

TRANSLATIONAL ISSUES IN *UMRAO JAN ADA*

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Abstract: *Mirza Hadi Mohammad Ruswa, one of the best Urdu prose writers of all time wrote Umrao Jan Ada reflecting 'the social milieu of the Muslim society in Northern India in the nineteenth century'. The original Urdu text exudes chaste and elegant Urdu of the 19th century Lucknowi society and captures a life-like picture of the socio-cultural ambience of the time. In order to forge the theoretical foundation, this paper attempts a definition of translation vis a vis traces the history of translation along with changing status of translation and translator today. Issues in translation in general are also discussed and such issues are applied to the text under study. The objective of the paper is to shed light on the issues that surface in the translation of Khushwant Singh's Umrao Jan Ada. Translation issues such as verbal equivalents, culture, language, decoding and recoding, fidelity and untranslatability are discussed and analysed in this paper for a proper understanding of Khushwant Singh's translation of Umrao Jan Ada. This paper adopted the method of close textual analysis of both the Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT) along with application of various translation theories. The translational issues emanating from the texts are discussed and analysed in the light of various theories.*

Key Words: *Translation, Verbal equivalent, Fidelity, Untranslatability, Cultural nuances.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Mirza Hadi Mohammad Ruswa, one of the best Urdu prose writers of all time wrote *Umrao Jan Ada* foregrounding 'the social milieu of the Muslim society in Northern India in the nineteenth century' and the novel was a 'thunderous success'. The original Urdu text exudes chaste and elegant Urdu of the 19th century Lucknowi society and captures a life-like picture of the socio-cultural ambience of the time. The task of translating *Umrao Jan Ada* by a non-Urdu speaking writer into a non-native language must have been daunting, challenging and perplexing for Khushwant Singh. In order to forge the theoretical foundation, this paper attempts a definition of translation vis a vis traces the history of translation along with changing status of translation and translator today. Issues in translation in general are also discussed and such issues are applied to the texts under study. The objective of the paper is to shed light on the issues that surface in the translation of Khushwant Singh's *Umrao Jan Ada*. Translation issues such as verbal equivalents, culture, language, decoding and recoding, fidelity and untranslatability are discussed and analysed in this paper for a proper understanding of Khushwant Singh's translation of *Umrao Jan Ada*. The paper has adopted the method of close textual reading of both the Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT) along with application of various translation theories. The translational issues emanating from the texts are discussed and analysed in the light of various theories and Susan Bassnett deserves a special mention in this connection as the paper has drawn heavily from *Translation Studies*.

2. TRANSLATION AS VIEWED BY SCHOLARS:

Translation both as a branch of study and practice, though came to receive due importance relatively only recently, there is no denying the fact that most of the knowledge we have today is from translation. Translation has been the means of transferring information from Source Language (SL) to Target Language (TL), from one culture to another thus exhibiting possibility of carrying knowledge beyond the confines of a language and/or culture. Knowledge about Aristotle, Plato, Dante, Homer, Shakespeare and their perennially influential works reached out to different parts of the world in translation only.

The Neoclassical literary stalwart John Dryden observed that translation is a type of "drawing after life" and cautioned against the license of "imitation", i.e., of adapted translation: "When a painter copies from the life... he has no privilege to alter features and lineaments..." While the contribution of translation in augmenting and disseminating knowledge cannot be denied, systematic study and research in the area started only recently. Translation as a field of study and an area of investigation or critical inquiry remained neglected as an inferior art for a long time. In her celebrated and widely studied *Translation*

Studies, Susan Bassnett summarises the general perception about translation thus:

What is generally understood as translation involves is the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) so as to ensure that (1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2) the structures of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted. (Bassnett 13)

Bassnett opines that such narrow concept of translation gives rise to issues of ‘superiority’ of the Source Text (ST) and ‘inferior’ status of the Target Text (TT) and ideas akin to this are pernicious for both translation and translator. In this context, Bassnett cites Hilaire Belloc who summed up the problem of ‘status of translation’ in his Taylorian lecture *On Translation* in 1931. She maintains that Belloc’s statement holds good even day:

The art of translation is a subsidiary art and derivative. On this account it has never been granted the dignity of original work, and has suffered too much in the general judgment of letters. This natural underestimation of its value has had the bad practical effect of lowering the standard demanded, and in some periods has almost destroyed the art altogether. The corresponding misunderstanding of its character has added to its degradation: neither its importance nor its difficulty has been grasped. (14)

