

Translation as Handloom: Acknowledging Family as (Re-)Source

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Abstract

Indian English poets as translators in their prefatory remarks or extended acknowledgements often refer to the intimate familial sites that propel them into the act of translation. The paper takes a close look at 'acknowledgements' that these poet-translators write, to map how at a fundamental level Indian translation tends to be family-enterprise, a kind of small scale handloom industry in which every member of the family partakes in tangible ways. Family/home continues to be the primary site of translation-encounter. It is the source as well as destination of translation.

Among the pantheon of modern Indian English poetry, there is hardly a poet who has not shown more than part-time interest in translating regional poetry into English. Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar translated *Tukaram* and *Jnaneshwar*; A.K. Ramanujan translated Tamil *Sangam* poetry and Kannada *vacana* poetry; Arvind Krishan Mehrotra translated *Gatha Saptasati* of Hala and Kabir; Agha Shahid Ali translated Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Even the poets of the new generation retain the fervor for translation. Sudeep Sen translates poems from Hindi and Bangla; Ranjit Hoskote translates Kashmiri medieval poet Lal Ded; Mani Rao has translated *Bhagwad Gita* and Kalidas. Although these poets as translators are not obliged to write explicitly about their translations, yet in their prefaces, forewords, acknowledgements or interviews, they do throw up autobiographical anecdotes which if put together or even just catalogued in a consistent frame, can offer us a real-time peep into the very act of translation in the Indian context. Through a reading of their prefatory remarks, extended acknowledgements

and occasional remarks on their practices of translation, I intend to identify and foreground the intimate sites and circumstantial drives that propel these poet-translators to enter into inter-lingual cross fertilization, so necessary for translation to fructify.

I

In his characteristic way of saying through the narrative, A. K. Ramanujan in his essay “On Translating a Tamil Poem”, recounts a tale to underline not only the impervious nature of the original poetical text to be translated into alien tongue, but also the necessary team work that is required to do so. The tale goes like this:

A Chinese emperor ordered a tunnel to be bored through a great mountain. The engineers decided that the best and quickest way to do it would be to begin work on both sides of the mountain, after precise measurements. If the measurements were precise enough, the two tunnels would meet in the middle, making a single one. ‘But what happens If they don’t meet?’ asks the emperor. The counselors, in their wisdom, answered, ‘If they don’t meet, we will have two tunnels instead of one.’ (Ramanujan, “On Translating a Tamil Poem”. 231)

Clearly translator alone is not the sole individual who translates, there are many other players – acknowledged or unacknowledged, who partake in the serious enterprise. Who are the players (or co-translators) here? In this tale there are many – a Chinese emperor who orders the tunnel to be dug, two sets of engineers who decide to bore across the mountain from both the sides and the counselors who encourage to go ahead with the enterprise. At an allegorical level, it would mean that translation requires bold and benign state patronage, prudent artisans/ artists and the empathetic critics/ wise readers in a definite sequence of commands.

Does Ramanujan translate alone or is he too assisted by a

team of unofficial co-translators/ engineers? This is an important question, because it would to a large extent determine whether translation in his case is just a matter of personal will, professional compulsion or organic social circumstances involving his family and community or even the institution he works with. In his "Translator's Note" to *Poems of Love and War*, he begins with his 'home' and straightaway identifies his 'mother' as his prime mover thus: "... I have also accumulated debts – beginning at home with my late mother who gave me more than a mother tongue and my wife Molly whose literary insight and advice have been a mainstay ..." (Ramanujan, "Translator's Note", *Poems of Love and War*, not paginated). In the same piece of acknowledgement, Ramanujan enlists the names of other co-workers and counselors, but what is significant is the precedence that it gives to 'mother' over all other. The 'mother' receives precedence not due to some emotional piety or some oedipal pull; rather 'she' is seen as an active agent and keen participant in the act of translation. Therefore, very emphatically he would say that the mother bequeaths "more than a mother-tongue".

