

# NIRMALA TRANSLATED: Premchand's Heroine in English Dress

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Is Premchand translatable? An English-medium journal dedicated to Hindi seems the right place to ask such a question; and the existence of not one but *two* English translations of Premchand's 1927<sup>1</sup> novel *Nirmala* provides a comparative context for an attempted answer. The first of these translations is the work of a well-established American scholar of Hindi, David Rubin, and was published in 1988 by Orient Paperbacks, Delhi; Rubin is best known in the Hindi world for his translations of Premchand's short stories under the title *The World of Premchand* published in 1969, and in a revised edition entitled *Deliverance and Other Stories* in 1988; a further dozen Premchand stories appeared as *Widows, Wives and Other Heroines* in 1998. A more recent *Nirmala* in a translation by Alok Rai has appeared as handsome volume published by O.U.P., Delhi, in 1999; and tedious as such introductions may be for the individual concerned, it is worth noting that Alok Rai is the son of Premchand's son and biographer, the late and much lamented Amrit Rai.

Is Premchand translatable? In a word, no: the subtext of 'purity' borne by the very title 'Nirmala' is denied to those who access this novel only through English. But the question might be put in a rather less trite manner by asking: 'Can English offer access to the world of Premchand?' Circumstantial evidence suggests again that it cannot, because few readers who have to rely on translations alone seem to be much moved by the writing of this 'father of modern Hindi fiction', as he is commonly described. During his disdainful mapping of *An Area of Darkness* in 1964, V.S. Naipaul recorded his disappointment at finding that Premchand 'turned out to be a minor fabulist, much preoccupied with the status of widows or daughters-in-law'; and indeed the general standard of translations from Hindi into English may explain Naipaul's feeling that 'what little I read of them [writers in Indian languages] in translation did not encourage me to read more'<sup>2</sup>. Where V.S. Naipaul has trod, others,

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<sup>1</sup>This is the date given by both translators; but the blurb on Alok Rai's book contradicts this with a 1928 date.

<sup>2</sup>V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, London 1968, p. 215.

such as S. Rushdie, have followed, inscribing a severe indictment of the work of those of us who strive to bring Hindi literature to an English readership. The failure derives from the difficulty in translating Hindi literature not just into the English *language*, but into English *literature* – rendering it in a style of writing which conveys more than the bland ‘and then..., and then..., and then...’ of ploddingly literal narrative.

An early casualty in the translation process is the individual voice of the original author, which is all too easily lost in a lowest-common-denominator kind of multi-purpose English style, whether in prose or verse. My own attempts at translating the poetry of Kunwar Narain, Manglesh Dabral and others have foundered on precisely this difficulty of finding an English voice that adequately matches (or impersonates) the highly specialised and individual diction of the original poems; and an invitation from a Delhi publisher to translate the recently televised (and hence saleable) nineteenth-century novel *Chandrakanta* had to be turned down, because I could not for the life of me find a style of comfortable English clothing for Devakinandan Khatri’s fabulously gothic heroes and heroines that did not end up seeming ridiculously un-Indian. Even writers who attempt to translate their own work (is this, incidentally, a peculiarly Indian phenomenon?) often seem unable to recreate the original style and flair of their own original text – Bhisham Sahni’s lacklustre translation *The Mansion* (1998), for example, seems a distinctly rickety structure when set alongside the fine original *Mayyadas ki Marhi* erected a decade earlier; and Ajneya’s versions of his own poetry, even aided and abetted by the American poet Leonard Nathan, fall curiously short of doing justice to the crisply articulate Hindi poems. Other languages like Tamil, well served by such gifted translators as R.K. Ramanujan and Lakshmi Holmström, seem to have fared so much better. But new hope for Hindi has recently been shown in the sublime achievement of *The Servant’s Shirt* (1999), this translated novel being worn just as comfortably by the translator Satti Khanna as was its original Hindi *Naukar ki Kameez* (1979) by the novelist Vinod Kumar Shukla: the engaging individuality of the Hindi survives intact in this astonishingly sympathetic English version, with none of its essential quiriness ironed out; and would-be translators should study the processes that Khanna has used to such great effect.

