Translating Cultural Encounters: Hali's *Muqaddama*

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Abstract

The translational relationship between Urdu and English can be traced back to the first formal contact between the British and the Indians on Indian soil. The institutionalised interaction, however, began only with the establishment of College of Fort William in Calcutta in 1800. It marked the beginning of a cultural interface which led to a major shift in literary attitudes in Urdu. Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali's Muqaddama Sh'ir-o Sh'airi (1890), a critical treatise on poetry which attempts to formulate a new poetics, is a product of his encounters, solely through translations as he knew no English, with the English literary tradition. Hali's success, even if limited, in transplanting the western literay precepts and practices in an alien but receptive milieu is translation in a wider sense.

Translations can be taken as one of the reliable indicators of the nature of cultural transactions that take place between or amongst various cultural groups or speech communities. Whether the relationship is one of equality or of dominance can be, more or less, correctly gauged by the volume and the direction of the translated traffic between the concerned groups or communities. However, these apparently valid generalizations are open to many

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qualifications if the languages involved are English and one of the *bhasas*, necessitated, as is obvious, by the unique position that English occupies in colonial and postcolonial India's cultural configurations. These and other related issues are sure to arise in any discussion on the translational relationship that exists between Urdu and English.

The beginning of this relationship can be traced back to the first formal contact between the English and the Indians on Indian soil. Sir Thomas Roe during his presence at the Mughal court between 1615 and 1618 must have interacted with the same cultural group, the Mughal elite or the *ashraf*, which, though Persian-speaking, was slowly adopting Urdu as a language of preference. This was, however, an isolated and brief encounter and one has to wait for nearly two centuries for an institutionalized interaction between the two languages. It was at the College of Fort William in Calcutta, established in 1800 for preparing textbooks for the British civilians that the scholars of Urdu worked in collaboration with the British. Mir Amman, brought from Delhi to work as a translator at the College, produced his classic Bagh-o Bahar, a translation of the Persian text Qissa-i Chahar Darvish under the supervision of John Gilchrist, Professor of Hindustani at the College of Fort William. This marks the beginning of Urdu prose though scholars are divided on the importance of its role in the development of the main current of Urdu prose. The other institution that brought Urdu and English closer was Delhi College. Started in 1702, the College, originally established for the study of Arabic and Persian, had an English class attached to it in 1828. It was under the aegis of this College that the Vernacular Translation Society, the first formal body to translate and publish English books into Urdu, was established in 1843. Muhammad Sadiq, the noted historian of Urdu literature, has described the College as "*the foremost interpreter of the genius of the West*" *(Mohanty 1984: 315).*

The first Urdu literary text to be translated into English was *Bagh-o Bahar* or *Qissa-i Chahar Darvish.* Lewis Ferdinand Smith translated this Urdu classic by Mir Amman Dehlavi in 1841/1845.1 Though there is no definite information on the first English literary text to be translated into Urdu, it can be affirmed on the basis of many references to organized translation activities from English to Urdu in the nineteenth century that Urdu-English literary and cultural interface through translations was not altogether a unidirectional one. In fact many Urdu writers, including Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali (1836-37 to 1914), whose book is my point of reference, came in contact with Western literary and cultural traditions through Urdu translations of English texts as they knew no English. Apart from the Vernacular Translation Society of Delhi there was the Punjab Book Depot, an arm of Anjuman-e Punjab (founded in 1865), established with the object of translating English texts into Urdu and publishing them. It was during his employment with Punjab Book Depot in the 1870's as an assistant translator (his job was to correct Urdu translations made from English) that Hali had his encounter with a wide range of English literary texts.

From these early encounters in the colonial era the interface between the two literary traditions through translations has continued even after the end of the Empire, though their frequency may have varied from regular to occasional. The 1970's, however, saw a significant growth in the translation of Urdu texts into English. Mirza Ghalib's centenary celebrations in 1969-70 probably gave a big fillip to these translation activities. As many as eleven English translations of Ghalib's poetry appeared between 1969 and 1975. This proved infectious and other important Urdu poets and writers were translated into English. Among them Krishan Chandar stands out as ten of his fictional works were translated between 1968 and 1975. Many translated anthologies of Classical Urdu poetry came out during this period. The most comprehensive one was *Classical Urdu Poetry*, edited by M. A. R. Barker and Shah Abdul Salem, and published in 1977 from New York. The collection anthologized as

many as thirty-four poets beginning with Quli Qutub Shah and coming up to Muhammad Iqbal. It may be mentioned in passing that the 1970's saw a spurt in English translations not only of Urdu literature but also of other major Indian literatures. Since a majority of the translators were Indians it was seen by many as breaking *"the barrier between one Indian literature and another . . ."* (Mohanty 1984: viii).

