

TRANSLATION AS INTERVENTION: SAMBHU MITRA'S *PUTUL KHELA* (A *DOLL'S HOUSE*)

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Introduction

In his letter to Edmund Gosse dated April 2, 1872 from Dresden, Henrik Ibsen expressed his gratitude to the English critic and translator for introducing him to the English-speaking world. In it he clearly indicates his “pleasure” at the prospect of him being translated into English, a task which would enable him to touch the hearts of “Det engelske folk står os Skandinaver i ånd, tænkemåde og følelsesliv så nær” (*Henrik Ibsens skrifter* [henceforth *HIS*]: http://www.ibsen.uio.no/BREV_1871-1879ht%7CB18720402EGo.xhtml) --“The English people [who] are very closely related to us Scandinavians”-- (Trans. Laurvik and Morrison, 1905, 231).

To be translated into the de facto lingua franca of the large parts of the 19th century Victorian colonial world was indeed a matter of pride and excitement for Ibsen who was then an author in his mid 40s, known only to a handful of European countries. Nevertheless, Ibsen knew that translation of a dramatic text is a challenging job, for it needs to communicate with a live audience. In a letter to Cornelis Honigh which Ibsen wrote from Munich on January 4, 1891 Ibsen emphasized the importance of retaining a “good, natural and fluid” voice, or “spoken language” (*et godt, naturlig og flydende talesprog*) in translation. He writes:

Jeg håber at De i Deres oversættelse særlig lægger an på at benytte et godt, naturligt og flydende talesprog. Altså ikke noget stivt bogsprog. At oversætte dramatiske værker er en særegen og vanskelig kunst. (*HIS*, Vol. 15, 79)

I hope that your translation uses a good, natural and spoken language. So not anything like stiff bookish language. Translation in drama is a peculiar and difficult art. (my translation)

Significantly, Ibsen is categorically dismissive of “*stivt bogsprog*” (stiff bookish language) in translation of his plays. This was an extremely important aspect of his own career as a writer, i.e., to bring everyday life and speech onto the stage, an effect he was anxious that translation may lose. Ibsen’s remarks can be read as a piece of advice to translators who should make sure that the translation does not lose its connection with the local culture. Seemingly, Ibsen’s prefers “domestication” to “foreignization” as a strategy for fluency in translation to ensure successful communication with the audience. Here, one may be reminded of the domestication technique that Enrico and Icilio Polese adopted to Italianize Ibsen in the 1890’s. The Ibsen plays Poleses chose for translation, “underwent a process of domestication which included the abbreviation, simplification or explanation of the most obscure and complex passages, and a softening of the plays

that might have been perceived as offensive and scandalous in Italy” (D’Amico, 2010, 14).

I will argue in the following that Mitra intervened in Ibsen almost along the same line as Poles’ through introducing numerous cuts, omissions and replacements to explain and interpret the Norwegian playwright in post-independence Bengal. Mitra interfered with Ibsen because he always worked hard to make his theatre appear natural in every respect. Mitra endeavoured to achieve the translation’s naturalness by his response, reaction to and reinterpretation of the source text. I will read Mitra’s *Putul Khela* (1958), a translation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, as an “intervention” and consider Mitra as an *interventionist*. Indeed, Mitra pronounces his voice by intervening in the translation through careful choices such as his choice of the title, selection and naming of the characters as well as his recasting of dialogues and treatment of swear words and special words. However, I will here only consider Mitra’s choice of the title and his treatment of the swear words and special words to read his translation at the linguistic level. I will contend that in *Putul Khela* Mitra purposefully modifies Ibsen to ventilate his own ideas and thoughts about his own society.

