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CHALLENGES OF CONVEYING A LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC POETIC SENSIBILITY IN
TRANSLATION: A STUDY OF NAOMI LAZARD'S: *THE TRUE SUBJECT: SELECTED
POEMS OF FAIZ AHMED FAIZ*

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Abstract

Although translation has played a decisive role in the development of human civilization, it is a process which is inherently complicated; the practice of translation continues to be far removed from theory. The sensibility proceeding from the subtleties of language and culture makes the process even more problematic. The paper looks at Naomi Lazard's endeavour of translating some of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's Urdu poems into English. Owing to the fact that Lazard could use Faiz's own literal translations to accomplish the task, her renderings are, to a great extent, able to convey the force and poignancy of Faiz's poems. However, Faiz's purest poetic expression and his artistic sensibility which are naturally linked to a distinct culture defined by peculiar moral-psychological convictions and beliefs makes the process of translation very complex. The paper probes the possibility or otherwise of rendering this language and culture specific poetic sensibility through translation.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Translation, Sensibility.

Any discourse on the intricacies of translation starts with the question whether it is actually possible to translate from one language to another while retaining the quintessence of the original. A translator may feel the truest emotion that a writer wants to convey but may not be equipped well enough, in terms of understanding the nuances of a particular language, to keep the translation close enough to the original. There are serious linguistic contradictions for a translator to contend with when it comes to perceiving an idea, poetic or otherwise, during the process of translation. Likewise a translator does not always possess a consciousness or sensibility similar to that of the writer he wishes

to translate. In the essay entitled "The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile," Edward Said writes about Faiz Ahmad Faiz's close association with some Palestinian friends while living in exile at Beirut remarking that, "although there was an affinity of spirit between them, nothing quite matched-language, poetic convention, life history." (175)

Lazard's Translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's Poetry was beset with similar problems. She did not know Urdu and had to rely on Faiz's literal translations of his poetry. In the introduction to her

book, *The True Subject: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz* Lazard writes:

We established a procedure immediately. Faiz gave me the literal translation of a poem. I wrote it down just as he dictated it. Then the real work began. I asked him questions regarding the text. Why did he choose just that phrase, that word, that image, that metaphor? What did it mean to him? There were cultural differences. What was crystal clear to an Urdu-speaking reader meant nothing at all to an American. I had to know the meaning of every nuance in order to re-create the poem. (Lazard xii)

Faiz Ahmad Faiz's unique phraseology which emanates from his profound knowledge of Arabic and Persian makes it exceeding challenging for a prospective translator to comprehend the nuances of his poetic style. His distinctive versification which is a natural concomitant of his flair for Urdu language makes it even harder. Some other translators of Faiz like Shiv K Kumar and V G Kiernan did not have the luxury of the writer himself offering literal translations of his poems to be used for the purpose of translation. Lazard was lucky in this respect. The idioms, expressions, speech rhythms peculiar to a particular language may not be translatable at all. The best a translator can do is to convey the meaning as poetically as possible without straying too far away from the language of the original. In spite of the handicap of not be conversant with Urdu language or poetic tradition Lazard has been able to convey the poignancy of Faiz's poetry with considerable success.

In spite of his poetic prowess, albeit in a different language, Faiz remained, before the appearance on the scene of some the translations of his poetry, unknown to even to the Americans possessing scholarly or literary taste. In the subcontinent where he is celebrated as one of the greatest Urdu poets of all time he is admired as much by the literati as by those who barely have a working knowledge of the Urdu Language. One of the immediate challenges that Lazard faced was that she was required to introduce a poet of Faiz's stature to a people who were grossly unfamiliar with his

poetry. This was a task which was fraught with unforeseen difficulties.

