

Father Tongues, Mother Tongues, and Other Tongues

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Abstract

A considerable amount of translation is done in Bangladesh, functional and literary, from English – and other languages – to Bangla – and from Bangla to English – and other languages. Most translations in other parts of the world are from another language to the speaker’s own language, from another tongue to the mother tongue. In Bangladesh – as well as in other parts of the sub-continent – translations from the mother tongue to English are common. In addition, there is a lot of translation into Bangla from “other tongues,” languages which one has not learned. These translations are almost always via another translation, generally an English one. What are the problems related to this sort of translation? The paper discusses the issues which crop up in these situations and attempts to suggest solutions.

Keywords: father tongue, mother tongue, other tongues, functional translation, literary translation

A lot of functional translation has been going on in Bangladesh, both for international and domestic purposes. The World Bank, UNICEF, and the numerous NGOs need reports, papers, handouts, etc. to be translated. The growth of international travel – for education, work or other purposes – also means that there is an increasing need to translate different types of documents. The result has been the development of a veritable translation industry, with shops along busy thoroughfares advertising translation services.

However, in addition to this functional translation – of documents, transcripts and reports – there has also been a steady growth of literary translation, much of this sporadic and dependent on the translator. While most Bengali writers are still fiercely nationalistic, a sociological and demographic change has taken place. There is a large Bengali diaspora, with people moving out of Bangladesh for education, jobs, and “the pursuit of happiness.” While the first generation of immigrants cling to their mother tongue, their children soon forget it. In Bangladesh as well there is a whole generation of young people growing up away from their mother tongue because of English-language education. Bangla writers want to reach this audience by publishing English translations of their writings.



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As a result, there is a lot of literary translation from Bangla to English – from the “mother tongue” to what Bobby Islam, the late editor of a local daily, termed the “father tongue.” He had used the term when he had applied to the Department of English, University of Dacca, as it was spelled in those days. At the time, the university had separate admission tests for its different departments. Bobby Islam was being interviewed by the formidable head of the department and was asked, “Why do you wish to study English?” The young man replied, “Because it is my father tongue.” Taken aback, the head asked for an explanation. Bobby replied that English was the language of power. It was the language that opened doors to prestigious jobs. He did get admitted and went on to become the editor of a newspaper now defunct. In one of his editorials he mentioned this incident.¹ It is his phrase that I use when I refer to English as the “father tongue” with all the implications that it has.

Most translations in other parts of the world are from a foreign language to one’s mother tongue. Why in India or Bangladesh – perhaps in Pakistan as well – do we see so many translations from one’s mother tongue into the father tongue, from one’s native language to English? Many explanations have been given, the predominant one being that we would like to translate our writings so that the world can read these master works. The famous example given is that of Tagore. Would Tagore have won the Nobel Prize if the *Gitanjali* had not been available in English? Many writers hope that their work will win the next Nobel Prize and look for translators to help them. However, many translations do not succeed. Writers who show their translations to foreign publishers are told that the translations are not up to the mark. And yet that has not prevented people from translating or having their works translated.

Native Bangla-speakers often lack command of the language into which they are translating – the *target language*. Furthermore, even when they do have competent target language skills, they lack the ear for the target language which is essential for all creative writers and translators. Many years ago, in his introduction to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao talked about the necessity of the language being not just part of the writer’s intellectual makeup but also of his “emotional makeup.” While he was talking about the creative writer, this is also true of the translator. It was a point that Amiya Chakravarty made when discussing the difficulties of translating from Bangla in general and Tagore in particular. He noted that the resonances of the language and its cultural undertones are often lost in translation. To have a “valid” translation, as he put it, it must be “done in the language learnt by a poet at his mother’s knee, a poet

¹ Anwarul Islam, better known as Bobby Islam (1942-1994), founded the now defunct *Morning Sun*. He mentioned this incident in an editorial in the paper.

for whom it is the language of his subconscious” (317). Chakravarty was mainly talking about translating poetry, but what he said applies to other creative writing as well: plays, short stories, and novels. However, to be a good writer or translator, must a language be learned at one’s mother’s knee? One of the most remarkable creations of the last century was Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett, an Irishman, wrote the play in French before translating it into English. Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* plays with the English language in the most delightful way – and Nabokov grew up in Russian. And, even earlier, one of the masters of the English language, Joseph Conrad, was not born into English. Roquiah Sakhawat Hussain wrote the remarkable “Sultana’s Dream” in English before she translated it into Bangla as *Sultanar Swapna*. Significantly, neither Bangla nor English was Roquiah’s mother tongue. Abu Sayeed Ayyub, one of the great literary critics in Bangla, did not learn Bangla at his mother’s knee.

