

SNEHAL SHINGAVI

Premchand and Language: On Translation, Cultural Nationalism, and Irony*

*ham kō bhī kyā kyā mazē kī dāstānēñ yād tħīñ
lēkin ab tamhīd-e zikr-e dard-o-mātm hō ga’īñ*

*I, too, used to remember such wonderful tales of adventure
But now all I can recollect has turned into painful dirges.*

—RUSVA, *Umrā’ō Jān Adā*

THE EPIGRAPH TO THIS ESSAY is taken from the opening of *Umrā’ō Jān Adā*, Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī Rusvā’s most famous novel, which begins with a lamentation on the prospects of storytelling in the present moment (the novel was published sometime between 1899 and 1905).¹ The couplet explains that what once was an archive of the pleasurable possibilities of fantastical fiction (*mazē kī dāstānēñ*) has now given way to the overwhelming immanence of dirges of pain and mourning (*dard-o-mātm*): it famously signals the shift that will take place at the end of the novel after the romantic escapades of the courtesan and her lover are brought to an abrupt end with the declining fortunes of the élite. The novel itself contains an almost innumerable number of such ghazal couplets strewn throughout the conversation between the eponymous courtesan and the author, all part of the elaborate pseudo-seduction that takes place between a now aged Umrā’ō Jān and the ever-flirtatious Rusvā. But opening the novel in this way is, in part, Rusvā’s acknowledgement that the novel understands itself as straddling two traditions from the start, or more precisely, under-

* This is a revised version of the paper presented at the International Seminar on Premchand in Translation, held at Jamia Millia, New Delhi, 28–30 November 2012.

¹Fathpūrī puts the publication date at 1899 (see Rusvā 1963, ii), while Khushwant Singh insists the novel was published first when Rusvā was 48 years old (putting the date of publication at 1905) (Rusvā 1993, ix).

stands itself as documenting one tradition about to be eclipsed by another. The next fifteen years would reveal just how dramatic those changes actually were.

Umrā'ō Jān Adā has become important in the world of Urdu letters precisely because of its self-conscious representation of the impact of important historical changes on the forms of literary production: first, the novel documents the transformations underway in North India in the wake of the failed 1857 War for Independence and the subsequent decimation of Mughal and Navābī power; and second, it meditates on the effect of that decline on Urdu literary institutions, especially the *kōthā*, which depended on that power for patronage. The changes taking place in North India were not merely political and economic, but also religious and social. Even Rusvā notices the pressures to censor and mute his own narrative becoming ever more forceful, even as he slyly challenges those same pressures. When discussing the bawdier performances done in the cities, Rusvā comments “we are no reformers to get worked up by these [obscene] customs” (Rusvā, 1993, 27).

The range of changes taking place within an Urdu literary sensibility—in which the decline of the aristocracy, the rise of British power, and the growth of religious modernism and ancillary literary movements such as the New Light played a prominent part—were staggering. One of the most profound ways that these changes manifested was a temporary shift away from the ghazal, now seen as part of the reason for the decadence of Urdu’s cultural institutions, and towards prose with a more markedly chaste idiom (a kind of inversion of the process that Umrā'ō begins her narrative with).

This essay is an attempt to tell part of the story about literary publics in North India and the transition from poetry to prose, from romance to realism, from élite to democratic sensibilities, from pleasure to asceticism, and from Urdu to Hindi, all of which are involved in the production of what Rashmi Sadana calls a “literary nationality” (2012, 177).

Munshi Premchand’s contribution to that literary nationality has long been understood as the domestication of the Romance—in Gopi Chand Narang’s formulation, by introducing “into it the living truth of human existence” (1991, 127), and in Ali Jawad Zaidi’s formulation, by enriching it “with a robust sense of realism” (1993, 412)—but in both instances the shift is away from *Umrā'ō Jān Adā*. When we turn to histories of “Indian” literature (because Urdu still does not always make the cut) or Hindi literature, then Premchand’s genealogy reaches through Tagorean romanticism back to the religious epics in Braj and Khari Boli, in which Premchand’s progressivism is seen as a result of nationalist agitation and Gandhian asceti-

cism (Machwe 1977, 49).² So the movement in Premchand's fiction is away from Romance doubly: away from the sprawling, adventure-filled narratives that were more properly the provenance of genres such as the *dāstān* (a process that Rusvā begins, but does not complete), as well as away from the erotic and material rewards that romance might offer the true adventurer in favor of the more sober and less immediately tempting conclusions of the real. It is in this specific sense that the combined legacies of *Umrā'ō Jān Adā*, the *dāstān*, and the ghazal all haunt Premchand's novelistic representation of the *kōṭhā*; all hang over his fictional courtesans as precisely the representational norms against which Premchand is resisting and writing *in Hindi*.

