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Challenges in Translating Faiz Ahmad Faiz into English: A Comparative Study of Agha Shahid Ali and Shiv K. Kumar

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Abstract. This paper examines the challenges involved in translating the poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz into English by Agha Shahid Ali and Shiv K. Kumar. Through a close comparative analysis of select poems, the study explores how each translator negotiates linguistic, cultural, and ideological elements embedded in Faiz's poetry. The paper explores differences in translation strategies, including literal versus interpretive rendering, preservation of poetic form, and handling of socio-political nuances. Drawing on translation theories such as linguistic theories, cultural theories, domestication, and foreignization, the study argues that each translator constructs a distinct version of Faiz, thereby reshaping his poetic voice for different readerships. The analysis highlights the complexities of translating Urdu poetry into English and contributes to ongoing debates in translation studies and Urdu literary criticism.

Keywords. Translation, Urdu poetry, literary translation, culture, domestication, foreignization

Introduction

Faiz Ahmad Faiz stands as one of the most prominent poets in modern Urdu literature, whose poetry combines romantic lyricism with a strong commitment to social and political consciousness. He was born on 13 February, 1911, and died on 20 November, 1984, in Lahore, Pakistan. His poetry blends the classical tradition of the ghazal with a powerful engagement with themes of love, resistance, exile, and social justice. In addition to his literary background, Faiz was an army officer, a newspaper journalist, a member of a trade union, and a broadcaster on

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radio and television. He hails from a literary family that is well-known for its academic achievements. He created an aesthetically rich and politically powerful poetical voice in the backdrop of colonialism, the Progressive Writer's Movement, and the post-partition realities. Gopi Chand Narang compliments him as "Faiz Ahmad Faiz is the most significant poet of Urdu, and an understanding of contemporary Urdu poetry is not complete without a recognition of the importance of his work" (23). His poetry continues to inspire the readers all across the world, not only for its lyrical beauty but also for its enduring relevance in the contexts of oppression and human struggle.

Translation of literary texts plays an important role in transferring cross-cultural communication, especially in multilingual countries like India. Literary translation requires the translator's knowledge of both the source and target languages, as well as a comprehension of both the cultures and literary sensibility. Anisur Rahman believes that "a literary piece of writing is a phenomenon of veritable significance." It is a complex construct of cultural significations, political connotations, and historical implications" (In Translation 25). It is through translation that a poet can gain international recognition; however, this process also raises important issues about faithfulness, cultural transfer, and transformation of poetic meaning. Each translator can present his/her own point of view and reflect his/her choice, priorities, and literary sensibilities, resulting in multiple versions of the same poetic text.

Translating Faiz Ahmad Faiz into English is a rich field of study that has attracted the attention of many translators across the world. These translators have followed many strategies and techniques to translate Faiz into English. Among the major translators who have rendered Faiz's poetry into English, Agha Shahid Ali and Shiv K. Kumar represent two distinct yet influential approaches. Ali, being himself a poet, recreates Faiz in a highly lyrical and privileging aesthetic effect and emotional resonance. Translating Faiz into English was an important decision for him. He aimed to make a significant contribution to enriching the literary and cultural norms of the Urdu language. He takes a liberty for the sake of making his translation more idiomatic. In contrast, Shiv K. Kumar adopts a comparatively restrained and text-oriented approach, seeking to preserve the structural, cultural, and semantic integrity of the source text. His effort in translating Faiz is noteworthy, which provides readers to access Faiz easily. These differing translation practices raise important questions about fidelity, interpretation, and the transformation of poetic voice across languages.

The theoretical background of this study draws on the prominent translation theorists such as Lawrence Venuti and Eugene Nida. Venuti's strategies like domestication and foreignization are particularly relevant in examining whether the translators retain the cultural words of the source text or adapt it to the expectations of the target audience. According to Venuti, domestication refers to "...an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bring the back home" (20), while foreignization is "...an ethnodeviant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (Venuti 20). Generally speaking, domestication seeks to make the text more accessible and familiar, often at the cost of cultural specificity, to reduce the strangeness of the foreign text for readers of the target language, whereas foreignization refers to the production of a target text that purposefully breaches target conventions by maintaining part of the foreignness of the original. To domesticate a text, a translator must adapt its cultural features to the target culture so that the readers of the target text can understand the translation easily and fluently. As with foreignization, a translator preserves a text's cultural elements for the target culture. By introducing the cultural nuances of the source material, it enriches the culture of the target audience. A translator uses various techniques, such as footnotes, endnotes, explanations, and glossaries.