Conceptualizing Bharucha’s translation critique

Bharucha’s theorisation of translation as “intervention” can be seen as an attempt to discover “the original” by the translator in a different time and place with he/she assuming the role of an interventionist (cf. Munday. ed. *Translation as Intervention*, 2007 [1] by his/her choice of erasure, cut, sanitization and addition. While writing about his experience of directing *Peer Gynt* in Kannada, *Gundegowdana Charitre* (The History of Gundegowdana) produced at the Rangayana theatre in Mysore, Karnataka, India in 1995, Bharucha talks at length about the role of translator in an “intracultural” context. Acknowledging the complexity that translation entails in an intercultural milieu, Bharucha opines that “intracultural” translation is even more challenging and important than that of intercultural translation. The translator has to negotiate with the codes (linguistic, stylistic, cultural, etc) of ‘source text(s)’ as well as with the even more pressing codes in the target culture already complicated by “intracultural” exchange, exposure:

In the case of *Gundegowdana Charitre*, this [negotiating process in intracultural theatre practice] included Kannada and English; half-English, half-Kannada; Hindi; Hindustani; idioms from popular culture across India; and the gestures, grimaces, smiles, eye-contacts, nods of the head, and emphatic rejections that constitute the non-verbal resonances of ‘theatre language’. (Bharucha, 1996, 125)

Bharucha adds that his translator, Raghunandana, himself a reputed poet, director and dramaturg, reconfigured the Ibsen play by his “linguistic/grammatical/stylistic/rhetorical interventions at the level of translation” (ibid, 124).

It will be intriguing to employ Bharucha's "intervention" model to read Mitra's translation of *A Doll's House* at the linguistic level with regard to his choice of the title and his treatment of the swear-words and special words.

The title

Mitra's choice of the title reveals that he is interested in acting as an intervenient being. Ibsen's own title, *Et dukkehjem* which, Frode Helland argues, is an oxymoron. According to him, it is usual to speak of *dukkehus*, doll's house; as such, Ibsen's replacement of *hus* by *hjem*, is quite important (Helland, 2006, 136). The replacement foregrounds a contradiction — the dolls cannot have a home — thus intensifying the effect of oxymoron. The English translation of the title — *Doll's House* — falls flat against that of Ibsen's, for though idiomatically the title is spot on, it removes the complexity of the original title, the intricate play of words. Indeed, the dichotomy of home and house occupies a significant position in Ibsen's oeuvre. Helland cites a typical example from Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) to illustrate the dichotomy of home and house in the playwright. Maja and Rubek confront the issue as soon as they reach the resort by the sea:

MAJA: ...We could have it so nice and cosy down there in our lovely new house—

RUBEK (*with an indulgent smile*). Or, to put more exactly: our lovely new *home*.

MAJA (*brusquely*) I prefer *house*. Let's stay with that. (Trans. Rolf Fjelde 1965/1978, 1)

The rather casual note of the couple's discussion brings into light the differences between home and house. The latter is a physical entity which offers shelter and protection to people; the former is a concept based on the proverbial expression that home is where heart is. A cage is also a house in that it houses pets/beings; but it is not a home. Ibsen's title of *Et dukkehjem* pinpoints that the dolls cannot have a *hjem*; that a home remains a mirage as long as a *dukkerelasjon* (Helland, 2006, 136), a puppet relationship exists in a family.

A literal Bengali rendering of the title accommodating Ibsen's oxymoron would have been পুতুল বাড়ি (*Putul Bari*; Doll Home). But, as an expression it is unidiomatic. A more lively and idiomatic translation could have been পুতুল নীড় (*Putul Neer*). The word *neer* (Nest) romanticizes home connecting it to a pre-Fall state of bliss. However, with *Putul* (Doll) preceding *Neer*, the phrase may create an effect of oxymoron because an inanimate object like doll cannot have a home of its own. Even Mitra's predecessor, Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya's choice of the title, পুতুলের সংসার (*Putuler Sangsar*, 1944) with which Mitra's actress-daughter, Saoli Mitra [¹¹] is uncomfortable, seems a good decision with the *sangsar* implying household or family which corresponds to the translated English title, but which at the same time can sound like an oxymoron to an initiated reader. Nonetheless, in the Bengali context there is that other facet of *putul*

which allows for an acceptance of the Bengali titles at their face value, for usually a dear girl child is named Putul who can have a family of her own. [iii] Thus, Putul can have her own *neer* or *sangsar*. Ibsen's oxymoron is not evoked when such is the case. But the *neer* or *sangsar* or *bari* in the title then can serve an ironic purpose because the play toys with those ideas and because it ends showing that Putul's home is an impossible ask.