Alternatively we might suggest that despite being a writer who works in Urdu, Premchand is also abandoning many of the accreted traditions so central to the canon of Urdu letters, not in some crass deference to a communalist *geist*, but as a consequence of intellectual, historical and market-driven responses to developments taking place in colonial North India. But even still, critics have yet to disaggregate which of the literary changes that Premchand introduced were developments within Premchand's own artistic innovations in the novel, in general, and which were responses to the newly differentiated reading publics that had begun to coalesce variously around Urdu and Hindi. Understanding this requires asking a counterfactual: if the genre of the novel about the courtesan, especially in North India, is closely connected to the history of the ghazal and if the primary way for aristocratic men to receive their education in poetic culture would have been in the *kōṭhā*, why is Premchand's novel about courtesans, *Bāzār-e Husn* (The Marketplace of Beauty) in Urdu and *Sēvāsadan* (The Orphanage) in Hindi, so devoid of any reference to the ghazal, in particular, or to Urdu poetry in general? What had happened in the intervening twenty years between *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* and Premchand's novel(s) to shift the expectations and demands of the genre so dramatically that Premchand need not have produced a single ghazal or *ṭhumrī* in the entire novel?

To put the problem as polemically as possible, we might also ask how exactly Premchand, a novelist who sets the standard for literary anti-communalism in South Asia, might have participated, wittingly or no, in the production of certain politicizable boundaries between the world of the Urdu ghazal and the world of the Hindi novel. (I will ultimately argue

²It is important in this respect that Premchand's novel was never tainted with the charge of "obscenity" which so many other novelists who dealt with themes of female sexuality explicitly faced. The story of how this contributed to the development of a reading public in Hindi is taken up by Gupta (2001, see especially chapters 1 and 2).

that *Sēvāsadan* does this more forcefully than *Bāzār-e Husn*). Part of what this paper wants to interrogate is just exactly what was at stake in Premchand's famous shift from writing and publishing in Urdu (until around 1918) and the decisive shift he made to publishing and writing in Hindi after 1924 (Trivedi 1984), all the more so since the shift seems to have taken place first in a novel about courtesans and their relationship to an emergent bourgeois nationalist culture in Benares.

The question still facing all Premchand scholars is whether the fiction he produced in Hindi is a translation of what he produced for his audiences in Urdu or not? Shall we call them revisions, transcreations, reinterpretations, or something completely different? And if what is at stake in the move between Hindi and Urdu reading publics is in part a whole set of expectations about differentiable communities, what does this do to our understanding of Premchand's anti-communalism?

Such a discussion of Premchand's fiction, especially when dealing with his works that exist in both Urdu and Hindi, is already made complicated by certain important facts. First, as a writer who stands at the head of the novelistic tradition in both Hindi and Urdu, he has earned a reputation for being an anti-communal writer, one sensitive to the cultural viability of both Hindu and Muslim traditions as they have been conceived in the twentieth century, and an anti-communal activist, one who spoke out against communal violence as it began to become a regular feature of late colonial India (Rai 2000, xiii). This reputation, however, occasionally occludes the important role he played in shifting the center of gravity of North Indian literary publishing from Urdu to Hindi and its consequences for the communal politics of language, with the result that "the Hindi Premchand" and "the Urdu Premchand" have now almost completely different critical legacies (Trivedi 1984).

Second, Premchand's own ideas about translation, his own work as a translator, and the proliferation of translations of his work make theorizing his translatability a knotty problem, especially since he tended to ignore his own advice when it came to his translational practice, but also because many translators follow his example and translate Premchand without an eye towards his own views on translation.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the critical and scholarly audience which is able to read in Urdu and Hindi simultaneously and account for the varied critical reception of Premchand's Hindi and Urdu materials is infinitesimally small and almost entirely insignificant in the scholarly corpus. One of the most devastating legacies of Partition has been the separation of Urdu and Hindi into two now almost completely separated literary traditions. To make matters worse, Premchand's own brand of cultural nationalism,

which was interested in interrogating the corrosive effects of British colonialism on Indian thought but also on defending Hindi as an infant language, makes the work of translating him as well as theorizing his shuttling back and forth from Urdu, at the least, an ironic project (if not an outright failure) from the start.

