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Manto Flattened: An Assessment of Khalid Hasan's Translations

MANTO BEGAN his literary career as a translator. Bari Alig, his literary and ideological mentor, introduced him to the worlds of the English, French, and Russian writers. He read, among others, Victor Hugo, Guy de Maupassant, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, Pushkin, and Maxime Gorky with passionate involvement. On Bari's suggestion he undertook the translation of Hugo's *The Last Days of the Condemned* and called it *Sarguzasht-e Asir*. Later he translated Oscar Wilde's *Vera*, a collection of Russian stories, and two plays by Chekhov into Urdu. It is reasonable to surmise that his apprenticeship as a translator made him aware of both the inadequacy and extraordinary power of words in conveying or communicating human experience. In his autobiographical essay, "Sa'adat Hasan," he alludes to his incessant, sometimes vain, search for the most appropriate word. It is therefore not surprising at all that in his best work he makes every effort to exploit all the nuances and associations of words and even non-verbal elements of expression.

Lately there seems to be a resurgence of interest in Manto. And for a variety of reasons. One has to do with the growing interest in the partition of India in 1947. Even half a century after this cataclysmic event, historians and social scientists are nowhere closer to comprehending it in all its complexity. They are now looking beyond the official historical documents to literary and semi-literary narratives which are sometimes much more insightful in illuminating critical human situations. If literature is supposed to mirror life, it is entirely valid to assume that the dominant attitudes, assumptions and even the *angst* of an epoch will inevitably find expression in the creative writings of that period, and social scientists will do well to take cognizance of this fact. A recent example of just such an effort can be found in the two-volume anthology, *India Partitioned:*

*The Other Face of Freedom.*¹ The one writer who has been given primacy in this anthology is Manto. However, besides the fact of Partition, of which Manto writes with searching insight and muted rage, the cult of violence that is raging around us today makes him increasingly relevant. With uncanny intuition he brings out the darkness that sometimes lies at the core of the human heart and erupts in all its ferocity when the civilized values of restraint and discipline are thrown to the winds and men turn into brutes.

I

Translation may be considered the reincarnation of the writer in a different language and culture, and a bad and irresponsible translator can do great damage to the writer, by falsifying his image and distorting the true import and spirit of his works. The politics involved in selecting certain pieces, as well as the translator's own perspective, can become crucial because a particular view of the writer may be projected which is not consistent with or may be even detrimental to his whole corpus or his total image. One is reminded of the translations of Tagore's poetry into English by himself and others in the early decades of this century which resulted in building up his image as an oriental mystic and prophet at the cost of his genius as a poet, playwright, and fiction writer—an image which subsequent translators of Tagore tried to dispel. The recent translations of Tagore by William Radice have been done from an altogether different perspective. A.K. Ramanujan's competence in translating U.R. Ananth Murthy's *Samskara* has remained undisputed, but some scholar's think that his elaborate footnotes and the afterword appended to the translation tend to divert the reader's attention from the novel itself to principles of anthropology. The translations of Ghalib's poetry by Ahmed Ali, Yusuf Husain, and Ralph Russell and those of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry by Victor Kiernan, Naomi Lazard, Agha Shahid Ali, and Shiv K. Kumar have different degrees of competence and inadequacy. All this is mentioned here merely to emphasize the point that now when Manto's appeal seems to be acquiring international dimensions, one has to be very careful about the translations that mediate this appeal.

