

ELIZABETH BELL

The Re-Contexted Master: Masud Comes to My House

WORKING ON NAIYER MASUD'S SHORT STORY "Sheesha Ghat" was my second project in assisting with the translation of Urdu fiction. When the many drafts had been corrected, polished, shown to the author and, at last, published, I sat back to take stock of the finished product. Moazzam Sheikh, the primary translator, and M.U. Memon, our assiduous adviser, had made sure the English version stayed within Masud's strict guidelines: Each sentence was an austere, nearly uninflected, conveyance of its material. Adjectives were few, idioms largely avoided. Emotions were alluded to chiefly via their external manifestations. We were pleased. To our great delight, the beautifully chiseled piece and its translation were selected for a Katha Prize.

But something kept nagging at me. As a native North American who has never traveled to South Asia (and the only member of the team lacking this grounding), I was highly aware of the foreignness, to my ears, of certain elements of the story. A *ghāt* was a mysterious facility to me, the idea of a *munh-bōlā bāp* strange and only tentatively grasped, the bazaars and small villages remote figments of my untutored imagination. Plus the narrator's ruminations, told in a language as neutral as possible, did not sound plausible to me as the words of a child.

Yet the core story felt profoundly aligned with my sensibilities. I wanted to bring it closer to my face, to dissipate the aura of "otherness" that pervaded it: I wanted to own it in some deeper way. These intense, perplexing desires led me to reflect on story itself, as skeletal structure, as essence. Masud breaks new ground with his skill and determination at stripping away specifics; he withholds orientation as to time, place, name, and gives only the broadest indications of characters' ages. He does not, thankfully, go so far as to attempt to eliminate context altogether and

produce an interplay of disembodied minds. Yet “Sheesha Ghat” wears its sociocultural setting like the gauziest of garments.

It is a fairly common practice in theater to culturally recalibrate plays, as when *Romeo and Juliet* is reset in New York’s Puerto Rican barrios as *West Side Story*, Shakespeare having first appropriated the story line from the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, and in this spirit I soon decided to adapt the story, retaining as many particularities as possible, to a setting native to my culture. It was an entirely personal experiment.

In essence, then, who is the protagonist? A child buffeted by fate and the will of the adults around him, who themselves seem to have no great purchase on their own destiny. The physical location encompasses a small town and increasingly remote rural settlements. When I realized the tale could be transferred to a backwoods area of the United States—unspecified, in keeping with Masud’s trademark vagueness—the new version began to unreel as though by itself. I rewrote the Masud story sentence by sentence, attempting to stay as close as possible to the original sequence of words, at times preserving a sentence exactly as it appeared in the original translation.

Difficulties presented themselves with varying degrees of thorniness. The boy is now in the custody of his uncle, a situation I leave without explanation since it is not jarringly unusual. The *ghāt* has become a dock, not analogous in function, but also a construction humans erect to facilitate their dealings with a body of water. The bazaar is transformed into the main street of a village, i.e., the place where shopping and socializing go on, the “common area” of a small aggregation of residents. Most problematic was Masud’s glassworkers’ settlement, where “there were few houses, but each one had a glass-furnace.” Since glassmaking as a small industry has never been conducted in this way in North America, I decided at last to make the site the location of a large glass factory whose chimneys would emit enough soot to blacken the “walls, the lanes, the trees...people’s clothes and the coats of stray dogs and cats,” but whose population would work for the centralized facility rather than at home.

Alterations at this level remind me of decisions made by interpreters unknown who translated a series of Aesop’s fables into Náhuatl, the language of the Aztecs, during the European conquest of the Americas. In the Náhuatl versions, lions have become jaguars, coyotes replace foxes, and there is even an appearance by a quetzal, a bird unknown outside a restricted region of Mesoamerica. Such substitutions serve to eliminate a needless sense of foreignness and preserve essential features of the text: simplicity, familiarity, characters drawn from the common stock of the

imagination. They are deviations without being violations.

A far more controversial feature of “Glassy Dock” is the recasting of the first-person narrative in a generic North American backwoods vernacular. I could find no “neutral” speech that would believably convey the words of the uneducated rural poor. I did take care to steer clear of language strongly identified as Black English, so that while the words might be those of a rural African American, they have been retrieved by my writer’s ear from the speech of white farm families in central Pennsylvania and southern North Carolina. To achieve the desired degree of naturalness, I even inserted a simile or two—where, in the first translation, waves come in to shore with a “halting” sound, in “Glassy Dock” they come in “as though they dit’n really want to,” because I could not feature the narrator using the word “halting”—but for the most part, the exclusion of metaphors, similes and figures of speech is respected. The highly specified speech pattern is a startling departure nonetheless.

If I may draw on another example from Mesoamerica, a similarly dramatic personalizing device played a role in the forcible implantation of Christianity there. At a certain point, local populations hovered between adamant resistance and a tentative acceptance based on the invaders’ seemingly supernatural ability to withstand the mysterious diseases plaguing the land. The missionaries’ methods of proselytizing and brute force had had little success in tipping the balance. The religion did not achieve a hold on the popular imagination until the rumor spread that a local man had seen an apparition of the Virgin Mary and that her skin had been the same color as his.¹ Through this single distinction, a remote

¹ According to the legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Aztec man who saw her, Juan Diego, was not received when he tried to recount the miracle to Bishop and Protector of Indians Juan de Zumárraga. The divine figure appeared a second time and instructed him to gather roses from the site of her apparition and carry them to the bishop in his tunic. Juan Diego complied, and when the garment was unwrapped to deliver the roses, it was found to bear a miraculously imprinted image of the woman in the vision. The incident greatly facilitated the syncretization of the Virgin Mary with a local goddess, a frequent occurrence in the spread of Christianity. The Catholic Church, in research pursuant to the possible beatification of Juan Diego, found that no evidence of his physical existence could be established. The garment with the image, which hangs in a Mexico City basilica devoted to Guadalupe, has had threads subjected to scientific examinations, which indicate a close resemblance between the imprinting substance and paint. After the apparition, five million people were

icon had become “one of us,” and a tide of conversions ensued.

In the same way, my recasting of “Sheesha Ghat” in rustic speech was the crucial touch to my personal “familiar” version, and the sense of satisfaction I felt on completing it was almost physical.

The question most people ask when I describe this project is Why this story? Obviously, I have read many works of fiction set in other cultures without feeling the need to invent a shadow twin for them. Reading is already a radical act of appropriation, by virtue of the reader’s individuality and the specifics of personal experience. It is a commonplace by now that the text is not solely about what the author thinks or wants it to be about, nor can there be a perfect reader capable of apprehending the totality of its possible meanings. The text is its taste in my mouth. To you, the taste in yours.

The answer is that I do not understand it myself. To possible objections that I have overdomesticated, denatured or violated the original, I can only remark that the most anomalous thing about this text is that it has found its way into print. It exists as the result of scratching an itch, and was intended to gratify a single person. To anyone else, it might best be looked at as folk art—say, the reproduction of the Mona Lisa in needlepoint—motivated by the usual unfathomable impulses and now, for one reason or another, removed from its creator’s home and placed on display. Thank you for your indulgence. □

converted to the faith in a single year, five times the number achieved in the preceding fifteen-year period. Whatever the spiritual realities, the ploy may be considered a miracle of propaganda.