The remarkable translational harvest of Urdu literature in the English language created the right platform for a new area of specialized study to appear on the academic scene, generally referred to as Urdu Studies. This new discipline, offered as part of South Asian Studies in various universities, found adherents on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere. Scholars and translators from SOAS and the various American universities showed great vigour and enthusiasm in disseminating Urdu literature's rich harvest to the English-speaking readership. In fact, translation activities in the 1980's and thereafter were not confined to literary texts alone as books dealing with the cultural life of the Urdu-speaking people, predominantly but not exclusively Muslim, were also taken up for translation. The most notable example of such a cultural text is Behisti Zevar, a manual for a newly married Muslim woman compiled by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1864-1943) and given till recently as part of her dowry. This manual was translated by Barbara Metcalf as Perfecting Women in 1990. If one looks at the recent crop of translations one is surprised by the variety of the translated texts and the large number of translators and scholars at work. The old team of Russell and Khurshid ul Islam has been joined by C. M. Naim, Frances Pritchett, Gail Minault, Muhammad Umar Memon, Christopher Shackle, Javed Majeed and Laurel Steele. The list remains incomplete as new names are being added each passing day.

Such frenzied translation activities are sure to make one euphoric. But this is just one side of the story. The other side, the

number of translations from English to Urdu, necessary for sustaining its vigour and freshness, is not such a happy one. Such translations in recent times have been few and far between. There is neither an institutionalized set-up for its creation nor a ready market for its consumption. The lack of individual initiatives has further compounded the problem. A few literary journals like the *Shabkhoon* do publish Urdu translations from other languages but they do not go beyond a short story or a few poems. This gives an unhealthy twist to the cultural transactions between Urdu and English and disturbing questions regarding the nature of the relationship are sure to be raised. The spectre of neocolonialism may appear more and more real.

What accounts for the kind of interest Western scholars and translators have in Urdu literary and cultural texts? Is it a manifestation of the Anglo-American West's acceptance of the fact of multiculturalism? Or, is it a refashioning of the old interest in the oriental exotica? Or, is it sheer ennui with the Self which turns the gaze to the significant Other? As of now we have to remain satisfied with framing these questions for the answers are perhaps still in the process of making.

An equally relevant question is: why does a scholar rooted in the traditions of Urdu choose to translate into English? Is he, through the act of translation claiming the agency to represent himself and all that that self is constituted of? Or, is he acting as a self-appointed cultural ambassador of the language community he belongs to and has the competence and confidence to reach out to a non-Urdu audience wherever it may be? Or, is he a collaborator in the neo-colonial designs of the Anglo-American cultural industry?

The concern of the present paper is, however, not the politics or poetics of translation but the translation of a poetics. Altaf Husain Hali's *Muqaddama Shir-o Shairi* (first published in 1890 as a long prose introduction to his divan or collection of ghazals, and

then brought out as a book in its own right in 1893) is the first, and perhaps, the only major theoretical treatise on poetry in Urdu. It is also credited with laying the foundation of modern Urdu poetry. Surprisingly, such an important text has not been translated despite Hali being a favourite quarry of the English translators of literary and cultural texts in Urdu. The only attempt to introduce it to the English language readership was made by Laurel Steele, who published a translated summary of the text in the inaugural issue of the journal *Annual of Urdu Studies (1981)*. This significant omission made me choose the *Muqaddama* for English rendition.

While the literary and cultural importance of the text is obvious, for a student of Translation Studies the importance may also lie elsewhere. The new poetics that Hali tried to formulate in his book is based on his encounters with the English literary tradition solely through translation. As mentioned earlier Hali knew no English. He relied on Urdu translations of English texts that came to him for correction during his employment in Lahore in the 1870's. The other significant aspect is how Hali transplanted the Western literary precepts and practices in an alien but receptive milieu. This is also translation in a wider sense.

Muqaddama is a product of the later phase of Hali's life, a phase in which Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) and his Aligarh Movement had become the shaping influence on him. The amelioration of the Muslim community, defeated and persecuted in the aftermath of the failed uprising of 1857 (Hali had first hand experience of the chaos and misery that followed the suppression of the uprising) had become Sayyid Ahmad's mission, and Hali joined him as a committed soldier. Hali took up the mission at the literary front. Giving up the traditional poetic form of ghazal, which he had cultivated in the company of his patron Mustafa Khan Shefta (1806-69) and through occasional consultations with Mirza Ghalib (whose biography *Yadgar-e Ghalib* he wrote in 1897), Hali started working towards the creation of a new poetic attitude and a new idiom. In

place of eroticism and formal eulogy which were the major preoccupations of *ghazal, qasida* and *masnavi*, which are traditional forms of Urdu poetry, Hali focussed on social issues touching the life of his community. Aesthetic pleasure became subservient to social concerns. Like his mentor Hali also moved closer to English, especially to English literature.