The English translations of Manto's stories are scattered over innu-

¹Mushirul Hasan, ed. (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1995).

merable literary magazines and anthologies. Among the magazines, the most notable are *Journal of South Asian Literature* (Ann Arbor, Michigan), *Pakistan Review* (Lahore), and *Thought* (Delhi). The anthologies are truly numerous, sometimes representing Urdu short stories from the Indian subcontinent or South Asia and sometimes arranged under some overarching themes. In the latter group fall the three anthologies: *Stories about the Partition of India*,² *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*, and *Orphans of the Storm: Stories on the Partition of India*.³ The first contains translations of four of Manto's stories and two short pieces from his *Siyāh Hāshiyā*; the second the translation of all the thirty-two pieces from *Siyāh Hāshiyā* ("Black Margins"),⁴ and the third translations of four Manto stories, one by Khushwant Singh and the other three by Khalid Hasan. Alok Bhalla's translations of Manto are, as he claims, quite close to the original texts except for some minor inaccuracies. Mushirul Hasan's translations have some blemishes in the first edition which have been removed in the second, conveying, as they stand now, fairly adequately the splintered and fragmented quality of the original. Khushwant Singh's translation of the short story "Ṭōba Ṭēk Singh" cannot compare favorably with other competent translations of this classic Manto story, though one is pleasantly surprised to see that he has reverted this time to the original title from his earlier translation of it as "Exchange of Lunatics"(!).⁵

Apart from these translations spread across magazines and anthologies, five collections exclusively devoted to Manto's short stories and sketches have been published in English so far. The earliest among them is *Black Milk*,⁶ which contains translations of six stories by Manto. This collection was quickly censored and very few copies survived the iron hand of the thought police in Pakistan. This was followed by Tahira Naqvi's translation of seventeen of Manto's stories.⁷ In recent years Tahira Naqvi has achieved considerable fame as a competent translator of Ismat Chughtai's novels and short stories, but her translations of Manto

²Alok Bhalla, ed. (New Delhi: Indus [HarperCollins], 1994).

³Saros Cowasjee and K.S. Duggal, eds. (New Delhi: UBSPD, 1995).

⁴[As a matter of fact, the number of pieces translated in the volume in question is only twenty-two. Alok Bhalla has also noted this fact, for which see his review of the work elsewhere in this issue. — Eds.]

⁵In Khushwant Singh, tr. and ed. *Land of Five Rivers* (Bombay: Jaico, 1965).

⁶Hamid Jalal, tr. (Lahore: Al-Kitab, 1956).

⁷These appeared in the volume *The Life and Works of Saadat Hassan Manto* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1985).

stories belong to an earlier period. Although they are free of distortions and inaccuracies, they cannot be called very distinguished.⁸ Then came *The Best of Manto*,⁹ which contains fifteen translations by Jai Ratan, who has his own peculiar notions about translation and narrative logic, in that he often reorders his material, making small changes here and there. Of all Manto translators in English the best known to date is Khalid Hasan. He has translated and edited two collections of Manto's stories and sketches: *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*¹⁰ and *Partition: Sketches and Stories*.¹¹ Since both of them have been quite widespread in their circulation and have become extremely popular with scholars and general readers, I propose to concentrate on them and demonstrate how Hasan's translation raises some important issues about the objectives of translation, its pitfalls, and the ethics involved in it.

II

Khalid Hasan's English is good and idiomatic and his translation fulfills the goal of readability in the target language. This seems to be the secret of the popularity of his anthology. A non-Urdu reader will be immediately impressed by the lucidity of his prose and his clever turns of phrase, and will be thereby tempted to trust his competence and judgment as a translator. But when one compares his translations with the originals, one is horrified by the kind of liberties he takes and the ways in which he distorts the text. Hasan commits all the errors of an inordinately adventurous translator. He changes the titles of stories without any valid reason, leaves out large portions of the original, summarizes descriptive paragraphs and dialogues, changes the order of sentences, eliminates ellipses, flattens out uneven contours and cultural angularities of the original, and sometimes, though not as frequently, adds some copy of his own for the benefit of readers not acquainted with Indo-Islamic culture and the history of the Subcontinent. It will be my endeavor to substantiate these allegations with illustrations from his translations.

⁸[Time constraints prevented the editors from contacting the author to find out how he might justify this judgment. —*Eds.*]

⁹New Delhi: Sterling, 1989.

¹⁰London: Verso, 1987. Henceforward referred to in the text as *KE*.

