Translators and Translating

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AFTER translating *Alma Kabutari*, a Hindi novel by Maitreyi Pushpa, into English I believe more than ever in a ground level requirement for translation: that the translator has to be fully at one with the spirit of the original. Of course an unwavering and total affinity is not always possible. Dips occur, as they occurred with me during my work with 'Alma'. But the initial attraction of the original for the translator has to be - as it proved to be for me - strong and sound enough to make these low pressure phases pass, and restore buoyancy.Let me start with my gut reaction to *Alma*. But before that a few things about the novel and its author, Maitreyi Pushpa. The novel, written in Hindi, is set in the Bundelkhand region of Rajasthan, the habitat of several tribes. The Kabutaras, the tribe to which Alma, the protagonist of the novel belongs, were a notified criminal tribe under the British. After independence Jawaharlal Nehru de-notified them. But they continue to be on the fringes of the society, mercilessly exploited, both socially and sexually, by the 'upper castes', called 'kajjas' in the Kabutara language. Some words from the standard speech of the area have been incorporated into the Kabutara language. But till today anything like a full assimilation of the tribe into the mainstream hasn't happened.

Alma, the protagonist of the novel, is able to breach the taboos and totems of the upper class and caste ideology. But hers remains an individual fight, remains the story of Alma, the spirited, charismatic girl of the Kabutara tribe. Maitreyi Pushpa, the author, has consistently written about politics in human relationships. *Alma Kabutari* won her the SAARC literary award.

Alma is omnipresent in the book. The story line is formed by presages of her arrival. All the women characters preceding her

climax in her personality. This is one of the major attractions of the book for me. In the stories of Kadam Bai and Bhoorie the seeds of the story of Alma are present. A genetic continuity runs through the novel. To write about Alma, therefore, it is not necessary to write about her per se. The other women prefigure her.

Apart from the women characters, Mansaaram, another character in the novel, was a man to whom I took an instant liking. Here was a man who could suffer, really suffer, for love. He doesn't whine, even though he does break into tears under Kehar Singh's quizzing. A man breaking into tears? Is it not sissy? Is it not effeminate, unmanly? No, it is none of these. Mansaram emerges masculine, sound of fibre, tough. He seems to be a man who becomes free of the latent oedipal longings that are present in him as in so many men. Kadam Bai, his 'low-born' paramour because of whom he suffers a boycott by caste and kin for life, for whom he has bouts of hatred too, finally becomes for him a transcendental female figure. He goes to her for physical satisfaction, but also as much for a sense of total security, of a homecoming. In their lovemaking she emerges as the dominant partner, generous, giving and inventive. He is the recipient, receiving Kadam Bai's bounty with hunger, wonder and a total sense of belonging.

He doesn't even glance at another woman for the rest of his life. For him, immediate needs and deeper longings of both the body and the intellect are fulfilled through his association with Kadam Bai. He endures the social rage that is let loose against him. And his psychic- emotional bonds with Kadam undergo no slackening. A passion like this, collected and channelised, spells masculinity to me. There is a solid density to it, like rock. It can flare into dramatic action, all quivery and vibrant with violence held in leash. This kind of sheathed violence is present throughout the novel. I took to this tensile quality, this hard core substance and fulcrum on which the story pivots. It does not always come so stated in women's fiction, one feels.

This stratum of solid worth in the novel saw me through the periods of lowered affinity with the original that strike the translator from time to time.

I couldn't like the first love scene of Alma and Rana. I found the explicitness just that - explicit - lacking the extra surge of writing tone that brings in ambiguity and touches explicitness with poetry. “Two solid mango-like breasts" (*Do ththos amiya si chchaatiyan*), I read that sentence with distaste. The simile seemed commonplace, hackneyed. I didn't like, either, the secrecy that surrounds the meeting of Alma and Rana. I thought it detracted from the innocence that was being projected by the author as a quality of the whole event and story of the meeting of the two. Alma seemed too knowing. She seemed, somehow, sullied by covert, romantic longings ascribed to girls of her age and of her circumstances. And the prompt, easy way she could broach marriage! "How will you marry me?" she asks, as Rana snatches his hand away when she tries to press it against her breast. Rana's shyness I could understand. I could also understand Alma's initiatives in the game of sex. These are, somehow, archetypal. But her speech seemed too swept by the politics of sex that enters the mind of women who are taught to keep the men- folk happy. True, Alma is doted upon by her father. She is pampered. Her girlhood is glorified in the way the boyhood of the boy is in our society, tribal or non-tribal. But she still comes out in the novel as a man's woman. Her personality shines only by interaction with the men - Rana, Shriram Shastri, Surajbhan, or Dheeraj - not independently, on its own. Despite this, she strikes a parity with the man. She has something like veto power. Her displeasure counts in the general atmosphere of wherever she happens to be.