In order to understand Premchand's unique intervention into the canons of both Urdu and Hindi literature, we have to think about him as a writer who only makes sense under the sign of translation, as a writer whose intellectual concerns are only made manifest by putting his translations (and translations of his works) at the center of our attention. In part this is a necessary corrective to the way that he is more commonly read as either a Hindi or an Urdu novelist, despite both critical traditions having knowledge of the other. But aside from correcting a critical oversight, this attempt to highlight Premchand's concerns with translations and his understandings of what the work of translation is helps us not only understand the contours of his language politics but also his responses to the developments taking place unevenly in the publishing world in late colonial India.

Premchand's relationship to this problem of literary translation, I contend, is best understood by looking carefully at the *Bāzār-e Husn/Sēvāsadan* combine as it is his first serious attempt at writing a novel for two different reading publics simultaneously.³ There are three reasons for focusing on this pair of novels at the expense of, say, his more frontal engagement with translation theory or his own translations of novels from English. First, that the way he approached the question of English-language communication and art under the yoke of colonialism was fraught with contradictions. The problem that he notices is that Hindi was being crowded out by English and suffered from being a largely derivative publishing field dominated by translations into Hindi from the other regional vernaculars—Urdu, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati are the ones that he names in *Sēvāsadan* and hints at in *Bāzār-e Husn*—and the classical languages, especially Sanskrit. Most critics, on the other hand, notice the following speech toward the end in the novel and then assume that the primary problem the novel wants to contend with is one of Anglophone linguistic

³Even though *Bāzār-e Husn* was completed first, it was published after *Sēvāsadan*, making the problem of “translation” all the more vexed as both texts were undergoing revisions at around the same time as he tried to make them ready for publication. This process was even more protracted in the case of *Bāzār-e Husn* since it was much more difficult for Premchand to convince a publisher to undertake the task of publishing the novel. For more on this, see Gopal (1965, especially chapters 11 and 12).

and cultural hegemony:

And if intelligent people like you are devoted to English, a national language will never be born [...] people have found a lofty language like English and have sold themselves over to it. I don't understand why people think it honourable to speak and write in English. I, too, have studied English. I spent two years abroad and learned to speak and write from the best English teachers, but I hate it. It feels like I am wearing an Englishman's soiled clothes.

(Premchand, 2005, 193)⁴

The temptation to read this kind of robust cultural nationalism as the dominant strain in Premchand's work obscures other important literary debates about translation that the novel was also contending with, many of which do not fit the usual pattern of his nationalist credentials. The Premchand that emerges from closer attention to translational politics is more contradictory and provisional, as the battle lines that would become more cleanly defined the closer India got to independence were still poorly marked and often obscure. These contradictions—between national and local level loyalties—also structure the ways that the novel thinks about all politics, despite its straightforward and pious representational modes, which have led to the oversimplified assignation of progressivism to Premchand's work.

The second reason is the novel's deep interest in Suman, a young, Brahmin wife who turns sexlessly, but still romantically, to the *kothā* as a solution to her dissatisfactions with her impoverished, married life. This interest is not only the terrain on which the novel's gendered politics are resolved, but also the terrain on which it subconsciously deals with the vexed inheritance of the Hindi novel from Urdu cultural institutions, such that Suman's peripatetic and undirected transit through parental home, marital bed, guest quarters of the Benarasi élite, the brothel, the widow's home, the servant's quarters, and finally the orphanage mark also the novel's politics and anxieties about genre, translation, and the status of Hindi aesthetics. Another way of saying the same thing: this is the arc of the transformation of the Romantic inheritance of the Urdu novel into the national *Bildungsroman* of Hindi.

And finally, Premchand is best understood as a novelist of translation, a novelist both personally and thematically interested in translation, and someone who produced novels in the middle of cultural debates about the

⁴In every instance available, I have offered citations from the extant English translations of Premchand's novels to allow as many readers as possible access to the works in English.

problems and advantages inherent in translation, most importantly because *Sēvāsadan* signaled the important shift from publication in Urdu to publication in Hindi as demand, markets, education, and politics made possible new, single-script readers in Devanagari. I want to attend to these debates as they appear in Premchand's *Sēvāsadan* and then attempt to think about the structure of this novel as thematically interested in translation in a number of modes twinned together in it as alternative possibilities: conversion and seduction, redemption and ruination, repentance and depredation, transaction and corruption. Whether the Brahmin wife can be reunited into the Hindu jati after she has become a *tavā'if* is also a question—to put it polemically—of translation. To put the problem another way, are we certain that cultural nationalism or anticolonial aesthetics are resistant to translation in precisely the ways that we imagine?