¹¹New Delhi: Viking, 1991. Henceforward referred to in the text as *PSS*.

First, the change of titles. Hasan translates the title of the spine-chilling story “Ṭhandā Gōsht” as “Colder than Ice” (*KE*, p. 119). In fact, several translators have translated it either as “Colder than Ice” or “Cold, Like Ice,” and one wonders what makes them do so. The story ends with the phrase “colder than ice” (“Kalwant Kaur placed her hand on Ishar Singh’s which was colder than ice”), and if Manto had so wanted he would have retained it as the title. The comparatively euphemistic phrase “colder than ice” does not evoke the rawness and immediacy of Ishar Singh’s experience as does the phrase “cold meat” or “a lump of cold flesh.” The keyword here is “meat” or “flesh,” serving as a metaphor which brings out the horrifying implications of man’s descent into bestiality where a woman’s body becomes the contested site for conquest, violence, and sexual assault that lies at the core of the story. Another similarly unwarranted change of title: Hasan translates “Kḥōl Dō” as “The Return” (*ibid.*, p. 35). It is clear that the unbearable nature of the traumatic experience of Sakina, Sirajuddin’s daughter, has been telescoped in her gesture of lowering her *shalvār* following the utterance of the two words “kḥōl dō” (“open it”). Not only is the neutral word “return” insipid as a title, robbing the original of its terrible impact, but it also changes the whole emphasis by shifting the focus from the daughter’s trauma to the father’s frantic search for his daughter. Moreover, the change of the title in English to “Return” becomes more problematic when we remember that Joseph Conrad has a celebrated story by the same name, and Manto’s story offers neither any parallel nor any counterpoint to it. Then again, Hasan translates “Sarkanḍōn kē Pīčḥē” as “The Wild Cactus” (*ibid.*, p. 221), where the more literal “Behind the Reeds” would have been more appropriate because the preposition “behind” (“pīčḥē” in the original) conveys the sense of shady goings-on and thus alludes to the story’s ambiance. Besides, Hasan’s title lends itself to a kind of symbolic interpretation which Manto, in all probability, had never intended. Similarly, he translates the title “Ṣāḥib-e Karāmāt” as “A Man of God” (*ibid.*, p. 179), whereas “The Man of Miracles” would have been closer to the text and more appropriate. Hasan’s unwarranted irreverence may be mistaken by an unwary reader for Manto’s, and if it is foregrounded in the title then the story will lend itself to an altogether different kind of reading. There are several more instances of this kind in the two collections.

Secondly, the most serious of all Hasan’s errors is his omission of large chunks of the original texts in his English translations. He leaves out not only sentences but whole paragraphs, indeed even pages, thereby doing great violence to the original text. For instance, in “Nayā Qānūn”

(“The New Constitution”; *ibid.*, pp. 83–92), a story of about 3,500 words, the total omission amounts to about 500 words. In “Ṭēṭvāl kā Kuttā” (“The Dog of Titwal”; *ibid.*, pp. 19–24), a story of roughly 3,000 words in the original, Hasan has left out a total of about 400 words. In “Mōzēl” (“Mozail”; *ibid.*, pp. 97–111) which runs to some 7,500 words, the omission amounts to some 700 words. However, the story that bears the brunt of Hasan’s scissors is “Swarāj kē liyē” (“A Question of Honour”; *ibid.*, pp. 149–60). Here the omission comes to about 1100 words (which includes an entire page of the Urdu original). Now, if Hasan’s excisions pertained to seemingly superfluous or supporting details of description or atmosphere-building, or to interminably long character portrayal—though even such excisions would be unethical and unallowable—one would at least try to make some sense of it. By no means is Manto a prolix writer. Hasan’s heavy dose of editing is therefore absolutely gratuitous.