If this is the woman that the sixteen year old Alma is to become, wouldn't her speech be less given to calculative, pre-scripted queries like "How will you marry me?". And a few sentences later she says "You won't go away from here, will you?" (*Jaaoge to nahin?*) How filmi, you can't help thinking. How craven! The words don't suit the character. It doesn't seem just a question of

craft falling short. It seems a shortfall of awareness on the part of the writer.

And once this happens, once you fall out with the writer in spirit, your task of translating gets blocked. You can only substitute the words from one language to another. You become mechanical, you feel like a hack.

But the tide turns as you read on. Other facets of character and temper make themselves known from the text. You encounter another portrait of Alma. The girl stutters, you realise, despite her verbal glibness. You hear and feel the throes of silence that she feels beset by, despite the freedom of tongue she has been bequeathed. The whole scene of the tryst of Alma and Rana, now, unfolds and gets played in this seethe of silence. The sentences of both dialogue and narration strive against this strident, prevailing force, and set up their own low but carrying voices. You say the short one-line sentences that Alma says. You hear yourself saying them. You feel their breathless, quivery quality. The narration at this point seems to paraphrase the feelings you have about the character of their dialogue. "For the first time Alma seemed to be looking him full in the eye and speaking. The slivers of light in her eyes were saying more than what she was saying. Lips motionless were communicating below lips in motion. This unspoken language -Rana was in a daze".

And now the silence of the character changes. It does not come from the inhibitions that overcome Alma for all her bold manner. It is a celebrative silence going up from the "dense trees of mango, the broad green leaves of the banana trees, dampened with the moist heat of Alma's sweat". Together the two "watched the parrot, the nightingale and the kingfisher. Never had these birds looked as beautiful as they did now". And in the swoon caused by the magic and the enchantment, Rana "reins in his desires. He is keeping control over himself". This private act of will by Rana makes the silence layered. Alma's quivering one liners gain coherence and a more defined context.

What is this context? It lies in and rises from the thematic aspects of the whole book. Fear -stark and ever imminent -forms the warp and woof of the kabootara woman's life. She can be abducted or traded in by the police, by her own clansmen, or by sharp shooting political desperadoes like Surajbhan. Alma is aware of all this. How can she not be? She is aware that the proper, ritual backed marriage with Rana being planned by her father is an event that has to be a miracle pulled off against heavy odds. Would this miracle take place?

This whole mass of un-likelihood created by precedent and history pushes against Alma's conscious-unconscious mind as she stands with Rana in the ring of trees, grappling with fears which are deep within her.

You wake up to this crushing history of uncertainty and fatalism as you read through that scene of the declaration of love between Alma and Rana. Fine-tuned and sharpened of receptivity thus, you hear, register, the semitones and ellipses of the raga of fear below the one line speeches of Alma. She rises above the fear, as you see in the last one-line she speaks in that scene "Always come over here, to this very place when I make a sign". (*Main ishara karun to tum isi jagah a jaya karna*.)

On first reading it is just the plucky tone of voice the author had not hit so far. But in the light of the insights into the history and background of the kabutara woman's life you've woken to, you sense the fathoms of consciousness that the voice has travelled to find articulation. The shortfalls of the earlier one liners spoken by Alma now seem passing errors.

I had transmigrated into and out of Alma, I felt, made a rite of passage, after I had read this scene thus. I could read the offending lines now without feeling offended. I could read my translation of the lines without flinching.

I think this is one of the most valuable gifts of translation - this nudge away from words it gives to the translator.