Mitra's title, *পুতুল খেলা* (*Putul Khela*) which is literally "Puppet Play" or "Doll's Play" speaks more when it is translated as "Playing with Dolls" because in Mitra's perception the human beings trapped in a corrupt and degenerated society inevitably act like dolls. The title also expresses Mitra's disregard for the institution of marriage which, as he sees it, is based on lies and deceptions. The institution asks men and women to act like puppets and that is what the humans have been doing for ages.

Treatment of swear words and special words

I will now look at Mitra's treatment of the swear words and special words because handling of those words invariably poses a big challenge to translators. Management of these words is a big test because in most cases the words, particularly the swear words, are culture and religion sensitive. The problem is multiplied in case of a play translation because translation of it becomes a test of adaptation, as it has to fit within the cultural and linguistic framework of the target audience. It will thus be interesting to see how Mitra deals with the words.

Swear words

Bjørn Tysdahl (2008) who has studied the significance of swear words in the plays of Ibsen from "*Pillars of Society onwards*", says that "Swearing, bad language, offensive phrases – these are inclusive terms" and argues that "in Ibsen these various kinds of usage are restricted to one sub-class: impious language" (2008, 69-70). Tysdahl says that women usually use "milder swear-words" than men and that these words "nearly always function as ... social swearing" (ibid, 71). He gives a look at the social swear-words like "å Gud" and "Herregud" which abound in *Et dukkehjem*. Nonetheless, Tysdahl discusses an instance where Nora uses swear words for a serious purpose, to express her desire for death, which she would like her husband to hear as well. The instance is taken from the latter part of Act 1. The rather light conversation involving Nora, Rank and Mrs Linde attains almost a tragic height when in reply to Dr Rank's query Nora says, "Jeg har en sådan umådelig lyst til at sige: død og pine" (*HIS*, Vol 7, 248) which in Tysdahl's translation reads "such an immense wish to say: death and pain" (2008, 72). According to Tysdahl, the oath "Death and Pain" embedded in which there is a reference to "the passion and death of Jesus" "marks an important stage in her [Nora's] development away from being the innocent songbird" (ibid.).

I will begin my inquiry with the above example. In R Farquharson Sharp's translation of *Et dukkehjem* (1910), Mitra's as well as Chattopadhyaya's source text, the pathos of the original is absent although in some way it retains the Christian religious fervor: "I should just love to say—Well, I'm damned" (Modern Library edition [henceforth, ML], 1947, 23). However, "død og pine" also has a proleptic function —

death and pain or torment do play a role in what is to come — that Nora considers suicide, etc. The phrase's proleptic function was also evident in the past — in Nora's experience of death and torment during Helmer's illness. However, it is an idiomatic expression in Norwegian. Tired and exhausted, one may utter the phrase to express one's disgust, which is devoid of any religious connotations. Besides, it can also be used as a light-hearted expression. It is interesting to note that in Mitra, the word 'damn' is translated into a very common expression, ধেত্তেরিকা (*dhetterika*), a familiar derivative of *dhutturi/dhet*, a back translation of which can be 'damn'. However, in the Bengali context the word is bereft of any religious connotation; it is one of the commonly used words in *adda*, an informal get-together of friends which played a big role in Bengali life in the past.^[iv]

"Herregud" and "Å Gud" have been repeatedly used in *Et dukkehjem*. The first instance of the use of "Herregud" occurs quite early in the play when Helmer, after having given Nora money, utters the word. Later in the act, Nora uses the word in her conversation with Mrs Linde when she says that she did not want Helmer to know "what a dangerous condition she was in" (ML, 1947, 16). The word in Sharp's translation is not identical all through. For example, in the context of the latter it is translated as "my goodness"; but, "Good gracious" is the phrase used when Nora tells Mrs Linde that "There was no gentleman at all" (ibid, 19). However, Sharp renders "Se der" to "There you are" (ibid, 5) and leaves out "Herregud". Because of its omission in his "source", Mitra also does not have the word in his translation. Mitra translates "There you are" into a one-word expression, ঠিক (*thik*; precisely) (প্রথম অঙ্ক: ৬; I, 6).