Translation becomes even more tricky when you are translating not from the original but from the literal rendering of the text as it is merely a run-through of the broader meaning or the quintessence of the original. Then there is also the challenge of finding a phraseology which comes close enough, as regards meaning, to the one used in the original. Certain idioms and phrases peculiar to Urdu language do not signify or connote much when an attempt to render them into English is made. In her introduction to *The True Subject: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz* Lazard aptly sums up the aforementioned problem:

A natural problem that comes up over and over again in translating from a literal text is the one of making it more specific, since the literal text is usually a summation, more or less general, of the original meaning. In the poetry of Faiz this problem is intensified because his language in Urdu is singularly devoid of active verbs. Images and passive constructions abound. A great part of my work has been finding active ways of expressing in English what Faiz has expressed more passively in Urdu. There is also the problem of a certain construction that is prevalent in Urdu poetry that is exemplified in phrases such as these: city of pain, land of isolation, disturbance of hope. (Lazard xv)

Every scholarly act of translation tends to lend a particular form or character to itself. This implies that such an exercise allows itself to be governed by a certain pattern which is determined by the manner in which a particular translation is done. To expect the same pattern to hold good for every act of translation is wishful thinking. Enlightenment or refinement which springs from familiarity with and concern for what is regarded as excellent in the arts differs from culture to culture and context to context. The standard that may be followed while translating a writer like Virgil into English may not be valid enough vis-à-vis an attempt to render Faiz into English. The culture and tradition to which a writer belongs not only imparts an

essential and formative characteristic to his responsiveness and capacity for feeling but also determines the interrelation and arrangement of words and phrases used by the writer. Moreover, as pointed out earlier the system of syntax, inflections, and word formation also vary from culture to culture and language to language.

It is therefore important to pay serious scholarly attention to the complications caused by the discreteness of languages than to merely focus on the rendition of the literal sense of the text. Such an exercise very naturally stalls proper comprehension of the distinctions and niceties of thought. In this respect translating poetry, as Lazard might have felt while rendering Faiz's poems, is much more challenging than translating prose. Translating prose merely involves restating or interpreting the meaning which is distinctly comprehensible while translating poetry involves not only the rendering of the pattern of stress through the verse but also the sequences of sounds and the balanced and rhythmic flow of the verse. This, for the most part, is not possible to accomplish.

Lazard deserves all the commendation for her meticulousness vis-à-vis keeping her translations as close as possible to the original. Her translations indeed represent the purest feelings and emotions which Faiz has endeavoured to convey. This is where she has been successful in distinguishing herself as a good translator of Faiz. However, as pointed out before rendering the language specific-poetic sensibility and the musical qualities is virtually impossible. This is the difficulty which poses insuperable challenges to Lazard as well. The rhythmic structure which Faiz puts in place effortlessly, together with his peculiar intellection which stems from linguistic sensibility, defy translation.

A good instance of the above argument is Lazard's translation of the poem entitled "when Spring Comes". Those who have read the Urdu original understand full well that it a compact poem which is subtly pleasing to the senses. It's a poem steeped in a peculiar kind of angst which, in spite of having been dormant, surfaces in accordance with the circumambient seasonal atmosphere. Lazard has

tried her best to render mental representations and pictures with precision; moreover she has also endeavoured to intensify the style of rendition by being exceedingly cautious with her choice of words in order to ensure that her translation is expressive of the right emotion. However, the literal translation of the poem which Lazard received from Faiz sounded and perhaps meant a lot different if one delves into the subtleties and nuances. Here is the literal translation which Lazard had received from Faiz:

Spring comes, suddenly all the time returns
all my young days that expired with our
kisses, that have been waiting in Limbo, come
back every time the roses bloom with your
fragrance, and the blood of your lovers.

All my misery returns, all my melancholy of
suffering of friends, drunken after embraces
of women beautiful as the moon.

The book returns replete with the heart's
suffering, the questions left unanswered.
Spring comes. (Lazard xiii)

The only means available to Lazard to reach the quintessence and emotion of the Faiz's poetry, as she has herself confessed, was by putting relevant questions to Faiz about the import and essence of the lines. Here is the adjustment she could make to the lines after bringing out its supposed meaning:

Spring comes; suddenly all those days return,
all the youthful days that died on your lips,
that have been waiting in Limbo, are born
again each time the roses display themselves.

