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A Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Approaches in the Translation of Urdu Language Oral Narrative *Daastaan-e Amir Hamza*

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Abstract

No two individuals use a language in translation exactly the same way. The vocabulary and phrases people use are linked to where they live, their age, education level, social status and sometimes to their membership in a particular group or community. The translation domains may be analyzed by: tracing the evolutionary path of writing English translation; through looking at the adoption of new words, sentence structures, and the perspectives spread and adapted by different cultures; and by looking at the paths of the historical circumstances that influence the translator. Translation Studies is an inter-discipline containing elements of social science and the humanities, dealing with the systematic study of the theory, the description and the application of translation, interpreting, or both.

Daastaan-e Amir Hamza was the most popular oral narrative in Lucknow during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The 21st century witnessed the publication of two different English translations of this narrative by Frances W.

Pritchett and Musharraf Ali Farooqi. This paper will illustrate that both these translators have different approach and perspective that affects their language, style and point of view in dealing with the same text. It will demonstrate how cultural differences affect any considerable alteration in their feelings and notions.

Keywords

Oral Narratives; Translation Studies; Pritchett; Musharraf Ali Farooqi; *Daastaan-e Amir Hamza.*

Any translation, the very best, truest translation, is still by its nature a step removed from the authentic original. A number of factors influence the quality of a translation. Translating a text from a source language into a target language of a different culture is not only meant to be an exercise in assimilating cultures; it is also the transposition of the cultural identities inherent in the source text.

A translator occupies the role of mediator between language and culture (Agar 60; Loogus, 373), and in this bridging of cultures and language, the translator is swimming in very murky waters. As a mediator, a translator must be able to convey the typicality of the culture of the source language to the culture of the target language. It is vital to incorporate and retain the cultural traits of the source text in the translation because a translation is not a means of "comparing cultures" (Loogus 374); rather, it is a "transfer between cultures" (Vermeer 86).

The goal of any talented and morally scrupulous translator must be to translate text for a target readership's understanding without sacrificing or diluting unnecessarily the author's intentions, his messages as meant to be perceived within his culture. This is quite a tall order and there are a number of impediments to accomplishing this goal. But there are such translations that illustrate this notion as a possibility.

In addition to the potential intrusion of the translator's personal values in interpreting the author's text, because the translator is responsible for providing the specific systems/values of the source culture to the target culture, the translator's subjectivity is again tested. He is also responsible of providing the specific systems of values of the source culture to the target culture. This transfer is intrinsically pedagogical and subjective both in its nature and its context. Translations entail some subjective decision of the translators that vary in different situations.

How successfully the translator is able to accomplish this presupposes not only knowledge of the author's language, of course, but also the translator's knowledge of and familiarity with the author's culture as well. Obviously we must presuppose that the translator keeps his conflicting views/prejudices, if any, consciously in abeyance. American poet and storywriter, Tommye Rodrigues (personal communication, March 11 & 12, 2013) believes that a failure to accomplish this must then be attributed to prejudices on the part of the translator, prejudices that he may not be aware of on a conscious level or to an unscrupulous act of defiance in putting his own prejudices ahead of the author's.

For the purposes of the present paper it is to be assumed that the discussion is on conscientious translators whose goal is to remain as true as humanly possible to the intent of the writer.

A translation is either source-culture-specific or target-culture-specific; in both of these situations we nevertheless end up with a different version of the same text because “to convey the spirit, texture and general idiom of a text in a different culture is a creative imitation” (Nelson 362) based on the translator’s own perception of the source and target culture.

The difference in perception is a result of the cultural difference which generates “culture-related decision conflicts in the process of translation” (Loogus 372). Loogus describes the decision-making process of a translation as a multi-stage, goal-oriented, calculating and conflict-conscious process (373). The process is rarely easy; it often involves the risk of making a "wrong" decision.

As any choice contains an element of risk, decisions often involve a feeling of uncertainty. A decision conflict occurs when the translator is faced with a situation where he has to make a choice, but for some reason or other finds himself in an area where there are no rules to guide him.

The conflict of perception and transformation is skillfully illustrated by Mustapha Ettobi in his study of two different translations of the Moroccan novelist, Mohamed Choukri's novel *Al-Khubz al-Hafii* (The Plain Bread). He has demonstrated that the English and French versions of this novel differ in translating cultural aspects of the book. One of the translators prefers laying stress on the "cultural difference of the Arabic text" while the other "assimilates its specific traits to the target culture" (Ettobi 226).