Eugene Nida's contribution to translation studies cannot be ignored. He takes a more systematic approach to examining the theoretical concepts. His formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence are important because they are designed to reveal the form and content of the original message. He says that "formal equivalence (or F-E) translation is basically source-oriented; that is designed to reveal as much as possible of the form and content of the original message" (165) and dynamic equivalence is "... the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message" (166).

Within this context, the present study conducts a comparative analysis of two poems of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, translated by Agha Shahid Ali and Shiv K. Kumar. By analyzing a corpus of these translations, the study focuses on how these translators negotiate issues of language, style, cultural nuances, and ideological expression. The scope of the present study is limited to a close textual analysis of the select translations, with the goal of highlighting variations in translation strategies and their implications for interpreting Faiz's poetic voice in English.

Discussion

The poem *mujh se pahlī sī mohabbat mirī mahbūb na maañg* by Faiz Ahmad Faiz is one of the most celebrated examples of modern Urdu poetry in which personal love has transformed into social consciousness. The poem talks about the lover's longing for the romantic and love-filled times of the past that they can still remember in their hearts. The poet is pleading to his beloved not to provoke or expect from him the same level of emotion, love, and intensity that he once had for her. The poem opens as

*mujh se pahlī sī mohabbat mirī mahbūb na maañg
maiñ ne samjhā thā ki tū hai to darakhshāñ hai hayāt
terā ḡham hai to ḡham-e-dahr kā jhagḌā kyā hai
terī sūrat se hai aalam meiñ bahāroñ ko sabāt
terī āñkhoñ ke sivā duniyā meiñ rakkhā kyā hai*

Agha Shahid Ali translates it as:

That which then was ours, my love,
Don't ask me for that love again.
The world then was gold, burnished with light---
and only because of you. That's what I had believed.
How could one weep for sorrows other than yours?
How could one have any sorrow but the one you gave?
So what were these protests, these rumors of injustice?
A glimpse of your face was evidence of springtime (trans. Ali 8).

Shiv K. Kumar translates this couplet as:

Ask me not for that old fervor, my love.
I had then imagined
that your love would spark off my being
counterpoise the giant agony of the world—
that your beauty would bring every spring to eternal blossom
(trans.Kumar 20).

The key words in the source text are *hayāt*, *darakhshāñ*, *ḡham*, *ḡham-e-dahr*, *jhagḌā*, *sūrat*, *aalam*, *bahāroñ* and *sabāt*, which justify Faiz's attempt to evoke a deep connection towards his beloved. All these words carry a loaded meaning and need to analyze and discuss. The literal meaning of the first word, *hayāt*, as per the *Feroz-ul-Lughat Urdu* dictionary means, “*Zindagī*”, “*Rūḥ*”, (577), which denote a “life” or “soul” in English. Agha Shahid Ali has transcreated the word *hayāt* as “world.” He has not followed the literal approach in which he modifies

its sense and extends its meaning. Shiv K. Kumar has translated the word *hayāt* as “being” which is close to the source word. Both the translators have used a distinct approach to reach out to the source text as per their own understanding, which gives a notion that the Urdu language has a beauty of multiple meanings. Similarly, in the second example, the word *jhagḌā* again poses a problem for both the translators. The lexical meaning of the word *jhagḌā* in Urdu means “to have a disagreement over something or to quarrel. Agha Shahid Ali substitutes the word *jhagḌā* with many words and admits to taking a liberty to extend the meaning: “I took two recognizable liberties...I enlarged that one line into three lines” (*The Rebel’s Silhouette* xx). The TLT1 translator could have translated the line as “when there’s your sorrow, what is this struggle of the world?” (xx). This appears to be quite close to the original line. Despite this structural loss, Agha Shaid Ali breaks the single Urdu line into three lines as “How could one weep for the sorrows other than yours? / How could one have any sorrow but the one you gave? / So what were these protests, these rumours of injustice?” (8). This shows how much struggle he had done with the words in order to create the meaning for the target audience. Similarly, the Shiv K. Kumar substitutes the word *jhagḌā* as a counterpoise, which does not convey the intended meaning. “Counterpoise” means attaining balance, stability, or improved performance by countering or balancing one force or factor with another. Similarly, in the fourth line, Faiz Ahmad Faiz compliments his beloved as:

terī sūrat se hai aalam meñ bahāroñ ko sabāt
terī āñkhoñ ke sivā duniyā meñ rakkhā kyā hai

