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Resistance to Translation in Hasan Azizul Haque's novel, *Agun-Pakhi*

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In a world made smaller by the multiple avenues of communication that are available at the moment, a desire to know about cultures other than one's own has become more widespread than ever before. The demographic shift world-wide under a variety of causes has problematized the idea of 'home' by opening up possibilities of newer cultural affiliations. The contacts between races and cultures thus made possible have paved the ground for the emergence of translation as a means to cement interracial/ intercultural bonding. Without doubting the value of this cultural exchange, one, however, feels that the translational practices, as things stand today, leave much to be desired. Leaving aside the question of the volume of translated texts, it is the lack of initiative to explore the deeper recesses of a culture by accessing texts of homelier provenance that makes the global project of translation appear hopelessly inadequate. Without questioning for the time being the literary value of the translated texts and the merit of the translation, something can still be said for the need of resisting the move to make a handful of texts, emanating from a particular section of society in a given country, stand in for its whole cultural tradition. The life of a people is too complex in its cultural and socio-economic ramifications to be encompassed by any select number of texts, and the experiences which it involves may seek expressions through different cultural registers all of which may not be amenable to translation. One is reminded in this context of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's warning: "If we are discussing solidarity as a theoretical position, we must also remember that not all the world's women are literate. There are traditions and situations that remain obscure because we cannot share their

linguistic constitution." (Spivak: 408) What is sometimes viewed as difficulty or impediment by a translator may well be the strength of a text, depending on its authenticity. If there is resistance to translation inherent in a language, can there be, one would ask, a parallel resistance within certain cultures to the cannibalism of the global market?

The present article deals with a novel which is in the form of a first-person narrative by a woman, whose fictional identity is shaped by her marginalized position in her society. Far from questioning her status within her family, the protagonist is content to lead a shadowy existence under the domineering authority of her mother-in-law. Hemmed in by the care of her family, the woman has remained blissfully ignorant of the politics of the outside world until it begins to impinge on her private life. Her first brush with politics occurs in having her son suffer arrest for his alleged involvement in India's freedom movement and eventually death for his untimely exposure to the rigour of imprisonment. The language is fraught with the rhetoric of suffering which indicates, in the words of Spivak, the "limits of language" (400). Her pain of loss finds expression only in the muted language of a woman reconciled to her position of inferiority in a society dominated by the male discourse The protagonist's husband is, for his part, a man of strong will and not unkind towards his wife, but hardly willing to regard her as his equal. He even tries to give her a little education, albeit without much success. His involvement in politics takes him into a domain of public activities which has little in common with her sphere of life, consisting, as it does, entirely of domestic chores. Soon, however, with a national crisis arising out of the political demand for Partition looming large in the horizon, the fabric of life in both the public and the private spheres begins to get frayed. The novel views this spectacle of political upheaval through the eyes of a near-illiterate woman, who takes her moorings in a traditional Muslim society for granted and is taken unawares by the sudden turn of events. She sees her own family being split into fragments, while, on the national level, the country is partitioned along communal lines. The first-person narrative is couched in a local dialect of South-Bengal which gives it the form of an interior monologue.

The author, Hasan Azizul Haque , a popular novelist of Bangladesh, who received the Bangla Academy award in 1971 for his contribution to Bengali prose literature, is known for his experimentations with language. The novel employs two different sets of linguistic registers to denote the connection of language with power. The standard Bengali used by the narrator's husband is part of a superior culture that he has access

to by virtue of his education and exposure to the outside world, while the narrator uses a dialect current among the uneducated population in the southern parts of West Bengal. Her language which lacks the sophistication of its literary counterpart captures beautifully the intonation and inflection of everyday speech of the illiterate or nominally literate women of the Bengali countryside. Her choice of the dialect, as distinct from the language of the printed page, as a means of communication is inseparable from her notion about a woman's subordinate position in her society. Her language gives her an identity which is predicated on her powerlessness rooted in her status as a woman ensconced within a patriarchal set-up. The pithy, almost laconic utterances of her husband give him an aloofness which she can hardly penetrate. Haque, a male novelist, imitates through the mouth of the narrator, almost in the manner of a ventriloquist, the voice of a woman, intensely aware of her powerlessness to resist the march of history. Instead of viewing the power-dynamics in terms of either class or gender, the novel equates power with culture, which, in its turn, is equated with linguistic sophistication. The narrator describes her first impression of a prosperous Hindu family of her village, that she is introduced to soon after her marriage, in terms of the cultural difference separating its female members from the women-folk of the village. The elegance, inscribed in the former's accoutrement, has its reflection in their use of a polished Bengali which fills the narrator's mind with admiration and reverence. The equation that she here makes between power and culture is, however, jeopardised, as the story unfolds itself, by the emergence of a new historical force in the Indian sub-continent that redefines the distribution of power in terms of religion rather than culture. The cynical manipulation of opportunities for self-aggrandizement offered by events like the outbreak of war and famine signals the collapse of a culture nourished by the liberal-humanist values. The narrator's husband, brought up on those values, helplessly watches the disruption of peace both within and outside the family, while the members of the Hindu family long revered for their cultural sophistication find themselves at the mercy of the jingoists of another community. It is against this background of failed loyalties that the novelist situates the narrator's stubborn refusal to yield to the exigencies of the historical moment. Her refusal to relocate to another country under pressure can be seen, particularly in the context of her emotional investment in her hearth and home, as an allegory of resistance inherent within a marginalized culture to the blandishments of monetary gains.