Other more recent examples of writers who have moved from their mother tongues to writing in the father tongue include Khaled Hosseini from Afghanistan, Aamer Hussain and Nadeem Aslam from Pakistan, Neamat Imam, Zia Haider Rahman, and Arif Anwar from Bangladesh. Of course, these are creative writers, but, as the PEN America organized “World of Translation Conference” in 1970 noted in a “Bill of Rights,” a translator is also a creative writer:

Since translation of works of literature by the very nature of the task is the creation of a new work, the translator must be regarded as sovereign. The translator’s chief obligation is to create the work in a new language with the appropriate music and the utmost response to the silences of the original.

A good translation is possible only when the translator has not just the language skills but the imaginative brilliance and literary skills of a creative writer. Translators not familiar with the idioms of the target language, not familiar with the culture, not familiar with the music of the target language, cannot be good translators. Weak translators are not quite sure when to paraphrase or translate literally and when to paraphrase, convey the meaning.

Sometimes translators are aware of their limitations but persist, hoping that the translation will interest someone better qualified to rework it. Sometimes this is a false Bengali/Asian humility such as when Tagore expressed his weakness in English. Tagore was not weak in English as his remarkable prose translation of “চিত্ত যেথা ভয়শূন্য, উচ্চ যেথা শির” (“Chitta jetha bhoysnunno, uccho jetha shir”) shows.

Tagore's original Bangla reads:

চিত্ত যেথা ভয়শূন্য, উচ্চ যেথা শির
চিত্ত যেথা ভয়শূন্য, উচ্চ যেথা শির,
জ্ঞান যেথা মুক্ত, যেথা গৃহের প্রাচীর
আপন প্রাঙ্গণতলে দিবসশর্বরী
বসুধারে রাখে নাই খণ্ড ক্ষুদ্র করি,
যেথা বাক্য হৃদয়ের উৎসমুখ হতে
উচ্ছ্বসিয়া উঠে, যেথা নির্বীরিত শ্রোতে
দেশে দেশে দিশে দিশে কর্মধারা ধায়
অজস্র সহস্রবিধ চরিতার্থতায়,
যেথা তুচ্ছ আচারের মরুবাণুরাশি
বিচারের শ্রোতঃপথ ফেলে নাই গ্রাসি,
পৌরুষেরে করে নি শতধা, নিত্য যেথা
তুমি সর্ব কর্ম চিন্তা আনন্দের নেতা,
নিজ হস্তে নির্দয় আঘাত করি, পিতঃ;
ভারতেরে সেই স্বর্গে করো জাগরিত।

Tagore's own translation reads:

Where the Mind is Without Fear
Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow
domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary
desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and
action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

However, often that false humility about one's weakness proves actually quite true. For example, some years ago some selected poems of the Bangladeshi writer Al-Mahmud were translated into English. In his introduction, Mahbubul Alam Akhand, the translator expressed his reservations about the quality of the translation as English was not his mother tongue. He hoped, however, that someone better qualified would take up the task that he had attempted.

As Rimi B. Chatterjee points out in her essay "Translation,"

Furthermore, India is probably the only country where people who

read the originals also read the translations just as avidly. They are invariable disappointed. It is very difficult to explain to readers that translation cannot and must not attempt to recreate the original in another language. All it can do is provide an approximation that asymptotically approaches the excellence of the source without ever quite reaching it. A good translation should awaken in its readers a twinge of regret that they cannot read the original in its pristine glory. Yet people here are conditioned to the idea that English and its works are somehow superior, and that the verse of Rabindranath Tagore in English, for example, must be a wonderful thing. They do not realize that as readers of the originals they are in the closest, most privileged position anyone can be in with regard to the text, and that translations are meant for those unfortunate beings who will never reach that state. (26)

This is also true to some extent of Bangladesh as well. Readers of translations from Bangla are almost always disappointed because the translations do not achieve the quality of the originals.

