
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 13:12 December 2013

ISSN 1930-2940

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Loss of Cultural Element in Translation - A Comparative Study of Premchand's Original Story *Kafan* and Its Translations

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Abstract

We come across different literary works and their translation every day. Translation acts as a bridge to access the hidden treasure of knowledge of the source language. Cultural elements of the source language like idioms, proverbs, etc., are identifying features which help the readers to imagine and understand the historical cultural setting of the literary text.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

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Translation of a literary work is considered successful if the cultural elements which are intrinsic part of the source language are translated to the target language to recreate the same aura for the readers of the translated text, as thought by the author of the original text. In case translation of these cultural elements is overlooked by the translator, then its reader are devoid of the pleasure seeing the picture in its original hues and shades.

This paper is an attempt to identify if these cultural elements found their due place in the two translations of Premchand's short story *Kafan*, which is the focus of the present study. The paper also tries to find if the readers of two different translations for the same literary text will be able to perceive the image created by the author of the original text.

Key words: translation, cultural elements, identifying features, idioms, proverbs



What is Translation?

The word *translation* for a lay man means words that have been changed from one language into another language to convey the same meaning as implied in the source language. But the process of translation is not as easy as it may be understood by common person, especially when one is dealing with literary translations. It is a complex process which does not only involve translating ideas of the author from the source language to the target language . At the same time translation also involves “translating cultural elements such as proverbs, idioms, metaphors, collocations, swear words into proper equivalents from the source language

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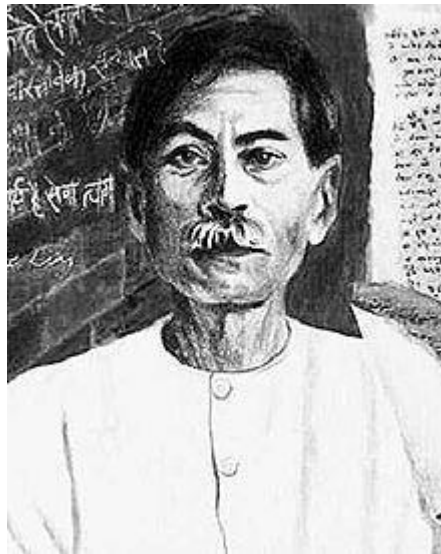
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to the target language”. (Jabak and Idlib, *Why is translation into the mother tongue more successful than into a second language?*, translationdirectory.com) These cultural bound aspects are so closely woven in the original text that sometimes it is very difficult to find an equivalent in the target language because these terms are language specific and sometimes country specific too. The motive behind the study is to investigate how the two English translations are different from each other in terms of translation of cultural elements of the story. The other important aim is to look closely to find out if there will be some kind of change in the readers perspective towards the original text depending on the translation they have access to.

For the purpose of study I have taken two translations of the story “Kafan” (original text) written by Premchand, and its translation ‘The Winding Sheet’ translated by Jeffrey Krouse with Dr. Hanif Fauque. The second translation in consideration is ‘The Shroud’ done by Frances W. Pritchett.

1. Premchand’s Writing Style



Courtesy: www.en.wikipedia.org

Premchand is considered the pioneer of Hindi and Urdu short stories. He is called a great *afsananigar* (storyteller) of Urdu literature. He laid the foundation of Urdu and Hindi fiction. Premchand’s story has been selected as a topic for study. Premchand’s stories have been

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successful in touching the hearts of the readers, as his language is very simple and he used dialect and colloquial expressions in his writings. Indian culture and customs are a part of his stories, thus it is easy for a reader to relate to his stories.

As stated before, the aim of the study is to find out if the translations of his story are able to recreate the picture painted with the colours of culture and customs as imagined by Premchand himself, and whether the translations are successful in influencing the readers in the similar fashion as the original text reader.

2. Outline of the Story

The selected story “Kafan” by Premchand is set in rural India. The characters are rustic but unlike other rural characters they are not hard working and their acts in the story evokes strong sense of dislike along with sympathy for them in the reader’s mind.

