

Translation Section

Editorial Comments

Samrat Sengupta

In the translation section of the current issue of *Sanglap* we are publishing a short story and a poem. Translating from different languages is an important political act, particularly when it comes from different languages of a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic country like India. India, apart from housing cultural and linguistic diversities, contains various forms of inequalities across class, caste, or gender. However, translations may indicate certain recurrent and analogous patterns of violation and suffering, especially for people from the margins. One of the translated works here is a short story by the celebrated Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto. Manto has been a master storyteller of people from the lowest rung of society. In the Urdu story “Yes Master” the childlike simplicity of Manto’s language has been translated effectively by Asma Rafiq which relates to the protagonist Qasim – a ten year old boy serving as a domestic help in a household. The title of the original story was Qasim, after the protagonist. But the translator chooses to rename it, holding up the irony in pronouncing the agreement “Yes Master.” The agreement, it is obvious, has been extorted from the boy, who we see in the story, is overworked and has no respite. The story depicts the performative possibility of denial through repeated forceful affirmation. The only way to get freedom from relentless service, we see in the story, is in having a wound. The accidental wound makes the boy realize the path of freedom. Not having his fingers perhaps becomes a form of resistance to his condition of relentless enslavement. “Yes Master” – becomes the voice of affirmation as well as denial in a condition, where saying “no” was impossible.

Literature from the margin can communicate across languages and cultures, but also across patterns of experience. The poem “How to Overcome a Bad Day” by the Malayali author Kala Sajeevan directs us towards another form of aphasia or speechlessness where the pain and discomfort of a woman can never be depicted, and a woman is always expected to be happy and beautiful. Dr. Nithya Mariam John translates the poem, making it a part of the corpus of Indian English female poetry by poets such as Kamala Das or Meena Kandasamy. This can be another form of affirmation, extorted by power which in this case happens to be patriarchy. The idea of beauty and good nature enforced on women makes it impossible for them to depict their bad experiences. “A bad day” is a regular complaint for any working man, often required to be comforted by the women they are close to, but a woman always has to come up with niceties even in her moments of suffering. The image of darkness in the poem indicates the absence of

representation of women's bad days, which are supposed to be covered by proper makeup, false self-decorations and feigned happiness.

Such stories and poems refer to our collective amnesia toward the suffering "other" of human society. The task of a translator is also to translate amnesia and speechlessness of the mainstream. Perhaps that is how different forms and genres of literature connect through a similitude of pain. Cultures and languages can be different, but when translated into a common language they have the possibility of touching each other this way. Diversity is Unity! Yes Master! Let us read the poem and the story in English, uprooted from their immediate language and culture. We affirm to negate the language of power.

Yes Master

Sadat Hassan Manto

[Translated by Asma Rafiq]

The atmosphere of the kitchen was dull and dim. Like a melted candle, the string light illuminated the place with red color. In the corner of the kitchen, a young boy was busy washing the dishes under the hand pump. He was inspector sahib's servant. This boy was humming, while washing the dishes, and the words were slipping from his mouth without any effort.

Yes master, yes master, I am almost done. Sahib, the dishes are to wipe with ashes and then to be cleaned with water, and I also have to place them in order and he knew that all this requires time. The boy was feeling sleepy and exhausted. His head was heavy but without washing the dishes, it was almost impossible for him to take rest.

He was feeling so restless that he tried to open his eyes wide by changing his posture and relaxing his muscles. Eventually, he occupied himself with washing the dishes while humming yes master, yes master.

Qasim! Qasim

Yes master... The boy who was repeating these words, now ran to reach his master.

Inspector sahib got angry and spoke peeping out of his blanket, Nonsense! you again forgot to put *surahi*¹ and water here.

“Just one second, one second sahib”.

As soon as he was back to kitchen, after putting the *surahi* and glass in the room, he heard master calling him again.

Qasim! Qasim

Yes master, Qasim ran to his master.

The drinking water in Bombay is very bad. Go fast and bring soda from Parsi's hotel, I am feeling so thirsty.

“Alright sahib”

Qasim went running to the Parsi's hotel that was half mile away from his house. He brought the soda and poured it in the glass and offered it to the sahib.

¹ Surahi: An Indian clay pot with a long neck, used for storing water.

“Now you can leave, but what were you doing, dishes are still unwashed?”

“It is about to be done sahib”

“And yes, after washing the dishes, you have to polish my black shoes, but be careful. He warned Qasim by saying that any carelessness will not be tolerated, otherwise....”