Naipaul’s facile dismissal of Premchand indicates, on the one hand, the paradoxically self-assured failure of his touristic attempt to take the pulse of literary India; on the other, it suggests that Premchand’s appeal has become so eroded by the process of translation as to make the endeavour barely worth the candle. For the Hindi reader, Premchand’s writing in the original is so seductive that even the narrative inconsistencies that so obviously mar a novel such as *Nirmala* are readily forgiven; when we read Premchand we willingly suspend our disbelief and urge him

on. The reader of the original Hindi is seduced by Premchand's ability to create an entirely believable domestic world of infinitely subtle integration, in which one is led into the thoughts and feelings of the characters by a subtle mechanics whose laws seem to derive directly from the genius of the Hindi language itself; the power of his writing is in the detail, and many of the small and large satisfactions offered by Premchand's prose are to do with its texture, suggestive at once of surface complexity and rooted depth. The successful translator must therefore have a profound insight into the workings of Premchand's hair-spring artistic mechanics: literary translation is the ultimate form of aesthetic analysis, and calls for much more than the obvious basic requirements of proficiency in what the conventional mixed metaphor labels as the 'source' and 'target' languages respectively.

That being said, it is of course true that one must understand the language of a book before translating it: as the Braj poet Vrind laconically observed in another context, you can't have a boundary if you don't first have a village. For someone from across the black water to acquire real competence in, for example, Hindi, is a life-long undertaking, and a translation free of howlers is the holy grail of the foreign translator's long and rock-strewn path. Foreign learners of Hindi are much tested from the outset, for example, by the ambiguities inherent in the Devanagari script because of its having no distinction of upper and lower case, and many a student reader of Premchand's classic novel *Godaan* has been thrown by the first few lines of the opening chapter, wherein the word *gobar* appears both as the name of a protagonist (Hori's son) and in its earthier sense as 'cowdung'; the teacher has to fill in the etymological background of '*govardhan*' in order to show in what sense Dhaniya's hands were full of *gobar*, and also to prevent students from wondering why a proud north Indian farming family would seemingly name its firstborn son 'Bullshit'. The potential for such confusions is profligately abundant, and many of us have fallen into the traps of ambiguity more often than we would like to admit; but as I silently suppress the record of my own published howlers, I must also maintain silence on those perpetrated by my peers and betters, even though the tally is a lavishly full one.

While I hope to show that an accurate initial reading of the original is only part of the recipe for a successful translation, it is very obvious that our two *Nirmala* translators are unevenly matched in their mastery of Hindi.<sup>3</sup> A list of the places where Rubin has misread, misunderstood or misinterpreted the Hindi original would add

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<sup>3</sup>Since neither translator tells us which edition of *Nirmala* he used, it is possible that discrepancies noted here derive from differences in the originals. The edition used for this review article is that published by the Saraswati Press of Allahabad, and is itself undated.

unwelcome length to this article, without adding much to my attempted analysis of what is genuinely and fundamentally untranslatable in Premchand; a few examples will suffice to show the various levels of error involved. In a telling passage from chapter six of the novel, *Nirmala* ponders her fraught relationship with her husband, and expresses the delicate and intractable nature of the problem with the words “मैं ... वह नहीं कर सकती; जो मेरे किये नहीं हो सकता” (p. 71). The complex phrasing of the Hindi is accurately resolved by Rai (p.52) with ‘I cannot do that which I cannot do’ (even if the awkward ‘that which’ construction pokes a bony elbow in the reader’s eye); but Rubin, evidently reading *liye* for *kिये*, stands the sense on its head with his ‘I can’t do what can’t be done for me’ (p. 52). Those who know the novel, and who agree with the observation in Rai’s thoroughly engaging ‘Afterword’ (p. 207) that sexuality is ‘the unacknowledged but unmistakable subtext of *Nirmala*’, will see the extent to which Rubin’s version is not just a linguistic slip but a fundamental misreading of *Nirmala*’s marital situation. Less critically perhaps, earlier in the novel, Totaram’s crony Nayansukh advises him on how to strike a rakishly attractive figure, and includes the advice “सौ-पचास गजलें याद कर लो” (p. 68); and while Rai bends over backwards to capture the casual approximation of the hyphenated number with his wording ‘Commit some hundred-odd ghazals to memory’ (p. 49), Rubin misreads the mathematics with his stultifyingly literal (or rather, just plain wrong) ‘Memorise a hundred and fifty *ghazals*’ (p. 49). Similarly in chapter seven, Premchand has Totaram say ‘विचित्र स्वभाव की औरत है’ (p. 84), economically and even racily rendered by Rai as ‘She’s a strange woman’ (p. 66), but mistranslated by Rubin as ‘A woman’s character is peculiar’ (p. 63); and in the important dramatic scene with which chapter eighteen ends, Rubin crucially mistranslates सहृदयता as ‘help’ (evidently reading सहायता), making nonsense of a fine closing paragraph.