This couplet again poses a problem for the translators to translate appropriately. Agha Shahid Ali transcreates this couplet as “A glimpse of your face was evidence of springtime / the sky, wherever I looked, was nothing but your eyes” (trans. Ali, 15). Shiv K. Kumar translates as, “that your beauty would bring every spring to eternal blossom, and what else was there to cherish but your eyes?” (Trans. Kumar 22). The key words in this couplet are, *sūrat*, *aalam*, *sabāt* and *duniyā*. The word *sūrat*, as per the *Feroz-ul-Lughat Urdu dictionary*, means “*shakl, chehra, naqsh taṣvīr, khāka*” (866), in English means ‘shape’, ‘form’, ‘face’, ‘appearance’ and *sabāt* means “*qiyām, qarār, pāyedārī, mazbūtī, sābit-qadmī*” (436), which in English denotes ‘subsistency’, ‘durability’, ‘stability’ has been rendered as “Glimpse of face” and “evidence” by Agha Shahid, “beauty” and “eternal” by Shiv K. Kumar. There also occurs a deletion of words in translation by both the

translators. The word *aalam* has not been translated by both the translators and *duniyā* has been translated as ‘sky’ by Agah Shahid Ali and deleted by Shiv K. Kumar. Deletion in translation can have a significant impact on the meaning of the poem. If specific words in the poem are deleted by the translator, it may lead to the loss of contextual meaning in the target text. In poetry, each word carries a meaning, and it is important for the translators to translate each and every word of the source text and to justify it with the source text. According to the context, Faiz wishes to convey that in this world, the beloved’s face imparts eternity to the springtime. However, Agha Shahid Ali deviates from the source text by implying that seeing beloved’s face meant seeing the springtime, which is not the context of the line. Abdul Naseeb Khan argues that Agha Shahid’s translation of this line “vitiates the import of the source text” (70). As a result, he takes excessive liberties in expressing the source text through his own perceptions. Even Shiv K. Kumar also has not retained the words appropriately but conveys the sense of the source text.

In another example, from the same poem, Faiz says, “*khāk meñ luThDe hue, khuun meñ nahlā e hue*” (Line 13), which has been translated as “saw bodies plastered with ash, bathed in blood” by Agha Shahid Ali, “bodies smeared in dust, bathed in blood” by Shiv K. Kumar. The noun *khāk* has been translated differently in the context of the poem. The TLT1 translator creates a more horrific and frightening image by translating *khāk* into “ashes”. Shiv K. Kumar has literally translated the word *khāk* as “dust”. Hence, while translating source text, one needs to keep the atmosphere of that period in mind in which the poet has contextualized his poem. That is why; we find multiple interpretations of a single poem. Agha Shahid Ali regards the source text just as an inspiration and creates his own world of experiences. He does not care whether his translation appears strange in its images and style to the target readers. He adopts the lexical elaboration in which he moves beyond the source text while keeping the intentional relation of its meaning in consideration, leaving behind the translation of other translators aside to keep it more acknowledged with the easiness to reach the word more accurately. Shiv K. Kumar follows the literal approach.

Dil meñ ab yuun tire bhūle hue gham aate haiñ is one of the most celebrated ghazal by Faiz Ahmad Faiz, which reflects his nuanced treatment of memory, loss, and emotional afterlife. At its surface, the ghazal engages with the classical theme of remembrance in love, where the lover revisits past sorrows associated with the beloved. However,

unlike customary expressions of grief in the Urdu ghazal tradition, Faiz portrays memory not merely as pain but as a softened, almost anesthetized emotion that returns in unexpected and subtle ways. The ghazal begins as:

*Dil meñ ab yuunñ tire bhūle hue gham aate haiñ
jaise bichhDe hue kaabe meñ sanam aate haiñ
ek ik kar ke hue jaate haiñ taare raushan
merī manzil kī taraf tere qadam aate haiñ
raqs-e-mai tez karo saaz kī lai tez karo
sū-e-mai-khāna safīrān-e-haram aate haiñ (158)*

Agha Shahid Ali translates as:

The heart a desecrated temple
In it all status of you broken
Those forgotten sorrows
My memories of you return
Gods abandoned by their worshippers
One by one by one
The stars light up the sky
In step with them
Your approach me in the dark
Your final destination
Tonight increase the pace
With which the liquor is poured
Oh tell the drummer to play a breathless beat
Worshippers have abandoned the mosques
They're coming here to the wine house (trans. Ali 13).

