

Translating the Nation

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Having been a translator all my life, and from many languages, I must confess to a certain feeling of diffidence about the given theme, if not being quite out of synch with it. How *does* one translate a nation? And what does the term “nation” mean anyway? Let’s suppose that every individual who writes about a country, or a people, or a community, is doing something like a translation for us. For she’s letting us into secrets, into insights, into anxieties, that would have been foreign to us but for the text that she produced. But in that sense, translation, or a text that “translates” a “nation” for us is like Derrida’s notorious, and entirely useless formulation: “There’s nothing outside the text.” For then all texts become translations in their own right.

But the matter may perhaps be viewed from another angle: What is *translation*? The Arabs have the same word, *tarjamah*, for both “translation” and “biography.” *Tarjamah* is from the root *tar-ja-ma* which means, “to translate, to explain, to interpret.” And from this the Arabs derived the meaning “to write the biography of someone”, the idea being that when you write an account of someone’s life, you are actually translating and interpreting them. The person was like a closed text, her biography makes her explicit to us by giving us her “translation”.

By the way, the English word “dragoman” which means “a diplomatic interpreter, especially in the middle East” is from the Turkish through the Arabic *tarjuman* which means “translator, interpreter”. In Urdu, it is used to mean “spokesman”, so a person explaining somebody’s position on something is actually “interpreting” that position.

It has been known to the West since at least Roman Jakobson, and to the Arab and the Sanskrit literary culture since antiquity, that we constantly translate from our own language to our own language when we come across a text, or find ourselves in conversation with someone. Richards has a lot to say about the process of comprehension, though what he says is hardly an advance upon Acharya Mammata in Sanskrit, and Abu Ya’qub Sakkaki in Arabic. For example, both Mammata and Sakkaki emphasize the speaker’s role, that is, his intention, as fundamental to our understanding of speech, and by extension, of a text. Richards is an unconscious follower in their footsteps.

So when we come to texts that pretend to, or claim to “translate” a “nation” or some of that “nation’s” manifestations for us, what do we do? Are there any ground rules to help us judge *Mother India* by Miss Mayo, *Verdict on India* by Beverly Nichols, *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization*,

and *India, a Million Mutinies Now* by V. S. Naipaul? Well, these texts, or these “translations” raise everybody’s hackles as opinionated, patronizing, prejudiced, in short, characterized by a near total failure of understanding of the “nation” being “translated” How do we prove that the “translator” did not intend well, or that she was unqualified to translate our nation?

But stay here a little. Was Forster qualified to write *A Passage to India*? Or were even Edward Thompson (*An Indian Day*), John Masters (*Bhowani Junction, Nightrunners of Bengal*), and Paul Scott (*The Raj Quartet*) qualified translators of our nation? Well, in one sense they were. Some of my most well remembered lines from Shakespeare occur in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

Snout: *Oh Bottom, thou art changed! What do I see on thee?*

Bottom: *What do you see? You see an ass’s head on your own, do you?*

Exit Snout, Enter Quince.

Quince: *Bless thee Bottom, bless! Thou art translated.*¹

Everybody knows that Bottom, now with an ass’s head, has been transformed, but Shakespeare describes him as “translated.” And this meaning still persists in phrases like: *translate into practice*. And in any case there’s no doubt that when you translate a speech or a text from your own language to your own language, you *transform* it, and lose or add something thereby. Roman Jakobson described this process as “rewording” and hoped that nothing really was lost in the process. Much later, Gerald Prince “reworded” Charles Perrault’s story *Little Red Riding Hood* and stated that his version “differs from Perrault’s version of *Little Red Riding Hood* in style only. In structure and information content, it is identical with it.”²

Now there is no doubt that Gerald Prince has done an excellent job to prove his point: stories can exist without their stylistic claptrap, or “verbal contraption” as Auden called it. But the transformation made by Prince works because the symbolism of “Red” remains unchanged. Without going into the Freudian and other fancy interpretations of the story’s symbolism, one can say without hesitation that if the “rewording” or “transformation” had made necessary the substitution of Red with some other colour, say Green or Yellow, the story might still have been recognizable as a story, but it would not have been the same story. The colour Red makes an important point and its loss would be intolerable to anyone who knew the original story. But there could be nations or cultures where Red would signify negative things, or would not evoke the strong, mysterious feelings and ideas that Red evokes in a Western European reader. It is clear that a “rewording” will not do in that case.