However, even a translator who is equally skilled in both SL and TL, the mother tongue and the father tongue, might face problems. The formidable head of the English Department whom I mentioned earlier faced problems of translation – how true could he be to the original? – when faced with the complexities of cultural differences. Syed Sajjad Husain who did some remarkable translations of Kazi Nazrul Islam – though he did not often hesitate to change the order of the lines, which only a comparison with the original will reveal – hesitated when he came to translate Nazrul’s masterpiece: “Bidrohi.” In addition to the almost breathless pace of the verse, the tone of the lines, reminiscent of Whitman in “Song of Myself,” there is also a range of images drawn from Hindu mythology which Husain felt would be impossible for a non-Bengali reader to understand. He explains the reasons for his truncation of Nazrul’s remarkable poem.

[The poem’s] dazzling array of images and metaphors drawn from numerous sources, Indian, Islamic, Greek, and even industrial, strung together in apparent disregard of logic, is difficult to translate. The repetitions, inconsistencies, and paradoxes in Bengali are redeemed by the vigour and energy of the verse and the fascinating succession of rhymes. But I found that a literal rendering would result in a version which would not only fail to convey the superb beauty of the poem but even expose it to the ridicule of foreign readers not familiar either with the idiom of the Bengali language or with non-western mythology. I have therefore pruned away lines which I thought

would not translate well and also tried to avoid the repetitions which would tire the reader's ear in English. The translation is consequently slightly shorter than the original. (25)

Husain seems to belong to the Macaulay school of education, believing that Indian mythology is ridiculous. Macaulay was not talking specifically of Indian mythology but of the language of education, but his scoffing at the contents of books in “Sanskrit” – which is how he spells the word – reveals his distaste for them.

The question now before us is simply whether, when it is in our power to teach this language, we shall teach languages in which, by universal confession, there are no books on any subject which deserve to be compared to our own, whether, when we can teach European science, we shall teach systems which, by universal confession, wherever they differ from those of Europe differ for the worse, and whether, when we can patronize sound philosophy and true history, we shall countenance, at the public expense, medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier, astronomy which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school, history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long, and geography made of seas of treacle and seas of butter.

Thanks to writers like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, Indian myths and legends as well as Indian words and phrases have entered literature. (Earlier, of course, Indian words like khaki, jodhpurs, bungalow, pajama had become part of the British lexicon. These words are no longer italicized.) The newer words – not so common in English – are still, for the most part, italicized except by publishers like Zubaan who deliberately do not italicize words from indigenous languages.

As Rimi B. Chatterjee notes, western readers have grown more tolerant of cultural differences. Many terms too have become common beyond the borders of the Indian subcontinent.

Today many of the Indian originals (at least in the case of *kebab*) are now almost universally familiar to most Western readers. In addition, readers, have become more tolerant of cultural difference and no longer baulk at a glossary of Indian kinship terms; food, flora and fauna; and articles of dress and daily use. Concomitantly, it is fast becoming standard practice among publishers of translations not to translate such words, but to leave them (in italics, usually) where the context makes it fairly clear what they are (supplementing

this with a glossary at the back of the book) or, if such practice interferes seriously with the flow of the text, to substitute a short descriptive phrase for the Indian name rather than look for a closely matching English word. However, the practice can be a problem if the publisher/translator lacks the vision to see readership beyond the immediate locale. Not being a Tamil speaker, when reading some translations of Tamil works, I have been frustrated to find numerous words untranslated in the text, but no glossary provided. It is not merely translations which offend thus; Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, could have done with a glossary for non-Malayalam speakers. (25-26)

To return to Husain. It is clear from other translations that Husain did that he was an able translator. His skill as a translator is revealed in his moving translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam's "Shat-el-Arab":

Forever glorious, forever holy,
Your sacred beaches, Shat-el-Arab,
Are bathed in gore, the blood of fighters
Of many races, and diverse colours.

Strewn on these sands lie the bones of Arab,
Egyptian and Turk and Greek and Bedouin,
Also of women, bold and daring,
Who sobbed as they battled, reckless of danger.