“Kafan” is a story about a low-caste father and his son who are poor labourers in a village. An emergency occurs when the son's wife dies while giving birth to a child and the family has no money to cremate the body of the dead woman. Truth dawns upon them that they need a shroud for completing the cremation rites. The lazy duo asks for money from the zamindar (landlord) and other members of the society. However, they use the money to buy liquor and food instead. Their shameless attitude leaves the reader aghast because the stark reality of death even fails to deter them from spending money for their own vested interest. Premchand might have wanted his readers to understand the seriousness of the story’s subject by rendering it the title “Kafan” which means “shroud” a white piece of cloth required to cover the body of the dead, it is the most important thing required in the Indian tradition for the last rites of a person.

3. Differences in Linguistic Aspects in the Two Translated Texts

Starting with the difference in the linguistic aspect of the two translations I would like to draw the attention of the readers to the fact that Frances W.Pritchett in his

translation has used the term “The Shroud” while translating the title so as to let the readers know that the story would revolve around the serious subject of death, whereas the other translation of the story done by Dr. Hanif Faque uses the phrase “The Winding Sheet” as the title which to an extent sounds ambiguous and unclear. The phrase “winding sheet” can refer to anything used for wrapping an object and not necessarily the dead body. The title of the translated text “The Winding Sheet” may fail to paint the image of a dead body in the reader’s mind unlike the title ‘Kafan’ which spontaneously might have evoked the image of death in the minds of the readers of original text. Thus it helps us to drive home the fact that two different titles of the original text would create two entirely different pictures in the reader’s mind depending upon the translation he would read.

The two characters Ghisu and Madhav in the story are illiterate and use unrefined language. To make the readers realize this, Premchand deliberately makes them speak certain words as used in their dialect, in place of the standard pronunciation. For example, ‘Bhaman’ in place of ‘Brahmin’, ‘Saadi bayah’ instead of “Shadi Byah”, a reference to the marriage ceremony in their conversation. Ghisu is shown pronouncing many Persian words poorly to highlight his lack of education. For "life," instead of “zindagaanii” he says “jindagaanii”; for "faithlessness," instead of “be-vafaaii” he says “be-vaphaaii”. Madhav in the story also mispronounces these words.

It was Premchand’s unique style to blend colloquial terms in his stories so that the readers are able to identify with the characters and the settings. Though these words are mispronounced by the characters, they are easily comprehended by the Hindi readers. The translators Frances W. Pritchett and Dr. Hanif Faque both are not able to find equivalents in English for these dialectal terms and also both the translators are not able to translate these mispronounced word used by the character at several places as consciously done by Premchand in the original text to add elements of humour to his story. So, W. Pritchett and Dr. Hanif Faque seem to first translate the colloquial words to standard words existing in Urdu and Persian languages, and then translate the same into English. However, the difficulty in finding an

equivalent in English for these mispronunciations to use in the translated texts deprives the reader from experiencing the true taste of the colloquial idiom which is an integral part of Premchand's writing in Urdu and Hindi language. The landlord's addressed Gheesu as "Gheesua" in the original text. It is a gesture of an upper class person in the Indian society to show his superiority over the poor and also to snub or scold a person. In his translation "The Shroud", Frances W. Pritchett has used the same name "Gheesua" as used by Premchand in the story in order to retain the originality and the flavor of the Hindi text instead of using the correct name "Gheesu"

Premchand in his story deliberately mentions the caste of the father and the son as "Chamars" to emphasize the fact that discrimination on the basis of caste was prevalent in those times, and to make the readers understand the deplorable financial state of the characters. Premchand wanted to let the readers know that the society was divided into castes and sub-castes. "Chamars" was an untouchable caste group living on the outskirts of the village. It seems that Premchand wanted to let his readers about the pathetic condition of the lower caste people.

Francis while translating the text has used the same caste name 'Chamars' and added a foot note for the reader in his translation so as to justify the usage of the caste's name whereas Dr. Hanif in his translation has translated "Chamars" to "The men were from the lowest Hindu caste" which leave the readers in some doubt and uncertainty and makes the translation a little obscure since there were many other castes which were also considered low in those times in India. The readers of this translation also do not get a clear idea of the caste of the father and the son.

In the original text, Premchand, while referring to Buddiya's role in the family, wrote "usne is khandan mai vayvastha ki neev dali" meaning that she laid the foundation of family. The English translation "The Winding Sheet" says "his wife has been trying to get the men together as a family." This translation is no way near to the original text. The closest translation possible would be "she laid the foundation of civilization" as used in the other translation "The Shroud".