The debates about Anglophone culture in *Sēvāsadan* happen alongside the more prominent debate in the novel about courtesans and their relationship to an élite (read Muslim and Mughal) culture. A new group of modernist, English-educated thinkers in the Municipal Council in Benares and a few liberal-minded religious personalities have combined forces in order to remove the courtesans from Dalmandi in the hopes of improving the lives of the citizens of Kashi. This puts them at odds with the communal elements, both Hindu and Muslim (who see the eviction of courtesans as a ploy to either attack property values or reduce the number of Muslims in the city), and some of the landed gentry and powerful industrialists, who are amongst the courtesans' best clients.

The arguments advanced against the removal of the courtesans from the city variously interrogate whether or not eviction is the best course for the Municipal Council to take, but the debate also brings up the problem which is the intimate connection between the *tavā'if* and a national literary and musical culture. Throughout the course of the novel, a number of contradictory arguments are put forth about the causes and solutions for the expansion of the *kōthā* and its ancillary cultural effects: that the appreciation and tolerance of courtesans is the result of a new, élite, modern (read English) education *and* that it is the uneducated, rural peasants who supply the demand for courtesans, especially at weddings; that courtesans are responsible for the preservation and spread of national musical and poetic traditions *and* that the culture that the courtesans control is decadent and responsible for the vice of prostitution; that courtesans are a part of the national and cultural heritage *and* that courtesans threaten the most important national and cultural institution, namely marriage; that spending money on *mujrās* and concerts is *swadēshī* since it provides jobs for Indian musicians and the like *and* that *mujrās* and concerts bankrupt families

during weddings with unnecessarily lavish expenditures; that courtesans are pious and reformable *and* that courtesans are only sinners and irredeemable; that courtesans would not exist without patrons *and* that certain men and certain women are natural-born sinners; that there is no difference between the economic transactions of prostitution and marriage *and* that marriage is always preferable to the *kōlhā*. The debate is sociological, political, and religious, but it is also a consequence of the mode of Premchand's novel, as a novel primarily organized by debate and rhetoric—*Sevāsadan* is, after all, one of Premchand's most dialogic novels with almost every chapter being the scene of some important debate or other, almost always left unsatisfyingly resolved at best.

But the provisional nature of each of these debates, the way that the novel presents arguments and ideas inconsistently from chapter to chapter, the fact that despite our fondness for the reform-minded members of the Benares Municipal Council, even they do not ultimately agree on what it is that they are trying to accomplish or why—leaving Suman, ultimately, very much alone—places the novel very importantly historically at the beginning of an ideological opening that the novel only uneasily acknowledges.

This is a novel still in search of an ideology and an idiom: here is one of the first attempts of Hindi trying to argue its case as an equal player in the world of Indian letters. One such argument takes place during the debates in the Hindu section of the Municipal Council. In the course of a touchy repartee about whether financial losses should be suffered for the sake of moral reform, Kumvar Aniruddh Singh, in a moment of bright irony, interrupts the conversation and changes its direction by wittily attacking Prabhakar Rao, the editor of the local paper, *Jagat*:

Sir, you spend all your time in editing your newspaper. You don't have the time to enjoy the pleasures of life, do you? But those of us who are carefree need some way to entertain ourselves, don't we? We can spend our evenings playing polo, our afternoons napping, and our mornings in talking to government officials or riding our horses. But what are we to do between the evening and ten o'clock at night? Today you suggest that we should evict the courtesans from the city. When tomorrow you propose that every dance, concert, or party in this district should have approval from this board, it will become quite impossible for us to survive.

(Premchand 2005, 140)

When Prabhakar Rao suggests that Kumvar Aniruddh Singh should read something if he needs entertainment, the latter mocks the importance of books altogether:

We [the rich] are debarred from reading. We don't want to become book-worms. We have already learned all of the things that we need in order to lead a successful life. We know the dances of Spain and France. You may not even have heard of them. You can put me before a piano and I will play a tune that will put even Mozart to shame. We know all about English morals and customs. We know when to wear solar *topis* and when to put on a turban. We read books as well. You will find that my bookshelves are filled with books, but I don't rely on them. This resolution of yours will be the end of us.

