

FATIMA RIZVI

## Politics of Language and Cultural Representation: Premchand's "Shatranj ke Khilari" in Translation \*

MUNSHI PREMCHAND (1880–1936) published his Hindi short story "Shatranj kē Khilārī" (The Chess Players) in the magazine *Mādhuri* in September-October, 1924. Since then it has seen several translations/transcreations and one cinematic adaptation. The first was Premchand's own, re-titled in Urdu as "Shaṭranj kī Bāzī" (A Game of Chess) and published sometime before 1928 in his anthology of short stories *Khvāb-o-Khayāl kī Kahāniyān*<sup>1</sup> (Stories of Dreams and Visions). Several cross-cultural translations have been brought out, before and since, most of the English ones bearing the title "The Chess Players" with David Rubin's being one of them. These versions exhibit subtle differences. Premchand had inherited a nearly century-old translational tradition and witnessed at firsthand the "cultural chauvinism"<sup>2</sup> which led up to the division between related linguistic traditions such as Urdu and Hindi. This paper examines how these three versions of Premchand's texts are layered and stratified by various political considerations surrounding language and cultural representation. The study begins by trans-contextualizing the standardization of language and literature by means of translational exercises and the politicization of the sociocultural environment, leading up to the Hindi-Urdu divide. Premchand's compulsions to self-

---

\* This is a revised version of the paper presented at the International Seminar on Premchand in Translation, held at Jamia Millia, New Delhi, 28–30 November 2012.

<sup>1</sup>As regards the Hindi and Urdu versions of Premchand's self-translated texts, it is often difficult to determine which version preceded the other as publication was often superseded by considerations other than the creative exercise (Pritchett 1986, 186; Rubin 1988, 261). However, in the case of "Shatranj kē Khilārī" and "Shaṭranj kī Bāzī," Madan Gopal and Amrit Rai, two of Premchand's biographers, have given an indication of the sequence of publication.

<sup>2</sup>Satya P. Mohanty's phrase, as discussed in Kumar (2012).

translate are briefly reviewed. It then conducts a close textual analysis of Premchand's original Hindi story as well as his self-translated/transcreated "Shaṭranj kī Bāzī" in Urdu to analyze the main differentiating aspects which emphasize the politics of linguistic and cultural representation. This is followed by focusing on translational techniques/strategies in Rubin's cross-cultural translation "The Chess Players." The study concludes with an estimation of Premchand's texts as depictive of the decadence of erstwhile Awadh.

### Translational Tradition and Sociopolitical Culture

Translation from the original/source to the target/receptor language is a semiotic/inter-semiotic exercise involving, extrinsically, a change of script and, intrinsically, a process of cultural, semantic and linguistic decoding and recoding. It also involves recension, abridgement, reordering, transcreation and adaptation. Translational exercises are not new, but within subcontinental India the nineteenth century saw a surge in translational exercises which contributed significantly towards the development and standardization of both the dialectal linguistic forms and the traditional literary genres of, especially, Urdu prose and fiction.

Institutions such as Fort William College, Calcutta, (established 1800) and Delhi College (established ca. 1827) were set up as part of the colonial practice to disseminate knowledge of the Orient. Urdu was the mediating language at the Delhi College. Translations undertaken at these institutions were osmotic in influencing the creation of modern Urdu literature and instrumental in cultivating a long standing interest in Urdu prose. Besides Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu and Hindi texts, the Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow (established 1858) also undertook translation of many English novels which were "Indianized" to accord with the Subcontinental milieu. In the aftermath of the Uprising of 1857, Urdu periodicals and papers became platforms for discursive, intellectual, cultural and literary debates, thereby facilitating transactions between the East and the West. Thus *Avadh Akhbār* (1859), *Avadh Panč* (1877), and *Tehzību'l-Akhlāq* (1870) also published translations of European, especially English literature, providing new models for Urdu writers. As against the highly evolved poetic genres of Urdu literature, the relatively younger prose forms of the Urdu *afṣāna* (short story) and the novel evolved from the conflation of several minor and major indigenous genres, inflected with Western influence due to the various translational processes. The popularity of these relatively new genres led to the absorption or gradual fading out of several older indigenous genres.

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed distinctive efforts emphasizing the separateness of modern Hindi and Urdu, in spite of their common origins from rural dialectal linguistic forms such as Braj, Awadhi, Maithili and Bhojpuri and the urban khari boli. Amrit Rai traces the bifurcation of Urdu and Hindi to the Mughal courtly practice in the late eighteenth century, differentiating between a culturally evolved, heavily Persianized idiom, based on correctness of usage and meant for the élite Muslims and Hindus and the nobility and other varieties of dialectal usage (see Kumar 2012, n.p.). However, Sanjay Kumar differs by observing that this language was not based on religious differences; that the greatest differentiator between this and the other dialectal varieties such as Awadhi and Braj was that it was urban while the others were rural; that only the élite Hindus and Muslims attached to the courts used it; and that script was not an issue (*ibid.*). He also cites colonial language policies, based on religious and cultural differences, as the earliest patterns emphasizing separateness and Dr. John Borthwick Gilchrist, Professor of Hindustanee at Fort William College, as the person who first identified language with script and religion. Kumar notes that Gilchrist promoted two different styles as two different languages—Hindustanee in Persian or Nastaliq script, which became Urdu, and Hindavi/Hindui in the Devanagari script, which, purged of all foreign influences, evolved into modern Hindi (*ibid.*).