Many decades ago I read *Lycidas*, and was struck by the incredible beauty and dramatic power of the concluding lines:

At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:

¹ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III, I, 103-107.

² Gerald Prince, *A Grammar of Stories*, The Hague and Paris, Mouton, 1973, p. 100.

*Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new*³.

I interpreted “blue” to mean something like “of the colour of Royalty, sky-like” because that’s what I thought “blue” meant in the English literary and social culture. Much later, I was given to understand that “Blue” actually encodes purity and hope renewed. Well, if I were translating the poem in Persian or Urdu, I would have been hard put to translate “blue” in the Indo-Persian sense or the Western-Milonic sense, because the colour blue is considered inauspicious in Persian social and literary culture and this belief, or convention, obtains in Urdu too. In Persian, the sky is often described as “green” for the reason of the inauspiciousness of the colour blue. Many pre-modern Urdu poets too, in proper contexts, describe the sky as green.

There is a much-loved ghazal of Hafiz, on of his best in fact, which begins with the following verse:

*I saw the green field of the sky, and the new moon’s sickle:
I remembered all that I ever did, and the time of reaping.*

This sounds beautiful, even in my feeble translation, but could anyone else, who wasn’t aware of the Iranian national superstition against the colour Blue, and the literary convention of representing Blue as Green, make much of it? One is here reminded of George Steiner who said something to the effect that to study the status of meaning is to study the substance and limits of translation. But meaning often resides in national conventions. Some years ago I came across Elizabeth Gray’s Hafiz translations, *The Green Sea of Heaven*.⁴ I imagined that the translator had boldly changed “green field of sky” to “green sea of Heaven” thus retaining some effect of Green. But in fact, she did not translate the above cited ghazal at all. She merely inserted the one word “sea” to find a catchy title for her book. Richard Le Gallienne made a yet bolder essay, but mistranslated, and also did a lot of padding, thus making Hafiz sound not at all like the original:

*In the green sky I saw the new moon reaping,
And minded was I of my own life’s field:
What harvest wilt thou to the sickle yield
When through thy fields the moon-shaped knife goes sweeping?*⁵

This sounds like a weakened W. S. Blunt or Coventry Patmore. One is here reminded of Roman Jakobson’s term “transmutation” for translations where the “substance” of the original is retained. Thus “transmutation” is a higher activity than what is implied by his other term “rewording.” But national characteristics, or the author’s own guiles, are always ready to trip us about his meaning, or hide his intention.

³ John Milton, *The Complete Poems, with a Critical and Biographical Introduction* by Matthew Brander, New York, The Co-operative Publication Society, n.d., p. 426.

⁴ Elizabeth T. Gray, *The Green Sea of Heaven, Fifty Ghazals from the Diwan of Haifz*, Ashland, Oregon, White Cloud Press, 1995.

⁵ Richard Le Gallienne, *Odes From the Divan of Hafiz*, Boston, L. C. Page & Co., 1925, p.152.

To what extent, for instance, does Premchand present to us a translation of the “Indian Nation” as seen through an Eastern UP wallah’s eyes? The extent to which Premchand modifies the vocabulary of his rural characters’ speech amounts virtually to a translation. That is, the Urdu or Hindi with which he represents the speech of his rural characters is actually a translation into an Urdu/Hindi which would, in his view, be comprehensible to his readers, and more important, which would sound appropriately “rural” but not rural enough to sound rustic or become incomprehensible. Further, Premchand freely gives a modified Bhojpuri speech to all his rural characters regardless of their origin.