(*ibid.*)

Aniruddh Singh is undoubtedly Premchand's favorite character in these debates, as his most important function seems to be to expose the hypocrisy and stupidity of the people around him—and it is clear that Premchand has contempt for most of the council members, whose rhetorical flourishes are so incommensurate with their own personal ethics. The moral heroes of the narrative—Padamsingh, a lawyer, and Vithaldas, a social worker—are characterized by their perfect earnestness and sincerity, while the members of the Municipal Council are, more or less, all hypocrites and opportunists. Aniruddh Singh, the wealthiest zamindar in the district, brings a patrician irony that cuts through the posturing of the nouveau bourgeois who populate the Council. Here, Aniruddh Singh caricatures the self-interestedness of the people around him by translating it into an ironic exposé of his own lifestyle. The basic position—that the taste for luxuries must be indulged and that there is nothing of value in literature that is not better realized in real life, even when describing rare, foreign things—is clearly a ridiculous proposition, as is the self-satire of the lives of the idle rich. But the ironic intervention is perfectly misunderstood by everyone, who, as Kumwar Singh points out, cannot see the way that their class interests dictate their feigned moral outrage. Later in the novel, when Padamsingh attempts to win Aniruddh Singh over to his position because he believes that the zamindar actually wants courtesans to continue working in Benares, he learns that Aniruddh Singh's position has been misrepresented to him by the other members of the Hindu council.

Aniruddh Singh responds to the charge that he has opposed the resolution to move the courtesans out of Dalmandi:

I expended all my energy in support of your resolution. I didn't think that the opposition deserved a second thought. I handled it all with a touch of irony. (Remembering) Yes, that possibility exists. I know. (Roaring with laughter again) If that's the case then you must see that the municipal council is filled with simpletons. Surely, you understand my sarcasm. Some people must have misunderstood. It's strange that none of the most learned and

respected municipal council commissioners understood my simple irony.
Shame! What a terrible shame!

(ibid., 163)

When Padamsingh reflects on Aniruddh Singh's explanation, he thinks, "If these men were so easily fooled, they are thick headed. But Prabhakar Rao was fooled as well, and that doesn't make sense. It seems as if his daily translations have worn out his brain" (*ibid.*, 164).

Translations, here, are responsible for the diminution of an ironic, nuanced, aesthetic sensibility, because they reduce the translator to a mere, literal amanuensis rather than raising his/her abilities to the level of a creative, original thinker. Too much translation, the argument seems to go, dulls the literary refinement of any linguistic professional editor.

The joke, though, about translations only makes sense in context, and it derives much of its power from the fact that Padamsingh is not a mean-spirited man, so his biting jab at Prabhakar Rao is all the more poignant because it is so out of his character. What, though, is the problem with translation, here? It is of course one thing to be tone deaf to irony (and it must be said that it is impossible to mistake the irony because the rest of the novel is so plainspoken), but it is another thing altogether to understand the practice of translation as responsible for the inability to read between the proverbial lines.

The inversion that Premchand is making, interesting because it is so unusual, is that translations make one unable to see creativity in one's own language, that translations make one believe that all innovations happen elsewhere and must be smuggled into one's own language, that they permanently retard the development of a genuine literary sensibility. Translation into Hindi is necessarily the acknowledgement of the hegemony of other languages. Disavowing translations, then, becomes the idiosyncratic formulation of Premchand's cultural nationalism. If, as postcolonial scholars, we normally attribute the practice of translation to the colonial apparatus and its attempt to exert power and authority over vernacular languages, Premchand here accepts a variant of the argument, put forward variously by Derrida, Spivak, and Benjamin, that translation involves an acknowledgement of the otherness of the other, a necessary defamiliarization of the self in favor of a more ethical approach to the politics of speech and access to media and power. At the same time, though, Premchand's position is also different in that he seems to be arguing that translations into Hindi actually hurt the ability of Hindi to develop its own literary sensibility. Translation here is not a risky ethical maneuver that might raise the status of the voiceless or a procedure which necessarily tramples over the rights of the subaltern, but a process of undermining the very language into which

a literature is being translated.

The joke had really been established when Aniruddh Singh had only a few lines before argued that translations were ruining Hindi:

It's really a shame that the country that produced priceless epics like the Ramayan, gave birth to wonderful poetry like Sursagar, has to rely on translations for even ordinary novels. In Bengal and Maharashtra, where they have a strong tradition of music, they haven't lost their sense of beauty. They still have wonderful imaginations and aesthetic sense. I have stopped reading Hindi novels altogether. The translations aside, there is really nothing of worth other than a few plays by Harischandra and a few things such as *Chandrakanta Santati*. This must be the most pitiful literature in the world. And worse, there are some individuals who have translated a couple of English novels with the help of Bengali and Marathi translators and who think that they are prominent literati in this country. One such man generated a word-for-word translation of Kalidasa's plays, and now he considers himself the Hindi Kalidasa. One scholar translated two books by Mill, not himself, but with the help of Marathi and Gujarati translators, and he thinks that he has single-handedly revived Hindi literature. I think that all these translations are ruining Hindi literature. Originality never has a chance to thrive.