This view is similar to that of the historian Tara Chand, who perceives “the zeal for finding distinctions” on the part of some of the professors at Fort William College at the base of the bifurcation (qtd. in Faruqi 2001, 54). Faruqi cites Gilchrist as the person who first sowed the seeds of linguistic separatism (*ibid.*, 59) and cites (a) Francis Robinson as designating the 1880s and 1890s as the period of the communalization of the languages and (b) Bharatendu Harishchandra’s invectives to indicate the serious communal byplay that was underway during this period (*ibid.*, 57–58). He notes that, as Urdu became increasingly identified as a Muslim language, it was denigrated on “moral” and “religious” grounds; that users of Urdu were perforce made to feel guilty about its orthographic ambiguities and foreign origins; that the Devanagari script was claimed to be superior to the Urdu script; that continually, proactive measures were undertaken to popularize Hindi while invectives marginalized the written and spoken idiom of Urdu (*ibid.*, 45–56).

Paul Brass’s remark that the defenders of Urdu were too slow in their response (1974, 136) is corroborated by Faruqi who also notes that the serious ramifications of this linguistic, cultural and communal bifurcation were anticipated by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who played a key role in the defense of Urdu during this period, but the process, already set in motion,

seemed irreversible (*ibid.*, 58).

Faruqi quotes Premchand's public addresses made at the Arya Bhasha Sammelan in Lahore (1936) and the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha in Madras (1934) to establish that although he accepted the common origins of the two languages and advocated the use of a simplified Hindustani idiom which would stride Sanskritic Hindi and Persianized Urdu, he too emphasized the foreignness of Urdu and swam with the tide (*ibid.*, 21–22, 62). Premchand specified that he was not concerned with the politics of the singularity of Sanskritic Hindi as the national language. He believed in the essential closeness of Hindi, Hindustani and Urdu and believed that linguistic pluralism was in fact an indication of the evolution of language (1967, 100–33).

### Premchand and Self-Translation

Dhanpat Rai Srivastava (Premchand), also known as Nawab Rai, began his literary career as a writer of Urdu fiction because Urdu was the prevailing medium of literary expression during much of the nineteenth century. He had imbibed this tradition in the course of his education. By about 1900, his social and political awareness gradually matured into a nationalist consciousness. However, from 1913–1915 he steadily gave up Urdu in preference for Hindi (Rai 2002, 388). Dalmia observes that Premchand switched to publishing his works in Hindi early in his career, as Hindi had a larger market (2010b, 494). Premchand confided in a letter addressed to Munshi Dayanarayan Nigam (26 June 1915) that he had got “little benefit” from the art of writing (qtd. in Gopal 1964, 108). Economically this was a lean period. Around the same time, he resumed studying, negotiated taking over editorship of *Zamāna*, and sent out stories to both Hindi and Urdu journals. He received greater appreciation from Hindi periodicals, newspapers and journals and confided in Nigam: “I think writing in Urdu won't do. Like the late Balmukand Gupta, I shall have to pass the last days of my life in writing Hindi. Is there a Hindu who has distinguished himself in Urdu? And if none has succeeded, how can I?” (*ibid.*, 113).

Premchand self-translated short stories and novels on a regular basis, converting Hindi and Urdu into source and target languages. Such continual exercises could have been prompted by the divergent systemic socio-political and cultural patterns and the diverse artistic and political objectives and priorities precipitated by the breakdown of the cultural and linguistic syncretism of once related traditions. The cultural dominance and élitist nature of the already standardized Urdu in multilingual northern India could

well have been the reason for Premchand's continued self-translations/transcreations despite his professed preference for the new national language.

Several other reasons may be ascribed to these exercises which created a large corpus of bilingual oeuvre. Perhaps, initially, he took to writing in Hindi to avoid the proscriptive eye of the government. His continuing to do so may also be ascribed to his being in governmental service. The new official language being Hindi, he envisioned the need to develop a body of literature in this modern language. It is also likely that the unadorned, simple and direct style of modern Hindi prose, still in its evolutionary stage, as opposed to the ornate and verbose style of Urdu, was better suited to delivering the message of psychological, social and political realism on which his stories were centered. Premchand believed that in the current politically and socially turbulent times, literature ought to embody a moral purpose and express true emotions and realities (*ibid.*, 278). Hence realism ought to precede craftsmanship. As is evident from the Presidential address he delivered at the inaugural session of the All India Progressive Writers' Association in April 1936 in Lucknow, he also believed that literature should describe "some truth, in a mature, refined, and graceful language," which affected the mind and the heart; that it was best defined as a "criticism of life" (qtd. in Rahbar 1957, 166–67).