Let me illustrate this by another scene in *Alma*

Mansaaram and Anandi physically unite at the peak of their hostilities with each other. There is acute hatred between them. By itself this enmeshing of sex and anger is understandable. Sex in a fit of violence or pent up anger is something we have learnt to accept as a part of life and history. But Anandi and Mansaram are not uniting in anger here, though they have enough grounds for it. There's a certain ancient wisdom about it, a bowing to a superior power, a moving away from the base game of blame fixing.

Here's how the deep-seated inner gestures of the scene graph themselves out. Anandi comes up to Mansaram as he lies shattered after his son Jodha's disclosures about the crass misdeeds of Kadam Baai - his kabutari paramour for whom he had been openly slighting his wife. Anandi sits down to press his feet. And she says, with that mixture of humility and pride that only a woman of a certain kind of breeding can command, "Perhaps I am clouding your lustre. You are gold, Raja Kaka says. Don't starve your heart. Let the Kabutari nurture it. Give me the chance to wait upon you. I ask no more". Mansaraam is shaken, struck dumb.

But he understands this humility. He understands the specific feminine angst of this behaviour. And he understands the privacy of it, a privacy that goes deeper than the privacy of husband and wife. It is to this deeper, inherited temper that combines submission and longing -like religion - that Mansaram pays homage when he says in a hushed tone after the love-making: “Silly! Who in this world can take your place?” And it is in the same fervent blend of the personal and the impersonal that Anandi responds, her voice even more of a whisper than Mansaram's: "Don't pay heed to the ranting of the boy. This *maya* is just between you and I".

Those two lines of dialogue are very beautiful. The word 'maya' avows and disavows the dharma of conjugal love. It is both affirmation and negation. Along with the lines of dialogue it makes

the ideology of feminine pliancy poetic, which seemed abasing when Anandi presses her husband's feet and begs for the continued privilege of waiting upon him.

What is the secret of the stature that comes to Anandi, I wonder. How has an ideology that I've learnt to abhor, acquired this unsuspected depth? Other questions come tumbling into my mind. What do I know, really, of the psychology of submission, of the meaning it holds in the life of millions of women in this country, I ask myself, Is the ability to submit just a question of killing personal preferences?

A flood of ambiguities assail me, and I see this whole scene of Anandi's submissive behaviour in chastened neutrality.

Sometimes, of course, this neutralisation of personal thought and disposition by the power and mystique of established thought does not take place: the gap remains. In *Alma*, for instance, in its last sections that depict Shriram Shastri's death and cremation, Alma, on hearing of the news of his death, cries out "Shastrijeeeee!" and collapses against the wall.

I found this not just a theatrical but also regressive behaviour, even atavistic. As the scene of the cremation unfolds, this gesture of Alma's gets negated, and she emerges as the self-contained, self-propelled and liberated woman as visualised by the author. This makes the gesture even more of an aberration Let us consider her behaviour and action after that loud gesture. She tells the *purohits* conducting the ceremony that she herself would perform the rite of *mukhagni* - placing the fire into the mouth of the dead man. *Mukhagni* is performed by males only, usually the eldest son of the deceased. Shriram Shastri has no son, nor any male relative. But Alma's action does not seem to be an 'in lieu of' action. It is deliberate, issuing from long-dreamed of opportunities for breaching the strongholds of kajja (mainstream) beliefs and faith, and thereby their supremacy. A grand, well-choreographed and

significant sequence of action takes place from this inner commitment of hers. Let's trace this sequence.

Alma performs the *mukhagni* rite. The priests are outraged. Rumbles of protest go up from the vast crowd assembled for the cremation. Alma brushes them aside. She has the power and the personality to do this. She is the close, exclusive associate of Shriram Shastri, who had been the social welfare minister, and had possessed solid political clout. The fortunes of many *netas* were subject to his moods and temper. And she is beautiful. It is a combination of factors just too dynamic and unassailable for the slowed down reflexes of traditional, established power, become flabby by the habit of power. The priests keep up their chants. From the swirls of smoke rising from the holy fire, and the mesmeric sounds of recitation, Alma, woman, untouchable by caste and gender both, emerges transcended. She walks through the crowds. The crowds part to make way for her. Bathed by the holy fire and the holy sounds of ancient chants, yet unbound by either, she walks to the clansmen of her tribe who came to the funeral of the powerful state social welfare minister. It is a proclamation of loyalties and ties. It is a proclamation of a levelling of the heretofore low and the heretofore high. It is a proclamation of power, of feminine empowerment that has climaxed to a gender-free status. It is a political act par excellence. The cremation of Shriram Shastri has become a political arena.

