, through a new promise of faithfulness
May hearts again be thirsty for that same ancient wine
 If there's a Persian cask, so what? My wine is Hijazi
 If the song is Indian, so what? My melody is Hijazi.

[KS:]

Let the lament of this lonely bulbul pierce the hearts of all,
Arouse the hearts of the sleeping, with this my clarion call.
Transfused with fresh blood, a new compact of faith we'll sign.
Let our hearts thirst again for a sip of the vintage wine.
 What if the pitcher be Persian, from Hejaz is the wine I serve.
 What if the song be Indian, it is Hijazi in its verve. (Singh 1981, p.58)

Compared to the literal one, what have we as readers lost in Khushwant Singh's translation? Among other things, we've lost "fellow-singer" (addressed to the nightingale); we've lost the "courage-instructed" power of speech ("my theme makes me bold" is an invention); we've lost the wish for hearts to become alive again ("transfused with fresh blood" is a complete invention); we've lost a "promise of faithfulness" ("a new compact of faith we'll sign" is an invented legalism); we've lost the ambiguity of "my wine" (does he drink it, or pour it out for others, or both?) in favor of an imposed one-dimensionality ("the wine I serve" is an invention); we've lost the subtlety of the Indian song and the Hijazi melody, in favor of an invented quality of Hijazi "verve."

And compared to the literal translation, what have we gained? We've gained English meter and rhyme (sometimes awkward, sometimes agreeable), and a few nice touches ("clarion call" is not bad, and I like "vintage" wine, even though it's not literal). We've also "gained" several new poetic elements invented by the translator and interwoven with Iqbal's own imagery in such a way that no English-speaking reader could detect the intrusions.

Now let's look at Khushwant Singh's chief example of what he considers to be the anthology's bad translations: a ghazal by Iqbal that Prof. Farooqi herself translates, called "Wild Poppy" [Lalah-e sahra], published in 1935. He complains that rather than choosing the "best or the best known" of Iqbal's poems (and it's easy to imagine his "Shikwa" passing before his mind's eye), Prof. Farooqi has, in a "baffling" way, "opted for the obscure and the short." But in fact this is a brilliant ghazal, and I'm surprised that Khushwant Singh finds it an unsuitable choice. Here is the whole ghazal, first in a flatly

literal version by me that even retains Iqbal's own punctuation, then in Prof. Farooqi's version:

[FWP:]
Desert Tulip

this azure dome! this world of solitude!
it frightens me, the expanse of this desert!

I'm a traveler who's strayed from the road, you're a traveler who's strayed from the road!
where is your destination, oh desert tulip?

this mountain and foothills are devoid of speakers -- otherwise
you are a flame of Sinai, I am a flame of Sinai!

why did you burst into bloom from the branch? why did I break from the branch?
a single feeling of creation; a single relish of uniqueness!

may God be the protector of the diver of love
in every drop of the ocean is the depth of the ocean!

the eye of the whirlpool weeps in grief for that wave
that rose from the ocean but didn't crash into the shore!

from the heat/fervor of Adam, the life of the world is hot/fervent
the sun too is a spectator, the stars too are spectators!

oh desert wind, may there be vouchsafed to me too
silence and heart-burningness, intoxication and gracefulness!

[MAF:]
Wild Poppy

This lacquered dome, this world of loneliness,
the vastness of this arid plain
makes me afraid

A traveller who lost his way
that's me
A traveller who lost his way
that's you
Poppy of the desert
where are you going?

These mountains and these valleys

have no Moses. Otherwise
both I and you
are the fire of Sinai
Why did you blossom forth?
Why did I break away from my roots?
It was nothing but
the urge for self-revelation,
nothing but the delight of peerlessness
God protect him
who dives into the ocean of love,
For every drop
is as deep as the ocean itself

The eye of the whirlpool
weeps for the wave
that rose from the ocean
but did not break against the shore

Man's fevered actions
keep the world alive and warm
suns and stars,
watching in absorption

Wind of wilderness
bestow upon me too
silence, heartache, intoxication,
and grace. (Farooqi, pp. 6-7)

What have we, as readers, lost in Prof. Farooqi's translation, as compared to the literal one? (Ignore the tulip/poppy question -- both are permissible, and the choice is not in this case poetically significant.) The main problem I see is with the fourth verse, in which the flower's "bursting into bloom" from the branch, and the speaker's breaking off from the branch, are in the original entirely parallel (with the two verbs even rhyming). Thus the second line of the verse invites us to link the feeling of birth or creativity ("self-revelation" doesn't seem quite ideal) to the flower (to explain its blooming), and the relish of uniqueness to the speaker (to explain his quest for solitude). These linkages become obscured by the way the basic two-line verses have been broken up and also pushed together. But this is a small problem, and could easily be fixed.

And compared to the literal translation, what have we gained? Some graceful phrasing in individual lines (especially the last few). An attempt to break the strict two-line verse form and reshape the poem into irregular stanzas that feel much more natural in modern English poetry. A free, flexible shape to the lines that enables their rhythm to be felt with more spontaneity. And a major gain is what might be called non-intrusiveness: we remain very close to Iqbal's actual words, and we don't have to worry about any extraneous padding, or about distinguishing the translator's invented imagery from Iqbal's own.

About this translation Khushwant Singh complains that "one is left asking, 'What is so great about this poetry that lovers of Urdu keep raving about?'" He even reiterates the query: "One may well ask where is the poetry? Where is Iqbal's magical music of words?" The obvious answer, of course, is that Iqbal's own "poetry" is in Urdu, and his "magical music of words" is to be found there alone. No translator can achieve in English all the effects that Iqbal so elegantly and suggestively commanded in Urdu. The only choice is among different ways to make a gallant failure.

Apparently Khushwant Singh thinks that his own thumping rhythms and rhyme-at-all-costs line endings, his resort to padding the original with imagery "transfused with fresh blood" or artificially full of "verve," can best capture Iqbal's poetry. His ideal of English poetry appears to be drawn from an older, more Kiplingesque model than Prof. Farooqi's. This is perhaps one reason he's so petulant about her starker, simpler, unrhymed translations. It's a problem that plenty of other readers won't have. Those with a post-Kiplingesque view of English poetry will find Prof. Farooqi's well-balanced, well-designed anthology to be a truly valuable new resource.

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Farooqi, Mehr Afshan, ed. *The Oxford India Anthology of Modern Urdu Literature*, vol. 1 (of 2). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Singh, Khushwant. *Muhammad Iqbal, Shikwa and Jawab-i-Shikwa*, trans. by Khushwant Singh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981.