There are *many* further examples of similar errors involve a straightforward misinterpretation of the Hindi lexicon and/or syntax. But other varieties of misreading suggest a more fundamental failure to engage with the deeper meanings of the novel. Elsewhere in chapter seven, when *Nirmala* reacts to Totaram’s suggestion that *Nirmala* may not be as unsullied as her name would suggest, Premchand voices her perplexity in the first-person sentence “ईश्वर ही इस घर में लाज रखें” (p. 85). Rai’s version ‘May God protect the honour of such a house’, (p. 67) captures the spirit of the sentence very efficiently, even if it interprets the object of God’s protective power as the family unit rather than the individual; but Rubin’s version is ‘Probably only God might be above suspicion in this house’ (p. 64), a reading which involves a deep-seated misunderstanding of the divine dimension in Premchand’s idiom.

Thus it would seem that there are at least three different levels – literal misreading, syntactic misinterpretation, and cultural confusion – at which the foreign translator can betray his reader’s trust, and there is no doubt that in this sense at the very least, Rai is the more reliable of the two translators, and by a long chalk. Only very occasionally does Rai let his attention stray: rare examples include the mystifying ‘Chandar was Chandrabhanu Singh’s son’ (p.4), which inadvertently turns Nirmala’s brother Chandar into his own father (Premchand, p. 27, reads straightforwardly “चन्द्र का पूरा नाम चन्द्रभानु सिनहा था”); a missed negative on p. 96 in which Rai’s ‘she was always very fond of the jhoomar’ reverses Premchand’s intention of showing that Nirmala routinely spurned fine jewellery; and a forgivable confusion between the names of brothers Siyaram and Jiyaram on p. 149.

But the story does not end there: mere freedom from fundamental errors is no guarantee of a successful translation. Unquestionably the crux of the matter lies rather with register and style, and the safe transfer of these factors from Hindi into English. Though not always faithful to his own theoretical statements on the use of language, Premchand has a remarkable facility with a wide range of stylistic registers in Hindi, and the conventions of Hindi narrative (perhaps to some extent actually *determined* by him through his fiction, as implied in his alleged paternity of this genre) allow him to move seamlessly in and out of the dialogic voice that is his forte. Whereas conventional English style requires the introduction of direct speech to be marked with quotation marks, such tight-fitting restrictions are felt to be uncomfortable and unnecessary in the freer-flowing composition of Hindi narrative; and Premchand exploits this licence to the full, commuting easily between the voice of a detached narrator on the one hand and the ‘first-person’ inner thoughts of an individual character on the other. This facility is ideally suited to Premchand, since it is in the first-person voice that we find him at his most engaging. But here too lies the translator’s main problem, because the supple and idiomatic voice that integrates so organically with the whole fictional world of Premchand’s creation is absolutely of a piece with the Hindi language: to attempt to render it in English, with its radically different perspectives, tastes, intimacies, sensibilities and cultural allusions, is like trying to translate a plate of Diwali laddus into a Christmas pudding. This is the reason for the quality of banal ‘sameness’ that so frequently hampers translations from Hindi: though working from a stylistically marked original, translators tend to opt for a safe, middle-of-the-road English voice, which may avoid the raucous chaos of anachronism, but which equally fails to preserve the true quality of the original.

In translating a novel such as *Nirmala*, one has to determine an appropriate English voice for each of the various characters. This involves a recognition that the

translation is not only reaching across space (between two very different languages) but also across time (between two very different historical periods, separated by the best part of a century). Can Premchand's characters be made to speak a stylistically marked English, or should their voices be culturally neutral? While overlooking the fact that today's Mansaram would probably speak a banal 'Hinglish' khichari picked up from the globalising media, the translator has to respect the fact of Mansaram's integration into his U.P. college world, and to present him through a fluent colloquial style of language that does not seem out of place for the time and setting. The same applies, of course, for all the characters, and, to a lesser degree, to the voice of the remote narrator. The use of Sanskritised vocabulary is conventionally acceptable in Hindi prose (even if too much distance between high-register wording and humdrum events may recall Shrilal Shukla's lampooning description of an anguished villager as 'suffering from self-pity, acerbity and several other such literary characteristics'<sup>4</sup>). At every turn the translator has to maintain a sensibility to the inferences and implications of the translation register, since alien imports will upset the delicate literary eco-system of the original. Anything as obtrusive as American stylistic features (such as Rubin's 'A snake's gotten into my room', p. 51, and 'who all do I have to make up to', p. 70) seem ludicrous in the Indian context and must be avoided. Indian English, on the other hand, raises no eyebrows in the translator's recreation of the early twentieth-century United Provinces, and Rai frequently allows himself such usages as 'Say, why don't you ask Buwan once?' (p. 25), 'I'll deal with her today itself' (p. 41), 'Mansaram wasn't keen on shifting to the hostel' (p. 57), 'family members' (p. 68), 'She kept on tormenting Nirmala in this fashion for long' (p. 68), 'Where shall I keep these sweets?' (p. 90), and 'he must be plying the charkha too' (p. 126).