The issue of translation seems acute in relation to Hasan Azizul Haque particularly

in view of the fact that his literary works, except for a book of short stories, have remained by and large untranslated till date and hence unavailable to the English-speaking readership of the West. This despite the fact that the novelist is not unaware, as is evident from what he says in an interview on the occasion of the publication of the anthology of his translated short stories about the obvious advantages of translation. Rightfully proud of the rich literary tradition to which he belongs, he rues the inadequate knowledge of Bengali literature in the West due to lack of capable translators. His choice of a dialect of rural Bengal that does not lend itself easily to translation implies an ideological position hardly compatible with the assertion made in the said interview.

The dialect used in *Agun Pakhi* is an integral part of its evocation of the life in the rural Bengal of pre-Independence India. The terrain of South Bengal, commonly known as Raarh Bangla, where the novel is set, is hard and unpropitious. The poor farmers who live on it toil hard, depending on the vagaries of nature, to produce harvest. The novel describes beautifully the dusty and undulating roads that the armoured vans loaded with soldiers come hurtling down in times of war. For most of the poor villagers of this region, education is a luxury which few can afford. The narrator's dialect is textured with images of hard and poor living, simple, homely words, intensely evocative of a life lived with least amenities. The dialect is thus inseparable from her socio-economic condition, its vocabulary, a reflection of her lowly educational status. If it is a distorted version of the standard speech of the elites, it is a measure of the gap that separates the privileged from the less privileged, the rich from the poor in that society. The novelist, in other words, does not sentimentalize illiteracy, but projects it as an ineluctable fact of life in a region where education is synonymous with power.

Translation, as we all know, presupposes a desire to understand. The fact, mentioned by Paul Ricoeur in his book, *On Translation*, of the proliferation of translation evidently points towards such a desire for inter-lingual communication. His formula of 'equivalence without identity (Ricoeuer 34) is based on a tacit recognition of the need of a compromise. Apart from the classics, what determines the selection of texts for the purpose of translation is a question that resists an easy answer. While the part played by the translators based in the First World in the dissemination of texts from the outer reaches of the erstwhile empire deserves praise, the market forces shaping the process of decision-making are generally driven by considerations other than aesthetic. Hence the sense of hurt evident in the words of many an author who feels left out is understandable. It is in this context that the authorial decision underlying the choice of

a dialect as a linguistic medium in *Agun Pakhi* seems intriguing. For the apparent untranslatibilty of the text arises in this case not merely out of the semantic and lexical peculiarities but also out of a resistance, embedded in the text itself, to the implied threat of a cultural erasure.

The resistance to relocation in spatial terms, articulated in the final chapter of the novel in the narrator's decision proclaimed, for once, in defiance of the express command of her husband, is grounded in her love for and attachment to her homestead. Against the background of a demographic shift which is more a matter of choice than of compulsion, the narrator chooses to remain where she is, amid the familiar ambience of the neighbourhood, close to the place where her first-born was laid to rest. The allurements of a good life spent in the company of her children who have already shifted to their country of adoption fall on deaf ears as she sees no reason for relocation. In valorising the narrator's refusal to shift from her place of origin, the novel implicitly foregrounds the importance of the dialect as a signifier of culture. From the way the novel associates the mainstream language with the locations of power, the narrator's decision to stick to her position, both literally and metaphorically, reflects a sense of pride not uncommon among peoples of marginalized cultures.

This, however, is not a plea for the ghetto-ization of cultures. There is no denying the importance of the role of a translator as a mediator between cultures, but her role is often restricted within limits set by the payers who choose the tune in the global market. The theme of *Agun Pakhi*, centred on an illiterate woman's solitary battle against powers implicated in the larger processes of nation-formation, is too much outside the ambit of politically debated issues like class or gender to interest such translators. The novel represents a domain of literary activity that resists the homogenizing pressures of a global market and will continue to do so until there is any possibility of what Spivak calls "the intimacy of cultural translation" (407). The authorial stance here is that of a translator who abandons the ease of a hegemonic language to embrace the risk of immersion in a culture not entirely his own.

Works Cited

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