I’ll conclude with one last example. But let me remind you once again of something from Shakespeare. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Katherine says to the Princess that her false lover sent her:

*Some thousand verses of a faithful lover,
A huge translation of hypocrisy.*⁶

Although the Yale Edition of Shakespeare gives a slightly different interpretation, David and Ben Crystal gloss “translation” as “expression” or “rendering,”⁷ So now a “translation” becomes a “rendering” which also means “handing over”, or a “translation” becomes an “expression” which also means “pressing out”, like oil being “expressed” by an oil press.

Given this sense, we see Ghalib “translating” in his letters the effect on Delhi of the reign of terror let loose by the British after they retook Delhi in September, 1857. But he carefully refrains from blaming or criticising the British. His letters from 1858 to 1863 give us poignant glimpses of his own plight, and more importantly, of the hell that broke loose over Delhi after the English retook it from the Indians in September, 1857, and the long-term effects of the British conquest of Delhi. In one letter, he makes a brief mention of recent events, but says, “I can’t write more.” Obviously, he fears the censor, or the informer. Many of his formal, routine letters to the Navabs of Rampur, Yusuf Ali Khan, and then Kalb-e Ali Khan, were preserved in the Navab’s Chancery and are now deposited in the Riza Library, Rampur. But many letters, maybe more than a dozen, were not preserved because Ghalib made specific and urgent request to the Navab that they be destroyed after they were read. One can only guess at the contents of those letters. Perhaps Ghalib was translating his anger and misery in those letters, emotions that he could not give vent to in his correspondence with lesser persons? Perhaps he also apportioned blame to the British for their brutalities, something which he had carefully avoided doing in his letters to friends?

Ghalib also wrote a formal, short-book-length account, in arcane Persian, purporting to have been written during the actual days when Delhi was overrun by the rebel soldiers, then its siege and subsequent retaking by the British. This account was intended to be presented, and was actually presented to the British

⁶ *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, V, ii, 53-54.

⁷ David Crystal and Ben Crystal, *Shakespeare’s Words, A Glossary and Language Companion*, London, Penguin Books, 2002, p. 457.

Queen and others and it is a carefully sanitized account in which blame is assigned freely to the Indian soldiers for atrocities. The British have been spared all such criticism.

Thus we have three “translations” of Delhi made by Ghalib. One has disappeared, one is a valuable and authentic source for Delhi’s social and urban history during 1857-1863. And the third is “a huge translation of hypocrisy.”

But is that expression of hypocrisy quite bereft of truth? Surely not, but the "real" truth seems to have been translated out in Ghalib's published account. Ghalib handed over ("rendered") to his English audience a version of the facts that he thought they would be pleased to receive. As for the Indians, perhaps he didn't care what they thought of his rendering. But is it not the case that Miss Mayo of *Mother India* (ill) fame thought precisely the same thing when she wrote a superior, patronising, highly offensive account of India nearly a hundred years ago? Was she not hoping to give to her readers what she thought would be liked by them? Or was she being "truthful" in her "translation"? Perhaps she was being "truthful" about India, and Ghalib also was being "truthful" about Delhi. We know that Ghalib wasn't much of "a man of the masses", and Miss Mayo was certainly a well-bred, gentle English lady who thought that what she "saw" in India was seen, or should have been seen by all well-bred people everywhere.

Perhaps we can never resolve the question of a translator's ulterior motives, especially if the text to be translated is a whole nation. But how is it that no one has really ever liked or appreciated a rendering of her nation by a foreigner? And if we apply this to the question of translating a linguistic text, we may not desire to be Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson and froth at the mouth and say bad things about each other because they didn't agree about how Pushkin's *Evegeny Onegin* should be translated in English, but we might very well end up behaving like them when criticizing someone else's translation of a literary text.

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