While some of these Indian English expressions may not be authentically contemporary to the early decades of this century (the novel first appeared in serial form between 1925 and 1926, and presumably draws on situations and experiences of some years earlier), they ring true to the general north Indian scene of modern times, and seem wholly in keeping with the spirit of the novel. It is easy to imagine that Premchand himself (whose encounter with English began at the age of ten<sup>5</sup>) would have been entirely happy with these versions, as indeed with the overall tone, tenor and achievement of his grandson's translation. The use of Indian English (or the retention of Hindi features in the translated English) is more risky in the narrator's voice than in the speech of the characters themselves: Rubin's 'At this very moment Totaram came into the room and stood' (p. 63) is much too close to the Hindi "उसी समय

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<sup>4</sup>Shrilal Shukla, *Rag Darbari*, 2nd edition, Delhi 1985, p. 285.

<sup>5</sup> Geetanjali Pandey, *Between Two Worlds: an Intellectual Biography of Premchand*. Delhi, 1989, p. 12.

तोताराम कमरे में आ कर खड़े हो गये” (p. 83), and Rai is on safer ground with his neutral ‘Just then, Totaram walked into the room’ (p. 65). Much depends, of course, on the intended readership, since subcontinental readers will find nothing remarkable in these Indian-English usages; but such habits as assimilating the sense of ‘to put’ to that of ‘to keep’ (both translating the Hindi verb रखना) strike a discordant note for those of us who find ourselves stuck on Blighty. Also to be avoided are those cases where the Indian English actually differs importantly *in meaning* from standard usage; here the syntax of the Hindi shows through all too clearly as a determinant of the English construction, as in ‘Till the time I thought it was my job, I did it’ (Rai p. 63).

Premchand’s prose abounds with allusions to Indian cosmology, religion, and mythic narrative, and translators have to negotiate a path between the two extremes of leaving the reader to battle with obscurities on the one hand, and either over-explaining or reducing the text on the other.<sup>6</sup> The commonplace equation of the goddess Lakshmi with wealth is a case in point, and when Premchand has Totaram say to Nirmala, “भाई, आती हुई लक्ष्मी तो नहीं ठुकरायी जाती” (p. 73), Rai’s neat deconstruction of the sentence as ‘But one can hardly turn away the goddess of wealth’ (p. 54) is a clear winner over Rubin’s bizarre ‘My dear, one doesn’t spurn the incoming Lakshmi’ (p. 54) – which somehow manages to mean very little at all. This Hindi sentence is in fact a kind of translator’s shibboleth. In addition to the Lakshmi reference, it contains, firstly, a vocative (*bhai*) of the kind that cannot be rendered literally (Rubin’s ‘my dear’ deals with it nicely; Rai drops it, substituting the conjunction ‘but’ as a colloquial lubricant to initiate the speech); and secondly a use of the passive voice of the Hindi verb for an impersonal statement – for which both translators adopt the appropriately dated English ‘one’, which sits well with the early twentieth-century period. Nirmala lived in a world so far removed from our own that a ‘period’ tone is fully justified on many occasions – though fageyism has to be avoided, and when Rai indulges in such phrasing as ‘there was that love between them that reckons not a whit the lack of lucre’ (p. 109) he sails much too close to the wind of self-parody.

Even more problematic are such cruxes as the concept of determinism enshrined in the word *sanskar* – “कदाचित् पूर्व संस्कारों के कारण यहाँ अन्य अनाथों से हमारी दशा कुछ अच्छी है, पर हैं अनाथ ही” soliloquises Mansaram (pp. 87-88). Here Rai assimilates the text to a modernising idiom, ‘It’s possible that, *out of old habit*, our condition here is better

<sup>6</sup> In this context it is worth mentioning the now infamous introduction to Nandiny Nopany and P. Lal’s *Twenty Four Stories by Premchand* (Delhi, 1980), where a discussion of the problems of translating Premchand cites examples from various published translations, tacitly recommending the Nopany-Lal versions as victors in the competition. Unfortunately, the reader reaches other conclusions.

than that of the general run of orphans – but orphans is what we are’ (p. 70, emphasis added); Rubin is more doggedly faithful to the Indian metaphysics in his ‘May be as a result of earlier incarnations their state was better than that of other orphans, but still – they were orphans’, (p. 67) but his ‘earlier incarnations’ is not only too stolidly Indological but also too lofty and quite wrong in register, ‘incarnation’ surely being the preserve of deities, not ordinary mortals. It is, admittedly, a particularly tricky sentence to get right – a sentence which makes one glad of the critic’s prerogative of criticising without suggesting alternatives.

