

## Farther from the Original: Reading Mirza Ghalib in English Translations

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*The beauties of poetry cannot be  
preserved in any written language except that in  
which it was originally written - Johnson*

*The origin of philosophy is translation or the thesis  
of translatability - Derrida*

*A line will take us hours may be  
Yet, if it does not seem a moment's thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught -  
Yeats*

### Abstract

Translation has earned a very significant place in modern global multi-cultural societies for it bridges gap between cultures, climates, languages and people. It is an innate skill which can be mastered or developed through practice and guidance like other skills. It is a process of searching appropriate ways and means of voicing or saying things in another language. It is truly an intellectual activity involving the transportation of thoughts expressed in one language into the appropriate expression of another entailing a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding. Pertinently, due to cultural differences, the job of the translator becomes tougher, more complex and difficult for he / she has to search for approximations or equivalents – cultural words, proverbs and other idiomatic expressions. This paper intends to throw light on the uncertainties and difficulties a translator is caught in while translating poetry with special reference to various translations of Mirza Ghalib.

### Key Words

**Translation, Literature, dilemma, bilingual, multiculturalism, proficiency, and efficiency**

Translation, an intellectual activity, an innate skill, an act of recreation, an act of transfer of knowledge, a process of cultural and ideological transportation, a theory of meaning, a collaborative enterprise, a literary act, a process of substitution or negotiation, often transports the masterpieces of the human spirit from one language into another. It not only increases readership but also renders a great service to any nation or culture for it widens the scope and meaning of different artifacts by placing them on the international map of academics. Graham Hough says, "From the emergence of vernaculars to break-up of European civilizations in our own day, translation was one of the most important means of maintaining a common culture" (Hough 1961:71). G. Devy in "Translation and Literary History: An Indian View", rightly quotes J. Hillis Miller remarking, "Translation is the

wandering existence of a text in a perpetual exile” (Bassnet and Trivedi 1999: 182). For Peter Newmark translation is “rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text” (Newmark 1988). Similarly, Catford opines *that* translation is the “substitution or replacement of textual materials in one language by equivalent textual material in another language” (Catford 1965:20). Here, one thinks twice because the concept of equivalence raises queries and poses some problems for one can interpret a given text in different ways. The question remains – what about poetry? While searching for an equivalent hasn’t one then to give due consideration strictly to both content and effect in addition to other features such as concretion, vividness, vitality, music, personification as well for poetic language is invariably figurative language. Thus, translating poetry is undoubtedly a formidable task for it poses unprecedented challenges before the translator by landing him in a delimita and thereby forcing him to attempt an adequate target text after rendering. While translating, the search for equivalence especially in poetry compels the translator not only to pay due attention to the poetic features (stylistic, semiotic, morphologic and prosodic) – where it is not only the word that is taken into consideration but the context and effect as well – which makes translators of poetry special for they’ve to capture even the minutest details of the matter, beauty, content or message by conveying or sharing it in another language without omitting anything. David Lodge remarks: “To test the closeness of any translation to its original, one would have to be not only bi-lingual but – to coin an ugly phrase – bicultural, i.e., possessed of the whole complex of emotions, associations and ideas which intricately relate a nation’s language to its life and tradition, but possessed not only one such complex – as we are to some extent – but of two” (Lodge 1966:2). This speaks of the strengths which a translator has to develop before translating any piece of poetry. Translation is possible provided it “is not merely mechanical enterprise but a creative one” (Vinoda & Reddy 2000:123). This means one has to try to be faithful to the original for it is not simply a matter of seeking equivalents but finding appropriate ways of saying things in another language. Different languages use different linguistic forms. Other than the difference between language systems, the process of transmitting cultural elements through literary translation is a very complicated task for Culture includes history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. Some of the pragmatic problems which a translator of poetry encounters while translating a poetic text from one language to another in the Indian context are: For instance, a name is a linguistic cultural element and its use carries associative value; hence, it resists translation as its evocative value is lost. Similarly, in Indian languages, people show respect to their elders by addressing them in plural. Here, simple he/she cannot be substituted for the idea behind the use in Urdu or Hindi ‘*aap*’ or in Bangali ‘*apuni*’ for you. So, in addressing an elderly person, either choice-retaining the plural form or replacing it by a simple “you”-will make it ambiguous. Further, in Indian context, it appears quite artificial for family members to wish one another with “good morning,” “have a nice day,” etc., to apologize, or to express gratitude by saying “sorry” or “thank you.” In our social relationships, there are different words to refer to each relation. This is absent in the West. English language lacks these corresponding terms. This implies that the

translator must have a good knowledge of a foreign culture, history and language especially its vocabulary and grammar. One should be familiar with one's own culture and be aware of the source-language culture as well before attempting any literary translation act. He has to see similar or parallel language resources exist in the literary subculture of the target language. Research reveals that few writers depend so heavily on the intricacies of a given language as the poet, for whom each word is often essential. Every major language can provide examples of fine poetry, rich in the demeanor and presence of language, filled with the richness that makes a language unique and interesting. Some would argue that without the variance found in dissimilar languages poetry would fail us as a comprehensive art; could we have the peculiar grammar of Emily Dickinson beside the lyricism of Baudelaire if both poets were constrained to the same language? However, such richness lands the translator in tough situations when asked to translate poetry from one language to another, a common task in case of well-known poets of the past and a growing area of interest for the works of contemporary poets.

