Theorising Translation
At the Level of Discourse Rather Than the Word

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To translate Premchand into Tamil (or Tamil into Telugu) is not to translate into a neutral language in the manner of simply exalting, or improving, or diversifying, or nationally integrating. Rather it is entering a charged linguistic-political minefield. How can a translation capture this tension—and it indeed should capture this productive, worldly tension, rather than retreat into the claims of a disinterested high notion of literature.

This essay probes the conjunction, 'national/international', of the translation of one of the 20th century's most eminent novelists, Premchand, of the most widely spoken Indian language (Hindustani), into a circulating national object. While the 'Premchand-translation project' is a global, multinational object, this essay restricts itself to thinking of the ways of making him and his oeuvre a national object and the inherent challenges.

Much of the conversation around Premchand and translation is on the vicissitudes, challenges, pleasures, and conundrums of translating Premchand into different languages, Indian and foreign. Recent scholarship includes translations of Premchand into French, Uzbek, Malayalam and so on—one has, over the years, learned much that is fascinating from these struggles with which many scholar-translators have engaged (Asaduddin 2016).

This essay involves a different type of engagement. It would like to probe this conjunction, 'national/international', of the translation of one of the 20th century's most eminent novelists of the most widely spoken Indian language (Hindustani), into a circulating national object. As is obvious from the scholarship referred to, the 'Premchand-translation project' is a global, multinational object, but this paper will restrict itself to thinking of the ways and stakes of making him and his oeuvre a national object.

There are many favoured Premchands—secular, socialist, humble (he went for the first time to Delhi only after he was over 50 years old), nationalist, Gandhian, resolutely Hindustani. In all of these representations there shines the clear moral light of Premchand seeking to represent the under-represented and under-valued, and of giving voice to the voiceless. Yet, Premchand is entangled with at least one loud (and perhaps strident voice) -- and that is the rise of Hindi/Hindustani itself in the first half of the 20th century. Hindustani/Hindi is the most widely spoken, and widespread language in India. Or, to put it another way, perhaps less comfortably, it is the most dominant, certainly after a certain

'fall' of Urdu and Bengali. There is important scholarship on Hindi-Urdu as a common language sundered apart (King 1999). The relationship with Bengali is less explored. This is because literary questions are more complex and knotty than language obviously instrumentalised for political ends. And for that matter, even the Urdu-Hindi literary link is not particularly well-probed either, despite some important work (Orsini 2011). Literature, as a site for self-reflection, and almost infinite manipulability, has more dimensions than the narrowly, interest-based political—this essay will return to this political dimension later.

A salient literary question emerges: can one translate Premchand without translating, and assimilating, other 'cousinly' literary canons? Can one translate Premchand without translating/understanding Bengali, or Urdu—or for that matter, Braj, or Russian (would there be a Premchand without the Russian novel, a debt Premchand himself repeatedly underscored)? And what does it mean to ask thus of the larger task of translation? Is one ever translating a single work, that is also not equally a whole (and fairly precise) literary and semiotic genealogy? Is not the idea of a single work—be it short story, or novel or even the whole concept of a genre—an illusion that has lost its power?

Is it inevitable that modern translations (so reliant for external legalistic, copyright reasons) be so reliant on the idea of the single work—instead of the oeuvre, or even the trans-authorial tradition, however narrowly or capaciously defined? In the pre-modern world, and before the fixed and rigid notions of authors, there was less anxiety about translations in the manner we have today. We know that if the *Ramayan* had to be rewritten/translated, much was changed, seemingly casually, and without hand-wringing—the moment of origin of many of the regional/vernacular languages was just this emphatic and unapologetic rewriting, and homage. There was none of the violent doubt that has accompanied the question of translating the Bible and the Quran.

Perhaps some of the traditions of that older South Asian world understood better that translating is always the translation of complexes of tradition, genealogy, discourse and never the translation of the single author/text. Also, that translation, the creation of the new vernacular is future-oriented, and has nothing of the guilt and the (false?) humility of the translator today. It was seen as a wrestling of equal literary stars, and much was believed to be gained, affirmed and validated of the language as a whole, rather than lost or deformed or devalued. Today one does seem a little paralysed with the model of the giant literary figure on the one hand, and the humble translator on the other (one can never imagine a translator of Premchand having the fame of Premchand). Beyond personal merit, such a view of translation underserves the literary traditions of both source and target languages, and institutes a hierarchy that nowhere justifies itself except in a pragmatic, legalistic sense of the modern author-starfigure who can litigate.