The assimilation of cultural traits or "domestication", as in the case of Tahar Ben Jelloun's translation, leads to a "pleasurable read" instead of exposing "the readers to a foreign mode of living" (Ettobi 216). Likewise, Daria Fo's Italian play *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* loses its powerful political and social message when Gavin Richards adapts its text into English for a British audience. Elaborating Brigid Maher's argument (Nelson 362) that genuine fidelity to a source text lies in transmitting its intended effects in translations, Brian Nelson construes that Fo's original play was meant to "leave the audience with a residue of anger", whereas "the English adaptation, although remaining satirical, fails to engage its audience beyond providing it with a good laugh at figures of authority" (Nelson 362).

Jifri Levy, Christiane Nord (1989) and Terje Loogus argue that a translator should consider the text addressee's perspective of understanding and should mold his translation taking into account the requirements of the target language and culture. But the practice cannot avoid deforming and distorting source culture-specific values.

It is also assumed that depending on cultural differences, the translator has to "alter the information contained in the source text so that it can be interpreted in accordance with the intentions of the source text author" (Loogus

375). Once the information is altered, however, the 'intentions' are automatically changed as in the case of the above-mentioned texts. The process of translation, sometimes, does lead to culture-related and intra-individual conflicts of decision. But even then, a translator has to be honest to the source text otherwise the text will be either hallowed or misrepresented in the method of "foreignizing" and "domesticating" translation adopted by him.

This difference of decision making due to culture-related and intra-individual conflicts, and the typical methodology adopted by two or more translators of a source text can be illustrated and understood by analyzing two marvelous English renderings of an oral Urdu narrative, *Daastaan-e Amir Hamza SaaHibqiraan* (hereafter, *DAH*), known to many Eastern cultures from the 7th century A.D. (The Poetics of Amir Hamza's World: Notes on the Ghalib Lakhnavi/ Abdullah Bilgrami Version 89).

DAH is a glorious example of the tradition of story-telling popular in most of the regions of Asia. Its various printed versions in Arabic, Persian and Urdu indicate that besides oral recitation, it has been a popular romance in the form of a text as well. It was printed as a one-volume version in Urdu in 1801, 1855 and 1871. All these printed versions were compiled respectively by Khalil 'Ali Khaan Ashk, Amaan 'Alii Khaan Ghaalib Lakhnavi, and Maulvi Haafiz 'Abdullah Bilgraamii. There are two more editions of this one-volume tale that were published in 1887 and 1960 with some changes introduced respectively by Sayyid Tasadduq Husain Rizvi and Maulaanaa 'Abdul Baarii 'Aasii. Its popularity among the masses and the gentries during the latter half of the nineteenth century Lucknow is evident from the fact that between 1883 and 1917, Munshi Naval Kishor Press of Lucknow published it in forty-six volumes; each volume comprising of nine hundred to thousand plus pages. Frances W. Pritchett and Musharraf Ali Farooqi translated the one-volume editions of this tale compiled respectively by Maulaanaa 'Abdul Baarii 'Aasii and Ghalib Lakhnavi/Maulvi Haafiz 'Abdullaah Bilgraamii.

The selection of two different texts of the oral narrative show the translators' attitude towards the source text and their methodology incorporated in translation. Though, Frances W. Pritchett was the first to attempt an English rendition of this popular tale, her selection of the source text, which is an abridged, simplified and distorted version of the texts attributed to Ghaalib Lakhnavi and Maulvi Haafiz 'Abdullaah Bilgraamii, is a shortsighted approach, an unredeemable impoverishment ("Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran: Preface to the Translation" 170). It can be seen as the conflict of choice of a source text that a translator faces when he/she is more concerned about the target addressees.

Ghaalib Lakhnavi's Urdu version of *DAH* was reprinted by Naval Kishor Press in 1871 bearing the name of Maulvi Haafiz 'Abdullah Bilgraamii as its 'translator'. Both these versions are considered similar (*Saaherii, Shaerii, Sahibqiraani* 39) but it is inferred that in fact the later edition attributed to Bilgraamii is far better than the previous version in respect of narrative techniques. Bilgraamii not only embellished Lakhnavi's text with a grandiose and highly ornate language but also added his own passages to it whereas in 'Abdul Baarii 'Aasii's version published in 1960 most of the colourful passages are mangled and the text of poetry is also purged ("Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran: Preface to the Translation" 170). Pritchett, though herself an owner of the Lakhnavi's version (*Saaherii, Shaerii, Sahibqiraani* 195), selected 'Aasii's version as her source text which has diminished some of the most important elements of the narrative tradition that kept its audience spellbound for months and years.

