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Translating Indra Shah's Poems into English: A Diasporic Case in Point for Indian References

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Abstract: Indian literary tradition is surely one of the oldest traditions in the world. It is ingrained in a writer's creative endeavour through a variety of forms and images – directly or indirectly. Although as Ngugi wa Thiong'O compares the introduction of English language and culture to dropping a bomb on the creativity of bhasa literary writers, it has not been easy to colonize Indian minds. The translation of regional literary works into English can be seen as a decolonizing or reverse-colonizing effort. Indra Shah is known as a diasporic Gujarati poet and this paper elaborates on the first hand experience of translating his poetry into English, with a gamut of Indian religio-mythical and literary references that the poet ponders on. In the recent context of NEP-2020 and its emphasis on the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), the paper suggests that English translations of Indian literary texts that are rich with Indian references and traditions can be a way ahead in striking the fine balance between IKS and Teaching of English.

Keywords: Indian Literary Tradition, Bhasa literatures, NEP-2020, Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Teaching of English.

The fact that Indian literary tradition is mostly used in its plural form is a testimonial enough of its diversity and plurality. Across the span of thousands of years and including a wide range of languages, cultures, and themes, Indian literary tradition reflects the rich and complex history, philosophy, and societal evolution of a vast geographical area called India. Indian literature has its roots in ancient texts, with some of the earliest literary works dating back to over three thousand years ago. It is interesting to observe how the ancient Indian literary activity has influenced and survived through various *bhasa* literatures in India. It is even more interesting to observe how Indian literary tradition is imbibed and fossilized in diasporic writing in Indian languages. The act of translating diasporic Indian texts into English serves as the looking glass to

observe the nuances of literary sensitivity, creativity, reception of myths, transformation and regeneration of stories, change of contexts, and above all the possibility of introducing English translation of *bhasa* texts to teach Indian literary traditions in English - as also the comparative analysis and equivalence the poet draws from the western and Christian context. This possibility is especially relevant with reference to the emphasis on IKS in the NEP-2020.

Two of the most significant epic poems in Indian literature are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These epics tell stories of heroism, morality, and the human condition. The Puranas are a genre of ancient texts that provide mythological narratives, cosmology, and religious teachings. Sanskrit, the classical language of ancient India, produced a vast body of literature. The classical Sanskrit texts include the plays of Kalidasa, the philosophical works of Patanjali and Chanakya, and the poetry of Bhasa and Kalidasa. During the medieval period, the Bhakti and Sufi movements gave rise to devotional poetry. Bhakti poets like Kabir, Mirabai, and Tulsidas composed verses expressing love and devotion to a personal god, while Sufi poets like Rumi and Amir Khusro explored mysticism and divine love. The Mughal era in India saw the emergence of Persian literature as a significant literary tradition. Prominent poets like Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Ghalib created timeless ghazals and other forms of poetry. The British colonial period influenced Indian literature in English. Indian literature addresses a wide range of themes, including spirituality, love, social issues, political upheaval, and cultural identity. It reflects the country's rich tapestry of languages, religions, and traditions.

A lawyer by profession, Indra Shah (1939-2012) is a lesser known diasporic Gujarati poet with only a few published collections of poetry: *Be Phool* (Gujarati - 1991), *Gorakhgopalam and Other Poems* (2007), and posthumous collection *The Invisible World* (2019). Babu Suthar describes his first meeting with the poet in these words: "When I first met Indrabhai, I was impressed by his insight into *Re Math* and his understanding of existential philosophy. He was a fan of Osho Rajnish and had read in detail Kabir and Gorakh... I had seen in Indrabhai's library the books by Camus, Sartre and some other philosophers." (93)

M.F. Salat, while commenting on Shah's poems and the purpose behind the poet's wish to get them translated into English, observes,

Indra Shah's wish to publish translations of his poems also issues from a similar impulse albeit with a slight twist. His only son, having been born and brought up in the US, cannot read

Gujarati like many other such sons and daughters of Gujaratis who have lost their mother language for various reasons. Indra Shah, moved by the desire to enable his son and such others who have been alienated from their mother Gujarati culture acquire some awareness/knowledge of their cultural inheritance, decided to publish translation of his poems in the language they know: English. It is indeed a gallant effort. (v)

This observation is particularly remarkable in the context of how diasporic sensibility preserves, freezes and wishes to maintain native traditions and culture. Indian literary traditions preserved in this fashion can be an area of study and research on its own.