(ibid., 162–63)

The problem with translation is determined by a specific set of historical phenomena that were produced by the material realities of publication at the turn of the century. Premchand's own fear that inferior translations were overwhelming the market, as well as the talent for Hindi prose, are here represented as a distaste for translations in general, despite the fact that Premchand had already established himself as an important translator in his own right, from many of the languages here objected to. That the clearly awful *Chandrakanta Santiti* is held up here as a marker of the rich talent in Hindi prose is some index of how much Premchand was struggling to make the case for Hindi's vulnerable power: every other vernacular language had a more seriously established reputation, while Hindi's had to be manufactured anew. That this is happening precisely in the middle of the debates about the abolition of the *kōṭhā* should force us to reconsider just how contradictorily Premchand argued for a liberal view of courtesans and a conservative view of the *kōṭhā*.

The argument that Hindi is in bad shape and that translation of great works from other languages into Hindi is ruining Hindi's chances at producing great literature is aimed at Hindi's chief competitors, not singularly identified as English. In fact, in some ways the argument is at least also aimed at Urdu, since as Kumwar Aniruddh Singh argues, everywhere one

goes now in Benares, all one hears are “ghazals and qawalis” (*ibid.*, 162). And the problem is also the decline in musical traditions in North India. In so doing, Premchand is merely advocating for a kind of linguistic and literary autarky that we might associate with the cultural nationalism of *swadēshī* and its demand for Indian-origin commodities, only Premchand is narrowing the field not to India but to the Hindi-speaking belt of the north and to the Hindu jati. This is also the reason that he has to stretch backwards in time to the Bhakti period of Tulsidas and Surdas, because the contemporary scene is so “pitiful.” But the argument is also a fairly conservative one when it comes to linguistic mixing or aesthetic sensibility. Many of the translations are good because the original languages have aesthetic qualities, while many of the translations are bad because they substitute creativity in Hindi for the borrowed creativity of others. It is possible perhaps, Premchand could have written the lines ironically, except they do not all appear in *Bāzār-e Husn*, where presumably they would have clearly marked the novel’s Hindi-centric and perhaps even Hindu-focused ideological ambitions. The version in *Bāzār-e Husn* is far more gentle:

How unfortunate it is that the same people who produced a peerless work like the Ramayan now have to depend on translations even for light literature. In Bengal and the Deccan the tradition is still alive, so the people there are not so wanting in feeling.

(Premchand 2003, 155)

In Urdu, the passage gently nudges in the direction of nurturing literary sensibility in general; in Hindi, the same passage militates in favor of fortress Devanagari.

The problem about the different treatment of Urdu and Hindi in what is putatively the same novel is compounded by the fact that every passage about translation and about Hindi literature is expanded and more developed in *Sēvāsadan* than its corresponding passage in *Bāzār-e Husn*, which can only serve to highlight just how important both of these questions were in Premchand’s mind as he rewrote the novel for a new reading public. In *Bāzār-e Husn*, for instance, the passage where Aniruddh Singh explains his ironic intervention to Padamsingh reads very differently from the one in *Sēvāsadan*:

“You probably misunderstood me. In my speech I said everything in my power to support you; what else could I do? In fact I thought it useless to talk seriously with those who were opposing your scheme. Instead, I adopted a style of satire and ridicule; (remembers) ah, yes, I see (laughs aloud) if that is so I’d say that the Municipal Board is made up of fools. They probably didn’t even understand my satire! The city of Benaras does

not have a single discerning individual among the enlightened, cultured, and wise members of its Board! I am very sorry indeed that you misunderstood me. Please forgive me. I agree with your proposal completely."

When Padam Singh left Kanwar Sahib's house he felt as refreshed as though he had been on a pleasant outing. His host's warmth and geniality had captivated him.