Arabo-Persian oral narratives consisted of four integral arts woven together in the performance of a *dastaan-go* (story-teller)- *razm* (war), *bazm* (elegant gatherings), *Husn-o 'ishq*, (beauty and love), and '*ayyaarii* (trickery). Lakhnavii describes *razm* (war), *bazm* (elegant gatherings), *tilism* (enchantment/magic/mystery) and '*ayyaarii* (trickery) as the integral elements of the Urdu tradition of *daastaan-goii* (story-telling) (*Saaherii, Shaerii,*

Sahibqiraani 99). This classification is followed by all the critics of *daastaan*. Though there are emphases on rhetoric and narrative technique, they are never mentioned as the integral element of a *daastaan,* whereas it is everything but a performance based on the art of narration specific to a particular culture.

Post-1857 Lucknow was synonymous to a culture rich in its heritage of *zabaan-daanii* (mastery of language) not only in respect of poetry and prose but in day to day affairs as well, and *daastaans* were considered an encyclopedia of language and culture. Those opium addicted people were imparting an important and decisive role in cultivating and upbringing the *daastaan*- culture after Delhi's tryst with destiny in 1857. When 'Aasii attempted on a new version of *DAH* in 1960, he was being dishonest with the typical cultural traits of the period when its 1st or 2nd versions were compiled. Lakhnavii's version was published in the age of transition while Bilgraamii's version represents the Lucknow that was flourishing as a cultural centre in all its glory.

Pritchett's selection of the source-text and her argument that she has made a modest attempt to bring to the non-native Urdu reader some flavor, some idea of the richness of a genre which has suffered neglect for a long period (Bilgrami & Pritchett 32) testify the fact that her translation was target-culture-speakers oriented. She admits that her selection of the source-text was due to its translatability because "the changes over time have made the story [*DAH*] simpler and more translatable; they have certainly given the dastan the shape that it has today - and will continue to have in the future…" Farooqi rightly argues that her option to translate a rather "callously expurgated version" shows her insensitiveness to the original texts and sources. But it was a deliberate choice on her part as she was being honest to the culture and language of her target addressees. She further elaborates her methodology in the following words (Bilgrami & Pritchett 107-8):

> I'd like to achieve a translation that is as straightforward as it can be, as exact as good English usage will admit. Thus I try to avoid importing any highly marked turns of phrase: no modern slang, no

> archaisms, no striking idioms or picturesque images, no interpretive flourishes.

Avoiding "high marked turn of phrases" is in itself injustice with this genre because once those excellent rhetorical pieces are removed, *daastaans* lose their narrative beauty. They are meant to be narrated orally and their printed form is not much different from their oral narration except the fact that they do not employ the theatrics of narration. They narrate action. Sharar said that the *dastan-gos* of Lucknow have shown such expertise in all four arts [war, elegant gatherings, beauty and love, and trickery] that without seeing and hearing one cannot imagine it. Reading *DAH* is being a part of the assembly where the *daastaan* is being told. Though Pritchett admits that *daastaans* are built around a criterion of immediate rhetorical effect, her omissions of some of the elements from her already abridged and simplified source text are an intended effort for not showing genuine fidelity to the source text. One has reasons to wonder when she remarks that she has worked toward a language that is willing to "look like a translation" in order to be as far as possible a faithful bearer of a message from another culture (Bilgrami & Pritchett 109).

Farooqi writes that

> The *daastaan* was a genre of oral narration. Therefore it manifested itself fully in the *daastaan-go'i* tradition. After the end of this tradition, a critique of the *daastaan* must distinguish between *daastaan* as a genre and the written text as a record of its content. And as today we only have access to the text; any critique must begin from it. ("The Simurgh-Feather Guide to the Poetics of Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran" 163)

The written or printed form of a *daastaan* has all the elements of the genre except the theatrics. The same is true about the printed *DAH* as well. Now, if the translator intends to show genuine fidelity towards the oral tradition then he/she will have to rely upon the source text that is nearest to the spirit of that oral art. Therefore, Farooqi's selection of Lakhnavii/Bilgraamii's text as his source

testifies him being source-culture-specific. Pritchett once beautifully remarked reacting against Khushwant Singh's comments on translating Urdu poetry into English that

> …the claim that a good translator has to be a westerner, or at least "emotionally involved with English", gets us nowhere. A translator's personal "emotional involvement" with English is both unknowable and irrelevant… A translator needs to know Urdu well and English very well, and to know something about English poetry, and to have some kind of effective word-sense -- conditions that are not ethnic or emotional, but literary and craftsmanlike.