Indra Shah's poems are the poet's reflections and project a diverse personal experience. Indra Shah's poems draw from varied cultural beliefs: from Lord Krishna, Mahavir and Shivaji to Christ and Buddhist monks. Jainism, Zenism and Ayn Rand's philosophy are of interest to the poet. God and daily experiences are recurrent subjects in his poetry. The poet's faith in God wavers at times and gets confirmed back. He delves deeper into the question of being and nothingness (one of his poems is titled 'No/thing/ness' even in Gujarati.) *No/thing/ness* is not existential as the title may sound, but rather represents stoicism leading to ecstatic epiphany. The profound philosophical experiences touched upon in the poems remind us of Tagore's and Aurobindo's mysticism in poetry, albeit with a touch of everyday practicability. His lines from *Adrashya Vishva (The Invisible World)*

What is within
Is what forms the outer core
And the surface is what lies deep down In my kingdom
remind us of Robert Frost -
My object in living is to unite My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight. (45)

Similarly the recurrent idea of unified existence unfailingly reminds us of transcendentalism and Walt Whitman. *Yuddh (The War)* presents cipher as an emblem of unification. *Prashno (Questions)* is typically marked by scepticism (as is evident from the title), ending with exasperated and a little funny answer, making us conscious of wordplay the poet is at times accused

of Experimentalism - as also a unique rendition of certain Indian concepts such as nirvana - is evident in poems such as *Bijganit* (Equations).

Seed+grit, with the spirit of self sacrifice = germination.

A plant + loving care = flowering.

A flower + self realization = fragrance.

Diffusion of fragrance into space = nirvana. (79)

Lyrical rhythm is pleasing in some of the poems while some engage us with their semantic and contemplative core in free-verse. As Madhusudan Kapadiya remarks, the poet succeeds the most in free verse. Indra Shah's poems present to us a rich individual outlook. It is remarkable that Indra Shah lived in the US and evidently many of his poems might have emerged from his experiences in the US. I found a hint of American outlook in some of his poems even though he chose to write in Gujarati. If one knows that he loved to paint as well, one can relate to the poem *Muktak (A Verse)*. The idea of a poet- painter reminds us of Imtiaz Dharker and her poems accompanied by her sketches.

Indra Shah's *Udweg (Edginess)* lends itself open to ecocritical perspective, while *Ekad Kshan (A Moment)* presents the poet's criticism on the artificiality and hypocrisy of modern life. The last phrase of this poem – "everyday life" - cannot fail to allude to the Freudian psychopathology of everyday life. Albeit the poet is not as critical as Freud. For the poet, as Gopi Chand Narang (2017, ii) maintains with reference to Ghalib's poetry, what is negative is not really devoid of meaning and absence opens up possibilities for creativity. Narang refers to the Indian concepts of absence-presence.

Edginess also introduces the value Indian quality of stoicism, while *Two Flowers* introduces to the social evils and customs. The title poem for the first volume is an elegant example of brevity and symbolism. It is a poetic expression. It presents to us a unique picture of war and peace, widowhood and motherhood, sorrow and the sense of duty.

From the sky-like wide forehead

A moon fell down. Kohl adorned Every limb...

Sleep is dead;

Dreams leave to become sati; In the lap

Two flowers bloom. (90)

Striptease is satirical in tone and draws largely from the Mahabharata. It has a traditional subject but the title and treatment are fairly modern.

Dushashan now does not need To pull away at clothes.

A little expenditure

And Draupadi will herself Take off her clothes!

Sri Krishna's business of providing clothes Is almost wound up

And he has sought permission To officially declare insolvency.