### "Shatranj ke Khilari" and "Shatranj ki Bazi"

"Shatranj kē Khilārī" belongs to the genre of the serious, inward-looking short story which propagates utilitarian and political ideals. It is to the political culture of the times that this text, perhaps, owes its existence. Written during Premchand's stay in Lucknow—a phase described as both comfortable and prolific (Rai 2002, 205)—the story center-stages Lucknow as the seat of monarchical indolence and cultural profligacy characteristic of the kingdom of the erstwhile Awadh. Rai thinks this story was meant to serve as a wake up call for the populace in regard to the politically indolent situation of India's on-going freedom struggle, to shake it out of its complacency (*ibid.*, 209–10). Thus, Premchand believes in the circular notion of history; he uses the historic past to comment on the political present. The story is skeletal in that it revolves around the obsession with playing chess, against all odds, of the *jāgīrdārs* (landowners) Mīr Raushan 'Alī and Mīrzā Sajjād 'Alī, who represent the *élite*, Muslim cultural center. These two chess-players are real-life motifs illustrating a more serious theme than at first meets the eye. Premchand also conveys his serious political mes-

sage by introducing the device of the narrator. As an authorial intrusion, the narrator here serves as the author's mouthpiece, deconstructing for the reader both the protagonists and their sociocultural milieu mostly through the use of irony and satire. In these narrative comments, Premchand's Hindi is Sanskritic and his tone, condemnatory.

Later, he rewrites the same story in heavily Persianized Urdu as "Shaṭranj kī Bāzī" to make it accessible to an élitist, Urdu readership. This self-translational exercise, as most others, contributes toward a reestablishment of the cultural and linguistic hegemony of the deposed power center of Urdu within linguistically and culturally pluralistic northern India. Functionally, Premchand's self-translation is a special kind of renewal which enables the text to be read by another large group of people—the coded text is recoded and reinterpreted. Rewriting the story in the language employed by Mīr and Mirzā in the predominantly élitist cultural center of Lucknow differentiates Premchand's story linguistically and aesthetically from the earlier Sanskritic Hindi one. Premchand has his prospective readership in mind. His Persianized Urdu becomes as much a medium for the representation of cultural patterns as the Sanskritic Hindi is a medium for critical realism. "Shaṭranj kī Bāzī" is, in fact, a transcreational exercise wherein Premchand describes his protagonists and setting in greater detail; a hint of a lament is discernable for both the protagonists and the passing away of a social order. His narrator re-narrates with reduced tonal acerbity and mellowed sarcasm. His political message is veiled; its vigor and ironic intent seem diminished. It may be debated that the multiple semantic possibilities of the Persianized Urdu vocabulary employed by the author actually provide for the multiple connotative possibilities contained in the text and contribute to the veiling.

Premchand's altered Urdu title "Shaṭranj kī Bāzī" seems inappropriate when viewed, firstly, in the light of the holistic message conveyed by the Hindi text; secondly, because the replacement of the original "*khilāri*" with "*bāzī*" shifts the focus from the chess-players to the game of chess, or the moves made by the players during the course of the game; and thirdly, because the word "*khilāri*" (player/players), common to both Urdu and Hindi, carries similar semantic connotations and can be nuanced with similar ironic overtones. However, considering that the Urdu narrator's criticism of the society and castigation of the players is mingled with a lament for both, and also seems to conclude on a philosophical note bemoaning the fate of the players in meeting their unnatural deaths and the passing away of an old order, the title seems consistent with the substance of the narrative. The dilapidated mosque, supposedly built during the reign of Āṣafu'd-Daulah, symbolizes the old order, which combined within itself the dichot-

omies of magnificence and frivolity that brought about its inadvertent downfall. This is unlike the Hindi text which overtly satirizes the players with a condemnation of their bravado.

The opening lines of the two stories: “*Vājīd ‘Alī Shāh kā zamāna thā*” (Premchand 2011, 104), “It was the era of Wajid Ali Shah” (Premchand 1988, 182), and “*Navāb Vājīd ‘Alī Shāh kā zamāna thā*” (It was the era of Navāb Vājīd ‘Alī Shāh) (Premchand 2010, 83), transport the reader into another era. However, by prefixing the title “*Navāb*” to the king in the Urdu text Premchand provides for the formality deserving of the monarch. The opening line of the Urdu text also echoes the opening line, “*Ēk thā bādshāh ...*” (There was once a king...) of the oral, make-believe narratives of the raconteurs of Lucknow.

Tara Chand’s observation that Sanskritic Hindi was created on the model of Persianized Urdu (see Faruqi 2001, 55) provides for the estimation that morphologically the basic syntax and lexis of Urdu and Hindi are similar, that the two share common linguistic domains. This being the case, Premchand’s Hindi and Urdu texts share similar syntactical structures, but several distinctions pertaining to vocabulary are discernible.<sup>3</sup> A morphological reading of the texts clearly indicates a paucity of vocabulary and dearth of expression in the Hindi text; the abundant Urdu vocabulary and expression make the story aesthetically more engaging and the cultural representation richer than the one in Hindi. This may best be elucidated by the repeated use of the word *vilasita* (pleasure/pleasure-seeking) in the Hindi text (2011, 104–5) which is exchanged for several compound/portmanteaux words commonly employed in Urdu and Persian. For example, he uses *‘aish-o-‘ishrat* (life of ease and pleasures), *rañg-raliāñ* (debauchery), *nafs-parastī* (self-gratification), *nafs-parvarī* (hedonism) (2010, 82–83), and towards the end, in reference to the two noblemen, *‘aish kē bandē* (men given to sensual pleasures) (*ibid.*, 95) in Urdu as opposed to *vilasi* (2011, 114) in Hindi. In Urdu he differentiates the pastimes of *abl-e saif* (swordsmen) and *abl-e rōzgār* (the well-employed), whereas in the Hindi text the narrator’s sardonic enumeration clubs together all as vices. The critical realism of the modern Hindi narrator contemptuously reduces the era as given over to *vilasita*. This kind of repeated use of a single word to substitute for several others (carrying similar connotations) of another language points at the serious issue of the evolution of language pointed out by Dalmia, as regards the emergent modern Hindi, which, “in order to find its new feet [...] needed to overhaul its very base—syntactically, lexi-

---

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed analysis of Premchand’s language and vocabulary in the Hindi and Urdu texts, see Pritchett (1986, 66–72).

cally, orthographically—and set about educating the readership it needed to legitimate its being” (2010a, 33).