The subordinate status accorded to translation resulted in the low production of translation works. The superior status of the ST writer recognized and accepted by the literary circles and publishing houses hinders the growth, proliferation and production of translation. Bassnett stresses that because translation is perceived as a ‘mechanical’ rather than a ‘creative’ process, within the competence of anyone with a basic grounding in a language other than their own; it comes to be viewed as a low status occupation. Discussion of translation products has all too often tended to be on a low level too; studies purporting to discuss translation ‘scientifically’ are often little more than idiosyncratic value judgments of randomly selected translations of the work of major writers such as Homer, Rilke, Baudelaire or Shakespeare. What is analysed in such studies is the *product* only, the end result of the translation process and not the process itself. (Bassnett 14)

Explaining the ‘master-servant relationship’ in the context of ST and TT, Bassnett asserts that changing concepts of nationalism and national languages marked out intercultural barriers with increasing sharpness, and the translator came gradually to be seen not as a creative artist but as an element in a master—servant relationship with the SL text. Hence Dante Gabriel Rossetti could declare in 1861 that “the work of the translator involved self-denial and repression of his own creative impulses, suggesting that often would he avail himself of any special grace of his own idiom and epoch, if only his will belonged to him; often would some cadence serve him but for his author’s structure—some structure but for his author’s cadence...”(quoted in Bassnett, 15)

Matthew Arnold, the great Victorian poet and critic insisted that the translator should concentrate on SL text and ‘must serve that text with complete commitment’. H.W. Longfellow, who translated Dante’s *Divina Commedia* also restricted the function of a translator. Such views about translation hampered translation for quite a long spell of time.

However, the turn of the twenty first century witnessed remarkable change in the world view of translation. The discipline nomenclatured ‘Translation Studies’ by H.S.Holmes in his research paper titled, “Name and Nature of Translation Studies” emerged onto the horizon in the 1970s. The next decade of the 1980s brought the discipline to its consolidation as the importance of the discipline came to everyone’s realization and since the 1990s, translation began to experience its global expansion. Today, interest in the field has never been ostensibly stronger and the study of translation is being carried out alongside an increase in its practice all over the world. The electronic media explosion of the 1990s and its implications for the processes of globalization highlighted issues of intercultural communication. Not only has it become important to access more of the world through the information revolution, but it has become urgently important to understand more about one’s own point of departure. For globalization has its antithesis, as has been demonstrated by the world-wide renewal of interest in cultural origins and in exploring questions of identity. Translation has a crucial role to play in aiding understanding of an increasingly fragmentary world. The translator, as the Irish scholar Michael Cronin has pointed out, is also a traveller, someone engaged in a journey from one source to another. The twenty-first century surely promises to be the great age of travel, not only across space but also across time. Significantly, a major development in translation studies since the 1970s has been research into the history of translation, for an examination of how translation has helped shape our knowledge of the world in the past better equips us to shape our own futures.

3. CURRENT SCENARIO IN TRANSLATION STUDIES:

There is a growing interest among scholars, writers, students and academicians in the study of translation today evidenced by substantial increase in books on translation, new journals of translation, international professional bodies such as the European Society for Translation, New Courses on translation in universities. Once seen as a sub-branch

of linguistics, translation today is perceived as an inter-disciplinary field of study and the indissoluble connection between language and way of life has become a focal point of scholarly attention. The translation scenario in India today is encouraging as there is a spurt of translation going on. Centres and Departments of Translation in different universities in the country speak volumes about the renewed interest of scholars and academicians in the study of translation. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's deliberations and masterly handling of translation issues in her writings augur well for this fledgling branch of studies. Translation today is accepted as a booming area for scholars.

Susan Bassnett refers to two contrasting images of the translator that emerged in the 1990s. The first image was that the translator is a force for good, a creative artist who ensures the survival of writing across time and space, an intercultural mediator and interpreter, a figure whose importance to the continuity and diffusion of culture is immeasurable. In contrast, another interpretation sees translation as a highly suspect activity, one in which an inequality of power relations (inequalities of economics, politics, gender and geography) is reflected in the mechanics of textual production. As Mahasweta Sengupta argues, translation can become submission to the hegemonic power of images created by the target culture: "a cursory review of what sells in the West as representative of India and its culture provides ample proof of the binding power of representation; we remain trapped in the cultural stereotypes created and nurtured through translated texts." (quoted in Bassnett 4) Translation is a powerful tool for representation/misrepresentation and it is susceptible to manipulation also. Account of the colonizers about India and its people point to the opinion shaping power of translation. In this context, Andre Lefevere's concept of 'Translation as Rewriting' and the four influencing factors such as Ideology, Poetics, Patronage and Universe of Discourse deserve a special mention.