Both our translators have interesting things to say, outside the frame of the novel itself, about its reception in a world which has generally turned its back on melodrama as a narrative mode. The possibility of toning down some of the purple excesses of Premchand’s writing seems to underlie several choices of English expression, reminding us that a translator is, amongst other things, an editor in disguise. Chapter thirteen begins with the death of Mansaram, and its opening paragraph ends with the narrative voice lamenting that Munshi ji has realised Nirmala’s innocence too late in the proceedings. Premchand ends his paragraph with an autonomous sentence consisting of a double image couched in paired relative clauses: जब हाथ से तीर निकल चुका था -- जब मुसाफिर ने रकाब में पाँव डाल लिया था (p. 124). Rubin renders this as ‘... only when the arrow had left the bow, when the traveller had already set [sic] on his journey’ (p. 98), while Rai has ‘... but only now, when it was already too late, when the traveller had already set his foot in the stirrup and was ready to depart’ (p. 108). Both translators append their respective versions to the end of the previous sentence, thereby toning down the stand-alone (but too purple?) drama of the autonomous sentence carefully chosen by the author. Both, too, have seen fit to alter the imagery in subtle or substantial ways: Rubin helpfully corrects Premchand’s archery image by changing ‘hand’ to ‘bow’, but feels the need to substitute the ‘foot in stirrup’ image by a more generalising reference to departure on a journey; conversely, Rai throws away the bow and arrow in favour of the generalising gloss ‘when it was already too late’; he then maintains the foot in the stirrup, only to lose his nerve at the last minute, throwing in ‘and was ready to depart’ for good measure anyway.

Grammatical, stylistic and metaphorical cruxes of this kind throng every page of the novel, and both translators struggle valiantly for appropriate solutions. Less obviously intrusive, but sometimes no less problematic, is Hindi’s fondness for rhetorical questions. Ever since Tulsidas asked को कृपाल संकर सरिस – ‘Who is generous like Shankar?’ – Hindi writers have exploited the power of rhetorical questions for all they were worth; but when they come in flocks, do they not pall, are they not

tedious, and should the translator not reduce them in the English version? Rai allows a sequence of five in a dialogue on p. 59, where the conversation begins to resemble that children's game in which two speakers must converse entirely through interrogatives. Just as obtrusive is any structural patterning that repeats a formulaic cadence: five out of a consecutive six sentences on Rai's p. 57 end with the word 'there'. Such stylistic features have as much to do with English style as they do with the process of translation *per se*, but they all form part of the overall effect of the translated text, and hence bear directly on the reception likely to be afforded to Nirmala in her English clothing.

I would like to end with a final example of the difficulty of capturing the essential genius of Premchand's style. In a rather awkwardly constructed passage just before the 'Lakshmi' reference, Premchand attempts a kind of split-screen parallel vision of Nirmala's beautiful face and Totaram's ageing reflection in a mirror. For all the modernity of the apparent camera angles, the language itself is timeless if not actually 'classical' in tone: उसकी यह अनुपम छवि उनके हृदय का शूल बन गयी (p. 73). The imagery of a 'sharp pain in the heart', typifying Premchand's fondness for physical imagery and concrete metaphor, has a pedigree that reaches back to the medieval world of the bhakti poets, as does the entire lexicon for this sentence; but this very antiquity does not lead itself to modern dress in English, and our two translators feel the need to tone the image down by substituting a more everyday register. Rubin has 'this matchless beauty of hers had become a sore in her heart' (p.54), blunting the agony somewhat, while Rai surgically removes the heart with his 'Her very beauty had become a cause of pain and suffering to him' (p. 54). These are both safe readings, but their very safety makes them staid, and robs the original of some of its allusive potency. The reader is denied that sense of an integration with layers of metaphor which have accumulated gradually over the several centuries of what we may justly call 'the Hindi tradition'. For if it is true that Premchand is the 'father' of a modern genre, it is equally true that he is also the *product* of a literary tradition that reaches back to the medieval period.

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