

Difficulties in Translating Lalon

Md. Muhasin Uddin¹

(Lalon's songs have been widely translated in English by distinguished persons like Abu Rushd, Brother James and a few others. They have tried to make a sense-for-sense translation providing English cultural parallels for the Bangla expressions. But Lalon's songs strongly resist such attempt of translators as these songs are marked by a rich Bengali cultural overtone and at the same time by an illuminative philosophy of Baul doctrine. This essay aims to show in a small scale what has happened to the translation as a result of this resistance.)

It has long been a debate whether the guiding principle for translation should be 'word-for-word' or 'sense-for sense'. Most scholars of translation have, however, supported the 'sense-for-sense' view. Introducing his own translation of Aeschines and Demosthenes, Cicero, the Roman poet and philosopher, also said clearly that his translation was on the principle of 'sense-for sense'. 'I did not translate them as an interpreter, but as an orator, keeping the same ideas and forms, or as one might say, the 'figures' of thought, but in language which conforms to our usage', wrote Cicero (qtd in Munday 19). This widely supported view of sense-for-sense translation faces its most tremendous problem while looking for a sense equivalent in the target language.

The problem is a making of lots of factors. A very important one among those factors is the cultural overtone attaching to the idioms and expressions which constitute the sense units in the source text. In their connotation most of the idioms and words of poetic expressions in any language involve touches of a number of cultural issues and objects. All of those cultural issues and objects

¹ Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Jatiya Kabi Nazrul Islam University

have significant contribution to the sense that the idioms or the words are intended to hold or arouse. The difference between the source language and the target language inevitably involves a remarkable difference between the two cultures associated with the two languages. As a result, the available sense equivalents of the idioms or words of these two languages are bound to face unbridgeable gap of differences in respect of the cultural issues and objects associated with the idioms and words concerned. In translation, target texts are cursed by this limitation. While translating hardly any sense equivalent is possible to find out in the target language which contains all the touches of association with the cultural issues and objects that the respective idiom or word enjoy in the source language.

The limitation throws a challenge to the translator. The translator's success counts it importantly how far he has proved his worth to bridge up the gap between the source language and the target language in terms of cultural associations with the words. Naturally he is a worthy translator who can keep the maximum level of cultural overtone of expressions of the source language intact in the target language. So it is a test for the translator. We would like to apply the test in Lalon's translation by Professor Abu Rushd of Bangladesh in order to see how successful Abu Rushd was in maintaining cultural overtones of Lalon's expressions in the translation. The test will take as its basis a number of selected idioms and expressions conspicuously charged with cultural overtone or associations. Those idioms of the source text will be compared with their equivalents of the target text and the comparison will show whether and to what extent the target text reflects the cultural overtone of the source text. If it is found that the cultural overtone of ST (Source Text) is not satisfactorily carried down to TT (Target Text), we will try to explore the causes and factors behind the failure and will try to suggest what to do for a better maintenance of the cultural overtone in translation of Lalon and other authors like Lalon.

Abu Rushd has furnished seventy six songs in his book tilted Songs of Lalon Shah first published by Bangla Academy in 1964. The original Bangla text and the translated version have been put side by side in the book. This arrangement of the original and the translation informs us which of the various Bangla versions (Source Texts) have been used here for translation (Target Text). It also facilitates an easy comparison between the Source Text (ST) and the Target Text (TT) in order that we can measure the translator's success to produce the equivalence effect in terms of cultural overtone between ST and TT .

Let us begin with the first song of the book 'You are the Lord, Allah - - -'. The third line of ST reads 'রাখ মার হাত তোমার তাইতে তোমায় ডাকি আমি' which is translated as 'You touch me with your hand and I call out your name'. The Bangla phrase রাখ মার bears an idiomatic sense meaning 'to save or to kill' which is cleanly washed off from the translation. The phrase রাখ মার has no part in the translation. At the same time the next phrase হাত তোমার suggests one's power of subjugation over others and this sense is similarly ignored in the translation. 'রাখ মার' and 'হাত তোমার'- these two phrases together form an expression from reflecting a sense completely derived from the cultural reality of Bengal. The phrases together imply that God resembles the great feudal lords in His power of saving or killing (রাখ মার হাত তোমার) and only considering this power of God the speaker in the song is calling out God's name in awe and honour as the landless and helpless multitudes of any feudal or imperialized society are used to paying honour to their feudal lords.