Shiv K. Kumar translates as:

In my heart now well up your long-forgotten sorrows
As though some forsaken idol returns to the kaaba.
One by one the stars are coming alive—
Your footfalls are drawing close to my destination.
Pep up the tempo of the wine-dance let the music swell to its
crescendo—
To the tavern come the emissaries of the haram. (trans. Kumar 76).

This ghazal portrays the delicate meditation on memory, separation, and the gradual transformation of emotional pain. Faiz moves away from the intensity of immediate suffering and instead portrays a subdued, almost fading remembrance of love. The tone is introspective, where

grief returns intermittently, softened by time. The structure of the ghazal is based on five *she'rs* and the poet has maintained the music of ideas and euphony. The ghazal is full of poetic devices, like images, metaphors, similes, alliteration, symbols, and cultural words. These devices make the structure and form of the ghazal strong and challenging for the translators. Each *she'r* is followed by the rhyme and refrain, which adds the musicality in the ghazal. The rhyming words like, *gham*, *sanam*, *qadam*, *haram*, *karam*, and *kam* and the refrain such as *aate haiñ*, *aate haiñ*, have been used to impart a pleasant music in the ghazal. Both the translators fail to retain the rhyme and refrain in the target texts. They focus on the meaning rather than the form.

The opening *she'r* of the ghazal is as follows:

Dil meñ ab yuun tire bhūle hue gham aate haiñ
jaise bichhDe hue kaabe meñ sanam aate haiñ

Fiaz uses a striking metaphor: forgotten sorrows return like abandoned idols re-entering the *Kaaba*. The imagery is paradoxical and culturally dense, invoking the sacred image of *the Kaaba*. The key words in this ghazal are *Ka'ba*, *sanam*, *mai-khāna* and *safīrān-e-haram*, *Ka'ba* is a sacred structure in Islamic culture that is located at the center of the Masjid al-Haram Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is a cube-shaped building covered with a black silk and gold curtain, known as the *kiswah*. *Ka'ba* is regarded as the most sacred place in Islam and is the focal point of the annual pilgrimage, which is called Hajj (one of the five pillars of Islam). Muslims all across the world face the *Ka'ba* during their daily prayers; hence, it holds a great religious significance in Islamic tradition as the House of Allah. Agha Shahid Ali deletes the word *Ka'ba* which distorts the contextual and cultural meaning in the target text; hence, loss of meaning occurs in the target text. Shiv K. Kumar employed the strategy of foreignization, where he has retained the word as *Ka'ba* in the target text, which keeps the culture of the source text alive, but fails to explain it further in the footnote or endnote for the target readers for further understanding.

Similar loss can also be seen in another cultural word, *safīrān-e-haram*, which has been translated differently by both the translators. The word *safīrān-e-haram* is made up of two words: *safīrān*, which means an ambassador or diplomat of the highest rank, accredited as a representative from one country to another, and '*haram*' encompasses the larger sacred area surrounding the *Ka'ba*, including the Grand Mosque and its surroundings. The compound word *safīrān-e-haram* in a

broader sense might refer to an ambassador or a respected figure within the Muslim community who promotes and represents the values, teachings, and practices associated with the Masjid al-Haram (the Grand Mosque) in Mecca. Therefore, the word is loaded with religious-cultural significance. Agha Shahid Ali has applied the technique of paraphrasing, where he has explained the word *saḡīrān-e-ḥaram* instead of providing an equivalent or retained it. He transcreates it as “worshippers have abandoned the mosques,” which do not capture the appropriate meaning of the source word. His translation seems to focus on the act of worshippers instead of ambassadors and the mosque instead of the Haram. He simplifies the metaphor into a more direct statement. Thus, he fails to retain the cultural meaning of the source word. Shiv K. Kumar applies the strategy of foreignisation where he has retained the word *haram*. He translates as “emissaries of the haram” which is the appropriate equivalent of the source word. He preserves its symbolic tension and ambiguity, which is central to Faiz’s style. His translation captures the meaning effectively as intended in the source text but did not further explain the word in a footnote or endnote for target readers.