The first concrete manifestation of Hali's poetic attitude was his *Musaddas* (1879), a long poem on the existing miserable state of the Muslims and their former glory, written at the behest of Sayyid Ahmed Khan.2 The book was enthusiastically received and Hali's new mentor commented in his congratulatory letter to the poet:

> It would be entirely correct to say that with this Musaddas begins the modern age of [Urdu] poetry.
>
> (qtd. in Shackle and Majeed 1997: 35)

Buoyed by the success of *Musaddas* Hali took upon himself the task of ridding Urdu poetry of its perceived ills, the excessive artifice employed by the poets in the ghazal form being his main concern. In a letter of 1882 he writes:

> I want to write a long essay on the poetry of the Muslims from the days of Jahiliya to the present keeping Urdu poetry in mind. The purpose is to describe ways to reform Urdu poetry, which has become very poor and harmful. It will also be shown that if poetry is based on good principles how beneficial it would be for the nation and the art.
>
> (Qtd. in Qureshi 1954: 56, my translation)

This promised long essay came out as *Muqaddama Shir-o Shairi* (Preface to Poetry and Poetics). The *Muqaddama* shows Hali's preoccupation with what he calls 'natural poetry'. It is poetry

which in words and thought, is in accordance with nature or habit. By ‘words in accordance with nature’ it is meant that words and their arrangement should be, as far as possible, in keeping with the ordinary everyday speech of the language concerned. This is because the language of ordinary speech is nature or second nature for the people speaking the language . . . . By ‘thought in accordance with nature’ it is meant that poetry should deal with those matters which always happen or should happen in the world *(Hali 1893: 158-59, my translation).*

The passage, as is obvious, echoes Wordsworth's idea of poetic language in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads:* '… the language of such poetry as is here recommended is, as far as is possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men' *(Wordsworth 1800: 170).*

The quest for natural poetry takes Hali to Milton and Coleridge's normative spin to Milton's obiter dictum. In his tract *Of Education* Milton, while comparing rhetoric with poetry, described poetry as "*simple, sensuous and passionate*" *(Milton 1644: 444).* Coleridge in his Lectures and Notes of 1818 enthusiastically accepted and amplified Milton's "*three incidental words*" *(Coleridge 1818: 226).* Hali, relying on a mistranslation, quoted Milton as saying: "*Good poetry should be simple, passionate and based on truth*" (*Hali 1893: 127, my translation).* Hali seems to be relying on Coleridge's Lectures but having no idea of the European scholar's (this is how Hali refers to his source and Coleridge remains anonymous in the *Muqaddama)* intellectual roots in Neoplatonism and German idealism, either misunderstands or partially understands the import of Coleridge's representation of Milton. The consequences are predictable. By the time Milton's words reach Hali, mediated through Coleridge, they acquire a significance which neither the original author nor the mediator had intended.

Besides the authorities referred to earlier, Hali also draws upon Goldsmith [(?) 1730-1774] and Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859), the latter being a particular favourite, for the formulation of his new poetic creed. And by the time his long essay comes to an end, we see the Perso-Arabic literary tradition, which had been the basis of Urdu poetry since its inception, lying in an uneasy but utilitarian embrace of the Western literary tradition. Hali, of course, greatly benefits from the contradictions which such a situation gives rise to. While he employs his English scalpel to remove the 'unnatural' growth in the body poetic of Urdu, he manages to retain enough space within his new poetics to accommodate the richness of traditional Urdu poetry. His poetics, without jettisoning Mir (1722-1810) and Ghalib (1797-1869), paved the way for the emergence of Iqbal (1878-1938).

Judging the contemporary relevance of Hali's *Muqaddama* is not an easy task. It involves piecing together what he approved of as natural and what he had rejected as unnatural. It also involves a close examination of what he had borrowed and what he had made out of those borrowings. It has often been seen that Hali is at his original best when he misunderstands what he borrows and relies on his native genius to represent his misunderstood borrowings. Not that the process has not begun. Shamsur Rahman Faruqui's article *Saadgi, asliyat aur josh* on Hali's use of Milton and Coleridge is the best example of such a reconstruction *(Faruqui 1990: 233-44)*. But only a beginning has been made in what will prove to be a long and painstaking exercise.

NOTES

1. There is some controversy as to the actual date of the book's publication. Jatindra Mohan Mohanty's checklist *Indian Literature in English Translation* has two entries on *Qissa-i Chahar Darvish* and they carry two different dates, viz. 1841 and 1845.

2. Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed translated the poem into English as *Hali's Musaddas, the Flow and Ebb of Islam* in 1997.

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