Translation, in Ramanujan's case, is more than anything else a medium of dialogue between mother (-tongue) and father (-tongue); the former is the occupant of ground floor, the latter is positioned upstairs. In other words, home is the primary site of happening, of translating encounter. Translation in the bilingual/ tri-lingual Indian context begins right inside the home where mother happens to be the repository of interiority (*akam*) and father of the exteriority (*puram*) and son/ daughter happens to a creative and compulsive translator between the two. The following excerpt from his long interview with A.L. Becker (ALB) and Keith Taylor (KT) needs to be quoted here to understand the respective place and necessary flow of languages within Ramanujan's home:

AKR: ... I have literally lived my life in three different cultures, although they are connected. I think it is in the dialogue of these three cultures – which I sometimes refer to as downstairs, upstairs and outside the

house – and in the conflict between these three languages, that I am made. That’s

not special to me. About 10 percent of India is bilingual. If they happen to be educated, they will be trilingual.

KT: Let me see if I have the metaphor right. The downstairs language would be Tamil?

AKR: Tamil. Yes. The language of my family. Kannada would be the language of the city, Mysore. The language outside the house. English would be upstairs.

ALB: Upstairs would be the father?

AKR: Yes. I sometimes call them father tongues and mother tongues. My father was a mathematician. He did much of his work in English, and he literally lived upstairs. His library was there. (Ramanujan, “Interview Two”, *Uncollected Poems*, 53)

This is not just a candid explanation of Ramanujan’s linguistic make-up; this is rather an account of a compelling translation ecology which an Indian (translator) is born into. Translation is not just the necessary condition of cultural co-existence in postcolonial multi-lingual India; it is an intimate domesticate need, a household practice particularly in families where mother, rooted as she is in native traditions, operates largely through the native tongue and father, literate and professional as he is, speaks the language of the outer-world.

II

Agha Shahid Ali is not as prolific a translator as Ramanujan is, but he too cannot escape the obligation of translating native Urdu literature. Despite his own limitations of competence in Urdu language, Shahid Ali is simply gravitated towards the Urdu poetry of Ghalib and Faiz that used to reverberate in his home back in

Kashmir. He recounts: "Before the partition of the subcontinent, Faiz had stayed in our house in Srinagar, the summer capital of Kashmir.... When I was six or seven, he sent my father a copy from Lahore of his then latest volume – *Zindan-nama*. My father often quoted Faiz, especially his elegy for the Rosenbergs ..." (Ali, "The Rebel Silhouette", 76). Faiz was recited in the family, and that was, what he terms as, his first "sensuous encounter" with the great Urdu poet, but Faiz did not make inroads into the poetic unconscious of young Shahid Ali.

Decades later Faiz comes back in a much more intrusive way into Shahid's 'home' through Begum Akhtar who sings the revolutionary poet in a private concert meant exclusively for family and friends of Shahid Ali. In an elegy written in the memory of Faiz, this is how Shahid Ali puts his journey of fascination with the poet:

I didn't listen when my father recited your poems to us by heart. What could it mean to a boy that you had redefined the cruel beloved, that figure who already was Friend, Woman, God? In your hands she was Revolution. You gave her silver hands, her lips were red. Impoverished lovers waited all night every night, but she remained only a glimpse behind light. When I learned of her I was

no longer a boy, and Urdu

a silhouette traced by

the voices of singers, by

Begum Akhtar who wove your couplets

into ragas: both language and music

were sharpened. I listened:

and you became, like memory,

necessary. Dast-e-Saba,
I said to myself. And quietly
the wind opened its palms: I read
there of the night: the secrets
of lovers, the secrets of prisons.
(richautumns.blogspot.in)

It is the subsequent singing of Begum Akhtar that brings Faiz back into the active memory of the young poet. Home once again provides the exciting cause. Translating native poetry into English is not as much an academic pursuit for the Indian poet-translators; it is an intimate act of survival, an act of unburdening the over-laden self, an inner urge. It is only in this sense can these translations be seen as extension of poet-translators' own poetic output and vice versa.

