

Book Review

Mughal Sara'ey—A translation of 67 Mogul Miniatures

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The rendition of a culture and its nuances into a foreign language, and that too in rhyme, is a herculean task indeed as every cultural baggage brings a certain amount of 'intranslatability' with it. Raza Ali Hassan's 67 Mughal Miniatures is not just a collection of small poems rather it is an attempt to re-live a cultural experience. The Oriental 'trace' seems to haunt every syllable, every line and even the foreignness of its language does not take away its essential indigenosity. The translators of this volume Adul Aziz Sahir and Sheeraz Dasti had their work cut out when they ventured to render these poetic miniatures into Urdu. The reason being that if the 'trace' of the orient haunts the original lines, bringing them back into the vesture of Urdu meant that they not only had to invoke the inherent 'native' essence of the verses but also to purge them off their foreign code. The moment we delve into the experience of reading the translation, along with the original English version, we do admire their skill and dexterity.

Raza Ali Hassan's verse is 'split' between his Oriental longing and postmodern experience and many of his images cannot be dressed in poetic Urdu with ease. Take the example of this line;

Littering, its smudgy tar highways

The problem is that Urdu poetics does not accommodate the sudden mundanity of these images and a literal translation would have rendered it prosaic. The point is to convey the essence without damaging the aesthetics of the target language and the translators successfully did that as the translation speaks for itself;

Shahrah ke husn ko gehnae hue

Another instance is the line 'Gone too is the evaporating dew' which has been translated as 'Shaid who shubnum mubadal ba huwa ho gae hy'. To term phenomenon of evaporation as 'mubadal ba huwa' is really poetic indeed.

Not only the poems are divided into 'Shikwa' and 'Jawab-e-Shikwa' but Iqbal himself seems to be a character in the book though his 'plaints' and their Divine 'riposte' are not as candid. The poet seems to be complaining to himself or to be more precise to the whole Muslim civilization rather than to God and the translation has captured this beautifully;

Kahan woh din ke Zulfiqar e Ali ka aik war

Ar kahan yeh waqt ke Yazeed jese bud zuban ki Hukmrani

And

Sar zameen e Hijaz par mojood khana e Khuda

Aur Masjid e Haram ke uss ka manzar naama

Tijaarti sultanat ke bache bay gor o kafun pare hain

And then the reply which seem to be nihilistic and instead of coming from God, more of an expression of one's own guilt;

Woh Adam tha, jis ke hazoor farishte sajda raiz thay

Ae to bhi to aik adam jis ke gale men ghulami ka touq para hy.

And then it becomes a bit bitter;

Aik kitaab hy jo parhi jati hy ar hifz bhi ki jati hy

Par smji nae jati

As mentioned earlier, Iqbal appears as a character in the poem but his role is just like that of Tiresias in T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Wasteland' who holds disparate elements together. Just like Tiresias, he seems to transcend time and space witnessing at one moment the heart rending tragedy of Karbala and then transported to the contemporary urban landscape. This journey in space and time also entails a shift in the use of images and the translators have beautifully captured this shift.

Maatmi faza hy ar nawasa e Rasool ka noha

And

Kahan woh din ke Zulfiqar e Ali ka ik waar

Ar kahan ye waqt ke Yazid jese bud zuban ki hukmrani

And then the shift:

Jeddah ke Hera Avenue Mall par Alif Lailah ka majnon uriyan phir rha hy

Mothercare, United Colors of Benetton, Espirit se guzarat hua

There are some instances in which the cultural context got the best of translators and there seems to be a 'semantic crisis'. For example the line;

Where Cezanne's

"Still life with Apples" can still fetch a million.

is translated as;

Cezanne ka fun para aaj bhi lakhon logon ke leye tafreeh hy

Here the idiom ‘fetch a million’ is used in the monetary sense, and not in relation to the spectators who are attending the exhibition.

Another such instance is when the translators inverted a historical fact. The number 21 states:

The Shattering of the false gods who had found
Sanctuary since the time of Gilgamesh
In Downtown Baghdad’s Antiquities Museum
Completes West’s earlier venture—
The Conquistadors’ burning
Of Aztec , Maya and Inca scrolls.

Here the original text points to the fact that West’s disregard for other civilizations and their artifacts which started in the 15th C—when they burnt the ancient scrolls of Latin America—culminated in 2003 when the ancient Gilgamesh idols were shattered in Baghdad during American invasion. The translators got it the other way round when they translated the text like this;

Jhoote khuda jo Gilgamesh ke zmane se
Baghdad ke ajaib gharon men punah guzain thay
Tarakhat kr deye gaye
To maghrab ka pehla mansoba mukamal ho gia
Yeh fateheen apne aglay munsoobon ko barhay
Aztec, Maya ar Inca ko bhi jala dala

As we can see that the original text refers to the scrolls as the first project and not the other way round, though in both cases the meaning and intent of original text still makes it into the Urdu version.

Aside from these quibbles about translational technicalities, however, reading 67 Mogul Miniatures along with its Urdu translation is a transcendental journey that invokes and appeals to the mystic who is asleep in all of us. These are the meditations of a modern sufi and the credit goes to the translators that they have made them available for the indigenous aficionados.