

ISSUES OF TRANSLATION: THREE CONTEMPORARY URDU POEMS

Amina Yaqin

‘No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener,’ (Benjamin 1992: 70) and no original for a translation. Literary translation transforms the original text and at the same time shifts the intended audience of the original. Academic researchers in the field of literary criticism represent a small group who at some time or other come face to face with a translated text. This may be in the form of a translated work of literature or critical analysis in translation. Those researchers who focus on translated texts are confronted with the task of formulating a strategy in their analysis which addresses the translator as author as well as the author of the original. This strategy will serve as an invaluable guideline in their overall critical study of a translated work of literature.

‘Translatability’, borrowed from Benjamin’s essay, ‘The Task of the Translator’, signifies susceptibility to translation; it is a word which anticipates both the translator and the reader of a translation.¹ Those

researchers who adopt the project of translating will discover in their pursuit the presence or absence of other translations which will affect the way they approach their project. According to Benjamin:

For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. (Benjamin 1992: 72)

Those who turn to translation in the academic discipline of literary criticism, and whose aim is to reproduce a carbon copy of the original, often make the mistake of imagining themselves as the ‘chosen translators’ instead of focusing on the ‘translatability’ of the original. The imperative for researchers/translators is to coordinate the orchestration of selection, translation, and analysis in their overall research project.

Researchers who use English as their medium of expression whilst working with other literatures are limited by the means of accessing that literature: firstly, gaining hold of the original works themselves can be a frustrating task; secondly the barrier of language and lack of availability in the translated language of your choice is a problem; and finally the haphazard distribution of translated works, spread across metropolitan

centres of the First and Third World, has to be contended with. There are of course certain advantages in choosing the task of translation from a regional Third World language into a multinational First World language if one is located in a First World metropolis equipped with university and public libraries with national and regional holdings obtained from the Third World.

The following selection of poems have been selected from the works of three contemporary Pakistani Urdu women poets: Fahmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed and Zehra Nigah. Selected works from these poets have been translated previously by Rukhsana Ahmad in her edited anthology entitled, *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist poetry*.² It was this anthology which led to my own engagement with these poets and inspired me to work on my own translations. Of the three poems which I have chosen for inclusion, the two by Zehra Nigah and Kishwar Naheed were previously translated by Rukhsana in her book.

The three poems which I have selected are set in free verse utilising simple rhyming patterns to form their independent metres. In translating I have not kept to the Urdu rhyme scheme because of the difficulty in maintaining the meaning of the original. I have tried in translation to focus more on the content than on the style, and have tried to remain faithful to the text as far as possible in order to give the reader

an insight into the original meaning. The simplicity of style observed by Fahmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed and Zehra Nigah in the following poems lends itself with ease to translation. During the process of translation I have developed a better rapport with the literature I am researching from as well as the language in which I am translating into.

I have selected the theme of ‘Mothers and Daughters’ as one which is embraced by these poets. It is an ordinary theme taken from a woman’s daily life, representing in verse the perspective of three Pakistani women speaking as mothers and daughters, creating a forum for mothers and daughters to speak with each other and to forge an allegiance against oppression caused by patriarchal domination. Their distinctive themes add a new dimension to Contemporary Pakistani Urdu Poetry, being written by men and women, while their style of writing continues the modern tradition of experimentations with form.

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS:
THREE POEMS IN TRANSLATION

Lori (Lullaby)

Dearest your countenance like the moon
A piece of my heart
Dearest I keep on looking

Dearest you live in my eyes

Dearest I rock you cradled in my arms
Dearest clutching you to my heart

Dearest sparkle in my eye listen
Your mother's entire life,
A cataract of gushing tears
Kept on passing.

This bowl is filled with that fresh water;
Dearest with this only will I wash your flower hands, lotus feet
Hug you with my eyes

Sorrowful life constantly I wept, seeing you the tears stopped
Unfurled and blossomed into laughter
My shaken motherhood has a lot of hope for you

It seems like yesterday's news to me
I remember that night
When you were born

That night was very dark
Labour tormented with pain
But upon hearing your cry a candlewick was set to light

Your beautiful beautiful limbs
Fresh, fresh, healthy and prospering,
Dearest can't manage to kiss you
Dearest from shaking and shivering

I know a wolf is stood on my doorway
Drinking my blood, consuming my youth
Wolf nourished by money
One who rules the world
Cursing us from age to age

Because of whom in this world
Thinking is considered a crime
To love — a major sin

He has tasted the blood of a human spirit
Now watching your every move

Dearest cannot sleep at night
Dearest I am constantly awake

Dearest borne of my womb listen
This world is one of injustice
What skills can I teach you?

Women who came and went
Embroidering sprigs on net upon net
Filling platter upon platter
Which the wolf ate

Today every kitchen is empty
What can I show you
What skill can I teach you!

Whenever I take you in my arms
I hear the call of time
I hear great battlecries
I hear the call to war
I hear this again and again
Your skill is 'bravery'!