In fact some of the excisions constitute essential elements in character portrayal or the thematic core of the story. Let’s take the short story “Nayā Qānūn” to illustrate this. After introducing the protagonist Ustad Mangu, the tonga driver, in the opening four lines, Hasan leaves out the following:

Piḥlē dinōn jab Ustād Mangū nē apnī ēk savāri sē ispēn mēn jang ḥīr jānē kī afvāh sunī thī tō usnē Gāmā Ḥaudhri kē ḥaurē kāndhē par thāpkī dēkar mudabbirāna pēshingō’ī kī thī, “Dēkh lēnā Ḥaudhri, thōṛē hī dinōn mēn ispēn kē andar jang ḥīr jā’ēgi.”

Aur jab Gāmā Ḥaudhri nē us se yeh pūḥā thā keh ispēn kahān vāqē’ hai tō Ustād Mangū nē barī matānat sē javāb diyā thā, “Vilāyat mēn, aur kahān?”

Ispēn mēn jang ḥīr aur jab har shakhṣ kō iskā patā ḥal gayā tō istēshan kē addē mēn jitnē kōḥvān ḥalqa banā’ē ḥuqqa pī rahē thē, dil hī dil mēn Ustād Mangū kī barā’ī kā e’tirāf kar rahē thē.¹²

It is evident from the context that the above lines form an integral part of the character-building process initiated on the first page of the original Urdu version. They give the reader important insights into Mangu’s unlettered mind which has its own logic and way of deduction.

Then there is the scene where Ustad Mangu is carrying two barristers

¹²[No citations for the quoted Urdu texts have been provided throughout this paper.. —Eds.]

in his tonga whose conversation gives him the idea that they are opposed to the new law. In irrepressible anger he mutters the word “toadies” under his breath. Manto elaborates further:

Jab kabhī voh kisī kō dabī zabān mēñ “ṭōḍī bačča” kabtā tō dil mēñ yeh mehsūs kar kē baṛā khush hōtā thā keh usnē is nām kō ṣahīḥ jagah iste’māl kiyā hai aur yeh keh voh sharif’ādmī aur “ṭōḍī bačče” mēñ tamīz karnē kī ahlīyat rakhtā hai.

Hasan leaves out this part and thus robs Ustad Mangu of some of his interesting angularities.

Yet another significant and long omission comes in the latter half of the story:

Jab Ustād Mangū kō kisī savārī kī talāsh nahīñ hōtī thī yā usē kisī bitē vāqē’ē par ghaur karnā hōtā tō voh ‘ām ṭaur par aḡlī nishast čhōṛ kar pičhlī nishast par baṛē iṭmīnān sē baiṭh kar apnē ghōṛē kī bāgēñ dā’ēñ hātḥ kē gird lapēṭ liyā kartā thā. Aisē mauq’ē par uskā ghōṛā thōṛā sā hinhinānē kē ba’d baṛī dhīmī čāl čalnā shurū’ kar dētā. Gōyā usē kučḥ dēr kē liyē čhuṭṭī mil ga’ī hai. Ghōṛē kī čāl aur Ustād Mangū kē dimāgh mēñ khayālāt kī āmad bahut sust thī. Jis ṭarah ghōṛā āhista āhista qadam uṭhā rahā thā usī ṭarah Ustād Mangū kē zehñ mēñ na’ē qānūn kē muta’alīq qiyāsāt dākhil hō rahē thē.

The results of these excisions: First, the context has been either muted or obscured altogether. It is an axiom that the full significance of an event can be understood only with reference to its context (“Context is all”). Similarly a character derives its sustenance and signification from the context in which the author situates him. More so in the case of Manto who finely honed the art of story-telling in Urdu and in some cases reduced narration and description to the barest minimum. Second, in “Nayā Qānūn” the narrator’s descriptions and comments anchor Mangu firmly in a particular ambiance and assign him certain attitudes that make his character credible, contribute to the story’s verisimilitude, and prepare the reader for the story’s climax. Hasan’s omissions have alienated Mangu from that ambiance and have therefore deprived readers from insight into his mental workings. Third, linked with the above point, is the fact that though an ordinary and rustic tonga driver, Ustad Mangu is interested in the unrest in Spain; he has located the country in an imaginary space which he calls “vilāyat” and considers himself compe-

tent enough to forecast the Spanish Civil War. The translator ignores all this. Fourth, the frequent mutilation of the texts has severely altered their textual structure and interfered with their readerly reception. Fifth, the omissions have sometimes blurred the perspective of the narrator.