In addition to the narrator’s commentary, Premchand uses the dramatic, dialogic style to convey a sense of the lifestyle of the protagonists. As the Hindi narrative develops, the narrator gradually switches to the simpler Hindustani, employing an easy, conversational style and even a colloquial idiom. Occasionally, he uses Urdu vocabulary. Once he has delivered most of the introductory statements in the past tense, he tends to lapse into a present/present-continuous tense narrative involving the lifestyle of the two *jāgirdārs*. With its satiric tone and abundant use of Sanskritic vocabulary, the Hindi text clearly deprecates the cultural ethos of erstwhile Awadh and balances the artistic, literary and economic pursuits of the people with their leisurely recreations, which are indicative of frivolity. The narrator’s parenthetical asides, tongue-in-cheek comments and ironic observations supply the sarcasm. For instance:

*Sbatranj, tāsh, ganjifa kḥelnē sē buddhī tīrv hōtī hai, vičār-shaktī kā vikās hōtā hai, peñčīda maslōñ kō suljhānē kī ādat paṛtī hai. Yeh dalīlēñ zōrōñ kē sāth pēsh kī jāti thīñ. (Is sampradāye kē lōgōñ sē duniyā ab bhī kḥālī nahīñ hai.)*

(Premchand 2011, 104)

By playing chess, cards or ganjifa the wits were sharpened, the process of thought was developed, one became accustomed to solving complex problems—arguments of this sort were presented with great vehemence. (The world is not free even today of people of this persuasion!)

(Premchand 1988, 182)

The Urdu narrator conveys a similar sense of the times but his observations are less caustic, primarily because the parenthesis is avoided and the focus is only on the game of chess:

*Fikr kō jaulān ‘aql kō rasā aur zehñ kō tēz karnē kē liyē sbatranj kīmiyā samjhā jātā thā. Ab bhī is qaum kē lōg kabīñ-kabīñ maujūd haiñ jō is dalīl kō baṛē shadd-o-madd se pēsh kartē haiñ.*

(Premchand 2010, 83)

Chess was considered instrumental in stimulating the imagination, polishing the wit and sharpening the intelligence. People belonging to this community who present such points of view with great vehemence are still to be found, here and there.<sup>4</sup>

Also noteworthy is the narrator’s pointing out, later in the story, that

---

<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.



the wealth from the suburbs was frittered away in the city of Lucknow. The Urdu narrator is more detailed in his delineation of the frivolities but employs language aesthetically, in spite of using it as a vehicle to convey a sense of the waste and the misuse. His Persianized diction treats the reader with splendid rhetoric and usage while illustrating the people's pursuits and aspects of the precolonial, Awadhi lifestyle, albeit critically:

[...] *aur yabāñ sāmān-e ‘aish kē baham paučānē mēñ šarf hō jāti thī. Bhāñḍ, naqqāl, kathak, arbāb-e-nishāt kī garm-bāzārī thī. Sāqiyōñ kī dukānōñ par asbrafiyāñ barastī thīñ. Ra’īs-zādē ek-ek dam kī ek-ek asbrafi phēnk dētē thē. Mašārif kā ye ḥāl aur añgrēzi kampanī [...].*

(2010, 88)

[...] and it was frittered away over here, in pleasurable activities. Jesters, clowns, *kathak*, courtesans abounded. Vendors of liquors and spirits were showered with gold coins. Wealthy young men squandered their money without a thought. Such were the expenditures and the East India Company [...].

Premchand's Hindi narrator employs predominantly Sanskritic vocabulary in his enunciations of the state of affairs in the kingdom. His condemnation is acerbic in its brevity. His employment of the Sanskritic *vaishyā'ōñ* (as against the Persianized *arbāb-e nishāt*) seems to convey the sense and status the *ṭavā'ifs* (courtesans) had come to acquire subsequent to the Uprising of 1857 and the marginalization of their class during the period of the colonization of Awadh. Therefore, Rubin translates it as "whores": "[... the wealth was] squandered on whores, clowns and the satisfaction of every kind of vice. The debt of the East India Company [...]" (Premchand 1988, 187).<sup>5</sup> (Hindi original: "[...] *aur vah vaishyā'ōñ mēñ, bhāñḍō mēñ aur vilasta kē anya angō kī pūrti mēñ uṛ jāti thī. Añgrēz kampanī kā run [...]*") (2011, 108–9).

In the same strain is his ironic conversion of the chessboard and the chess game as a "*sangrām-ksbētra*" (battlefield/crusade/battle) in Hindi (*ibid.*, 110) versus the Urdu "*phir mahv-e shatranj bāzī*" (once more they immersed themselves in their chess games) (2010, 90). Such usage becomes particularly noticeable because, elsewhere in the Hindi text, Premchand

---

<sup>5</sup>Misra observes that in the years following 1857, courtesans, who once signified power, eminence and class, came under direct control of the town criminal officer and began to be referred to as prostitutes (2006, 135–66). Oldenburg also records how the taste for performances of the refined courtesan and the forms of entertainment changed with the establishment of colonial rule. Consequentially, a restrictive attitude adopted by the new government constrained, impoverished and humiliated them (2001, 132–44).

does use simpler Hindustani or Urdu words.