Since this paper attempts to identify the problems and hardspots which translators face while attempting a poetic translation, for illustrating this argument, few translated verses / poems of Ghalib are quoted here:

*Ah ko chahiye ek umare asar hone tak  
Kaun jieta hai teri zulf ke sar hone tak  
Ashiqi sabri-talab aur tamanna betab  
Dil ka rang karun khunie jigar hone tak  
Ham ney mana keh taghaful nah karoge lekin  
Khakh ho jaenge ham tum ko khaber hone tak  
Gham-e hasti ka Asad kis se ho jhuz marg ilaaj  
Shamah har rang men jalti hai sahar hone tak*

J.L. Kaul's translation of the aforesaid is as under:

I know –

The lover may sigh the livelong day  
To touch the loved one's heart;  
It takes too long to win thy love, and  
Can death outlive and hope to quell thy curls?  
I know how long suffering love must be;  
Desire brooks no delay, and death  
May summon me to pity by my plaint  
I would rather seek and find thy love  
I grant thou wilt not treat me unkindly  
When lamentations reach thine ears  
I know love's fruition  
I know death closes all, and doth all sorrow end;  
And man, like candle, burns away,  
Until the coming of the day, until he finds release in death...  
It dies as soon it flares. (Academy 2009:21)

Ralph Russell's rendering of the above quoted is as under:

My sighs will a lifetime to touch your unfeeling heart  
Who lives so long a life that he can hope to conquer you?

Within the coil of every wave a hundred monsters lurk  
Love demands patience; longing and desire brook no delay  
How shall I rule my heart till resolution takes control?  
I grant you that you will not be indifferent – but then  
I shall be dust before you realize that I am there  
Asad, the grief of life can find no other cure than death

The candle, come what may, burns on until the morning dawns (Russell  
2009:348 – 349)

The poet-lover voices his very passionate love for his beloved. We find that the original lucid lines are rich in emotion and pregnant with meaning. They owe this uniqueness to their beautiful wording and semantics. Each word talks of the lover's overwhelming love and his helplessness in the hands his beloved. Both these English renderings above show evident loss in case of the original prosody, imagery, conceit, ambivalence and literary aesthetics. Though the translators have tried their best to be very faithful to the meaning of the original poem yet these translations lack the same effect which the original verses have. Russell's version appears more English in taste and feel than Koul's whose version breathes Indianess and the structure of *ghazal* seems at work. In *ghazal*, every couplet is invariably a complete independent, self-contained entity because the poet's mood goes on changing from couplet to couplet. Ghalib's *ghazal* possesses exceptional force, unique strength, uniformity of tone and emotional pitch which are integral components of *ghazal* poetry. We must not forget that Ghalib is so rich in sound and imagery that it is almost impossible to render his ghazals in English without mauling them beyond recognition. How does one begin to translate a line as brilliant as *dil ka kya rang karoon, khoon-e-jigar hone tak?* How does one convey the richness of its color, beauty, music, message, the quality of the sentiment, the sense of quasi-paradox – all without losing the precision, the simplicity of Ghalib's original? Remarkable is the use of poet's references, his extraordinary use of tropes, beguiling force, opacity, mirage and the coalescence of imagery. For those of who speak Urdu, this ghazal requires no introduction so far its gloriousness is concerned. For those who don't know the language, there's enough in these renderings to convey the exquisite intelligence that moves through this poem, the sheer lyricism of a unique master whose every couplet stands as a poem in its own right, and whose words, a century and a half after they were written, continue to be quoted by millions.

Now let's look at the following verse of Ghalib:

*Hazaron Khwashien aise keh har khwahish peh dam nikle*  
*Bahut nikle mere arman lekin phir bhi kam nikle*  
Longings innumerable exquisitely intense!  
How many, many fulfilled:  
And yet, O God, how few!

- Hashim Ameer Ali (GhalibAcademy 2009:44)

Desires in thousands – each so strong it takes away my breath anew  
And many longings were fulfilled – many, but even so too few  
- (Russell 2000:111)