The work of the minutiae of translation-practice is fascinating and deeply under-estimated in its labour, though there is some awareness of the literary difficulties (Niranjana 1992). Must one translate the words in the order of the original text, even if an ungainliness results? Is one attempting smoothness and co-optation, or difference and difficulty—the need in the latter case to maintain that sense of foreignness and difference in the target language? How can one translate the rhythms of punctuation, of spacing, of pacing, of the relation of aurality to the written or printed, of diverse modes of address built into the very verb-forms, of the texture of attempted archaisms and irony, of the precise historical moment of the arrival of the text? While it is true in a broad sense that all great writers invent their own distinct language, it is only given to few (as part historical contingency, as part genius) to almost wholly invent a new public language, a language for a present and future republic. Premchand has had to do this in the first quarter of the twentieth century, being the first extensively lauded writer in Hindustani for his wide oeuvre. So how can a translator capture this sense of immense newness—not just newness of ideas, or words, but also of the very birth of a flowing, vivid 'newness' itself? How can she translate into a language that may already be old, that may already have a strong, and individuated and extensive novelistic tradition of many hundred years like the Western European languages have?

And not all languages are equally foreign—perhaps to translate Premchand into Russian is a homecoming, given the weight of the influence of the Russian novel on Premchand. How can a translation capture that sense of homecoming, of the new that is actually the familiar that has perhaps been forgotten and yet has infiltrated the present? Perhaps some Russians, who have lost the taste for Tolstoy, might need to read Premchand, might need this Hindustani mediation, to return to an old Slavic Christian nationalism? Or should we prefer, as translators, to retain that sense of that wondrous foreignness, that surreality, that must result in that literary multiverse where the Volga crashes into the Ganges. Such large questions cannot always be asked of translators who do not have a sense of deeper engagement in multiple and vast literary traditions—mere linguistic agonising over this or that word is less important in such a context. To continue to speculate thus, since we have scholarship on Premchand in French: is not Premchand, via Tolstoy, already part-French, insofar as Tolstoy himself was so influenced by the great mid 19th century French social realist novels? Thus again, how can the translator conjure this homecoming, this time perhaps to a grandmother's home rather than a mother's? The translator can never afford to externalise the extra-textual context that saturates the text-atom (whether that atom be a novel or a short story or poetry or the entirety of a genre).

One may recall the deeply insightful letters between Jainendra and Premchand regarding the Hindi novelistic tradition (Jainendra 1993). Perhaps every paper on Hindi modernism feels like it must begin with the questions those letters raise—questions of scale, canvas, the relation of form to subjectivity, the continuities and discontinuities of individual,

filial, and nationalist morality. There the full, empathic, respectful, unintelligibility of the younger generation is made clear in Premchand's bewilderment—Jainendra speaks of the need to work on more intimate, poetic, lyric scales, eschewing the large-format realism and desire for totality inherent in a Premchand drawing on the great Russian, French and English traditions. Here instead of the desire for totality is the desire for incompleteness and an affirmative fragmentation. One could analyze those letters on many dimensions, but the point being made here is that one could argue that in other regional novelistic traditions in India this problem of the relation between social totality and lyric individuality is not necessarily as polarized. One can think of the great novelist and poet Kuvempu (1904-1994) in Kannada, who for one, did not find any contradiction between the large scale social novel and the lyric mode. Large chunks of Wordsworth and the other 'romantics' are quoted extensively, even as other chapters explore the details of land-use and partitioning—lyric landlord notions of nature's beauty interact with peasant-impoverishment and the lack of ownership and control of land by the small peasantry. When, in Kuvempu's landmark novel *The House of Kannooru* (published in 1936, the year of Premchand' death), the chief landlord's house is divided, the servants do not know whether their household vessels and implements will also be partitioned—who owns what? Feudal ownership of property is a vast and complex subject that the novel discusses as ably as does Premchand. There is in Kuvempu both the desire for totality as well as the relativizing impulse of unique subjectivation and individualism. So, to elucidate the point of the comparison, how is one to translate Premchand's Hindustani into Kuvempu's Kannada, or, in other words, to a language (Kannada) which may not have quite the discontinuity of literary sensibility that the Jainendra-Premchand letters express? And this is not to speak of all the different problems of land ownership and use in different parts of India. Though both seek to represent social totality, it is not easy to compare the Indo-Gangetic plain to the mountainous, forested, cash crop-cultivating, plantation and export-based economy of the Indian west coast—this coast that has been historically interwoven with middle eastern and Mediterranean history for over a thousand years (Subrahmanyam 2011). Who can say where land issues end and the superstructure of 'culture/literature' begins?