It is not just the oral influence of Faiz that precipitates into a translating act; it is actual intellectual help that comes from Shahid's mother. He would say that when he went to Srinagar in the summer of 1989, "my [his] mother helped me translate[d] Faiz" (Ali, "The Rebel Silhouette", 77). It is not just mother who contributes tangibly, even Shahid's grandmother help him get over the crisis of translating Faiz into 'English' thus: "... my grandmother, quite by chance, quoted Milton during a conversation in English. She was then eighty-eight. Ever since I can remember, she could quote Ghalib and Faiz-in Urdu; Habba Khatun, Mahjoor, Zinda Kaul - in Kashmiri. But she'd never quoted Milton before. I was thrilled because I once again didn't need proof of my rights to the canonical English texts. Significantly, not only was all my training in school in English (I mean I grew up with English as my first language), but, paradoxically, my first language was/is not my mother-tongue which is Urdu. When I wrote my first poems, at the age of ten, it was in English. I did not "choose" to write in English.

It happened that way naturally" (Ali, "The Rebel Silhouette";77). The poet-translator inherits both Faiz and Milton, and this really felicitates, at the level of poetic unconscious, Faiz's translation into English.

Repeatedly Shahid Ali in prose interventions and interviews keeps on reminding that his translations take off not as much from the reading of Faiz, as from his listening of his ghazals, recited and sung by his family members and Begum Akhtar, later on. This, as he would underline, was his advantage over other translations of Faiz: "My distinct advantage was that I could "hear" and say the originals to myself, as I translated, something Rich and Merwin just couldn't have" ("The Rebel Silhouette", 85). He often claimed to have "rare tapes' of "Begum Akhtar singing his [Faiz's] ghazals in private concerts" (Ali, "The Rebel Silhouette", 86). The tapes ensure not only an after-life to Faiz's ghazals, but also transport back, on and off, the poet-translator into the world of the originals at the rarefied oracular level.

III

Dilip Chitre, translator of medieval *bhakti* poet Tukaram and his contemporary dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal, also owes his forays into the domain of translation to his family. In his path-breaking effort of translating Marathi saint poet Tukaram into English, he says: "I would like to recall here that it was my maternal grandfather, Kashinath Martand Gupte, who impressed upon my mind the greatness of Tukaram when I was only a child. My paternal grandfather, Sitabai Atmaram Chitre, gave my first insight into Bhakti. My parents – my father in particular – regularly gave me books that were relevant to my work on Tukaram." – (Chitre, *Says Tuka*, xxviii). If one were to undertake an anthropological excavation of the roots of the translating endeavour of the contemporary Indian English poet-translator, it would require going past the immediate parentage. The grand-parents, often invoked as they are in the acknowledgements, lend rare diachronicity to the cultural enterprise of translation. Formally

Says Tuka is a work of Chitre himself, but in terms of the temporal mapping of its authorship/ translator-ship, it is a project handed down to him by his ancestors.

Even when it comes to the translation of a contemporary dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal, Chitre is essentially responding to his inherited family values, his nurturing and his childhood camaraderie with dalit boys and girls. This is how he recounts his upbringing:

As a child I was looked after by Dagdu, a mahar from the coastal Konkan region of Maharashtra. Dagdu was a trusted employee of my father and was treated as a family member. Other caste Hindu children in our neighbourhood thought we were all 'degraded' as we had a mahar working for our family who had access right into our kitchen. At home and at school, I mingled with as many 'others' as with Hindus in all their caste and jati variety. (Dhasal 178)

More than anything else, translating Namdeo for Chitre is an act of becoming "déclassé and decaste" which he says "was the best natural route life offered to me [him]"(178). As a modern Indian poet-translator, Chitre is answerable to his family credo and therefore both *bhakti* and dalit texts become his preferred choices for translation. Translating a text is a task more of retrieving the original, of lapsing back into the familial zone of intimacy and comfort, of possessing all over again the lost or marginalized traditions.