It is certainly a contribution of cultural factors that the feudal power of saving and killing is attributed to God. The religions in which the concept of hell and heaven is essential (unlike Buddhism etc.) generally speak of God or gods

possessing fearful attributes of punishment and cruelty. Observation shows that those religions are mostly associated with societies in which people know their superiors as agents of penalty, punishment and sometimes as a kind pardoner and all this is evidently a common feature of a feudal society. The society of Bengal has experienced this feature as an abiding cultural reality since the history of Aryan colonisation till now. During the long periods of imperialistic regimes of the Aryans, Turks, Mughals or the English, the feudal native lords and the imperialistic rulers both enjoyed abundance of awe and honour from the landless and helpless multitudes. This long legacy of the feudal domination in all probability has for centuries embedded in these multitudes a subconscious inclination to establish a semblance between Lord of the above world and lords of this world. The language of these multitudes is then bound to be an expression of this attitude to their God. This is how the language Bangla has presumably absorbed the public view about God in its expression ৱাখ মার হাত তোমার which is then certainly mistranslated as ‘you touch me with your hand’. This translation has shown sheer disregard to the culture-endowed sense of the Bangla expression of the Source Text.

However the translated phrase involves elements of a different culture. It involves and assimilates the Christian culture of taking God as the benevolent Father with all affections for children, the mankind. This merciful and indulgent Christian God could duly be expected to touch with His hand the singer, the poet. But a translation to support this implication demands a Christian identity of the poet which can by no means be established in context of Lalon and his songs. So the translation is unacceptable. But surprisingly enough the translation pays due honour to the individual words of the Source Text. The words ৱাখ and মার individually find their equivalent in the word ‘touch’, and similarly হাত তোমার is properly translated as ‘your hand’. This word-for-word

translation meets sheer failure only because the cultural sense predominates in the actual meaning of the phrase whereas that predominant cultural sense is unwisely disregarded by the translator.

Professor Abu Rushd time and again brings into his translation things associated to the culture of the Target Language, unhesitatingly sacrificing the profound suggestions of the Source Language culture. In the same song ‘You are the Lord- - -’ the eighth line stands for the lines of ST- তার মনে সুমতি দিলে, / কুমতি তার চলে গেল। The translation reads ‘You gave him the light of reason and showed him the path of truth’. Obvious that সুমতি is translated as ‘light of reason’. But we know in our culture সুমতি conceptually refers to an ethical stand that conforms to the socially accepted forms of propriety or uprightness, whereas the phrase ‘light of reason’, due to its association with European Renaissance, refers to a philosophical awareness and ability to evaluate things. The phrase ‘light of reason’ in TT thus fails to convey the cultural overtone of the Source Text, rather creates a third sense associated to the culture of the Source Language (SL).

In the second song of the book there occurs a sentence ‘Several times in around/ a man is born’ which stands for the Bangla expression কয়বার যেন ঘুরিফিরি/ পেয়ে এলে মানবপুরি occurring in ST. This Bangla expression culturally refers to the belief in Metempsychosis of the Hindu traditions which says that a soul needs to be purified through crores of birth as non-humans in order to reach the ultimate purification through the blessed birth as a human being. It is remarkable that this essentially Hindu belief occurs in that part or section of Lalon's songs which has been labelled by Professor Abu Taleb as 'Hamd and Na't' (James vi). This labelling clearly testifies to the Islamic fervour of the songs and their nature of sincere devotion to Allah and it usually negates any possibility of

assimilating Hindu belief or concepts in these. But Lalon has done it. Lalon has assimilated and absorbed things from the basic creed of Hinduism and has woven those things in the texture of his Hamd for Allah. This shows how the doctrine of Baul can combine the two religious communities together in a single platform of cultural unification.

This message underlying the simple expression কয়বার যেন ঘুরিফিরি/ পেয়ে এলে মানবপুরি is thus missed in the translation 'Several times in around/ a man is born'. Moreover the phrase 'to be in around' is not seen enjoying any currency in the usage of English, neither cultural nor social. At least, such usage is not recorded in the recent editions Oxford or Cambridge Advanced Learner's English Dictionaries. Again in English this phrase has no connection to any concept of Metempsychosis and soul's journey of purification through recurrence of birth. All this shows the shortcoming of the expression of TT in question regarding its worth in conveying the cultural sense of ST.