Their scent belongs to you; it is your perfume.
The roses are also the blood of your lovers.
All the torments return, melancholy with the
suffering of friends, intoxicated with
embraces of moon-bodied beauties. All the
chapters of the heart's oppression return, all
the questions and all the answers between
you and me. Spring comes, ready with all the
old accounts reopened. (Lazard 37)

Examining the above lines carefully one realizes that Lazard effort is centred more on using the idioms and phrases which would supposedly be

more comprehensible to the presumed readership rather than an endeavour to convey the sensibility to which she has little or no access. This inconsistency however cannot be blamed on Lazard owing to her unfamiliarity with Urdu Language. The translation does not reflect any serious departure from what Lazard had received from Faiz and is merely a reworking of the idea in somewhat different words. Even though Faiz himself did the literal translation he could not capture all the layers of meaning of the original Urdu lines:

Bahar aaie to jaise yak-baar
Laut aaye hain phir adam se
Vo k̄hwab saare shabaab saare
Jo tere honton pe mar-mite the
Jo mit ke har baar phir jiye the
Nikhar gaye hain gulaab saare
Jo teri yaadon se mushkbu hain
Jo tere ushshaaq ka lahu hain
Ubal pade hain azaab saare
Malaal-e-ahvaal-e-dostaan bhi
Khumar-e-aghosh-e-mah-vashaan bhi
Ghubar-e-k̄hatir ke baab saare
Tere hamaare
Savaal saare javaab saare
Bahaar aaye to khul gaye hain
Naye sire se hisaab saare. (Lazard 36)

Rabindranath Tagore too, in all humility, had admitted that even though he translated the Gitanjali pieces into English from the original Bengali himself he could not do justice to the translations. In a letter to his friend, Edward Thompson he remarked, "I have done gross injustice to my original productions partly owing to my incompetence partly to my carelessness.(Tagore 446). This points to the difficulties of translating genuine poetry from one language to another even if the poet is himself the translator. This idea is corroborated by a close examination of the above Urdu poem by Faiz. Whatever lies between the lines is irretrievably lost; moreover the inherent rhythm, cadence, alliteration which makes the poem what it is also lost.

Each poem of Faiz poses a different challenge to the translator. In the introduction to *The True Subject: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz* Lazard herself refers to the difficulty she encountered while

translating the poem entitled *The War Cemetery in Leningrad*. Like the other poem mentioned above this poem too is brief and to the point with exemplary economy of words. According to her, the stiffest challenge she faced in relation to its translation pertained to the structure she was to lend to the poem so that it could amply represent the range of feelings and mental states embodied by the poem. Here is the shape the poem finally took:

These dabs of living blood
are carnations and tulips
sprinkled on the ice-cold stone.
Each flower is named for one
of the unforgotten dead,
and of someone who weeps for him
These men have finished their work;
there is the testament of the flowers
and the woman carved in granite.
She is their mother now;
makes them all small again,
watches them sleep forever.
Only she is awake, draped in her hard
garland, weaving and reweaving
her other garland of sorrows. (Lazard 95)

The poem is very rich as far as imagery is concerned. To comprehend the signification of each image and then place the images in the right order so as to allow them to make complete sense was another challenge for her. Working with literal translation to turn into something more meaningful or moving is fraught with unforeseen problems. Literal translation merely puts across the different ideas that comprise the poem but, to a large extent, fails to convey the poetic sensibility which is language and culture specific.

This seriously thoughtful poem is written in short crisp lines marked by repetitious cadence and rhythm expressing sorrow for something which is irrecoverably past. Lazard is able to convey the feeling and essence to a certain degree but is not able to do justice to conveying the abovementioned characteristics of the poem. Faiz's poetisation and sensibility are corollaries of a distinctive culture which is engendered by shared beliefs, ideas, and moral-psychological attitudes. In other words Faiz's poetry proceeds from sources which are beyond the

grasp of conscious perception. And what adds the peculiar flavour and charm to his poetry is his sweep as a litterateur. Such poetry needless to say defies all translation.