IV

Sudeep Sen, one among the leading poet-translators of the post-Ramanujan era, approaches translation in terms of parallel pleasure which he realizes through a "collaborative" effort. In his translation of Bangla poems, he would take active support of his father. He would explicitly acknowledge it thus:

..., I will give you some examples; when I was translating

Tagore, I was sitting with my dad, so he had his own input and I had my own version. So in fact, we were collaboratively doing it. I was probably doing the harder work, because dad being dad just preferred to have his cup of tea and spot some wisdom but then that was essential to the process of translation for me. Therefore, I want to give him credit because without his inputs it would have been a poorer poem (Sen 161).

Even though the inputs given by the poet-translator's father may not have the requisite finesse or aesthetic elegance, yet they go into the very act of translation. The important aspect of this father-son cultural exchange is that there is no easy correspondence between the two versions. The son as poet-translator uses the version provided by his father as raw material which he later on chisels with his poetic prowess and superior control of the English language. The homely intervention, thus, is an essential aspect of Sudeep's translations from Bangla. In case of languages other than Bangla or Hindi, Sudeep devises a novel strategy of 'translating with the poet' (of the original text). In any case, the poet-translator requires not just an approval of the 'original author' but he seeks to take him on board for his act of translation.

Ranjit Hoskote, another front-line contemporary poet of Indian English, has recently translated a Kashmiri woman poet Lad Ded under the title *I, Lalla*. In his acknowledgements, he mentions the names of whole lot of people who provided intellectual or emotional impetus to him, but he does announce that more than anything else, the entire exercise of translating Lal Ded was an act of rediscovering "a connection to an ancestral land, to a homeland and a language that I[He] had lost as the descendant of Kashmiri Saraswat Brahmins who migrated to southwestern India in several waves of diaspora between the tenth and fourteenth centuries"(Hoskote, *I, Lalla*, lxx). In case of Indian English poet, the act of translating is driven by two impulses – the centripetal umbilical pull that compels him to go back to his homeland, its literature and culture and the centrifugal pull of transmitting

native literature to the global audience by way of its translation into English. He does mention the name of his cousins who counseled him during the twenty long years which he invested into the translation of Lal Ded.

As a creative writer, Ranjit Hoskote in his poem does make repeated references to Ghalib. His recent collection of poems *Central Time* includes a translation of a couplet of a ghazal of Ghalib. The couplet in Urdu read thus:

ug rahaa hai dar-o deevaar se sabzah Ghalib

ham bayaabaan mein hain aur ghar mein bahaar aayi hai

(Jafri, *Diwan-e-Ghalib* 157, 117)

It is translated thus: "The doors and windows of my shaky house,/ says Ghalib, have broken into green tendrils./ Why should I complain,/ he draws his shawl closer in the rain,/ when spring has visited my house?" (Hoskote, "Monsoon Evening, Horniman Circle", *Central Time*, 39). In the same collection there is another poem, "Night Runner" (Hoskote, *Central Time*, 63), which also is a free-translation of a Ghalib's ghazal. Its opening couplet reads thus:

har qadam doori manzil hai numaayaan mujh se

meri raftar se bhage hai bayaabaan mujh se

(Jafri, *Diwan-e-Ghalib*, 191, 140)

The point which needs to be re-iterated here is that as the poet co-opts Ghalib into his poetry through his translations, he is assisted by his parents in a very overt way. This is how he accounts for his love for Ghalib: "Ghalib has long been a very special and important presence for me. I was born in 1969, which marked the centennial of Ghalib's passing. My mother has always admired Ghalib's poetry – she studied Shakespeare and Keats formally with Armando Menezes and V N Gokak in the mid-1950s,

and read Ghalib by herself – and my father presented her with a number of publications that had appeared during the centennial. From these, she would read to me, as I was growing up” (Hoskote, “Interview with Mustanvir Dalvi”). The modern-day young poet-translators inherit a very robust and properly cultivated bilingual literary competence in the sense that their parents are well-read and well-versed in both canonical European and popular native literature.