4. TRANSLATION OF *UMRAO JAN ADA*:

The Translation of *Umrao Jan Ada* by Khushwant Singh and M.A.Husaini was certainly not a smooth sail and the natural hindrances that translators come across in the process of translation did pose threats to the translators of *Umrao Jan Ada* also. The translators of the novel under study, are fairly acquainted not only with both the languages but also with both the cultures. The Source Language Culture and the Target Language Culture are familiar domains of both Khushwant Singh and Husaini. As Singh embarked upon the project of translation of the novel, one of the major issues he faced was the issue of 'equivalents'. There are quite a good number of instances where the translator had to face insufficiency of substitute words/ verbal equivalents. However, on such occasions, he negotiated with the words most approximate in meaning and sense of the word in the TL. Therefore, the translators of the novel aver:

We have compared four versions and taken the liberty of selecting from one or the other as we thought best. Since the author had never bothered to revise his work, we came across contradictions, repetitions and wrong sequences of events. We have also had to take the liberty of deleting some passages, inserting new lines to link the sentences and correcting a few minor details. (17)

Such liberties taken by translators are very common in translation and this leads to a question of mammoth importance—'How far is it possible to remain faithful to the ST text when liberty is taken in the TT?' The liberty and negotiations that the translators take recourse to, create space for 'loss' and 'gain' in the source and target text information. Whether it is loss or gain, the moot point is something additional, something from outside the Source Text gets incorporated in the TT- which cannot strictly be called 'faithfulness' to the original text. The issue of being faithful in translation dominated the translation theory world for quite sometime in early 20th century. However, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Susan Bassnett downplay faithfulness as a concept that subordinates TT to the ST, arguing that the TT is as significant and powerful as the ST. These translation theorists equate such proposition with husband/ wife/ and slave/ master relationship. Just as a wife in patriarchal set up is expected to be faithful to the husband, thus implying a superior status to husband, in the same manner, ST is accorded a superior status when TT is expected to be faithful to ST.

The ST author creates a 'milieu' as pointed out by Lawrence Venuti in his *Translator's Invisibility* (1995) which the translator strives to achieve and reproduce in the TT faithfully. Ruswa in *Umrao Jan Ada* creates an amorous atmosphere which Khushwant Singh tried to capture in his TT faithfully. Ruswa's intimate talk with Umrao takes an amorous turn and Singh reproduces the same as:

'What about the other remedy for cold?'

'Let's not talk about it now; I forswore it a long time ago.'

It's an awful habit. As for me, my state is best described thus:

'Wine forswore, but I cannot forswear the wish

That some one make break my oath ere I perish.'

'Divinely said Mirza Ruswa' I am willing to make you forswear if that will persuade you to take a drink.'

‘Will you keep me company?’

‘God forbid’

‘Why deny yourself when there is:

A clouded sky, a bleak wind blowing,

And the blessed vision of rich wine flowing. (1999:51)

Umrao Jan beseeches Ruswa, “Keep a hold on yourself, Mirza Ruswa! You are making me thirst for the nectar. For God’s sake let’s change the subject.” (51) Khushwant Singh’s depiction of Umrao’s situation is as much realistic, faithful and effective as it is in Ruswa’s ST. The ‘illusion’ (Venuti) of the ST atmosphere created in the above passage is perhaps one of the most realistic in translation history. Khushwant Singh has captured the minutest and subtlest aspects of the conversation between the two characters without hampering the ST. At the same time, Lawrence Venuti’s idea of ‘fluency’ is also maintained in the translation of the passage from Urdu.

Khushwant Singh seems to be strictly adhering to the principle of ‘Domestication’ in his translation of *Umrao Jan Ada* as Lawrence Venuti calls it. The translator, in his target text, particularly in the passage described above does not allow ‘Foreignization’ or infiltration of external elements into the TT. Such efforts are made to ensure faithfulness in the TT.