All lovers and admirers of Faiz understand that there is an inherent rhythm to his poetry which proceeds from the compactness of his verse. This compactness is irretrievably lost in translation. The rhythm which informs Faiz's poetry also sets its tempo. None of the translations of Faiz's poetry, including Lazard's, is able to match this characteristic rate of rhythm. As in Iqbal, it's the rhythm in Faiz's poetry as well that seems to regulate the flow and allow the lines to assume a particular shape and character. The metrical pattern, in certain specimens of Genuine English verse also, determines its pace, effectiveness as well as its music. Shakespeare's sonnets are a fine illustration of the point. If an attempt is made to translate these sonnets into another language all the essential rhythm, music and possibly the impact also would be lost. It would not be possible to retain the terseness of these verses in another language. One realizes this difficulty time and time again when going through Lazard's translations of Faiz.

It is difficult to imagine what Faiz's poetry, even in the original, would be if one was to strip it of its quintessential rhythm and music. Its force and poignancy would be lost which impels one to assert that his poetry is all about the coalescence of a peculiar kind of intellection and extraordinary expression which settles into a music which we recognize as the hallmark of his poetry. And this is what makes his poetry almost untranslatable. Consider Faiz's poem 'Tanhaie' (Solitude).

Phir koie aaya dil-e-zaar nahin koie nahin
Raah-rau hoga kahin aur chala jayega
Dhal chuki raat bikharne laga taaron ka
ghubhaar Ladkhadane lage aivaanon mein
khwabeeda charaagh So gaie raasta tak tak ke
har ik raahguzaar
Ajnabi khaak ne dhundla diye qadmon ke
suraagh gul karo shamien badha do mai o
miina o ayaagh apne be-khwab kivaadon ko
muqaffal kar lo Ab yahaan koie nahin koie
nahin aayegaa. (Lazard 98)

Here is how Lazard has translated the poem:
Someone is coming at last, sad heart! No. I
am wrong.

It is a stranger passing on the way to another
place.

Night falters; stars are scattered like clouds.

The lamps in the hallway droop; they want to
go out.

All roads are asleep after their long work of
listening.

Alien dust has come to cover the traces
of the footsteps everywhere.

Snuff out the candles, clean away wine, flask,
and goblet.

Lock up your sleepless doors, my heart.

No one, no one will ever come here now.
(Lazard 99)

The translation seems to convey the meaning
but not in the form and with the force which defines
the original.

The passivity of Faiz's poetry has been
perceived by many as an impassable problem
whenever a translation of his poetry is attempted.
Lazard has herself pointed to this difficulty in her
introduction to *The True Subject: Selected Poems of
Faiz Ahmed Faiz*. Abdul Jabbar in his perceptive
paper entitled "The True Subject: Selected Poems of
Faiz Ahmed Faiz" has a different take on this:

However, what Lazard regards as the
translator's drawback of passivity in Faiz's
verse is sometimes not really a drawback.
Whereas Lazard's point about the infamous
passive voice is valid in general, in some cases
the nerveless passivity may better suit the
verse. (167)

Jabbar further writes that "Lazard has
changed Faiz's fragmentary lines into complete
sentences, thus taking away the burdened, subdued,
muffled tone and the teasing incompleteness of the
original." (168) The point he wants to make is that all
fragmentary expressions assume a more definite
form in Lazard's translation.

It would not be difficult for any critic to pick
the lacunae in a particular translation but making
adjustments or corrections to the translation is as

difficult, if not more difficult, for the critic as it is for the translator. In this regard Gideon Toury's description of the process of translation in the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* is worth examining:

Translating is an act (or a process) which is performed (or occurs) over and across systemic borders. In the widest of its possible senses it is a series of operations, or procedures, whereby one semiotic entity, which is a constituent (element) of a certain cultural (sub) system, is transformed into another semiotic entity, which forms at least a potential element of another cultural (sub) system, providing that some informational core is retained 'invariant under transformation,' and on its basis a relationship known as 'equivalence' is established between the resultant and initial entities. (Sebeok 1112)

This points to some of the inherent difficulties in the process of translation and Lazard's translation of Faiz's poetry impels one to ponder over them again and again.

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