Mani Rao’s bold and experimental translation of a text as intimidating as the *Bhagvad Gita* is also in some measure a family enterprise. Very economical in her acknowledgements, she would say: “An army of friends participated in my experience of the Gita and this translation – I only acknowledge here those who were in the thick of it. My father was my first reader: He read every chapter as I drafted it, and his responsiveness vindicated my translation strategy. My mother’s sense of humour renewed my energy and kept me grounded – memorably when I expressed nervousness about confronting the revelation or *visvarupam* in Chapter 11, she said, “Relax, it’s just a lot of hands and legs” (xiii). The young generation of poet-translators exploits domestic resources to the hilt – and these resources are not just emotional, these are intellectual as well. These poet-translators never have the crisis of choosing a text to translate; it is the text that chooses them. This often happens to be the text that is read aloud or sung or just recited frequently, if not regularly, within the home. The father (or the mother) is invariably the first draft-maker; he (or she) also volunteers to be the editor as well. Home thus provides the readiness, in a way determines the tenor of translation. The mother’s rather casual version of ‘*visvarupam*’ might appear very innocuous, but it is this naughtiness that runs through Mani Rao’s translation of *Gita*. The mother lends her the playful ease; the father the necessary scholarship.

Vijay Nambisan, another young Indian English poet, who undertakes the translation of two *bhakti* texts – Puntanam Namputiri’s *Jnana-paana* and Melpattur’s *Narayaniyam*, actually

goes on to demand help from his parents. In an exceptional note entitled as “Translator’s Apology”, the poet-translator very candidly admits his handicap on two counts – one, his not being very competent both in Sanskrit and Malayalam, the language of the original texts, and two his lack of interest or rather skepticism towards the relevance of *bhakti* as a credo of critical faith in modern India. About Malayalam he admits that “I [He] can barely comprehend the newspapers, and most literary texts are closed books to me” (2). And Sanskrit was his “third language in school” (2), which he does not “really know” either (2). Yet he decides to translate the two texts which offer him “two measures of bhakti”. He asks his father to provide the first literal draft in translation of the original poems: “That is why I asked my father, two years ago and more, if he would supply me with literal translations of these three poems which I could turn into verse. He consented readily and unstintingly. He wrote them all down in longhand, though he has used a keyboard before. He considers pen and paper as better befitting literary work” (44). It seems that the role of these young translators is more directed towards versification of a literal draft prepared by (either of) parents. He thanks his mother too: “I thank my mother, too, for reading my drafts and encouraging me” (44). The labour involved in the literary act thus stands suitably divided between the literal and the literary – the former is taken care of by the parents, the latter by the poet-son.

V

Indian poet-translators are not lone rangers; nor are they autonomous individual beings who carry out their intellectual or creative pursuits strictly on the basis of their personal volition. In the instances quoted above it becomes evident that the presence of parents (or family/ home) in the translating act is not just salutary; it is tangible and substantial. It is the culture of the home that provides both the boundary and perspective to translation in India. Contemporary Indian poet-translator acknowledges, without any inhibition, the collective labour of the family towards the realization of his task of translation. Translation in the Indian

context is a family-enterprise, a kind of a small handloom industry in which all the members of the family (including grandparents) pitch in. Of course it would be too apocalyptic to suggest that Indian translator is mere a scripiter and that his position or authority is usurped by his family members in fundamental ways. 'Home' coordinates the poet-translator, it never controls him; it propels him into a potential situation of translation, but it never forfeits his right to be playful and creative. Indian way of translating, if one can sum up, is thus very enabling for it entails both reaching out (to the outer world) and reaching in (back towards the home/mother).

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