No longer do the Pandavas stand with bowed heads;

Craning their necks for a better view, They savour the scene gleefully! (24)

Chandarnu[Moonlight] is about the oblivious self. It transports us from one world to another, from the US to the poet's native land. It is an expression of accepting the US as one's own land. This poem dexterously describes the mundane everyday life in the US, uses English words appropriately and simultaneously with Indian-Gujarati reminiscences:

From the two halves of the hamburger Escapes

The taste of a piece of onion and rotla.

On a summer eve

I relish the moist breeze Coming from over

The rivulet of my homeland.

Dust clouds raised by the herd of cows In the village seem,

Mix with

The smoke clouds of the office.

From the grocery bag unexpectedly Gorasambli pops out.

In the beer mug is reflected Basil pot of the courtyard. And then,

I am not here. (56)

He uses within his poems a meaningful proverbial mix of English and Hindi. Many critics will not agree to this mix of 'other' languages but as the poet remarks in his poem *Adrahsya Vishva (The Invisible World)*, "*The Other is not hell,/ because there is no Other.*" (45)

Translation of poetry is probably the subject in translation studies that triggers the strongest polemics, says Italian fiction writer and translation studies scholar Bruno Osimo. The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies describes translating poetry as relaying poetry into another language. Poetry is looked up to as the best use of a language and it has complex features including sound, syntax, meter, rhyme and rhythm. Understanding poetry involves semantics as well as pragmatics. Translating a text essentially means understanding it. Apart from transforming a text, poetry translation also involves cognition, discourse, and action by and between human and textual actors in a physical and social setting. A poetry translation project usually aims to publicize a poet and is typically overt. Poetry translators are concerned to interpret a source poem's layers of meaning, to relay this interpretation reliably, and/or to 'create a poem in the target language which is readable and enjoyable as an independent, literary text. Poetry accounts for a tiny proportion of world translation output. Case studies and examples taken from poetry, however, have dominated theory- building in translation studies at the expense of more frequently translated genres. The axiom that it is the poets that preserve the languages is not surprising then.

One of the prevalent views about translating poetry has it that one has to be a poet to translate poetry. The counterview could be that poetry translation makes the translator a poet. American author and educationist Jennifer Liddy maintains that

Translating a poem is a lot like writing a poem yourself. You have to know what you want to say. You have to feel what you want to say. You have to be focused. There are a thousand other jobs that are easier, better paid, and eyesight-saving, but translating has its own glories. Putting poems into another language is one of the best ways to share culture, honor poets, and remind us that we can transcend geography.

Dr. Samuel Johnson famously opined that poetry indeed cannot be translated, but Osimo finds the debate on translatability of a text useless and believes that poetry translation is better governed by the factors of commerce, private production and readership. While describing the complexities of translating poetry, he writes, “Even for poetry, the translation dilemma is either creating a text enabling a reader to access the original, or creating a beautiful poetic text inspired by the original.” In his 2001 essay titled “Translation of Poetry”, he favours making distinctions on the aims of translating poetry. He makes seven distinctions – including metatextual translation - that broaden the meaning of translation.

With postmodernism and globalization, Indian literary traditions cannot be studied in isolation from global movements and currents of the literary world. The aim of translating *bhasa* texts in English can be any of those discussed above, and it can also be to preserve, prolong and introduce Indian literary traditions to the newer generation of students. With reference to the case of Gujarati literary tradition, M.F. Salat (2017) rightly points out what English translations can do for Indian literary traditions:

Gujarati literature, like Gujarati culture, is both rich and varied. Unfortunately, it has not got the recognition it deserves outside of the Gujarati knowing world at the national and international levels mainly because it is not accessible in a big enough way to those who do not know the Gujarati language. By getting his poems translated into English, Indra Shah has enabled those who do not know the Gujarati language to cultivate a familiarity with (and perhaps even a taste for) Gujarati literature and, through it, possibly acquire a better understanding of Gujarati culture. What a Gujarati poet living in the USA has done in his own small way needs to be done on a much bigger scale by others. Otherwise Gujarati writings would remain 'world famous' only in Gujarat. Indra Shah has shown a way to put Gujarati literature on the literary map of the world. Each such small step can make a world of difference in a world torn apart by differences.

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