The surging waters of the roaring Tigris
Bring you the blood they shed at Amara;
And the Euphrates thunders daily
Warnings to those whose hearts are evil.

You the nurse of the brave and the fearless
Who'd rather die than bow to a master,
These beaches ring with the voice of Ali
From a distant past, now dim and shrouded.

The crimson flame-like roses of Basra
Are radiant emblems of war and glory;
They flourish on soil where heads have tumbled
Like fruit from the date-palm in arid deserts.

We met by chance, but here are my greetings –
Homage sincere from a fellow bondsman –
To the sacred beaches of Shat-el-Arab,
Forever glorious, forever holy. (85)

A comparison with the Bangla original will reveal that Husain's translation lacks much of the declamatory nature of Nazrul's poem. Husain also does not try to replicate the structure of the original poem. Nor does he emulate the repetitions in the poem. By itself, however, Husain's translation succeeds in conveying the spirit of Nazrul's poem – the past glories of the Arab world and the loss of that glory which reminds the poet of the condition of his own country. The Arab of Nazrul's times was a “bondsman” like the Indian.

শাত্-ইল্-আরব

শাতিল্-আরব। শাতিল্-আরব!! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর।
শহীদের লোহু, দিলীরের খুন ঢেলেছে যেখানে আরব-বীর।
যুবোছে এখাঅনে তুর্ক-সেনানী,
যুনানি মিস্রি আরবি কেনানি; –
লুটেছে এখানে মুক্ত আজাদ্ বেদুঈন্দের চাঙ্গা-শির!
নাঙ্গা-শির –
শম্শের হাতে, আঁসু-আঁখে হেথা মূর্তি দেখেছি বীর-নারীর!
শাতিল্-আরব! শাতিল্-আরব!! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর।

‘কত-আমারার’ রক্তে ভরিয়া
দজলা এনেছে লোহুর দরিয়া;
উগারি’ সে খুন তোমাতে দজলা নাচে ভৈরব ‘মস্তানী’র
ত্রস্তা-নীর
গর্জে রক্ত-গঙ্গা ফোরাতে, – “শান্তি দিয়েছি গোস্তাখীর!”
দজলা-ফোরাতে-বাহিনী শাতিল! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর।

বহায়ে তোমার লোহিত বন্যা
ইরাক্ আজমে করেছ ধন্যা –
বীরপ্রসূ দেশ হ’ল বরণ্যা মরিয়া মরণ মর্দমীর!
মর্দ বীর
সাহারায় এরা ধুঁকে মরে তবু পরে না শিকল পদ্ধতির।
শাতিল্-আরব! শাতিল্-আরব!! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর।

দুশমন-লোহু ঈর্ষায় নীর
তব তরঙ্গে করে ঝিল্-ঝিল্,
বাঁকে বাঁকে রোষে মোচড় খেয়েছে পিয়ে নীল খুন পিঞ্জরীর!
জিন্দা বীর
“জুলফিকার” আর “হায়দরী” হাঁক হেথা আজো হজরত্ আলীর –
শাতিল্-আরব! শাতিল্-আরব!! জিন্দা রেখেছে তোমার তীর।
ললাটে তোমার ভাস্বর টিকা
বস্ৰা-গুলের বহিতে লিখা;
এ যে বসোরার খুন-খারাবি গো রক্ত-গোলাপ-মঞ্জরীর
খঞ্জরীর

খঞ্জরে ঝরে খজুর- সম হেথা লাখো দেশ-ভক্ত-শির!
শাতিল-আরব! শাতিল-আরব!! পূত যুগে যুগে তোমার তীর।

ইরাক-বাহিনী! এ যে গো কাহিনী,
কে জানিত কবে বঙ্গ-বাহিনী
তোমারও দুঃখে “জননী আমার!” বলিয়া ফেলিবে তপ্ত নীর।
রক্ত-ক্ষীর -
পরাধীনা! একই ব্যথায় ব্যথিত ঢালিল দু’ফোঁটা ভক্ত-বীর।
শহীদের দেশ! বিদায়! বিদায়!! এ অভাগা আজ নোয়ায় শির। (83-84)

Some other translator might, it is true, retain more of Nazrul’s repetitions, keep closer to the original, but Husain’s translation does not require the explanations that he felt were needed for his translation of Nazrul’s master poem. Was it then the matter of Nazrul’s “Bidrohi” that was a problem for Husain and caused him to excuse the truncation of the poem?