Summarization is also an omnipresent feature of Khalid Hasan's translations. He not only changes the order of sentences but also sometimes produces neat, if emasculated, summaries of entire paragraphs and dialogues. This has resulted not only in the elimination of detail contributing to the texture of the narrative, but also in inaccuracies. Two examples, taken at random, will suffice. In the story "Sirāj" (*KE.*, pp. 161–69), the original runs:

Main nē ek din sōcā keh Ḍhūṇḍō kō batā'ē baghair Sirāj sē milūn. Voh Ba'ikalla is̄tēshan kē pas hī ek nihāyat vāhiyāt jagah mēn rahtī t̄hī jahān kūṛē-karkaṭ kē ḍhēr t̄hē. Ās-pās kā tamām fuḡla t̄hā. Kārpōreshan nē yahān gharibōn kē liyē jasat kē bēshumār j̄hōṅpṛē banā diyē t̄hē. Main yahān buland-bāṅg 'imārtōn kā zikr karnā nabīn čāhtā jō ghalāzatgāh sē t̄hōṛī dūr istāda t̄hīn. Kyūnkeh unkā is̄ afsānē sē kō'ī ta'alluq nabīn. Dunyā nām hī nashēb-o-farāz kā hai, yā rafatōn aur pastiyōn kā.

And this is how Khalid Hasan summarizes it:

One day I decided to see Siraj without Dhondoo's good offices. I was curious. She lived in one of the filthiest slums of Bombay. The streets were almost impassable because of garbage heaps. The city had constructed a lot of tin huts for the poor. She lived in one of them. (p. 165)

Two things deserve notice here. First, in his translation of the passage, Hasan omits the place-name "Byculla Station," which gives the setting certain solidity and provides it, as it were, a local habitation and a name. Second, by omitting the narrator's ironic understatement about the tall mansions fringing the shacks where Siraj lived, he has interfered with the narrator's perspective by muting any evidence of his social conscience or awareness of economic exploitation.

The second example of unwarranted summarization constitutes the ending of the story "Sau Kēṇḍal Pāvar kā Balb" (translated by Hasan as "The Room with the Bright Light"; *ibid.*, pp. 171–77) which reads as follows:

*Magar usnē cōṭōñ kī kō'ī parvā na kī aur hōsh-o-havās qā'im rak^hnē kī
kōshish kartē hū ē bamushkil apnē g^har pahūñcā aur sārī rāt darā'onē
khvāb dēk^htā rahā.*

Hasan summarizes it thus:

Like a mad man, he ran out of the courtyard and into the dark street. (p 177)

We know how writers generally take the utmost care with the endings of their stories, thereby giving them a certain design and sometimes offering the reader interesting clues to their own vision through them. The translator has no business changing it even if it does not satisfy his subjective notions of the sense of ending. In fact the ubiquitous omissions and summarizations seem to spring from Hasan's patently Western and mistaken notion of the English short story as something essentially crisp, sleek and precise, as opposed to the free flowing and richly detailed narratives that we are used to in this part of the world.

A successful translator must inevitably grapple with the problem of cultural transference. "Translation means, above all, an act of cultural information."¹³ Sometimes reference to a ritual, a song, a proverb, and the like, illuminates essential aspects of a culture richly overlaid with a connotative context. A translator's endeavor should be to retain them as far as possible. Here one is reminded of Ranga Rao, editor and translator of *Classic Telegu Short Stories*.¹⁴ He pays special attention to this aspect of cultural negotiation. He rightly points out that "[t]ranslation is a discovery, by trial and error, of the right blend of English idiom and nativism: a good translation is a good, balanced text, balanced between, poised between a tolerable ballast of English idiom and a legitimate cargo of nativism."¹⁵ Khalid Hasan, on the other hand, seems undeterred by any such considerations. He flattens out cultural contours, omits evocative place-names, and either omits or mutes references to books, poets, and artists in his translations. For instance, in the story "Bābū Gōpinā^h," he translates the line

¹³[? See "Editorial Note" at the beginning of the special section on Manto. —Eds.]

