

REVIEW

Translating the Translator

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***Premchand in World Languages: Translation, Reception and Cinematic Representations*, edited by M. Asaduddin, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 284.**

The burden of being Premchand is a post-colonial condition. To argue that in the world outside India, particularly in the West, Premchand has, together with Kalidas and Rabindranath Tagore, shouldered the weight of being a true exemplar of Indian literature and a prophet of Indian ethos, may not be too audacious an assertion. But prophecy, practiced as an art, appears slippery when compared to a rather simpler act of writing. The latter does not always come with expectations of righteousness, certitude, precision or even futuristic visualisations. Maybe, during his own lifetime, Premchand did not experience much encumbrance in being the *upanyas samrat* or the sovereign of Hindi novel writing. After all, this was how he chose to advertise himself through the pages of his literary monthly *Hans*. And at any rate, this must have been far more bearable, maybe a cause for indulgence too, when compared to the near-remorseless scrutiny which the prophet has been subjected to in the decades following independence. For his alleged “insensitivity” portrayal of Dalits and women, his writings have been reviled and rejected by several Dalit and feminist scholars. Others have questioned his shift from Urdu to Hindi. To them he too is responsible for the contemporary plight of Urdu, the narrative of “Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan” and the cultural chauvinism associated with it.

It may be worthwhile asking as to what has led to this post-colonial condition. Factors such as circumstances surrounding India’s independence, questions of communalism expressed often as Hindu-Urdu conflict and the ascendancy of feminist and Dalit discourses

in social sciences, to name a few, have provided frameworks for Premchand's national and international reappraisal. By focussing primarily on the practice of translation, cinematic adaptation and by tracing the trajectories of inter-cultural literary exchange, the essays collected in the volume under review here, *Premchand in World Languages: Translation, Reception and Cinematic Representations* attempts to take the debate beyond the aforementioned issues and problematizes several easy generalizations. These essays underscore the fact that a progressive substitution of Indology with departments dedicated to South Asian studies and a growing interest in modern Indian languages have added to global interest in Premchand. As Gruzel Strelkova points out in "Premchand in Russian: Translation, Reception and Adaptation", the earliest Ukrainian translation of the author was undertaken by a scholar who was responsible for introducing "studies of contemporary Indian philology in place of classical Indian studies." This is also true of the Spanish and the German translations of Premchand, as Sonya Saurabhi Gupta and Christina Oesterheld appear to suggest in their essays titled "Beyond Orientalism: Premchand in Spanish Translation" and "Premchand in German Language: Texts, Paratexts and Translations" respectively. Premchand's translations in world languages mirror transnational historical and cultural traffic as well as the dynamic character of diplomatic and economic ties between India and other countries of the world. This can be best illustrated by examining the idea of translation in the context of Indo-Soviet ties. During the nationalist movement, many including Gandhi and Premchand drew inspiration from the Russian revolution and the cultural ethos which fermented it. Gandhi's dialogue with Tolstoy and Premchand's translation of his stories as *Tolstoy Ki Kahaniya* bear testimony to India's romance with the Soviet. This got further reinforced with the rise of socialist tendencies in the Congress, ascendancy of the communist party of India and after independence, during the regime of Jawaharlal Nehru. People of the Soviet reciprocated by embracing Raj Kapoor films and the works of Premchand. However, with the dissolution of the USSR and on account of India's emergent closeness to the US and Europe, this position appears to have changed significantly. As Strelkova points out, a 1989 translation of Premchand's *Rangbhoomi* and eleven of his stories, which was edited by E.P Chelyshev, may be regarded as "the last example of Indo-Russian friendship at the state level. After the collapse of USSR, unfortunately, there was practically no interest in modern and contemporary Indian literature." In other parts of the world, by contrast, 1990's economic liberalization in

India generated an interest in contemporary Indian literature and culture: an engagement which could move beyond Indology and orientalism. As Gupta suggests in her essay, majority of the Spanish translations of modern Indian writers appeared in the decades following 1990s.