Listen my dear little one
This earth, this sky
All the grandeur of peace
The markets full of grain

Until that is not ours
We cannot live in peace
Not supported by anyone
There is no other solution

Do not fear the wolf
Dear heart! fight with conviction
Do not ever despair

I will teach you bravery
Turn you into a lioness
Fear will not lurk near you

Listen my dear new little one
You will not be alone

Your friends will be by your side

Your companions, your friends
Will be with you at every step
Many hands will be held together
This is my one wish

— *Fahmida Riaz (b.1945)*³

[N.B. One of the features of the original poem is the poet's skilful interweaving of gender, e.g., every line which refers to the child ends with a possessive pronoun disclosing the feminine gender in its Urdu narration but proves impossible to replicate in the translation. Similarly the possessive pronouns used to refer to the wolf's movements at the end of a line in the original suggest a masculine gender and the subtle manner in which this teasing reference has been constructed could not be reproduced by myself in the translation. I have used incantation in my translation to convey the lyrical rhythm from the original poem which uses aaa, abab rhyme schemes for three/four line stanzas.]

Mom Mahal (Wax Palace)

Before my marriage my ma
would get frightened in her dreams
Her terrifying screams would awaken me
I would awaken her, ask her why
And with vacant eyes she would stare
She did not remember those dreams.
One night frightened in her dream
she did not scream
fearful she had hugged me tight
I asked her why?
While offering a prayer of thanks she opened her eyes, to say
“In a dream I had seen,
You drowning and myself jumping into the river to save you”
And that night lightning struck

Setting alight my fiancé and our buffalo.
One night ma was sleeping and I was awake
Ma kept clenching and unclenching her fist over and over,
It looked as if the effort of holding on to something had tired her
Yet again she clenches her fist to muster up courage
I awakened ma
But ma declined from telling me her dream
Since that day my sleep has flown away
I have come to the other courtyard
Now when we dream both ma and I scream aloud
And when someone asks
Then we say
We cannot remember our dreams.

— *Kishwar Naheed (b. 1940)*⁴

[N.B. The above is a prose poem in the original which on the surface poses fewer problems in the line by line translation. However, it can be tricky to maintain the overall independent metre of the prose poem particularly when trying to reproduce idiomatic language from the prose poem which in the original minimises words and in the translation adds to them. I have kept the word *ma* from the original which has the same meaning in English as in Urdu.]

***Jurm vada* (Unlawful Promise)**

My child a thousand times have I told you this story
Sometimes nestled in a lullaby
Sometimes in a cradle of words lulled and cuddled you to sleep
I have caressed your warm cheeks with my cold lips
I have made a promise to you
That very promise which has been written as divine decree for human
beings,
Of your security, of honour, of success

My child!
The tired, exhausted girl in the story
Was I, not a princess

My house was the one which burnt from a Magical Palace to a desert in a
flash

Where eyes remained as needles

Dreams were mine

Which had surrounded me

No strangers they were all known to me

Where her story was

There my reality lay

There where she became a stone frieze

There my love lay

Thousands of open spaces on fire

The rain was bloody

All this was my story

All this had happened to me

In the story, my child

That tired, exhausted girl

Was I, and not a princess

Where the story ended

My child!

There you were

A symbol of happiness in life

A continuous dream of hope

Guarantor of the honesty of friendship

Where every story had a happy ending only,

My child! you were there, you were there.

My eyes were heavy, wounded with the measure of a promise

Your image was a balm to those wounds

My hands were shaking from the remnants of an incomplete promise

Your companionship was a constant comfort

I had faith

I am dust

You beauty and adornment

I was conscious

I am fear

You peace and comfort

I am the past

But you the picture of enlightenment

I am complexity

But you the picture of easy hope

My child!

Today my faith and conscience are both guilty

With my head bowed I hear my criminal offence

Plucking thorns instead of flowers from a field of dreams

Do you know
What the allegation is
That same promise which has been written as divine decree for all
human beings
Of your security, of honour, of success

— *Zehra Nigah (b. 1935)*⁵

[N.B. In the above poem I have used the two words divine decree instead of fate or destiny to translate the one Urdu word, *taqdir* because I felt the interpretation was necessary in order to convey the grandeur which surrounds the Urdu usage of the word in this particular poem. In the original poem the metre varies in each stanza which in the translation can be detected from the lengthening and shortening of individual lines in each stanza. I have used repetitive words instead of rhyming words where possible to reproduce the lyrical quality of the original poem. Idiomatic language is again difficult to replicate and the translated line ‘eyes remained as needles’ is a good example of a difficult translation.]

: Benjamin, Walter (1992) *Illuminations* translated by Harry Zohn. London: Fontana Press. pp.70-82.

_ There are a numerous amount of other translations which are available on selected works from these poets but for the purpose of this article I will only be referring to, Ahmad, Rukhsana [ed. & trans.] (1990) *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, London: The Women's Press, 1990.

_ Riaz, Fahmida (1988) *Men Mitti ki Murat Hum* (I Am an Icon of Clay), Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications. pp. 262-7.

_ Naheed, Kishwar (1986) *Siyah Hashiyai Men Gulabi Rang* (The Colour of Rose in a Black Margin), Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications. pp. 104-5.

_ Nigah, Zehra (1998) *Sham ka Pehla Tara* (The First Star of Evening), Lahore: Asatir. pp. 30-33.