Qasim knew very well the sentence that follows “otherwise”. “Alright sahib”, he replied and went back to kitchen to clean the vessels.

Now he was feeling drowsy and sleepy and was experiencing severe pain in his head. But he knew that he has to clean his sahib’s boots... He stretched his head to relax and started humming the same words.

Yes master, yes master. I am cleaning the boots. But now, he could not keep himself away from falling sleepy. He was still left with placing the vessels in order. While thinking all this, a thought struck his mind. He was so tired that he decided to leave the vessels and boots and sleep for a while. After few minutes

“Boot! Boot!” His ears were exploded by these words.

“Yes, master.... I am polishing the boots”, said Qasim and got up from the bed. His reaction was as if his master has ordered to polish the boots for the first time. Qasim could not even polish one boot and again felt asleep.

In the morning the inspector saw his servant in the hall, he touched him from his foot and said, “This pig is lying here unconsciously and I thought he must have cleaned the boots...*Namak Haram*²... O Qasim!”

“Yes master”.

Qasim uttered these words and understood the whole situation by seeing the brush in his hand. He said in a shaky voice, “I slept sahib... But now I am polishing the boots” and after uttering these words he again started polishing the boots.

“Qasim”

“Yes master”

Qasim came running down stairs and stood in front of his master.

Listen, today we are expecting some guests so you have to clean all the dishes in the kitchen. The floor should also be properly cleaned. You also have to clean the pictures, tables and chairs of

² Namak Haram: Someone who is not loyal to his master.

the guest room. Understood! Be careful there is a sharp knife on my table, don't touch it. Now, I am leaving for office, you must complete your work within two hours.

“Alright sahib”

Inspector sahib went to the office. Qasim was busy cleaning the dishes. After one and half hours, he was almost done with the kitchen work. He wiped his hand and legs and moved to the guest room with the broom.

The time was very less and the room was not cleaned yet. He started dusting the chairs. While doing this work, all of a sudden he thought “Today, guests are expected. I have to clean so many vessels, and I am feeling so sleepy, it seems as if I could not do these works...”

He was disturbed by these thoughts. While dusting things on the table, he saw the knife in the pen stand; it was the same sharp knife that his master was mentioning.

The moment he saw the knife, these words slipped from his mouth... knife... sharp edged knife... This can end your suffering.

Without thinking about the consequences, Qasim cut his finger with that sharp knife. Now he was free from washing the kitchen vessels in the night and he can sleep peacefully.

The blood was flowing from his finger. The blood was more red than the red ink. Qasim was happily seeing the red blood flowing and was humming ‘sleep, sleep, sweet sleep’. After sometime, he went to the master's wife who was sewing in the zanaan khane³. He showed his finger and said, “Look bibi... O Qasim... what have you done? You must have touched sahib's knife.

Yes, bibi...I was cleaning the table and the knife wounded my finger.

Qasim was laughing at his victory.

Qasim bandaged his finger and came back to the room. He cleaned the spots of blood on the table and finished his work quite happily.

His master's anger made him forget the happiness and Qasim ran to his bed. He rested for three four days as the wound was healed by then. Now, again he has to face the same suffering.

“Qasim! Wash your master's socks and shirts”

“Alright bibi ji...”

³ Zanaan Khane: A place where women are secluded

“Qasim! The floor of that room is looking dirty. Clean them with water, remember that no dirty spots are left”.

“Alright sahib”

“Qasim! The glasses are looking so dirty. Clean them with salt”.

“Alright sahib”

“Qasim! The cage of the parrot is very dirty. Why don’t you clean it?”

“Okie bibi ji”

“Qasim! The cleaner is expected to come. You have to help him in washing the steps.”

“Sure sahib”

“Qasim! Go fast and get curd of one anna⁴”

“Going bibi ji”

One day while cleaning the table of the inspector sahib, his hands automatically touched knife and the blood began dripping from the finger. Both the inspector and his wife got angry at this escapade of Qasim. He was punished and was not given dinner. But Qasim was so happy at this new invention. Though he was not offered roti for dinner and the wound was also not so deep, but he was free from washing the dishes and this made him happy.

After few days the wound was healed. Now, the same burden of the work. He worked like a donkey, for the next fifteen and twenty days. In between, many times Qasim thought to cut his finger but the sharp knife from the table was removed and the ‘knife’ in the kitchen was not sharp enough.