In another example, *Ṣanam* has been translated as “statues” by Agha Shahid Ali and “idols” by Shiv K. Kumar. The word *Ṣanam*, as per the *Feroz-ul-Lughat Urdu dictionary*, means “*butt, mūrtī, putlī, dilbar, pyārā, māshūq*” (866). *Ṣanam* is used in various cultures and languages, including Arabic and Urdu, often referring to an idol, object of worship, or beloved used in expressions of deep affection or admiration. In Hinduism, *Ṣanam* denotes the physical representation of a deity made up of carved stone or metal installed in temples or homes. Devotees offer prayers, flowers, respect, and other rituals to these *Ṣanam*’s as a way to connect with the divine. Therefore, the word has cultural and spiritual significance. Agha Shahid Ali provides “statues,” which in general refers to sculpted or carved representations made from various materials and emphasizes the physical form and artistic craftsmanship. His choice of translation focuses on the material aspect and artistic representation rather than the religious or spiritual context. On the contrary, Shiv K. Kumar provides “idols,” which is sacred image used for worship or devotion. His choice of translation is better which highlights the religious and devotional significance. “Idols” carries a stronger religious connotation compared to “statues”. The choice between the two translators depends on the intended context and the depth of meaning and understanding of the source text.

Similarly, *mai-khāna* occurs in the third *she’r* which has been

translated as ‘wine house’ by Agha Shahid Ali and ‘tavern’ by Shiv K. Kumar. Agha Shahid Ali follows the literal approach to this word by translating as ‘Wine-house’ which conveys the idea of a place where wine is served. Whereas Shiv K. Kumar’s translation as ‘tavern’ is more general, encompassing a broader range of alcoholic beverages and suggesting a more casual or communal setting. The choice of these translators depends on the desired level of understanding of the source text. Agha Shahid Ali prioritizes poetic recreation and readability, while as Shiv K. Kumar retains cultural and symbolic precision.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that translation is not merely a transfer of words but reconstruction of poetic experience. Agha Shaid Ali recreates Faiz for a global, contemporary readership through transcreation and adaptation, and Shiv K. Kumar maintains closer fidelity to the original’s imagery, tone and cultural depth. Consequently, both the translations produce a distinctive version of Faiz, one more interpretive and expressive, the other more faithful and restrained, which highlights the inherent plurality of translated texts.

The study sets out to examine how translation reshapes the poetic voice of Faiz Ahmad Faiz through a comparative analysis of two of his most celebrated poems, “*mujh se pahlī sī mohabbat mirī mahbūb na maañg*”. By analyzing their English translations by Agha Shahid Ali and Shiv K. Kumar, the study has demonstrated that translation is not a neutral or purely linguistic act, but a creative and interpretive process that produces multiple versions of the same poetic text.

The analysis of “*mujh se pahlī sī mohabbat mirī mahbūb na maañg*” revealed how Faiz’s movement from personal love to collective social consciousness poses a significant challenge for translators. While Agha Shahid Ali tends to expand and reimagine the poem, enhancing its lyrical and emotional appeal for a global readership, Shiv K. Kumar remains closer to the original structure and tone, preserving its ideological subtlety and cultural context. Similarly, in “*Dil meñ ab yuun tire bhūle hue gham aate haiñ*” the contrast between the two translators becomes evident in their handling of memory, metaphor and emotional restraint. Agha Shahid Ali’s translation often amplifies and explicates meaning, whereas Shiv K. Kumar retains the suggestiveness and symbolic meaning of the ghazal.

After analysis it becomes clear that the translators adopt different strategies that can be broadly understood through the lens of

domestication and foreignization. Ali's approach leans towards poetic recreation and accessibility, at times, sacrificing cultural specificity for emotional immediacy. In contrast, Kumar's translation demonstrates a greater commitment to fidelity, preserving the original imagery, ambiguity and cultural resonance of the Urdu text.

Thus, the study underscores that translating Faiz involves negotiating not only language but also culture, ideology and aesthetic form. The multiplicity of translations highlights the impossibility of a single, authoritative version, suggesting instead that each translation is a reinterpretation shaped by the translator's vision and context. In bringing Faiz to a wider audience, translators do not merely reproduce his poetry; they recreate it, ensuring its continued relevance across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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