The fifth song starts with a similar instance of failure in conveying the cultural sense of ST. The first two lines of ST reads মদিনায় রাতুল নামে কে এলো ভাই ।।/ কায়াধারী হয়ে কেন তার ছায়া নাই and they are translatd as 'In Medina once arrived a man called as Mohammad/ Although a mortal, still peerless. The translation shows a naive attempt of conveying the sense of the prophet's divine uniqueness underlying the expression in question in ST through a rather inappropriate word 'peerless'. The expression কায়াধারী হয়ে কেন তার ছায়া নাই embodies a traditional belief of millions of Bangalee folks that the body of the prophet Mohammad (sm) cast no shadow while walking or standing in the sun. This unreal feature of the prophet's personality still exists in the folk belief as a proof of his being the prophet and therefore it is important for the text to qualify as a cultural document. It is also important for the doctrine of Baul itself because it leaves

here evidence that this doctrine glorifies mind (symbolically presented as Man of the heart) over matter or the body by laying emphasis upon the belief of the folk more than the scientific reality. But the translation with the word 'peerless' does not show any respect to this cultural suggestions of ST. Contrarily, the word 'peerless' shows its cultural connection to the European history of feudalism as the word peer is etymologically associated with the position of a lord in the feudal hierarchy. The 'sense-for-sense' translation thus here fails to keep the cultural meaning and suggestions of the Source Text.

The sense-for-sense translation sometimes tends to transfer one cultural phenomenon of one community to a similar phenomenon of the community to which the target language belongs. One example can be drawn from the ninth song of the book that starts with 'Come, let's all go to the Prophet's'. In the middle of the song occur the lines 'One who sees the Prophet never feels any thirst/ Everflowing in the mind is a stream of manna'. They stand for these lines of ST নবীকে সাক্ষাৎ হলে তার নাই।/ বহে আনন্দ অমৃত নদী সতত মনে।। The Bangla expression অমৃত নদী culturally alludes to the Hindu legend that says about a divine drink with the power of immortalisation. But the word 'stream of manna' in TT alludes to the Christian legend of divine victuals bestowed for the people of Moses so that they could merely subsist. This difference in the cultural suggestions between the words of ST and TT accounts for the failure of TT to represent the cultural senses and suggestions associated with the Source Text.

In many places Professor Abu Rushd has translated the word সাই, a derivative of the word স্বামী, as friend, not as husband or Lord. An example may be cited from the 12th song of the book in which 'The constant friend' stands as the translation for the Bangla phrase অনন্ড সাই। Instead of translation, Brother James has just transliterated it as *Sain* (James vi). The change of the word স্বামী into সাই has

among its other effects a mutation of the gender sense of the word স্বামী and this mutation is necessary for the Baul doctrine because the Bauls never discriminate between sexes. The Bauls always uphold the gender equity through angry utterances like বামন চিনি পৈতার প্রমাণ/ বামনী চিনি কি করে? or সুন্নত দিলে হয় মুসলমান/ নারী লোকের কি হয় বিধান? As a translation for সাঁই the word friend keeps this gender-neutrality in TT but fails to capture the sense of lordliness and propheticness that the word সাঁই signifies in the Baul usage. Its proves the propriety of James' act of transliteration and at the same time shows the extent of inappropriateness of Mr. Rushd's translation.

The translator needed to be very circumspect in finding equivalent for words like these which carry the concepts of the school of Bauls. But Mr Rushd has shown rather carelessness in many cases. In the thirteenth song of the book the Bangla expression অচিন মানুষ অচিন শহর duly involves the metaphysical knowledge of the Bauls called Atta-tatta. Lalon's terms to connect us to this atta-tatta commonly involve the phrases অচিন পাখি (Rushd 37), প্রাণ পাখি (Rushd 43), পাখি (Rushd 41), অচিন মানুষ, এবং অচিন শহর (Rushd 29)। So it could be taken as an imperative that following the manner of the Source Text these terms will also be translated along the same string of words. The word অচিন could be translated in the same word either 'alien' or 'strange' or a third one. However, Mr Rushd has not maintained that sameness in his choice of words. অচিন মানুষ has been translated as 'alien people' whereas অচিন শহর as 'strange cities' (Rushd 28) and again অচিন পাখি as 'the strange bird' (Rushd 36).