Where, in this setting, does Alma's piercing cry and collapsing against the wall fit in? Was it a ruse of hers? But Alma had always been above ruse! Was it a fit of real grief? Alma was never really selflessly attached to him. There had been just too much violence in the events preceding her liaison with him. You live again the genuine drama of the scene that ensues after the melodrama of her crashing against the wall. You recall and re-relish the taut and controlled writing of that genuine drama by the author. But this flashy act of Alma's sticks out unimbibable by your critical sympathies which are to guide you in your translation.

I can still feel the distaste with which I wrote the words: "Alma gave a full-throated cry -- 'Shastrijeeeeee!'. She collapsed against the wall". In the original there are three sentences. It reads "Alma gave a full-throated cry -- Shastrijeeeee! Her eyes closed. She collapsed against the wall". I wanted to get past the scene quickly, in one bound. So I made the `crying` and the `collapsing against the wall` into be one continuous action without break. To show any intermediate action would be embellishment. It would be laying it on even more thick than it was already, I felt. So I cut out "Her eyes closed".

But this sawing off only highlights that which is sawn off, even if it is saw-able. Long after the deed, even today, when I re-invoke and recall the original --a reflex action of a translator -- I feel the discordance of that gesture of Alma's. And I hastily summon the sweep and grandeur of her subsequent behaviour. That is still available to me, the stratum of solid worth I talked about earlier.

Let me consider in more detail this stratum of solid worth I find in the book. It is, as I said, constituted by a certain relish of violence present in the author's own make up. I think I have it in my make up too. I share with her this relish of the cutting edge of violence - it is like the sharp, cutting taste of chilli in food. Some of the most enjoyable stretches of work came to me from these sections in the book where the raw beauty of violence bursts out of the skin of the narrative. There's the scene where Kadam Bai is teaching Rana the use of arms. The savage beauty of violence packs this scene from all sides. Without skill in the wielding of axe and club the Kabutaras cannot hunt, cannot eat, cannot survive. To this steady throb of violence set up by the ever-present threat of death, is added the desperate, energetic violence of Kadam Bai demonstrating and explaining the use of the weapons to her reluctant, dreamy-eyed son. Further, this desperation and the breathless motor energy it is fuelling originate from a woman which makes the violence charismatic, gendered. Amidst the thwacks of the club coming

down, the axe swinging through the air, we get the image of a woman tempestuous and tearing along, ghagra flouncing, odhni made fast at the waist, her warbly woman's voice stretched to commanding pitch, wrapped around and borne by the flying weapons.

Buoyed by this lyrical violence employed strictly for survival, and hence ethical, I luxuriated in the precise visions of the damage the weapons could inflict, which come to Rana. The English words leapt out of the guts of the Hindi words. The words broke into my ears in both languages. Neither language came before or after. They were parallel, separate, but warm and close with each other: '*…kaam to kanpati phodney ki hai*". From the rat-tat of those Hindi words of violence sprang the English words in matching staccato: "..the job was to smash the temples above the ears…" Again, "*Is tarah maro to pasliyan chatak jayengi, us tarah to …nabhi phutegi*…" "..shot this way the ribs cracked, that way the belly button burst…" The inflections of violence and violent expression in both languages rhymed, in what I felt was a perfect fit. It was a translator's dream coming true.

Another place where the English words tumbled out with the push and sense of the Hindi originals is the one where Mansaram rushes up to Kadam Bai's hut carrying a gun and asks her to keep it safe for him. 'Can you keep this gun?' How and why this happened is due to a lot of complex events, the upshot of which is that Mansaram is beset by fears for his life. The enemies he has made because of his unrepentant liaison with Kadam Bai, are stalking him, are closing in on him. He is in search of an asylum, in search of protection, and Kadam Bai's smelly dark hut is the only hideaway he can think of. He is fortifying this hideaway with the gun. Guns are not allowed in the kabootara basti. But the bare sight of the gun charges Kadam Bai, the woman only too familiar with the inciting touch of weaponry, with a sense of invincibility. Her confidence flows into Mansaram, feeds him, redoubles his faith in her, makes him think

this sublime thought: Love is an emotion fit only for the strong `*Pyaar bhi vohi kar sakta hai jo takatwar hai*'. I remember reading that sentence again when I came to it, stopping and reading it again. This was my feeling, my thought. I was not the translator at that moment. I was the original writer. I was Maitreyi Pushpa. And I wrote the English words with the ease of ownership.