One day his master asked him to clean the almirah in which bottles of medicines and other things were kept. While cleaning the almirah he saw the blade that is used for cutting beard. He touched the blade and wounded his finger. The blade was too sharp so the cut was also too deep. Qasim somehow tried to stop the flow of blood but the cut was wide and deep. He got scared seeing the severe blood loss and ran to his master’s wife.

“I got my finger wounded by sahib’s razer”.

“Qasim! Now you cannot stay in our house”.

“Why so bibi ji?”

⁴ Anna: It is equal to 1/16 of a rupee.

“Ask to your master regarding this”

Around four o'clock, inspector sahib came back to home. He heard about Qasim's misconduct from his wife and ordered to see him.

“How should I treat this behavior of yours, quite often?”

Qasim was silent.

“You servants think that we masters are blind and can be cheated easily. Pack your clothes and leave the house. We don't need such kind of servants. Understand.”

“But, but sahib”

“I said, leave. You will not be paid for the rest of the month. And I don't want to listen any more.

Qasim left the room crying. He saw the parrot with pain in his eyes; the parrot was also saying something quietly. He packed his luggage and walked down stairs.

In a private hospital, a small child was lying on an iron bed. Two doctors were sitting near him.

One of the doctors told to his colleague, “The wound is in the stage where cure is not possible, it has to be cut off “.

“Alright”

The other doctor noted the name of the patient in his diary. On the side of the bed, the name plate was hanging with these words on it.

Name: **Mohd Qasim,**

Father's name: Abdul Rahman,

Age: **Ten years.**

[Translated from Urdu. The title of the original story was “Qasim”, which was published in the collection of short stories by Manto titled *Dhuan* in 1981]

Sadat Hasan Manto is celebrated as one of South Asia's greatest short story writer. He was a film script writer, radio drama writer and a journalist. He went against the tide and dared to speak the truth, even in the face of six court trials. His uncompromising work and his life-long

struggle to make sense of the reality were an inspiration. He was quite sure about his popularity that he knew that it was possible that Saadat Hasan would die, but Manto would live on.

Asma Rafiq is a research scholar, in the Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University. She is working on Satish Alekar, a Marathi playwright in translation. Her research area allows her to read in and work on translation. She has translated a short story “Siraj” by Saadat Hasan Manto. She can be found at asmarafiq507@gmail.com.

How to Overcome a Bad Day!

Kala Sajeevan

[Translated by Dr. Nithya Mariam John]

Meditate in front of the mirror.
Let the bright red sari flow down your body.
Line your eye, as thick as possible,
and make bigger the *bindhi* on your forehead.
Redden your lips with an unending hum.
Laugh pleasantly,
so much so that even the strangers wonder at your pleasures.

Stamp on the woman who laments, raves, and pulls out her hair,
at least until that evening,
when she will rise again.

Affirm at least a hundred times to yourself that the day is beautiful.
Stay strong until the sunlight recedes.
In the end, here she comes.

Can't shield any longer.
Let her cry.
Let her kill and eat me up,
pulling my hairs,
banging my head on the wall.

The best time to bury a dead body
is at night.

[Translated from the collection titled *Gypsy-Girl* by Kala Sajeevan)

Dr. Kala Sajeevan is Assistant Professor in the Department of Malayalam at Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, Kerala. She is a well-known poet on and off social media. Kala was awarded the 2020 Award for Women Poets instituted by Indian Truth, for her collection of poems titled *Gypsy Pennu* which can roughly translated as *Gypsy-Girl*.

Dr. Nithya Mariam John is a poet, translator, editor and teacher. Apart from her three short collections of poems titled *Ruminations and Reflections: A Pinch of Poetry & Perspectives*, *Bleats and Roars* and *Poetry Soup*, her scribbles have been housed in *Sahitya Akademi Indian*

Literature, The Alipore Post, Borderless, gulmohar quarterly, Hyderabad Literature Festival-Khabar, Muse India, The Samyuktha Poetry, Ink-Kochi and Malayalam Literature Survey, Usawa Literary Review and upcoming in *DoubleSpeak*. She has translated Anju Sajith's novel and upcoming movie, *The Unfinished Masterpiece*. Shahina EK, Unni R, R Sangeetha, Anna Joy and Gracy are a few Malayalam short story writers and poets whom she has translated for magazines and journals. She edited *Pen-ink* (a collection of poems) and *Vaidehiyude Cherukathakal* (a collection of stories). When not writing and reading, she loves to converse with her beloved students at the Department of English, BCM College, Kottayam, Kerala, from whom she learns a lot. Email: nithyamariam@gmail.com