The larger question is how to model India's linguistic diversity rather than merely celebrate it. Diversity, multi-linguality, multi-culturalism—these are all coveted categories of democracy. India is comparable only to Africa in its sheer linguistic diversity. Yet, the beginning of the political issue begins not with mere diversity (which, as said, is easily celebrated), but in terms of the accounting of the flows and counterflows of power. One might think of Sheldon Pollock's work on pre-modern India, the attempt (at least normatively) to set off Sanskrit (and often Prakrit and Apabhramsha) conceptually against the emergent vernaculars (2006). A similar engagement with macro-models needs to be thought of today. One might refer to the work on language and linguistic representation in Sumati Ramaswamy (2011) and Lisa Mitchell (2010). Yet the

challenge, since this current essay is in a more theoretical context, is to conceptualize language and literature in a manner not reducible to political instrumentalisation (as was the case with Tamil or Telugu).

So how may one engage with India's linguistic diversity, and its relation to power, productively? People are ready to die for language—we see this in the case of Telugu, Tamil, we see the deaths that the Hindi-Urdu divide has contributed to. How does one theorize these affective communities, where literature still holds a special place—most self-assertion of language has historically been based on the concept of the Great Poet-Seers—one can think of Mitchell's work on Telugu, but one might also remember how early in the twentieth century, in 1923, Bhagat Singh had written an essay on language and nationhood, where he had argued that literature was the soul of language (2007).

The impact of all this on translation is obvious—to translate Premchand into Tamil (or Tamil into Telugu) is not to translate into a neutral language in the manner of simply exalting, or improving, or diversifying, or nationally integrating. Rather it is entering a charged linguistic-political minefield. How can a translation capture this tension—and it indeed should capture this productive, worldly tension, rather than retreat into the claims of a disinterested high notion of literature. At the same time of course, the literary (as well as all the other phenomenological aspects of language) must be able to preserve some autonomy from narrow, easily deducible political interest.

The historical problems of diversity and hierarchy in the pre-modern have been mentioned. Beyond the facticity of this conflict, one might also wish to explore, again in the name of diversity if nothing else, the many Indian philosophies of language which may offer alternative models of language and literary epistemology. This essay writes of Sanskrit because the author is most familiar with that tradition, but obviously one must seek out similar work in any other tradition that has a sophisticated theory of language or literary philosophy. In Sanskrit, there is newer Indology more attuned to these problems—Lawrence McCrea (2009), Andrew Nicholson (2011), Yigal Bronner (2010). There is also new work on Indian theories of language and meaning, drawing on the older work of B K Matilal (1986), J N Mohanty (2001), and K C Bhattacharya (2008) —the newer work referred to is by Stephen Phillips (2009), Jonathan Ganeri (2012), Sundar Sarukkai (2009) among others.

One of the somewhat -schematic pronouncements on Indian philosophy is that it was always modelled on language as the object of knowledge par excellence, rather than on a Platonic model of form where language was sought to be "ideally" transcended—the ideal triangle transcended material, empirical or linguistic representation. In contrast, Indian philosophy (grammar, hermeneutics, word versus sentence theories of meaning, theologies that spoke of the super-imposition of words) sought to wrestle endlessly with the meaning of meaning. This can also be brought up with regard to translation, as the

questions are as timeless and pertinent as ever: Where does meaning reside—in the word, or the sentence or the discourse, or the relation of words? Where and when is the moment of the hermeneutical gambit—in the functions of both thought and communication? How does one translate concepts or ideas not locatable in individual words or sentences—is one translating word to word, sentence to sentence, or theory of meaning of one literature to the theory of meaning of another literature? How do literary affects derive meaning from words? Is translation above all a method, an orientation? What is the relation between the meaning and the usability of a word? What is the meaning-bearing capacity of a concept? How does one translate form? Is the word a universal, or a name, or a substance with property, or a defining property? Kunhunni Raja's *Indian Theories of Meaning* (1963) cites Bhartrhari's 14 types of derivations of meaning—to quote some of this immense nuancing of what we casually call 'context' today—association, dissociation, opposition, proximity, purpose, induction, companionship and suchlike.

One is not invoking this rich tradition in the spirit of making translation impossible, or for putting too high a burden on the translator-scholar. Rather, this tradition is to be understood as a rich site of possibility, creativity and autonomy if one keeps in mind this sense of philosophical complexity. In fact what is being argued against is policing translation overmuch, and getting stuck on a given word or nuance. Rather, one might want to err on the side of imagination and freedom, and celebrate what is gained in translation, for, a whole plethora of rich moral and literary genealogies are inevitably involved, whether one likes it or not.

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