The original text made a reference to the fact that both Ghisuu and Madhav discussed the important custom of giving loads of money to the people of Brahmin caste after someone died in the family. The conversation is a reminder to the readers about the important ritual observed by most of the Hindus so that a place is reserved for the deceased in heaven. This can also be seen as an author's way to suggest the readers that people especially from the Brahmin caste enjoyed superiority over other castes in the society. The readers of the translation "The Winding Sheet" may not be able to understand the implied meaning of the term "Brahmin" used by Premchand in the original story which has been replaced with "upper caste people" by Dr. Hanif in the translation. Therefore the purpose of Premchand mentioning the caste in his story may not be clearly understood by the readers of the translated version "The Winding Sheet". In fact many non-native readers would not be able to learn about the different castes that exist in India from time immemorial.

Also Mahdo in the original story said "Saadi bayah mai mat kharch karo kriya karam mai mat kharch karo" meaning that people do not spend money now-a-days either on marriage or on funeral.

The other noticeable thing in this dialogue is this is a direct address to the upper class which has wrongly been translated by Hanif Faque as "Forget about spending their money on wedding, they just save it all for their funeral" and the translation is third person address. This wrong translation leads to distortion of the original text, an extra line has also been added in his translation "What a bunch of misers" which is not found in the original text.

On further reading the original text one finds the mention of a Hindi idiom "Magar Gheesu per reham karna kale kambal per rang chadana tha" when both Gheesu and Mahdo visited the landlord for money. The idiom has not been translated in "The Winding Sheet" which reveals the fact that the translator took the liberty of deleting an idiom from the text while translating the story while Prettrich preferred to do word for word translation of the idiom for the ease of the reader.

Premchand mentioned that the landlord gave two rupees to the duo “ji mai kudte hua do rupeye nikal kar phenk dia” Dr. Hanif in his translation said, “he managed to fish out couple of rupees” thus neither did he translate the correct amount of money nor was he able to translate the true emotion of the landlord while giving away the money.

The choice of words, idioms and proverbs in the original story “Kafan” renders it strong colors of Indian traditions and culture. Premchand mentions them very often in the story so as to let the reader know that there are many rituals and rites that Indians perform, and they are often a part of their day-to-day discussion as they are considered inseparable part of their lives.

In other words we can say that this is Premchand’s unique style of reminding readers of different Indian customs and their relevance. Right in the beginning of the conversation Gheesu mentions that “Chudail” or a ghost may have overpowered Budiya and they do not have money to call an “Ojha” who can help them to get rid of this witch. W. Patrickk has given an elaborate description of the superstitious custom since it is difficult to find an equivalent for these terms in English or English culture. In his notes he explains that “The appearance of a chudail is, in South Asian folk tradition, a dangerous possibility when a woman dies prematurely and in a state of strong, unsatisfied desire. A woman who dies in childbirth would be very likely to become a hostile ghost who would linger in such a guise, lurk in certain trees, and leap out to attack passersby at night”. The best thing to do then would be to hire an exorcist, or “ojhaa”. This elaborate note clearly explains the context but the readers may not have been able to imagine the real picture of this superstition and the custom related to it. When one reads the second translation “The Winding Sheet,” Hanif Faque has translated chudail as “she must have some kind of demon or something” though “Chudail” as used in the original text points towards a female ghost. Thus this translation “demon” may lead the reader to think chudail as a male ghost. The word “Ojha” has also been translated by Hanif Faque as “Witch doctor” which may confuse the reader whether there is a witch which treats such people or there exists some kind of a special doctor to treat the witches. Thus the readers of this translation would never get to know how these superstitions and customs were a part of these rural folks and acquired an important place in the stories of Premchand.

In the story when Madav told Ghisu that he will be questioned by his wife Budhiya for not being provided “Kafan” by him because “it was he who had put sindur in her parting of the hair” is not just a reference to one of the important custom of Hindu marriage but it is also a gentle reminder of the promise that a bridegroom makes to the bride to fulfill all her needs till her death. Madhav’s reference to this ceremony makes the readers realize that though he is illiterate yet he understands the customs and their importance. This phrase is often used as an idiom in Hindi and Urdu language; the idiom is culture specific and thus Francis, in his translation, has used word for word translation though he has explained the custom in his notes in detail. But when one reads the translation of M. Hanif we realize that the translation does not make any reference to this important custom in the translated version.