Explaining the process of transferring the language and culture of the ST to the TT more often than not, confronts the translator as a serious problem. According to Susan Bassnett, “The first step towards an examination of the process of translation must be to accept that although translation has a central core of linguistic activity, it belongs most properly to semiotics, the science that studies sign systems or structures, sign processes and sign functions.” (2005:22) Bassnett quotes Edward Sapier in *Translation Studies* who claims that ‘language is a guide to social reality’ and that human beings are at the mercy of the language that has become the medium of expression for their society. Experience, he asserts, is largely determined by the language habits of the community and each separate structure represents a separate reality, “No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.” (22) Sapier’s observation comes true of Khushwant Singh’s translation experiences. *Umrao Jan Ada* reflects the translators’ optimum efforts to capture the cultural nuances of the ST. At times, it has been observed that the translators have retained the original Urdu words in the TT in order to convey the cultural nuances without distortion. Some examples from the translated texts are: ‘*Mushaira*’, ‘*pan*’, ‘*Wah Wah! Mokurrer Irshad!*’, “*Abbu*, why haven’t you brought me a doll” (1999:22), “*revari*”, *Handi* of curry (22), “*dupatta* of fine muslin” (23), “*Rajab*, the seventh month of the year” (24), “I will get some charcoal for our *hookah*”(30), “Both of them *salaamed* and took their leave” (37), “One day I was practicing *raga Ramkali* in the presence of Khanam.”(42) These words rooted in Lucknowi culture or Indian culture add to the expressiveness of the language the translation has been done into.

The vexing problem of ‘untranslatability’ also forces translators to retain original words of the ST in the TT. Besides vocabulary, imagery, symbols and other cultural nuances which pose challenge to the translator in the process of translating are transferred to the TT without change. Moreover, the degree and intensity of meaning of the ST message being an important area of concern, which might get lost in the process of translation, the translator decides to retain the original symbols, vocabulary and other cultural nuances in the TT.

Ruswa’s maiden sitting with Umrao has been described by the translators with a conscious effort to retain the exactness of the meaning of ST. At times, in the process of translation Khushwant Singh preferred to retain original vocabulary and imagery to lend verisimilitude and exactitude to the TT. The following passage from the TT explains it:

It was a moonlit night in summer. Munshi *Sahib* had had the terrace sprinkled with water to make it cool. Carpets had been spread the floor and covered with white sheets. *Surahis* fresh from the potters, fragrant with a smell of earth and fresh water, were lined up on the parapet. The *pan* had been delicately scented. The stems of *hookahs* had garlands of flowers twined round them and their smoke pervaded the atmosphere like heady incense. The only light besides that of the moon was a candle flickering in a glass shade, the *shama* which was placed in front of the poet whose turn it was to recite. (Khusahwant, Translator’s Preface 8-9)

Original vocabulary in the ST such as ‘*surahis*’, ‘*sahib*’ and ‘*shama*’ appear in the TT as it is, primarily because the translator creates an ‘illusion’ of the ST atmosphere in the target text. Bassnett says, “The translator, therefore, operates criteria that transcend the purely linguistic, and a process of decoding and recoding takes place.” (Bassnett 24) Such recoding and decoding involve some amount of ‘violence’ on both culture and language of the ST.

5. CONCLUSION:

Hadi Mohammad Ruswa’s all time great novel *Umrao Jan Ada* has witnessed translation into several Indian and foreign languages. Khushwant Singh and M.A.Husaini’s translation of the novel into English remains an important

asset to Indian literature as the taste, milieu, flow of thought; fidelity and all other translational issues generally encountered by translators are effectively maintained without distortion of the same in the original *Umrao Jan Ada*. The question of violence on both TT and ST cultures are but natural in any translation. However, the translation of the novel in English augmented readership and helped knowledge cross boundary and culture. Snell Hornby rightly points out, 'literature' is no longer the stately and fairly static thing it tends to be for the canonists, but a highly kinetic situation in which things are constantly changing" (1988:23). Susan Bassnett and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak prove to be great ambassadors advocating for the promotion of translation studies in the contemporary times. However, the translation of *Umrao Jan Ada* perhaps would have been still better with the retention of original vocabulary and imagery (as far as possible) reflecting cultural nuances as manifested in the ST.

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