Whereas Husain decided to leave out much that was culturally different, other translators too attempt to cater to foreign readers by trying to omit the cultural differences and substituting synonyms. Thus, translations of Bangla texts often see the word “gamchha” being replaced by the phrase “rough towel” or “coarse towel” and the words “sari” and “lungi” replaced by “native dress/garment.” Sari has become an accepted word now, though *lungi* and *gamchha* are not that common. But even if they are not, translators can easily retain them, giving an explanation in parenthetical commas – rather than in parenthesis, footnotes, or a glossary. Of course, Rimi B. Chatterjee is critical of the lack of a glossary to the many Malayalam terms that Arundhati Roy used in *A God of Small Things*. Much the same can be said of Junot Diaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008), which is full of Spanish words and sentences and problematic for readers who do not know Spanish.

Salman Rushdie was perhaps the first writer from the Indian subcontinent to use Hindi/Urdu words and phrases with a vengeance, refusing to explain or gloss them. How much should one think of the foreign reader when translating? How much of the original should be left untranslated? And how much should be translated for an audience not familiar with the language or its culture? This is not a problem only relevant to Bangladesh but to India as well. I would like to take the example of the same vignette from Sa’adat Hasan Manto’s *Siyah Hashiye* (1948) – “Black Margins” – translated in three different ways by three different people.

The translator who is most well-known for his translations of Manto is Khalid Hasan. Here is Hasan’s translation:

MODESTY

The rioters brought the train to a stop. Those who belonged to the other religion were methodically picked out and slaughtered. After it was all over, those who remained were treated to a feast of milk, custard pies and fresh fruit. Before the train moved off, the leader of the hosts addressed the passengers: “Brothers and sisters, since we were informed late of your train’s arrival time, we were not able to offer you the kind of hospitality we would have wished.” (407)

Hasan, believing that his English-reading audience would not understand “halwa,” uses the term “custard pies.”

Mushirul Hasan, in *India Partitioned*, has a slightly different translation:

Hospitality Delayed Kasri Nafsi

Rioters brought the running train to a halt. People belonging to the other community were pulled out and slaughtered with swords and bullets. The rest of the passengers were treated to halwa, fruits and milk. The chief assassin made a farewell speech before the train pulled out of the station. “Ladies and gentlemen, my apologies. News of this train’s arrival was delayed. That is why we have not been able to entertain you lavishly the way we wanted to.” (97)

Mushirul Hasan uses one Urdu word, “halwa.”

In addition to “halwa” – but spelled “halva” – M. Asaduddin also retains the Urdu address: “Bhaiyon aur Behnon.” By retaining the Urdu, he places the story in North India/Pakistan where the train massacres took place. These seemingly “slight” differences reflect on meaning. A careful translator chooses words, synonyms, phrases consciously. Perhaps even more than the original writer.

Humility

The moving train was forcibly brought to a halt. Those who belonged to the other religion were dragged out and killed with swords or bullets. The rest of the passengers were treated to halva, fruits and milk. Before the train continued on, the chief organizer of the hospitality addressed the passengers, “Bhaiyon aur Behnon! We found out about this train’s arrival rather late. That’s why, even though we wanted to, we weren’t able to treat you in a more befitting manner.” (186)

How much of the original language should be retained in translation? One can always say that one should retain only those words and phrases that have

no equivalents in the target language. Thus, spelled or pronounced “hulwa” or “halva,” the sweetmeat is both unique and common to the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. And even if it is not as familiar as “kebab” or “kabab,” it has no English equivalent and should be retained. However, “Bhaiyon aur Behnon” does translate to “Brothers and Sisters.” Nevertheless, the use of this phrase suggests where the train massacre took place – without the translator having to say as much.