Farooqi's choice of the source text does illustrate his emotional involvement with the source culture and his translation demonstrates that he is very well acquainted with the rhetoric of Urdu storytelling, the richness and ornamental beauty of Urdu oral tradition, and rich narrative heritage of English language. To illustrate this notion the following two quotations from each of the translations will suffice.

A story within story of *DAH* begins with a prophecy that is meant to arrest the attention of the readers/listeners. From the traditions mentioned in the writings of the literary and cultural historians, it may be construed that the opening or beginning of the *daastaan* was cast in such a way that it could spellbound the listener/reader. The translation of Pritchett besides giving us an idea of the source text chosen by her, demonstrates her methodology and approach of target-addressee-oriented translation.

> **Amir Hamzah's cradle goes to the Realm of Qaf, and takes that sun of perfection to Mount Qaf.**
>
> Now the narrator of sweet speech tells to the lovers of old stories and fables, a few words of the dastan of Qaf. One day Shahpal son of Shahrukh, ruler of Mount Qaf, was seated on the Throne of Solomon in royal state and infinite grandeur. From all parts of the Realm of Qaf eighteen kings who rendered service to

him, and paid the tribute due him, were in attendance at court, and also countless nobles and dignitaries, who stood respectfully with hands folded, waiting upon the king.

The chamberlain presented himself, made obeisance to the king, and gave the good news that a star of the sign of auspiciousness and chastity, a Venus of the heaven of rectitude and purity--that is, a princess with the qualities of Jupiter and the beauty of the sun, had adorned the cradle, and increased the radiance of the brilliant family. The king spoke to Khvajah 'Abdur Rahman, who was his vazir, and was the companion and disciple of Hazrat Solomon, and was eminently learned in all the arts, and commanded, "Give this girl a name, and look at her fate; tell me how it will be, and what her star of fortune foretells."

Khvajah 'Abdur Rahman, according to the king's command, named the princess Asman Pari. Throwing the divining-dice and casting her horoscope, he put the patterns together, and most joyously told the king the good news: "Let Your Majesty be congratulated. This girl will reign over all eighteen realms of Qaf, and will rule and govern these kingdoms in grandeur and glory. But in the eighteenth year from now, those high-handed Devs, who at present are under your hand, will grow thoroughly arrogant; rebelling utterly, they will step outside the path of obedience and behave insolently. Except for #Garden of Iram, all the cities--Gold, Silver, Ermine, etc.--will slip from Your Majesty's control. But at that time a son of Adam, coming from the inhabited region of the world, will destroy and break those rebels with his might, retake the land, and give it back into Your Majesty's hand." (Pritchett)

Farooqi, retaining the issues of cultural identities, renders this tale from the original source text without changing the discourse style:

Hamza's Cradle is carried-off to Mt. Qaf, and that Sun of Excellence Shines on the Mount of Brilliance

The zephyr-paced sojourner, the stylus of fascinating accounts of the expert chroniclers, the flying arrowhead, to wit, the pen that must detail the briefings of the incorporeal messengers, also records a few words concerning events on Mt. Qaf, and regales those enamored of fables and legends of the past with some choice phrases from this wondrous tale. One day the sovereign Lord and Potentate of Mt. Qaf, Shahpal bin Shahrukh, was seated with all imperial pomp and majesty and boundless state and dignity on Solomon's boreal throne, which was his seat of government. In the court were assembled the monarchs who ruled the eighteen realms of Mt. Qaf, who paid him allegiance and were his tributaries and feudatories. Numerous lords and nobles from the neighboring lands and regions were paying court and receiving royal audience, when the watchman of the harem presented himself, made obeisance, and communicated the propitious tidings that a Star of the Constellation of Blessedness and Virtue, a Venus of the Skies of Rectitude and Continence; to wit, a princess—like the Sun in beauty, and in nature the like of Jupiter—had risen forth to shine over the King's House, by gracing the cradle from her mother's womb.