Premchand's Urdu narrator provides the reader with a larger sense of the linguistic patterns employed in the *zenānas* (inner, female quarters) of the *jāgirdār* households. For instance, the Hindi expression “*Unhōñ nē, un kā nām Mīr bigārū rakh chōṛā thā*” (She had named him Mīr the Spoilsport) (2011, 105) is reconstructed in Urdu as “*Vo Mīr šāḥab kō nikḥaṭṭū, bigārū, tukṛē-khōr vaghaira nāmōñ sē yād kiyā kartī thīñ*” (She would think of Mīr *šāḥab* as the good-for-nothing, the killjoy, the freeloader, etc.) (2010, 84). The addition of essentially gynocentric pejoratives also conveys a sense of derision in addition to irritability. Mirzā's wife's invectives are a continuation of similar strains expressing extreme frustration and anger: “*Ab mūvā idḥar ā'ē tō khāṛē khāṛē nikāl dūñ. Ghār nahīñ čakla samajḥ liyā hai* (If the dead one comes here I will have him thrown out immediately. Does he imagine this is a brothel, and not a house?)” (2010, 86).

The Urdu narrator of “*Shaṭranj kī Bāzī*” seems to collaborate with language to transport the reader away from the reality of the present into the illusory world of the Navāb. His vocabulary is clearly more evolved, perceptive of the prospective readers' sensibility, and discerning of the cultural framework within which the story is set. His language is redolent with the ease and lethargy that characterized the people. The irony and sarcasm employed by the Hindi characters are mellowed by the larger descriptive details and the prolix syntactic style of the Urdu characters. For instance, “*Ḥuṣūr navāb šāḥab bhī 'aiśhgāb mēñ hōñgē*” (2011, 111) (“The King's in his harem, no doubt”) (Premchand 1988, 189) sounds rather condemnatory by comparison with the poetic “*Ḥuṣūr jān-e 'ālam bhī istirāḥat farmātē hōñgē yā shāyad sāghar kā daur čal rahā hō*” (Sir, the “beloved of creation” must be resting or perhaps enjoying a drink) (2010, 91) which speaks of the Navāb conjecturally, especially due to the use of “*shāyad*” (perhaps).

A comparison of the concluding paragraphs of the Hindi and Urdu texts reveals that the ironic references of the Hindi text render the chess players as caricatures that kill each other without a cause. Premchand employs a single epithet in lamenting their unnatural deaths in the Hindi text. His brevity drives home the point. The irony of the Hindi text is toned down in the Urdu story. This is best exemplified by the narrator's choice of words and his tone with regard to the protagonists. Consider for instance, the straightforwardness of the Urdu “*maqtūlīn*” (those killed) (2010, 95) when contrasted with the sarcasm of the Hindi “*vīrōñ*” (brave hearts) (2011, 114). Premchand's Urdu narrator seems more generous to the protagonists, concluding with a seemingly genuine, dirge-like lament embodying poetic pathos and philosophically bemoaning the ephemeral passage of time which takes all within its tide—animate and inanimate—the chess players

and the dilapidated mosque. The Hindi narrator merely employs a single rhetoric to indicate that the ruins of the crumbling mosque were baffled at the deaths of the chess players. In both texts, Premchand animates the chess kings by making them lament the deaths of the chess players, to amplify the point that decadence was destructive.

Compare the Urdu:

*Andhērā hō gayā thā. Bāzī bičhī hū'ī thī. Dōnōñ bādshāh apnē-apnē takbt par raunaq-afroz thē. Un par ḥasrat čhā'ī hū'ī thī. Goyā maqtūlīn kī maut kā mātām kar rahē haiñ.*

*Čārōñ taraf sannāṭē kā 'ālam thā. Khandḥar kī bōsīda dīvārēñ aur khasta-ḥāl kañgūrē aur sar-ba-sujūd mīnār lāshōñ kō dēkhtē thē aur insānī zīndagī kī bēshibātī par afsōs kartē thē jis mēñ sang-o-khisbt kā šibāt bhī nahīñ.*

(2010, 95)

It was dark. The chess game was laid out. Both kings sat magnificently on their respective thrones, stricken with sorrow, as if mourning the deaths of those who had been killed.

There was silence all around. They would look at the decaying walls of the dilapidated mosque, the damaged turrets and the minarets which had crumbled to the ground; looked upon their bodies and bemoaned the impermanence of human existence which lacked the stability of even a brick or stone.

with the Hindi:

*Andhērā hō čalā thā. Bāzī bičhī hū'ī thī. Dōnōñ bādshāh apnē-apnē siñghāsānōñ par baiṭhē hū'ē mānō in dōnōñ vīrōñ kī mṛityu par rō rahē thē!*

*Čārōñ taraf sannāṭā čhāyā hū'ā thā. Khandḥar kī ṭūṭī hū'ī mehrābēñ, girī hū'ī dīvārēñ aur dhūl-dhūsrit mīnārēñ in lāshōñ kō dēkhtī aur sir dhuntī thīñ.*

(2011, 114)

Darkness was coming on. The chess game had been set up. The two kings each on his throne sat there as though lamenting the death of these two heroes.