Another problem when translating from the mother tongue to the father tongue is unfamiliarity with correct idiomatic English. By this I do not mean ungrammatical English – though many translators are guilty of this – but a lack of familiarity with contemporary English. A number of English words have become part of Bangla – but have slightly different meanings. The word “hotel,” for example, has a different meaning in English and in Bangla. In English it means a place which provides accommodation, meals, and other services for travelers and tourists. Interestingly, in South Asia, the word can mean a restaurant, café, or roadside eatery. Signs such as “Highway Hotel,” “Muslim Hotel,” “Bhai-Bhai Hotel” are common in India and Bangladesh. While one can use these names while writing a story, it is a little absurd to say one stopped at a hotel for a meal and then resumed one’s journey. If one is actually stopping at a hotel for a meal – many people do have just meals at a hotel – the context must clarify it. However, if the writer means a roadside eatery, that is the term that should be used.

Translators – and writers – need to be familiar with current English as well as their prospective audience. Many terms introduced by the British in India are no longer used. Thus, translating the simple Bangla word “baigun” can be a problem. In India it is known as “brinjal” in English. Similarly “bhindi” or “dherosh” was “lady’s fingers” in British India. Today, perhaps a translator would use “aubergine” or “eggplant” for “baigun” and “okra” for “bhindi.” In other words, would-be literary translators need to familiarize themselves with the current terms and idioms of the target language as well as with contemporary fiction and poetry, with literature as it is written today in the target language.

Translators also need to be aware of cultural differences. A word or image might mean entirely different things to readers of the original and readers of the translation. Some years ago, I was translating a short story by Makbula Manzoor. The story was about a young woman who was raped during 1971, betrayed by the man she loved, and consequently had to leave her village to work in the city. The title of the Bangla story was “Kochuripana,” meaning water hyacinth. To an English reader, the hyacinth is a beautiful flower; for an educated reader who

has read Greek mythology, the term carries suggestions of homosexual love.² In Bangladesh, where this beautiful flower floats on the riverways, clogging them and becoming a nuisance, it is waste, unwanted rubbish. Therefore, instead of using “Hyacinth” for the title, I used the word “Flotsam,” to give the sense of something unwanted but also floating – as the protagonist is after the war.

All translations, however, are not from the mother tongue to the father tongue or vice versa. They are also from other tongues. Two hundred years ago, Raja Ram Mohun Roy knew Bangla, Persian, Arabic, and English. He knew Persian well enough to found and edit *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* (Mirror of News), a Persian language journal.³ Even fifty years ago, Bengalis were familiar with languages other than their mother and father tongues. Hindu students were expected to take Sanskrit as a second language at school, Muslim students Persian. An educated Bengali Muslim at the beginning of the twentieth century would be expected to know English, Bangla, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Despite his checkered schooling, Kazi Nazrul Islam learned Arabic as well as Persian in addition to Bangla and English. He was able to translate the *Ampara* from Arabic as well as the Persian poetry of Hafiz and Omar Khayyam.

Many translations in Bangladesh from languages other than English into the mother tongue are via another translation, generally an English one. What are the problems related to this sort of translation? To explain the problems, I am going to examine different translations of two *rubais* of Omar Khayyam. Edward Fitzgerald’s translations of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* are still the best-known English translations.⁴ However, anyone attempting to translate from Fitzgerald’s translation will not be translating Omar Khayyam but Fitzgerald. The following examples will explain why it is necessary to go to the original rather than to a translation.

While there are occasions when Nazrul Indianized the Persian of Khayyam as Rachel McDermott points out in an unpublished paper,⁵ Nazrul was translating from the original Persian to Bangla – directly, not through another language. The following examples show how Fitzgerald deviated from Khayyam in these two *rubais*, and how much closer Nazrul was to the original Persian in one of them because he was translating from the original.

2 See James E. Miller’s discussion of the Hyacinth girl in *T. S. Eliot’s Personal Wasteland* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1977).

3 The newspaper was published on a weekly basis on Fridays. It was first published on April 12, 1822. The last edition appeared on April 4, 1823.

4 His name is spelled both FitzGerald and Fitzgerald. He was the first and most famous English translator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

5 “Omar Khayyam’s Persian *Rubaiyat* in Nazrul Islam’s Bengali World.”

We are familiar with the following Fitzgerald translation:

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his destined Hour, and went his way.