¹⁴New Delhi: Penguin, 1995.

¹⁵[?]

Ghulām Husain kī farmā'ish par usnē Ghālib kī yeh ghazal "nukta-čīn hai gham-e dil uskō sunā'ē na banē" gākar sunā'ī. Ghulām Husain sau jān sē us par farēfta hō gayā

as "She had even sung something for him which he had liked" (p. 146), and that's it. Now it is obvious from the story that Zeenat's familiarity with Ghalib's poetry and her singing skill reinforce the portrayal of her character as an accomplished courtesan, as distinguished from a common whore. By muting this cultural nuance the translator has falsified the intent and spirit of the original. There is another aspect to this falsification that relates to his omission of Ghalib's name. One wonders whether one of Hasan's European counterparts translating into an Asian language would ever feel quite as free to omit references to Dante, Shakespeare, or even a lesser poet. The surest answer is that he would not. He will take it for granted that his readers are aware of these great writers; and if they are not, they should make an effort to be. Why then does Khalid Hasan fail to mention Ghalib's name? Is it from a sense of inferiority, the "colonial hangover?" The fact that the success of a translator also consists in how far he is able to stimulate the interest of his readers in the source-language text should not be overlooked.

In contrast to the muting of cultural nuances, Khalid Hasan sometimes goes to the other extreme and tries to transport an overflowing cargo of nativism. He adds information on his own and puts it in the body of the text as though it were by Manto. The italicized parts of the following extracts from the story "Yazīd" (translated by Hasan as "The Great Divine") are purely the translator's additions:

The month of Muharram was drawing close. Jeena always loved to watch the procession they took out *to mourn the martyrdom of Hussain, the holy prophet's favourite grandson, and his companions, who had chosen death instead of allegiance to Yazid, whom they considered an unjust and illegitimate ruler. She loved to see the devotees in black beating their breasts and walking with slow steps behind Hussain's riderless horse, the Zooljinnah.* (PSS, p. 55)

Bakhto's face went white *because no Muslim child is ever called Yazid as no Christian child can be called Judas. It is an evil name because it was Yazid at whose orders Hussain, the Prophet's grandson and his companions were deprived of water and finally massacred.* (Ibid., p. 60)

Needless to say, Khalid Hasan overshoots his duties as a translator who should resolutely resist the temptation to “improve upon” the original writer. He should not endeavor to expand, on his own, the textual structure of the original in his translation. Yazid is a symbol for Manto and not a convenient peg on which to hang either information about Islamic history or his knowledge about Shi‘a practices. Khalid Hasan’s translations of the pieces in “Siyāh Ḥāshiyē” are more accurate and closer to the original precisely because the originals hold no scope for editing or additions, being themselves fragmentary and pared down to the bone.

III

Thus what Khalid Hasan eventually presents to non-Urdu readers is a truncated, reductive, and often unreliable version of Manto. His good English effectively camouflages the lapses in his translations. But the lapses are quite serious and defeat the very objective of translation. If the objective is to introduce a writer of great talent and insight to those who do not read the language in which he wrote, the translator should take utmost care to minimize sacrifices and distortions. This calls for an attitude of respect towards the writer and the original text. The translator’s misplaced zeal should not lead him to import information in the attempt to add local color or exotic appeal. Likewise, it should not lead him to sanitize the text, cleaning out all seeming warts, angularities, and cultural nuances, because in the ultimate analysis these may have been the very qualities that made the writer and his texts distinctive in the original language. □