Silence spread over all. The broken archways of the ruins, the crumbling walls and dusty minarets looked down upon the corpses and mourned.

(1988, 192)

At times, Premchand's translation is fairly literal. The Hindi "vibhāg" (2011, 104) translated as the Urdu "shu'be" (2010, 82) or English "departments" is unsuited to the aspects of life he recounts. Perhaps, "pehlū" or "aspects" would have been preferable. This is odd, considering that Maulānā Shibli

Nu‘mānī believed Premchand’s Urdu usage was above par (Rai 2002 106), and brings into play the veracity of linguistic usage in regard to his target language—the idea that the question of the language in his translations is thorny (Rubin 1988, 261) and that he often assigned translations of his stories to his pupils/collaborators, which he later touched up (Gopal 1964, 113). Pritchett points out that Premchand’s Urdu terms sound “romantic” (1986, 69). This is primarily because the Urdu language maintains its resplendent poetic traditions in its fictional usage. It is perhaps, because of its copious, elegiac, rhythmic and lyrical style that the Urdu text seems less ironic and cynical, even in its satiric descriptions. That “Shatranj ki Bazi” was published in a collection entitled *Khvāb-o-Khayāl kī Kabāniyān* may also have had some bearing on the tone and tenor of the Urdu text.

### “Shatranj ke Khilari” and “The Chess Players”

David Rubin’s translation of the Hindi “Shatranj kē Khilārī” as “The Chess Players” was not part of his first, 1969, selection of Premchand stories. However, he included it, along with five other stories, in his second, revised and expanded edition of 1988. These additions were meant to illustrate the broad range of Premchand’s genius and the scope of his appeal (Rubin 1988, 11). He had intended this edition for Indian readership as well as for Anglophone readers outside India (*ibid.*, 12), to whom neither the author’s language nor the cultural significations of the story are otherwise intelligible. Thus, Rubin’s cross-cultural translation intends to acquaint a linguistically and culturally diverse readership with Premchand’s world and thought. Rubin’s translation is centered on Fishman’s formulation of the principles of sociolinguistics which may be extended to view translational exercises as centering on notions of who translates for whom, where and why (Gupta 1997, 185).

Rubin makes use of several translational techniques and devices in order to achieve textual, psychological, cultural and aesthetic equivalence. Although absolute exactness is elusive, his translation achieves equivalence in that it retains Premchand’s message, and aims to produce similar effects upon the reader. Rubin negotiates various linguistic and cultural patterns of the source language text in order to convey the serious intent of Premchand’s tale in the target language text. This is largely because the English language short story does not operate singularly on the device of irony and/or sarcasm in order to convey a serious, utilitarian message, if at all, it has one. Premchand’s irony, conveyed by means of his tone and vocabulary is the main-stay of his narrative, promulgating his political message. Per-

haps, this is because the tendency to make overtly ironic and sarcastic statements, or veiled innuendoes, is essentially an indigenous, cultural one.

Rubin translates Premchand as literally as possible, making use of lexical reordering to convey the sense of the story in the target language. He employs appropriation or adaptation only where a clear understanding necessitates the use of such devices. Hindi-Urdu rhetoric and adages, enconced in cultural patterns, religion, mythology and sociological practice have few or no parallels in English. This introduces difficulties in the translation process, which may or may not be surmountable without in some way intruding upon the substance of, or the effects produced by, the original. Such a translation as Rubin's from one language/culture into another, is a case of diffusion, a special kind of renewal where the code gets activated and extends beyond its previous boundaries, as well as of borrowing (Kapoor 1997, 148).

Rubin annotates the Urdu vocabulary he retains by means of a footnote glossary which foregrounds the continual reality of cultural distance between the source and the target cultures. For example, "*causar*," "*madak*" and "*ganjifa*" are duly explained (Premchand 1988, 182). In contrast to intexting or parenthetical glossing, this technique minimizes authorial intrusion. This rather primitive metonymical device forms a referential bridge and establishes the Hindi words as cultural signs (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2002, 6–12). In the same strain, he explains certain ideas by means of footnote annotations in order to provide cultural and historical intelligibility for his foreign readership. The point about the inappropriateness of an aristocratic lady who observes purdah going out to the doctor is elucidated (1988, 183); similarly a succinct comment acquaints the readers with Navāb Āsafu'd-Daulah's temperament and his regal pursuits (*ibid.*, 188).

Rubin also employs "selective lexical fidelity," a translational device which illustrates the importance of discourse in interpreting cultures (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2002, 63), by leaving certain "culture-specific" words untranslated, such as "paan," "yogi," "hookah," "gazel" (1988, 188, 190), which have found their way into Hobson-Jobson and other dictionaries. This is done in order to convey a sense of cultural distinctiveness. In the story Rubin adapts Premchand's interjections and forms of address, such as "*janāb*" and "*arē yār*" (2011, 106), as "my dear fellow" and "old man" (1988, 184), which convey a sense of the jousting that transpires between the two friends. He makes several translational appropriations to convey the sense of the text to the cross-cultural reader. For instance, Premchand's repeated use of "Company" is translated as "East India Company" (*ibid.*, 188) in order to put it in its proper perspective; "*ḥakim*" as "doctor" (*ibid.*, 183), "*Navāb*" as "King" (*ibid.*, 189) and "*abābīlēn*" as "swallows" (*ibid.*, 190) are appropri-

ations which cater to an English readership but erase cultural signification. In the pre-penultimate paragraph, “*vazīr*” (minister) is translated as “queen” (*ibid.*, 192) since in the Western game of chess the queen and not the *vazīr* is empowered next only to the king.