Here is Nazrul's translation of the *rubai*:

মুসাফিরের এক রাত্রির পাস্ত-বাস এ পৃথ্বীতল –
রাত্রি-দিবার চিত্রলেখা চন্দ্রাতপ আঁধার-উজাল।
বসল হাজার জামশেদ ঐ উৎসবেরই আঙ্গিনায়
লাখ বাহুরাম এই আসনে বসে হল বেদখল। (138)

In Persian the *rubai* reads:

in kuhnah ribat ra kih 'alam namast
aram-gah-i ablaq-i subh-o-sham ast
bazzmist kih vamandah-i sad jamshid ast
gorist kih takyah-gah-i sad bahramast⁶

As McDermott notes, E. H. Whinfield's translation is closer to the original Persian than is Fitzgerald's:

This earth is a journeyman's lodge –
Its canopy alternating bright and dark, day and night.
A thousand Jamsheds sat in this festival courtyard;
A lakh of Bahrams were forced off their seats.⁷

Like Whinfield, Nazrul too refers to Jamsheds and Bahrams, and is thus closer to the Persian than is Fitzgerald. There is no reference to Jamsheds or Bahrams in Fitzgerald's translation, only to generic sultans.

Another famous "translation" by Fitzgerald is the following:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

Here is Nazrul's translation – Indianizing the *rubai* as McDermott notes – but with no reference to the book of verses which exists in Fitzgerald but not in the Persian original:

⁶ Quoted in McDermott.

⁷ The translations from Whinfield are also quoted from McDermott's paper as are her translations of Nazrul's translations.

যতক্ষণ এ হাতের কাছে আছে অটেল লাল শারাব
গেহুঁর রুটি, গরম কোর্মা, কালিয়া আর শিক-কাবাব,
আর লালা-রুখ, প্রিয়া আমার কুটির-শয়ন-সঙ্গিনী, –
কোথায় লাগে শাহানশাহের দৌলৎ ঐ বে-হিসাব। (143)

McDermott's translation of Nazrul's translation reads:

As long as plentiful red wine is near at hand,
Wheat bread, warm kormas, kaliya curry, sikh-kababs,
And a tulip-cheeked beloved, a partner with me in bed –
The inestimable riches of the Shahenshah are no match for this.

The Persian original reads:

gar dast dahad z maghz-i gandam nani
vaz mi du mani z gusfandi rani
ba lalah-rukhi nishastah dar virani
'aishi bud in nah hadd-i har sultani

Whinfield's translation of the Persian reads:

As long as I possess two maunds of wine,
Bread of the flower of wheat, and mutton chine,
And you, O Tulip-Cheeks, to share my cell,
Not every Sultan's lot can vie with mine.

While Nazrul has also taken some liberties in his translation – made the tulip-cheeked beloved his partner in bed, the sultan a shahenshah, the choices made are his, not the translation of choices made by another translator. Many Bengali translators translate “other tongues” through the medium of an English translation of the original. These examples of a couple of Khayyam's translations reveal just how fraught with problems such translations can be.

Would-be translators will ask, does that mean we have to learn Greek or Italian or Spanish in order to translate world masterpieces into Bangla? Is it possible? Perhaps no, but in this case translators should choose the other tongue they wish to work with, learn some of it and then work with someone who knows the source language and can communicate with the translator. Sometimes it is important to know the connotations of words, sometimes to know the sounds of the original. This is perhaps a tedious way of working but that is what good translators have been doing.⁸

⁸ Many years ago, Carolyne Wright translated Bangla poems into English. She almost always worked with a person knowing Bangla. Rachel McDermott, who has been doing a lot of work on Nazrul, also works with persons knowing Bangla.

I would like to end by quoting from “Translating Fiction /Connecting Cultures,” an essay I wrote earlier:

A good translation should be in the language in use, but should also retain the cultural differences that are embedded in the source language. The translator must tread a thin line: be faithful to the universalities in the text being translated but also convey the differences in that text. Often it is simply a matter of using words from the source language appropriately. (21)

And, for translations from other tongues, translators should go to the original, not a translation. They should choose one other tongue to translate, instead of piggy-backing on other translators to “translate” from several.

NOTE: This paper was one of the two plenaries presented at the East West University Conference on “Transgressing/Transcending Borders through Translation,” January 25-26, 2019.

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