King Shahpal turned to his vizier, Abdul Rahman, a most eminent jinn bred in Solomon's court, who had distinguished himself in his service, and was a past master of all sciences. The King asked him to name the girl and cast her horoscope to see what it foretold, and determine what should be the star of her prestige and dignity. Abdul Rahman named the girl, Asman Pari, and throwing dice, casting the horoscope, and relating the shapes together, conveyed the news to King Shahpal, rejoicing greatly at what he deciphered: "My felicitations to Your Honor! This girl will

> rule the eighteen realms of Mt. Qaf, and hold majestic sway over these dominions. But eighteen years from this day, the mutinous jinns, who pay vassalage today, shall rise as a body in rebellion. They shall insurrect most contumaciously, violate the bounds of obedience and propriety, and show impudence towards Your Highness. With the exception of Gulistan, Iram, Zarrin, Simin, and Qaqum, all other cities shall slip out of Your Majesty's control. In those days a human will come from the inhabited quarters of the Earth and rout those rebels, and inflict upon them a most resounding defeat. And he shall conquer the occupied countries by his might and return them to Your Majesty's rule!" (Farooqi 227-28)

These quotations not only illustrate the source texts and their difference of rhetoric, they exemplify the difference of approach in transforming the text as well. The target-specific translation of Pritchett sans the lustrous beauty of the Urdu storytelling. There is yet another interesting quotation that exemplifies the conflicts of intercultural transfer and strategic cultural intervention in translation:

> When they embraced, first Gustahm squeezed the Amir with his whole strength, and uttered words of warmth and enthusiasm. Then the Amir too expressed his enthusiasm, and then squeezed him so hard that several times wind came out of Gustahm's asshole. Embarrassed, he said in the Amir's ear, "Oh Amir, you are chivalrous. Don't tell anybody about this, don't make me ashamed and embarrassed; let it remain a secret just between us." (Pritchett)

Whereas Farooqi's translation is as follows:

> As he embraced Amir, Gustham pressed him with his arms for all he was worth, offering him sweet words of welcome expressing his pleasure and delight. Amir returned his compliments and pressed him back so powerfully that Gustham's rear trumpeted many a note from an abundant release of wind. Greatly confounded by this

> mishap, Gustham whispered in Amir's ear, "O Amir! I trust to your chivalry never to breathe word of this to anyone, and not to work my humiliation and ruin before the world. Let this forever remain a secret between us!" (Farooqi)

Basic to the practice of translation, and therefore to translation theory is the translator's own subjectivity (Nelson 362). A translator is a speaker of both the source language and the target language. When the source language is his primary language and cultural heritage, both the author's and the translator's cultural heritage is manifested in the text he is translating. Farhat Mansoob (personal communication, March 8, 9 & 12, 2013) asserts that when, however, the target language is the translator's primary language and cultural heritage, he/she acts as a recipient and producer of the source culture in accordance with his own subjectivity even when he/she consciously and scrupulously works to avoid this natural tendency.

There are many arguments in favour of transforming translations in accordance with the goal of increasing the understanding of the target addressee. Central to the translation process of the Occidentals, this method leads to the loss of, to quote Walter Benjamin, "historical constellations" (Nelson 362). One can identify advantages to both a translator of the same culture and one of the target culture.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that if the emphasis is placed on being true to the writer, then the translator should be of the same culture as the author. The texts under consideration (*DAH*) make us construe that the translator from the author's culture is, of course, more accurately able to represent the author's intentions. It is argued that this translator is, however, less able to provide a bridge between the originating culture and the receiving culture. If, on the other hand, opine Nord, Loogus and Rodrigues acceptability by and understanding by the target culture is emphasized then the translator should be from the target culture while understanding that a translator from the target culture, even when endeavoring to stay true to the author's views, is

inevitably influenced by his own cultural heritage. The writing may be better received by the target culture because the translator will have, either intentionally or unintentionally translated in reference to his culture's expectations and background of the subject. It will not be considered as "genuine fidelity" to the source text.

There is yet another translation of *DAH* by the speaker of the language of the source text, and it is too much distorted in its contents as it was meant to be target-culture-specific. The translator, Sheik Sajjad Hosain, admits avoiding, "as much possible, the superfluities and exaggerations of the original…so as to make the book inviting and pleasant to English readers" ("Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran: Preface to the Translation" 172). That is the method adopted by Frances W. Pritchett.

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