A bilingual reader is likely to experience notable linguistic and cultural losses in Rubin’s translation. The untranslatability of Premchand’s gynocentric, typically regional, and culturally loaded “*nigodī*” (2011, 106), results in the rather unadorned “wretched” (1988, 184). Premchand’s idiomatic expressions, operating by means of images and metaphors, and so intricately woven into his conversational style, are handled variously by Rubin. Most often, his inability to convey the sense of the source language text by retaining the vehicles of expression, simplifies the lexis. Rubin replaces the “dramatic script format” employed by Premchand for the occasional “he said, she asked” in order to keep the order clear (1988, 12). For the most part, Rubin’s translation retains the sense and the flavor of the original text to the extent that the cultural and linguistic disparity involved in cross-cultural translations permits. His cross-cultural translation/transcreation acquaints an Anglophone readership with the author’s tale thereby providing a manifold increase in readership. Although the translation is less nuanced and its rhetoric less picturesque than Premchand’s, Rubin’s language accords the tale the seriousness required by the message contained therein.

### Conclusion

Lucknow, the capital city of erstwhile Awadh, was also its cultural capital, symbolizing grace and perfection in all aspects of life. It became renowned as the unparalleled center of cultural elegance and linguistic refinement. Ironically, however, inherent to the patterns signifying its cultural zenith were prototypically those that also contributed to its decline. Later, under colonial monopoly, the city and its edifying lifestyle suffered irrevocable setbacks and alteration and the inhabitants struggled in vain to hold their ground in maintaining, if not advancing, cultural grace and magnificence.

Although essentially urban, Premchand’s story provides only a jaundiced vision of the lifestyles of the city’s élite. His authorial interventions, in the form of the narrator’s criticism of the decadent, social fabric of the city, seem to ignore the flourishing trade and commerce in the bourgeoisie power-center, which pinnacled in creative and ingenious productivity and was representative of both its capitalist and its feudal culture. He also ignores its monumental grandeur, which has earned Lucknow laudable

encomiums including metonymical references as the Venice of the East or the Paris of Asia. The only instance he provides of this is in Mīr and Mirzā's conscious decision to play chess on the nondescript eastern banks of the Gomti: (“[...] *Gōmtī pār kī ēk purānī vīrān masjid mēñ čalē jātē*”) ([...] they would go to an old, deserted mosque on the other bank of the Gomti) (2011, 110; 2010, 90). Their decision is aimed at avoiding both the urban and the royal glare because this bank was uninhabited by persons of consequence. Apart from mosques and gardens, the baroque buildings of the city were located on the western banks. The *ashraf* mostly inhabited the western banks. Premchand's brief description of the eastern bank of the river is supportive of the lack of consequential occupancy.<sup>6</sup> Premchand provides the sense of the city only in terms of depicting a decadent way of life by foregrounding the chess players Mīr and Mirzā, whose lifestyles typify the milieu of their lives, which had its limitations and failings. The game of chess may be viewed as a metaphor for the larger political annexation and for the games being played within the *zenānas* of their households. The chess games of Mīr and Mirzā are, in fact, leisurely pastimes if compared to the shrewd political maneuvers of the British East India Company in its annexation of a vast and wealthy kingdom under the cover of allegations of misrule.

Premchand's narrow point of view squarely blames a decadent sovereign's governance of a decadent people as the mainstay for the annexation and its passive acceptance. The annexation remains a background reality in the shape of descriptions of the times and references to the decadent Navāb Vājīd 'Alī Shāh. It is foregrounded towards the conclusion, in the reduction of the Navāb to a persona non grata and the nemesis of a kingdom given over entirely to sensual and artistic pleasures. Premchand's criticism also ignores the historical-political conditions prevailing during the period and the avaricious designs of expansion of an imperialist country's “mercantile bottom” company (J. Kaye's phrase; qtd. in Mukherjee 1984, 43). However, Premchand does point out that the kingdom's debt to the Company was steadily on the rise; that the Company wanted to usurp the kingdom of Awadh through the evil of debt: “*añgrēzī kampanī kā qarṣ rōz-ba-rōz baḥtā jātā thā*” (the kingdom's debt to the Company was steadily on the rise) (2010, 88); and, “*kampanī [...] qarṣē kī 'illat mēñ salṭanat baḥam kar lēnā čabtī thī*” (the Company [...] wanted to usurp

---

<sup>6</sup>Alok Rai's English translation, based jointly on Premchand's Urdu and Hindi texts, ignores this brief affirmation by Premchand. He translates the statement, identical in both texts, as: “on the banks of the Gomti” (Premchand 2007, 59). Rubin translates more authentically and contextualizes the Gōmtī for his Western readership: “and go to the other side of the Gomti river” (1988, 188).

the kingdom through the evil of debt) (*ibid.*, 91). Pritchett notes that Premchand offers one redemptive statement in favor of Awadh in the Urdu story, though no such observation is made in the Hindi text. As regards the Company, he observes: “*vuhī mahājanī čāl čalī jis sē āj sārī kamzōr qaumēñ pa-ba-zangīr hō rabī haiñ*” (2010, 91); (“[The company] played the same moneylender’s trick due to which all weak nations are being subjugated”) (Pritchett 1986, 77). The outwardly peaceful annexation of Awadh is a reality which ushered in the cataclysmic transformation in India’s colonial history and is supposed to have had serious ramifications in catalyzing the Uprising of 1857 (Misra 2006, 109–14). The fact that the people of Awadh did not accept the annexation as a *fait accompli* is corroborated by the outbreak of the uprising in Meerut. They were also deeply moved by the dethroning of the Navāb (Mukherjee 1984, 35–36; Misra 2006, 110–11).