I will now consider the line in which Nora uses both "Herregud" and "Å Gud" (*HIS*, Vol 7, 241). Nora begins the line with "Good gracious, can't you understand?" and in the middle of it jumps up with excitement and says, "My goodness [Å Gud], it's delightful to think of, Christine! Free from care!" (ML, 1947, 19). In his translation Mitra does not include the first swear word; he translates the question sentence which follows it. And the second swear word in Mitra does not have any religious bearings. It becomes an intensely passionate expression when Bulu (Nora) addresses her friend, Krishna (Mrs Linde) as: ও কৃষ্ণারে (*O Krishna re*; Oh, my dear Krishna!). The expression reveals her state of mind, her anxiety and agony. Mitra intervenes by giving her some words which are not present either in Ibsen or in Sharp. The addition emphasizes Bulu's tension and torment. Bulu says,

সেই থেকে বুক ধক ধক করে ওঠে, কোনো কাজ মন দিয়ে করতে পারি না। চিন্তাটা কেমন যেন হঠাৎ সাপের মত গায়ের মধ্যে একেবারে কিলবিল করে উঠতো। এক এক সময়ে মনে হতো অন্ধকারে ছাদের ওপর গিয়ে চিত্কার করে কাঁদি,--অথচ কিছু করতে পারতুম না। কাউকে বলতে পর্যন্ত পারতুম না। কেবল জোর করে নিজের ভাবনাকে নিজের মনের মধ্যে পুরে রাখতুম। (প্রথম অঙ্ক, ২৭)

My heart had thumped ever since; I couldn't pay attention to any work. The thought kept wriggling inside me. Sometimes I felt like going to the roof-top in the dark and yell,--but, I couldn't do anything. Nor could I say it to anybody. Only forcibly I could lock up the thought in me. (I, 27,

my translation)

The point I am trying to make is that in Mitra's usage the swear words is devoid of religious significance. A look at a few more examples will further the claim. Mrs Linde wonders if she has ever told her husband the secret. Nora exclaims, "Good Heavens ["for himlens skyld"; *HIS*, Vol 7, 238], no" (ML, 1947, 17). Mitra's equivalent is once again a very ordinary Bengali expression, "পাগল হয়েছিস!" (প্রথম অঙ্ক, ২৪) ("*pagal hoyechis!*"— Have you gone crazy!) (I, 24). The commonplace utterance conveys disbelief at some weird proposition. To tell Helmer the secret is the last thing that Nora has thought about, hence the expression. A little later, in the same scene, Nora tells about the rainy days when she bought cheap clothes and saved money to pay off the debt. She thanks God, "Thank Heaven ["En Guds lykke"; *HIS*, Vol 7, 239], any clothes look well on me, and so Torvald has never noticed it" (ML, 1947, 18). Mitra's choice for 'thank heaven' is "ভাগ্য" (fortunately) which contains reference to some mysterious cosmic intervention; nevertheless, there is hardly anything religious about it.

Special words

Special words, the words Ibsen uses in his play to achieve some special effect, are once again difficult to translate. It is to be noted that Mitra's treatment of these words is dictated by his wish to localize the play. A look at some examples will clarify the point.

Mitra replaces Christmas by Durga Puja, the biggest Hindu religious festival in India's Bengali-speaking state, West Bengal and its neighbour, the nation-state of Bangladesh. As a consequence of the replacement, all allusions to Christmas give way to Puja. I cite here an instance from Act I. Krogstad visits Nora on Christmas Eve and he tells her that it depends on her "what sort of a Christmas you will spend" (ML, 1947, 27). Krogstad's Bengali reincarnation, Kestapada, visits Nora on *Moha Swaptami*, the day when the biggest part of the Puja festival gets under way. As Christmas Eve is a joyous occasion for Christians across the world, so is *Moha Swaptami* for the Bengali Hindu community. The replacement of the original by its local substitute creates a very familiar background against which the characters appear as live human beings.