There are some instances which even tell of the translator's weakness or at least lack of seriousness to grasp the exact meaning of the Source Text. This may be however a result of ignoring or not knowing the cultural and etymological factors wrapping around the respective word or expression. We see an instance

in the nineteenth song of the book. ST reads লালন বলে, পর/ বলতে পরওয়ার, / সে কেমন রূপ, আমি কি রূপ রে ।। for which the translation is 'Lalon may call one an alien,/ One hard to know/ What is his complexion, what is mine?' It is clear that the punctuation of ST has been ignored in the translation causing a misinterpretation. In ST বলে is a reporting verb which reports the rest of the sentence, whereas the translation has treated it as a transitive verb with a single object পর। Consequently an almost independent meaning unit পর/ বলতে পরওয়ার has found no expression in TT. But it is noticeable that the key words পর and পরওয়ার both here attack the concept of Atta-tatta and therefore they are crucially important for the text. Again the word পরওয়ার with its Persian origin and its legacy of the Persian cultural hegemony possesses a usual reference to God whom the Bauls call by various names মনের মানুষ, অচিন পাখি etc. So disregard to such an important word or expression is quite untenable and we have shown that possibly the translator's weakness in tracing the etymological and cultural associations of the word has worked behind this presumably unwilling disregard.

We have so far shown a number of instances in which, according to our judgement, Abu Rushd has failed to find out proper sense equivalents in the Target Language specially in terms of cultural overtone of the words or expressions in question. However this does not undermine the value of his translation. Abu Rushd was an academic and a good translator, no doubt. It is actually the difficulty of the job he had undertaken that ususally defies any amount of scholarly effort to discharge the job successfully. We will now try to identify the factors that contribute to this difficulty and to suggest some possible ways to cope with the situation.

It is widely agreed that the type or nature of a text determines the way to translate it. In this regard texts are usually grouped into three types based on the three functions of language- expressive, informative and vocative (Rahman 11). This group division is obviously on the basis of the predomination of these three aspects, not on an exclusive or absolute feature, because there can be hardly any text absolutely expressive, informative or vocative. When the language of a text is predominantly expressive the translator feels quite free to find out the necessary sense-equivalents in the Target Language as s/he feels bound by only one condition- to keep the expressive quality of ST intact- and free from the other two. Poems are commonly expressive texts and translators of poems need to take seriously only the profundity and penetration of the poetic expression. This feature of poetry allows the translator to move far away from the word-references of ST causing little damage to the aesthetic splendours of the poem in question. An example can be drawn from the translation of T. S. Eliot's poem 'Gerontion' by Vishnu De (English spelling of the name not checked). A part of the poem reads:

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas
To be eaten, to be dividd, to be drunk
Among whispers; by Mr Silvero
With caressing hands, at Limoges
Who walked all night in the next room;
By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians:
By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark oom
Shifting the candles; Fraulein von Kulp
who turned in the hall, one hand on the door.
Vacant shuttles
Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,
An old man in a draughty house
Under a windy knob

This is how Vishnu De translates it-

পচা ভাদ্রে কচু শাক, কালোজাম, মোহিনী ধুতুরা
চর্ব, চোষ্য, বিভাজ্য ও পেয়
গোপন ফিসফাসে, তাই জোটে হাতিলাল মেহতা
কোমল পেলব হাত, আহমেদাবাদে যেবা
পায়চারী করেছিল সারা রাত পাশের কামরায়ঃ
জোটে তাই কালাচাঁদ থাণোলিয়া বেলোয়ারি
ঝাড়ের তলায়,
মুখজ্জে গৃহিনী জোটে অন্ধকার ঘরে
বাতি নড়ে আগে পরে, পরে আর আগে; জোটে
মিস্টার তরফদার বেলেঘাটা হলের চৌকাঠে,
এক হাত দ্বারে