The original text mentions that Ghesu bought “gazak” with the bottle of liquor, though “The Winding Sheet” readers would find that the term has been translated as “snack”. The sweet which is mentioned in the story is specific to Indian culture but the word “snacks” can refer to any light food, sweet or salty.

There are other examples of culture specific terms in the story written by Premchand like “dhoti” which refers to a long piece of cloth wrapped around the waist by men in India. Francis in his translation has used the same term as used in the original text whereas Hanif in his story referred to “dhoti” as skirt which is a part of female attire in the western countries. “puri”, “chutney”, and “pan” are eatables and often served on special occasions in India. Besides the fact that there is no equivalent in English for them, Francis might have wanted to retain the Indian tinge in his translation. Thus he did not translate all these terms in English and used the Hindi terms as used in the original text. For some he has provided translator’s note at the end of the page for better understanding of the readers.

Upon a closer look at the second translation “The Winding Sheet”, the reader realizes that the term “puri” has been translated as “crepes” or “bread” ,“crepes” which also means a ‘thin pancake ‘ or as widely understood by many people as ‘light crinkled fabric’. The use of

this dual meaning word in this translation may evoke two different kinds of images in a reader's mind depending on his comprehension.

What Premchand mentioned as "gud" is often referred to as jaggery in English. It is used to feed the mother for post natal care in India. It is another important reference to Indian tradition, which has been translated by Francis as "brown sugar" and by Hanif Faque simply as "sugar". Looking at both the translated terms it is difficult for the readers to understand its relevance in the story or its connection to the custom of post natal care in the Indian tradition.

The other important term in the story is "baikunt". According to Hindu mythology "baikunt" is the residing place of lord Vishnu and virtuous souls find place to rest after death. In English language there is only one term "heaven" used for referring to the place where the departed souls rest, so the term "heaven" has been used in both the translations.

Another important custom which found mention in the story is offering of "pan" after a meal in a get together, a custom symbolic of the end of the meal time in the Indian culture. The translation "The Shroud" uses the original term "pan" whereas in the second translation the term has been translated as "leaf packet of tobacco" though "pan" may not necessarily have tobacco in it. This can convey a misleading message to the readers that "tobacco" is served to the guests after the feast. Thus, a non-native speaker or for a person who is not acquainted with the Indian culture may not be able to imagine the real picture of Indian feast, though Premchand has described Indian traditions and customs with all the minute details in the original text "Kafan". This also points towards the loss or sacrifice of vital cultural elements in translation.

These examples can also be seen as difficulties encountered by the translators with terms or concepts in the source language that do not exist in the target language.

Though there are minor changes in terms of vocabulary in the two translations but these minor differences may change a reader's point of view of looking at things. The study leads to a conclusion that the translation "The Winding Sheet" has been shortened at several places when

compared to original text. Some part of the text has been loosely translated without keeping the precision in mind. Thus, the force and authenticity of original text could not be maintained in this translation. The second translation “The Shroud” is a closer translation and the translator tried to do justice to the original text, though he also could not induce life in translation because of the absence of equivalent cultural element in English.

4. Conclusion

It is an accepted fact that the translator faces problems when he or she translates culture specific terms, or terms related to dialects. It is not incorrect to say that the translator is accomplishing a complicated task of recreating a replica of the original work, where he or she is trying to use words like pieces of jigsaw puzzle to bring to life a picture as seen by the author himself. There are no set parameters to judge a translation, but when it comes to literary translation, as stated above, the process may look like an attempt to make a replica of an original piece, the translator makes all effort to do justice to the text, but we cannot deny the fact that a masterpiece still remains a masterpiece.

The cultural elements are the heart and soul of any original text; they blow a breath of life in any piece of writing. So, the translator has to accomplish the mammoth task of making the translation also thrive with life like the original text, by translating the cultural elements, which in real sense carry the true essence of any literary work. Incorrect translation of these elements leads the reader to perceive a totally different image of the original work.

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