(*ibid.*)

In the intervening years between *Bāzār-e Husn* and *Sēvāsadan* the contours and complexities of publishing in Hindi (as opposed to Urdu) must have become far more pronounced for Premchand. If the problem in *Bāzār-e Husn* is merely the stupidity of municipal councils in general, the problem has clearly shifted by *Sēvāsadan* to include crucially the deleterious impact of those dreaded translations. That this comment could only be made later and in Hindi also reveals just how differently Premchand understood the newly differentiable readers he was encountering. But this is not reducible to the problem of hiding certain political commentary from certain readers; the deficiencies of Hindi were palpable to Premchand precisely because he had such an intimate knowledge of the publishing and literary culture in Urdu. In a letter to Imtiaz Ali Taj, composed around the same time as both novels, Premchand writes:

उर्दू में रसाले और अखबारात तो बहुत निकलते हैं, शायद ज़रूरत से ज्यादा, इसलिए की मुसलमान एक लिटररी कौम है. और हर तालीमयाप्ता शरक्स अपने तई मुसलिम होने के काविल समझता है. लेकिन पञ्चिशरो का अन्सर कहत है. सेर कलम-रोए-हिन्द में एक भी ढंग का पञ्चिशर मौजूद नहीं. बाज़ जो हैं उनका अदम और वज़ूद बराबर हैं, क्योंकि उनकी सारी कायनात चंद रद्दे नावल हैं, जिनसे मुल्क या ज़बान को कोई फ़ायदा नहीं.

(qtd. in Gopal 1965, 99)

In Urdu, a number of literary journals and newspapers are published, perhaps more than necessary, because the Muslims are a literary community. Every educated individual thinks himself qualified to become a writer, and there is an absolute dearth of publishers. In this ink-drenched India there is not even one proper publisher. The ones that remain are as good as nonexistent because their entire universe is a few cheap novels, which offer nothing of value to either the nation or the language.⁵

Here, Premchand's complaint is about the silliness of the publishing agenda that Hindi publishers pursue, as their entire universe is composed of a few trashy novels (*sārī kāyanāt čand radde nāval baiñ*) while the world of Urdu is marked by sophistication and refinement. The elision that he makes here, though, is of interest, because Urdu becomes a metonym for Muslim (*musalmān ēk literary qaum hai*). Many of the terms by which

⁵Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

Premchand would begin to distinguish the failures of Hindi vis-à-vis Urdu could easily later be utilized for an agenda that would have horrified Premchand.

One index of just how decisive a shift was being made in the world of Hindi letters was that Aniruddh Singh's argument about the relationship between Hindi and the other more established literatures in India was repeated, almost verbatim, in the Hindi presses which reviewed the novel initially. One reviewer, Kalidas Kapur, compared the literary scene in Hindi before Premchand to a garden overrun by foreign plants:

संसार-भर के भले-बुरे पौधे यहाँ मौजूद हैं। इधर देखिये तो बंगाली बंकिम और रविन्द्र के साहित्य-तुमनों की कलमें हैं, उधर गुजरात से लायी हुई सरस्वतीचन्द्र की बेल है। छांगों और छूमा के एतिहासिक उपन्यासों के कलमें लगाने की कोशिश हो रही है। कुछ सज्जन अंग्रेजी साहित्य के कूड़े-कचरे से वाटिका को सुशोभित करने का प्रयत्न कर रहे हैं। एक-आध कोने में छिपे हुए, इन-गिने साहित्य-प्रेमी अपनी सच्ची साहित्य-सेवा का बीज बोते दिखाई देते हैं।

(qtd. in *ibid.*, 94)

You can find every kind of plant—good or bad—here. If you look over there you will see trellises of literary blossoms from the Bengali Bankim and Ravindra, and over there a vine of Saraswatichandra brought over from Gujarat. In other places, there are attempts to plant the historical novels of Hugo and Dumas. Elsewhere a few gentlemen are attempting to decorate the garden with the litter and debris of English literature. And hiding in some corner, a few lovers of literature can be spotted planting the seeds of a true literary service.

The thankless labor of nurturing indigenous flora eventually bears the fruit of a fine literary tradition; the reference to *sāhitya sēvā* (literary service) could only be a nod to the ending of *Sēvāsadan*, itself: the sublimation of sexual desire and material wants in the sublime devotion to divinity in service. The hope, Kalidas Kapur concluded, was that novels like *Sēvāsadan* would fertilize the soil well enough that there would be a day when “there would be no shortage of Thackerays, Dickenses, Scotts, and Rabindras in Hindi literature” (see *ibid.*).