শূন্য চরকাণ্ডলি
হাওয়া বোনে পাকে পাকে বন্য হাওয়ায়
আমার তো দল নেই ভূত প্রেত হীন
এক বুড়ো লোক, ফুটোফাটা ঘরে
রোডো দরজায় ।

(qtd in Chowdhury 4-5)

The difference between the two above-quoted texts in terms of their verbal references is simply surprising. At the same time the sameness of the expression with the profundity and penetration of the Source Text achieved in the Target Text is also amazing. But such achievement in translation is not possible when the text is not marked by the predominance of a single force of the three. If the text is symmetrically balanced by any two or the three of the forces, the translator loses all freedom in his choice of sense-equivalents. In this precarious situation he finds that if the chosen equivalent bears the *expressive sense* of ST

it bears little touch of the *informative* or the *vocative sense*. The translator's task is then to adopt the golden mean to combine all the two or three forces working symmetrically in the text. But that golden mean is not easy to achieve.

Lalon's songs are one mentionable example of such difficult text incorporating at least two of the language-functions with their symmetric predominance. The *expressive sense* of these songs are their poetical quality to delight and impress the listeners. Simultaneously their *informative sense* is equally strong to give a full concept of the Baul doctrine. Like religious verses, these songs provide devotional pleasure, meditative enlightenment, concept of a philosophical doctrine and many more *expressive* and *informative* things like these, and all these are intellectually and aesthetically embedded in the combined cultural framework of socio-religious communities of a large geographical area. Consequently the translator's phrases of sense-equivalence in the Target Language often find the senses of the Source Text too many to be held in themselves. The outcome is that the translator sacrifices the *expressive* sense for the *informative*, or sacrifices the *informative* sense in order to keep the *expressive* sense.

We think this big hurdle in translating Lalon could be overcome through the practice of transliteration in a few crucial cases. Transliteration is hardly theorised in translation studies but has held currency in translation for centuries. If we look into the books of Indian philosophy lots of transliterated words like *purushha*, *prakriti*, *jnana*, *nirvana*, *maya* etc. will confirm us that no translation is appropriate for these words. Similarly we find many Greek or Roman books translated in English holding innumerable words just transliterated in the target text. The trend even gave rise to the debate of *inkhorn* terms in the renaissance England in which scholars like Dryden sided with the practice of *inkhorn* terms, that is, with the practice of transliteration (Baugh 215).

Though not supported by any well established theory, transliteration has shown its long-proven worth in translation of the holy books of Islam, especially the Quran. Observation shows that a system of Islamic education, that originated in India with the Deoband movement against the English colonization, maintains a curriculum including lots of books either written in Urdu or translated in Urdu. The curriculum of this wing of Islamic education is followed in many institutions in countries across India including South Africa, Malaysia and even England. In the books of this curriculum Arabic and Persian are used in Urdu so abundantly and unhesitantly that while translating Arabic books in Urdu one faces little problem in finding sense equivalents. The consequence is two fold benefits: the Target Language gets enriched in vocabulary, and the contents and cultural overtones of the Source Language are transported to the Target Language unhurried. If this technique had been maintained to convey the cultural contents and overtones and in certain crucial cases by transliterating words in Rushd's translation of Lalon, we think, many of the above-shown problems in finding proper sense equivalents could have been avoided. In that case transliterated expressions like *Sain*, *Achin Pakhi*, *Achin Pur*, *Manabpuri*, *Guru* and many others might remain the same in TT to expand the cultural and semantic domain over that of the target language. It would mean a healthy exchange in culture, an enrichment of a language and above all a reliable and enjoyable translation.

Works Cited

Baugh, Albert C. A History of the English Language. London: Routledge, 2000.

Chowdhury, Kabir. “প্রসঙ্গ অনুবাদ”. Translation Theory and Practice. Ed. Niaz Zaman. Dhaka: Academic Press and Publishers Limited, 2004. 4-8.

James, Brother. Songs of Lalon. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1987.

Munday, Jeremy. Introducing Translation Studies. London: Routledge, 2003.

Rahman, Arifa. "The Communicative Value of Translation." Translation Theory and Practice. Ed. Niaz Zaman. Dhaka: Academic Press and Publishers Limited, 2004. 9-19.

Rushd, Abu. Songs of Lalon Shah. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1991.