I will say a few words here about Mitra's substitutes for "Neapolitan fisher-girl" and "Capri". Gone are the references with the changed setting. Indeed, Bulu tells Krishna that they have an invitation at their neighbours' who live on the upper floor of the apartment house. The mistress of the house, Sebadi (the mode of address suggests that the person is senior to Bulu, but they are very close) has invited her to recite in a sort of *adda* where there will be music as well. Bulu shows Krishna a sari and says that Tapan wants her to put it on at the party. The sari which she shows her needs to be mended as it is torn. The torn sari is a reminder of Nora's fancy dress which Torvald made for her in Capri and which too is torn. There is a subtle hint in Ibsen that it was Helmer who being extremely aroused at seeing her dance could not resist himself; that he broke loose and in a fit of frenzy he tore it apart. That he is always stricken with

desire for love making whenever he watches his wife perform is revealed by Helmer in Act III as soon as they return after the ball. Helmer says,

— to be alone with you for the first time — quite alone with my shy little darling! All this evening I have longed for nothing but you. When I watched the seductive figures of the Tarantella, my blood was on fire; I could endure it no longer, and that was why I brought you down so early. (ML, 1947, 75)

Because Mitra retains the line with slight modifications (III, 107), it can be assumed that it was Tapan who had torn the sari. Can tearing of the sari be equated with forced seduction? The idea of a forced seduction may not be wholly out of contention because in Mitra's translation, Tapan burns with fire as against Bulu's stifled coldness.

Mitra also replaces the references to Western food and drink with those common in Bengal. For instance, Bulu does not speak of asparagus, truffles, oysters and champagne in her conversation with Dr Roy (Dr Rank) in Act II when they talk about the extravagant way of living by Roy's father. Instead, Bulu and Roy speak of *pilau*, *kaliya*, etc, the lavish food items and *surah* (alcohol/wine) (II, 70). Again, Dr Roy does not suffer from a sexually transmitted disease, syphilis, the hint of which is there in Ibsen. As Beret Wicklund argues, "Dr Rank will no longer be 'rank'—the Norwegian word meaning 'erect', ... but he will die as a result of the sins of his father, who too often enjoyed the pleasures of goose liver and champagne" (Wicklund, 2003, 36). Because one with a venereal disease like syphilis is a suspect in Bengali society, in Mitra's version Dr Roy does not have it. Bulu tells Krishna in Act II that Dr Roy has tuberculosis which was thought to be deadly and incurable during the 1950's. Besides, Tapan and Roy consume a lot of *sidhdir sherbet* (a beverage of pulp bhang; III, 108) which replaces champagne.

I will now discuss Mitra's treatment of one of Ibsen's keywords, *vidunderlig* which is used repeatedly in the play. Throughout Sharp's translation, the word has been rendered "wonderful". For instance, when Torvald tells Nora in Act I that it feels good to have "a perfectly safe appointment, and a big enough income", Nora quickly responds, "It's wonderful" (ML, 1947, 8). In Ibsen, Nora's expression goes like this: "Å, det er vidunderligt" (*HIS*, Vol 7, 222)! A little later, in reply to Helmer's line, "Men det er dog godt, at de knebne tider er forbi" ("But it is a good thing that our hard times are over") (ML, 1947, 8), she confirms, "Ja, det er rigtignok vidunderligt" (ibid, 223) ! ("Yes, it is really wonderful") (ML, 1947, 8). To express her profound sense of joy at the role she played in saving her husband's life, Nora jumps up and claps her hands ("*springer opp og klapper i hænderne*") and then makes use of the phrase in the line — "det er dog vidunderlig dejligt at leve og være lykkelig" (ibid, 230) ("It's a wonderful thing to be alive and happy") (ML, 1947, 19). Again, Nora speaks of "det er riktignok vidunderligt" in the same line in which she uses the swear words, "å Gud" and "Herregud". Sharp's translation of the phrase reads, "Oh, it's a wonderful thing to be alive and be happy" (ML, 1947, 19). Besides, in the final scene Nora says, "jeg tror ikke længer på noget