Premchand's position would not fit in easily with the dominant ways we have of thinking about linguistic politics in postcolonial literary studies. The cultural nationalist proposition is understood easily enough, but that the risk is not from excessive translation of Hindi but rather from the dependence on other languages and literatures whose already established literary credentials threaten the new, weaker markets of Hindi makes the mapping of this onto a colonial problematic difficult. Part of this has to do with the fact that while Premchand seems to have had a robust critique of colonial domination on India, it was not the only problem that he saw in North India, which was cleft by all manner of religious, class, and political

power bases that preyed on the weak. The novel is also written at a moment when modern communalism was in its earliest stages so the debate with Muslim cultural institutions is still part of the repertoire of nationalist renewal. The decentering of the colonial problematic for Premchand was also in some ways a reflection of the idea that colonialism did not appear to be waning in the years before the national agitations and World Wars.

Social reform threatened culture inasmuch as that culture depended on the institutions which held up the exploitative social and sexual relations in any economic arrangement; put another way, the feverish need to defend a cultural tradition comes at the expense of an ability to critique the economic and sexual institutions which maintain that tradition. But the reason why the novel can so easily abandon the *kōthā* is because its cultural capital no longer comes from the poetic traditions that the *kōthā* curates. This is in part what makes *Sēvāsadan* interesting: in a novel about courtesans there is relatively little Urdu poetry, as compared to what there would have been in a novel like Rusvā's *Umra'ō Jān Adā*. In place of the Urdu ghazal, Premchand turns to the Braj and Awadhi poetry of an earlier moment in Hindi's literary history to represent the music of courtesanal seduction and temptation; once the *kōthās* have been displaced from the center of Benares, the poetry and song that the novel captures are in a newly minted, modern standard Hindi, and the texts are much more about nationalist abnegation than about desire. In many ways, *Sēvāsadan* is already a post-Mughal, post-Urdu, and importantly a post-courtesanal novel, born of a certain kind of ideological moment in which social reform had already displaced one set of cultural institutions and created literary sensibilities that were removed from the world centered on the *kōthā*.

As an aside, very little in *Sēvāsadan* happens in the *kōthā*; it is mostly a scene of comedic anti-seduction and religious or moral instruction. All that remained was for the formation of a new tradition, the selection of a new canon through which Hindi could claim that it had never really deviated from the standard. And that is despite the fact that the novel was initially written in Urdu. Saving Suman from the *kōthā* is also about rescuing Hindi fiction from the supposed decadence of Urdu institutions—which is the way that we understand Ḥālī and Āzād's interventions into Urdu literary criticism at the turn of the nineteenth century—as well as the actual power and prominence of the Urdu literary scene and the seductions of other languages.

This is perhaps where understanding Premchand as a novelist under the sign of translation is helpful in allowing us to cut through some of the hagiographic modes of thinking about him and understand the real contradictions that he faced. The weak position of Hindi was like the weak

position of feminism in India in the early twentieth century, and sexual and literary reform would often require rearguard political positions, especially the patronizing and paternalistic solutions that are put forward in the novel. This is not meant as an argument that Premchand is a latent communalist or closeted antifeminist. It is meant rather to demonstrate that it is only when we think about the risks of translations, and the ways that translation is not merely an exercise in colonial domination or cultural chauvinism, that we can bring out the ideological and aesthetic force of a novel such as *Sevāsadan*. □

Works Cited

- Gopal, Madan. 1965. *Kalam ka Mazdoor: Premchand*. Dilli: Rajkamal Prakashan.
- Gupta, Charu. 2001. *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. New York: Palgrave.
- Machwe, Prabhakar. 1977. *Modernity and Contemporary Indian Literature*. New Delhi: Chetana Publications.
- Narang, Gopi Chand. 1991. *Urdu Language and Literature: Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited.
- Premchand, Munshi. 2005. *Sevasadan*. Translated by Snehal Shingavi. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 2003. *Courtesans' Quarter: A Translation of Bazaar-e-Husn*. Translated with notes by Amina Azfar. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Rai, Alok. 2000. *Hindi Nationalism*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited.
- Rusvā, Mirzā Muhammad Hādī. 1993. *Umrao Jan Ada*. Translated by Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husaini. Hyderabad: Disha Books.
- . 1963. *Umra'ō Jān Adā*. Edited by Zahīr Fathpūrī. Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab.
- Sadana, Rashmi. 2012. *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Trivedi, Harish. 1984. "The Urdu Premchand: The Hindi Premchand." *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* 22:104–18.
- Zaidi, Ali Jawad. 1993. *A History of Urdu Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.