A comparative study of these translated versions of the same verse of Ghalib reveals interesting details as the translation depends a lot on the translator's qualification and background of the translator. The first version by Hashim Ameer Ali is more condensed, with terse simple static lines. The translator seeks more culture specific words to remain faithful to the original. For example instead of just using 'desire' he uses 'longings'. This way, he tries to retain both tension and ambiguity of the original text. The second one seems static. These translations prove the fact that it is difficult to comprehend fully the obscurities of Ghalib as his original verses draw the loudest and longest applause for these truly have mesmerized the listeners and readers by placing them in a state of transcendental bliss. The translator has to remember that his poetry possesses a very unique message along with incomparable beauty of sounds and rhymes which really counts in poetry. We find that though these English renderings don't fully retain the same power and poetic strength in the form of their original literary aesthetics yet both deserve appreciation for at least forwarding one layer of meaning by trying to have appropriate choice of vocabulary in order to be closest to the source text. In these renderings, we also observe how *deep structure* is replaced by *surface structure*. Further, the Indian translator has tried to retain the *ghazal* structure and *Oriental* effect in his rendering. Here one gets reminded of Professor Annemarie Sachimmel who says that Urdu poetry employs: "The highly developed play on words, which can add inimitable charm by the clever use of the Arabic, Persian, and Indian elements of the poetical language, each of which bears not only its simple meaning but also different accessory notions. From this springs the peculiar art of oscillation between mystical and profane meanings, or between sensuality and spirituality ... who knows whether the wine is real or is the wine of love? Who knows whether the beloved is a handsome young boy, wearing his silken cap awry on his head, his curls hanging down beside his moonlike face or whether this description is openly a symbol of the Divine Beloved, whose beauty surpasses everything and is yet to be expressed only in terms of human attributes?" (See, foreword to *Three Mughal Poets*). Here, one is reminded of Josh Malihabadi's following verses:

*Aah ai naqqad-e-funn yeh kya sitam karta hai tu?  
Koi nok-e-khaar se chhoota hai nabz-e-rang-o-bu?  
She'r kya kuchh sochna dil men ba-lahn-e-dil-nashin  
She'r kya har baat kah kar kuchh na kahne ka yaqin.*

O literary critic, what's this atrocious thing you are doing?

Is it proper to feel the pulse of colour and scent with pointed thorn?

Poetry is the art of thinking secretly in the innermost recesses of one's heart.

Poetry is the art of voicing everything and still being sure of having said nothing

Or look at the following verse of Mirza Ghalib once it is translated what it appears like:

*Dil-e-nada'n tujhe hua keya hai  
Aakhir ise dard ki dawaa keya hai?*

*O foolish heart, what has befallen you?*

*Don't you know this sickness has no cure? (Russell 2000:97)*

The above English rendering largely ignores the formal tonal quality along with a certain degree of sacrifice of the ambiguity of the verse. One easily understands the modus operandi as well as the drawbacks of the rendering. Further, an apparent tampering with the sense of the original makes the meaning of the poem comprehensible in a foreign idiom and language. This makes one feel that if the blessed soul of Mirza Ghalib comes back to life and listens to the translated version of his lines, he would cry and bang his head for he won't find them equally musical and ambiguous. While translating, one forgets invariably the thematic and poetic impulses of any piece of literature particularly if it is poetry? One must remember that a work of art holds an experience in a particular state with the help of a language which is otherwise dynamic in nature. One also realizes seriously that translation of poetry is the most difficult task under the sun. It takes the form of transcreation which doesn't invoke the same responses. Poetry exploits and integrates the resources of the whole language be it phonology, morphology, syntax or lexicon. Thus, while translating a poetic piece, one has to experience problems at numerous levels – lexical, cultural and dialectal. The major difficulties in translation are as per Newmark, “lexical, not grammatical i.e., word, collocations and fixed phrases or idioms”(Peter1988:32). This means the creative literature especially poetry poses insurmountable problems for the translator. How can one forget in poetry the poet's expression in moving pictures – metaphor, personification, simile, image and symbol? Language of poetry abounds in plurisignation, multi-dimensionality and inexhaustible suggestivity. It is full of beauty and grandeur. One may produce the meaning of the poetic lines but the fire and passion of the original is usually difficult which makes the translation insipid. Regarding oriental poets it is generally said that they go further in investing words with meanings which cannot be found even in dictionaries. Almost all translators have understood that Ghalib is a difficult poet in character with more art than poetry, more thought or than imagination. A thorough reading reveals that his poetry is essentially intellectual or fancy than feeling. He consciously charges each poetic expression with intellect making the translator's task full of uneasiness and discomfort. The readers of poetry must know now that a lot of poetry of the original such as extensive sound patterning, internal rhyme scheme, and other poetic idiosyncrasies experience a change in renderings which doesn't mean translation doesn't serve its purpose. One gets here reminded of these remarks of Sontag, a noted critic: “To translate means many things, among them to circulate, to transport, to disseminate, to explain, to make (more) accessible.... the translation of the small percentage of published books actually worth reading: that is to say, worth rereading... in what I call the evangelical incentive, the purpose is to enlarge the readership... (Sontag 2003).

On the whole, even after making a translator to experience the delimita, the successive efforts of these different translators translating the same single text only reveal the inexhaustiveness of poetry and the textual residue that tempts another cycle of translations making clear the fact that translators translating ingeniously

with boldness, fidelity, integrity release an alternative, subversive potential of a text, turning it inside out to bring out its deconstructive meaning to the fore.

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