Both of Premchand’s stories conclude on a bloody note. Mīr and Mirzā draw swords and wound each other fatally. The kingdom falls in a bloodless coup with the king, seemingly, an accomplice, but minor issues, such as aspersions cast on each other’s lineage and frustrations due to deceitful moves in the game of chess, lead the chess players to confront and kill each other. The irony is unmistakable. This kind of *deus ex machina* dénouement seems implausible, keeping in mind the indolence that characterizes Premchand’s protagonists and the laid-back attitude of the people of Lucknow. Premchand’s justification of the sudden rush of blood is realistically unconvincing for a people given over to leisurely lifestyles. The story could have concluded with the narrator’s condemnation of the indifference and apathy of Mīr and Mirzā regarding their own fate, the fate of their king and of their kingdom. This would have perhaps brought home the point more tellingly.

The acme of Lucknow’s cultural and linguistic etiquette provided strongly for the possibility that anyone who was city-bred, or had spent some time in the city, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, literate or illiterate, feudal or professional, spoke the urban language with unmatched grace and eloquence, even bordering on artifice. Premchand’s Urdu text indicates this but his Hindi text’s expression, especially his narrator’s Sanskritic usage and irony, is at odds with the protagonists’ cultural and linguistic leanings. □



## Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2002. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Brass, Paul R. 1974. *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House in association with Cambridge University Press.
- Dalmia, Vasudha. 2010a. "Introduction: Hindi, Nation and Community." In *Nationalism in the Vernacular: Hindi, Urdu and the Literature of Indian Freedom*. Edited by Shobna Nijhawan. Ranikhet: Permanent Black. 33–63.
- . 2010b. Introduction to "Godaan—The Gift of a Cow." In *Nationalism in the Vernacular: Hindi, Urdu and the Literature of Indian Freedom*. Edited by Shobna Nijhawan. Ranikhet: Permanent Black. 494–97.
- Faruqi, Shamsur Rahman. 2001. *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gopal, Madan. 1964. *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Gupta, R.S. 1997. "Translation: A Sociolinguistic Perspective." In *Translation and Multilingualism: Post-Colonial Contexts*. Edited by Shantha Ramakrishna. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007.
- Kapoor, Kapil. 1997. "Philosophy of Translation: Subordination or Subordinating: Translating Technical Texts from Sanskrit—Now and Then." In *Translation and Multilingualism: Post-Colonial Contexts*. Edited by Shantha Ramakrishna. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007.
- Kumar, Sanjay. 2012. "Faultlines of Hindi and Urdu." In *Frontline* 29(15) (July 28–Aug 10). <<http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2915/fl291500.htm>>.
- Misra, Amaresh. 2006. *Lucknow: Fire of Grace—The Story of Its Revolution, Renaissance and the Aftermath*. New Delhi: Rupa & Company.
- Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. 1984. *Awadh in Revolt 1857–1858: A Study of Popular Resistance*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. 2001. "The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877." In *The Lucknow Omnibus*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Premchand, Munshi. 2011. "Shatranj kē Khilārī" (The Chess Players). In *Amar Sabit-yakar, Prēmčand kī Sampūrṇ Kabāniyāñ; Shatranj kē Khilārī Tathā Anya Kabāniyāñ* (The Complete Short Stories of Premchand; The Chess Players and Other Stories, vol. 12). Delhi: Saakshi Prakaashan. 104–14.
- . 2010. "Shatranj ki Bāzi" (A Game of Chess). In *Premčand kē Numā'inda Af-sānē* (Representative Short Stories of Premchand). Edited by Qamar Rais. Aligarh: Educational Book House. 82–95.
- . 2007. "Shatranj ke Khilari" (The Chess Players). Translated by Alok Rai. In *Shaam-e-Awadh: Writings on Lucknow*. Edited by Veena Talwar Oldenburg. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 53–64.
- . 1988. "The Chess Players." In *Premchand: Deliverance and Other Stories*. Translated from the Hindi by David Rubin. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 182–92.
- . 1967. *Sābhitya kā Uddeshya* (The Purpose of Literature). Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, Caxton Press.

- . 1928. *Khvāb-o-Khayāl ki Kabāniyān*. Lahore: Lajpatrai and Sons.
- Pritchett, Frances. 1986. "The Chess Players': From Premchand to Satyajit Ray." *Journal of South Asian Literature* 22(2):65–78.
- Rahbar, Hans Raj. 1957. *Prem Chand: His Life and Work*. Delhi: Atma Ram and Sons.
- Rubin, David. 1988. "Introduction," "A Word About the Translation," and "Notes to the Stories." In *Premchand: Deliverance and Other Stories*. Translated from the Hindi by David Rubin. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Rai, Amrit. 2002. *Premchand: His Life and Times*. Translated by Harish Trivedi. Introduction by Alok Rai. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.