vidunderligt” (*HIS*, Vol 7, 379), which in the English translation reads “I don’t believe any longer in wonderful things happening” (ML, 1947,92). Mitra too uses the word in the same sense as it is in Sharp. Bulu waits for the wonderful thing to happen. Mitra turns the phrase “wonderful things happening” into দৈব ঘটনা (*daiva ghotona*; miraculous incident; III, 130) on which Bulu does not have trust any more. Significantly, Mitra concludes with Bulu saying চললুম (“*chollum*”; good bye) as she leaves. He omits the last line of the play in which Helmer thinks aloud “Det vidunderligste”, “The most wonderful thing of all” (ML, 1947, 92). The omission reveals that Mitra does not believe in miracles, that the most wonderful thing will never happen because the relationship has been based on lies and deceptions.

Conclusion

Mitra’s translation of Ibsen sits within the parameter of post-colonial translation and it challenges the sanctity of the “original”. The *original* is not “complete in itself” and hence, it is open to intervention and negotiation by the translator. Since the original is never finished, it is, argues Homi Bhabha, “always open to translation so that it can never be said to have a totalised prior moment of being or meaning – an essence” (Rutherford 1990: 210). The non-finality of the original engages the translator with the “originary” in that he/she intervenes in it in a changed milieu.

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Summary

For post-colonial writers and theorists, translation is a highly political activity. As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi say, "translation is a highly manipulative activity" and it "involves all kinds of stages in ... [the] process of ["intercultural"] transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries" (1999, 2). They hold that the "the common translatorial temptation [is] to erase much that is culturally specific, to sanitize much that is comparatively odorous" (ibid). Rustom Bharucha terms translation as "intervention".

This article considers the Bengali translation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in 1958 by one of India's theatre legends, Sambhu Mitra (1915-1997). The paper reads Mitra's translation as "intervention", studying it at the linguistic level. It contends that Mitra pronounces his voice by intervening in the translation through making careful choices which include, among other issues, his choice of the title as well as his handling of Ibsen's swear-words and special words.

Biographical Note

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Notes

ⁱ The book includes nine essays which, as Munday put it in his short introduction, examine “various aspects of translation as intervention” (XI). Of special significance is the article by Carol Maier, “The translator as an intervenient being” (1-17).

ⁱⁱ Saoli Mitra dwells on her father’s choice of the title in an article entitled “Nora, Bulu, O Amra” (Nora, Bulu and We) in which she cites an anecdote: she attended an Ibsen seminar at Calcutta University in West Bengal, India in 2004 at which a professor raised the issue why Mitra chose to entitle the play as *Putul Khela* in lieu of *Putul Bari*. She thinks that the title selected for the Bengali play by her father is justified because it tells the story of breaking of a home; that it zeroes in on the metaphor of “play”. She is uncomfortable with *Putul Bari* and *Putuler Sangsar* because she feels that in Bengali these are not used to denote fragility of a relationship. After having thought along the line of Bengali lexicon, Saoli Mitra suggests that *Taser Ghar* (House of Cards) could have been an apt translation of the title, adding hastily that “a literal rendering is never adequate”. (*Natyachinta*, Vol 26 [1-6], 128-146)

ⁱⁱⁱ A good many girls are named *Putul* in Bengal. For example, the former prime minister of Bangladesh Khaleda Zia is nick named *Putul*. The incumbent prime minister, Sheikh Hasina’s daughter’s pet name is also *Putul*.

^{iv} For more on the importance of *adda* see Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007). In Chapter 7 (“*Adda*: a History of Sociality”, 180-213) Chakrabarty mainly discusses the refreshing and formidable influence that *adda* played in Bengali life during the British colonial rule.