The elation helped me through some subsequent passages where the spirit of the writing was not mine, and I had to consciously translate, had to summon skill, to match my words with Maitreyi's feeling and intent.

"I should have forgotten you, Mansa Maatey, How better things would have been then! But how could I forget - that one night has put me in a maze for life. That one night has not let me forget either Jangalia or you. Memories of that sweet tyrant and of you have been tumbling into me one after the other. The sound of your laughter has alternated with the burning of my breast. Rana grew in my womb. I would have put you out of my mind if I hadn't been a mother, maatey! Would have finished off Rana, but would that have lessened my wretchedness? So, for me, both living and dying got bound to you. At that time I didn't want to live or to let live. Now I don't want to die, nor want your death. What a bondage Rana has become, an unbreakable bondage and bond".

Looking at that passage now, months afterwards, I see how differently it has turned out. The anguish in Kadam Bai's plaint to Mansaram comes out toned down -urbane - in the translation, I feel. The language barrier tells however gamely I have tried to deal with it. In the original Kadam Bai's voice rushes and rises with the words she hurls. This hurl of voice I have not been able to bring into the English. At the end of each barrage of words from her in the original, you feel you can hear her sharp breathing and collecting of breath for the next tirade. The sentences are neither short nor broken. But you feel they are. Further, the sentiments of undying love she expresses are in a mode to which I have grown culturally alien. I

cannot take the declamatory tone. I cannot take the cries of 'what could I do?', nor the tear-filled confessions of helpless love made in an accusatory tone.

To these inhibitions of attitude are added the language-specific difficulties. Take the sentence, "*Us bairi ko yad kar karke tumhe yad karti rahi*". A word-for-word rendering, would be "Thinking again and again of that tyrant I kept remembering you". Travesty unpardonable! But how is one to convey the idea of incessant utterance contained in the phrases *'kar karke'* and *'karti rahi'* without recourse to 'kept' and 'again and again', and the utter flatness they bring in?

Eventually, of course, I did work out a solution. I focussed on the time factor contained in the sentence. Kadam Bai thinks about Jangalia (the tyrant) and Mansaram one after the other in quick succession. Basing myself on this image of fast alternation I built the sentence, "Memories of that sweet tyrant and of you have been tumbling into me one after the other". Viable. At least passable, let's say. But too sane, lost of the hot keening tones of the Hindi.

I couldn't have managed even this approximation without deep identification from the statement I discussed earlier, "Love is an emotion fit only for the strong". The same deep identification afforded me the pleasures of translation once again in the same chapter just a few paras off the one considered above.

The idea of strength and love is carried forward here. Mansaram is invigorated with the frenzied, generous and yet personal love making that Kadam Bai is capable of. He is exorcised of his fears. 'Nobody can kill me now, Kadam', he exults. And from this strength of freedom from the fear of death, he drifts into a nirvanic state of waking and dreaming together. A short spell of dialogue takes place between him and Kadam Bai.

> Come, let's go out. Let me see you in the light.
> Kadam, what are you saying?

Nothing.
The moon is on the soles of your feet. Turn
your feet towards me.
Maatey! What did you say?
Nothing.
Who was talking to whom?

That is a word for word rendering of the Hindi. Very rarely does a word for word rendering capture the spirit, mood and emotional timbre of the original. Here it does. The prose in the original is beautiful here, for one thing. Add to this my own thraldom to Mansaram's grand thought about love and strength that this scene extends and dramatises further. Word and idea fused for me. Once more I became the alter ego and amanuensis of the original writer, erasing the language gap.

These rapturous moments came to me again and again while translating *Alma.* Like fireflies they faded and rose. But they never fully extinguished, even when faded. They had to be alive to re-appear. And for this re-appearance the basic attachment between me and the book had to be strong. This ground level attachment is necessary if translation is to be a fulfilling and consummating experience.