The volume succeeds in opening up a nuanced enquiry into the various dimensions of translation and its challenges, particularly when studied in the context Premchand and his reception. While bilingualism as a skill is the common enabler in translations of Premchand, translations by Premchand, Premchand's theory of translation etc., his felicity in both Urdu and Hindi leads to a set of difficulties. For someone who launched his literary career as an Urdu author and subsequently went on to translate his own works in Hindi till he could establish himself as the Hindi *uḥpanyas samrat*, the choice of an "Ur-text" is a particularly perplexing one. As Harish Trivedi points out in his essay "Premchand in English: One Translation, Two Originals", "We thus have not one Premchand to translate, but two, or more accurately, one of the two, for nearly all of his works are available in both Urdu and Hindi, in editions which are far from identical." The variations between the two versions, most of which are a result of Premchand's own doings, resist easy generalization and cannot be simplified as a consequence of Hindi-Urdu binary. Further, they also undermine the assumption that this linguistic binary is nothing more than a political smoke screen which tends to obfuscate the reality that fundamentally Hindi and Urdu are identical except that they are written in two different scripts. Thus, as the editor suggests in his introduction, all true translations of Premchand must acknowledge the existence of two originals. In other words, all translators and scholars of Premchand must be perfectly trilingual. Unfortunately, with the increasing disappearance of Urdu from academic and social spaces in India, this has become a particularly daunting task. The way out, as Trivedi proposes, lies in developing a Hindi-Urdu variorum edition with the Urdu variants of unfamiliar key words given in the footnotes with a Hindi gloss.

Madhu Singh's essay *Translation As New Aesthetic: Premchand's translation of Shad-e-Tar and European Modernism* and Avadhesh Kumar Singh's *Premchand On/In Translation* draw attention to Premchand's theory of translation—an important aspect of his oeuvre which is often elided in most studies. Through forums such as Bharatiya Sahitya Sangatha, of which *Hans* became the mouthpiece in October 1935, and the Progressive Writers' Association, to which he delivered the presidential address in 1936, Premchand aspired

for linguistic and literary integration of India. If nationalist concern laced with sharp social commentary was to be the dominant mood of national literature, Hindustani was to be the favoured medium. This was particularly true of the post-1930-Premchand who launched his literary journal *Hans* with an avowed objective of supporting Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement. However, sustaining literary traffic by sampling articles every month and getting them translated, with fidelity to the original, would have been an overwhelming task for a periodical with severe financial limitations. To overcome this difficulty, instead of *anuwaad*, the terms that Premchand uses for translation are *marmanuwaad* and *rupantar*. Compared to the word *anuwaad*, which implies translation in a general sense, *marma* stands for essence and *rupa* connotes form. Perhaps it may not be too far-fetched to argue that Premchand's persistent use of the term *marmanuwad* [translation of essence] and *rupantar* [changing form] seems to suggest that the other source languages have little utility beyond the extent to which they contribute to the evolution of national consciousness in regions. Bypassing stylistic issues in translation through *rupantar* and prioritisation of *essence* over language lends itself to the hypotheses that what truly mattered to Premchand were expressions or ideas that could be hypostatized as national, and the availability of these ideas in Hindustani. However, as Singh points out, he managed to sidestep Hindi-Urdu conflict as "he was not a victim of linguistic fanaticism...he fought against it throughout his life, even within Hindi, for there was a concerted effort within his lifetime to Sanskritise Hindi...he advocated the golden mean... and practiced it too in the form of Hindustani." On the question of Premchand's rendering of caste too, the volume brings out readings which are enabled by translations and adaptations and which appear to contradict each other. The concerns with Premchand's portrayal of the so called lower caste characters, which is a cause of resentment among Dalit scholars, often appear glossed over or erased in his translations in world languages. To the Indian state, by contrast, as Nishat Haider argues in her essay "In quest of a comparative poetics: a study of *Sadgati*", Premchand was a chronicler of Dalit concerns. Acting on this belief, and on the assumption that due to budgetary concerns Dalit issues have not been adequately represented in cinema, the government commissioned Satyajit Ray to direct a film of his story *Sadagati*.

The volume, even as it deals with two Hindi cinematic adaptations of Premchand, both by Satyajit Ray, and examines in some details the numerous factors which determined sampling and translations

of Premchand in global languages, circumvents the questions of reading translation of Premchand in India languages, and the politics of selection therein. This lacunae, it may be argued, is common to both Premchand's theory of translation as well as the present volume.