

Meenakshi Bharat

University of Delhi

### **The Barbaric Soul: Lost in Translation. A Comment on the Hindi Translation**

Swami Vivekananda's appellation of Walt Whitman as "the sanyasi of America," seems to be indicative of certain innate qualities in the latter's writing that are Hindu in spirit. Indeed, Whitman was a favourite of not only the charismatic yogi but also of leading Indian poets such as Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate from India. T.R. Rajasekharaiah, in his *The Roots of Whitman's Grass* (1970), had pointed out that even as early as 1881, commentaries in newspapers had seen parallelisms between Whitman's thoughts and "Asiatic" themes (Rajasekharaiah 35). Critic after critic has spent a great deal of time trying to figure out the extent or the limits of the influence of the East on Whitman's writing (cf. Preston). It is strange that despite this evident innate tilt towards the Orient, it was not till 2011 that a Hindi translation of *Leaves of Grass* was published as *Ghaas ki Pattiyan* by Chandrabali Singh. Whether this translation of Whitman's predilection towards oriental mysticism is able to re-translate the mysticism is a moot question. Whatever the overall level of spirituality in his poetry, I am going to attempt a reading of the "spirit" in the controversial "barbaric yawp" lines in the context of the Hindi version.

Indeed, at first reading, the approximation of the translation of the poetry to the original certainly seems to indicate a natural proclivity to the east. I am going to focus on the three lines:

*English:*

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab  
and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,  
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

*Hindi (in Devanagari script):*

चितकब्रा बाज़ पार्श्व में नीचे टूट कर चला आता है और मुझ पर यह आरोप लगाता है,  
मेरी वाचलता और यायावरी की शिकायत करता है  
में भी तनिक-सा पाल्तु नहीं हो पाया, मेरा भी अनुवाद करना असम्भव है,  
में अपनी बर्बर टैं टैं दुनिया की छतों पर सुनाता हूँ.

*Phonetic pronunciation:*

*Chitkabraa baaz paarshva mein neeché toot kar chala aata hai aur mujh par yeh  
aarop lagaata hai,*

*Meri vaachaltaa aur yaayaavari kee shikaayat kartaa hai.*

*Main bhee tanik-sa paaltu nabin ho paayaa, meraa bhee anuvaad karnaa asambhav  
hai,*

*Main apni berber tain tain duniyaa ki chhaton ké upar sunaata hoon.*

The fact that strikes one immediately is how close this translation is, with every word finding almost an exact equivalent, almost as if the translator had sat with a dictionary and picked what he thought were the most suitable options. This does not, necessarily, make for a *good* translation. In his yearning to remain close to the text, the translator has unnecessarily ended up trying to find exact lexical equivalents. Moreover, the poetry, the rhythm is somehow lost in this word-to-word equivalence.

But there are departures from these exact word meanings too, all of which do not do anything for the poetry; rather, they quite often detract from the original: *Toot kar*: means “on being broken.” The word for “swoops” is *toot padna*. This not only makes for an entirely different meaning but actually demeans the action of the grand bird. “By”: in line 1 is given an expanded translation as *parshav mein neeche* or “down in the neighbourhood/vicinity.” The line is thereby lengthened and nothing gained. *Neeche* alone (down here) may have worked better. *Yeh* in the Hindi is redundant which re-translated

reads “accuses me of this.” The re-translation of the Hindi for “I too am not a bit tamed” reads: “I too could not become tamed.” The change in tense limits the continuing “is-ness” of the quality, emphasizing an abiding attribute. This is asserted with certainty and a positive sense of triumph since the testing is also implied as ongoing. The translation, on the other hand, implies “the effort to tame me was made and I could not be tamed.” In this, the face-off has happened, the poet has been tested. In the original, the testing is continuous, and, correspondingly, the withstanding of the “taming” act is either continuous or to come. It is obvious that the sense that the poet wants to communicate is one of indomitability.

The re-translation of “I too am untranslatable” reads “Of me too, to make a translation is impossible.” Here too, the exactness of the word “translation” limits the meaning to the act whereas in the original it is an abiding quality of the unfathomable in the poet. The last line submits an interesting eye-opener to the relationship between Indo-European languages: the similarity between barbaric and बर्बर (*ber-ber*) speaks of common origins and roots. Furthermore, the meaning in both the languages is exactly the same: savage, lacking polish, refinement, culture, etc.

The next word equivalent for “yawp” is even more interesting. The reduplication, a linguistic feature common to Hindi and other Indian languages, *Tain tain* (तै) has some of the same slangy, everyday dismissal of what can only be called prating but also incorporates the sense of nagging. The poet is certainly not engaged in this demeaning activity. The word *badbad* (pronounce *budbud*) is closer to the yawp.

Ultimately, a confident sense of self makes Whitman able to turn the “barbaric” into a positive quality—in fact, a tongue-in-cheek inversion to mean something quite the opposite, superior, with the added implication that anything regular, anything normal is neither acceptable nor laudable. The Hindi use of *tain tain* (to approximate the French pronunciation of Tintin) unfortunately, is not able to capture the notion of the simultaneous maintenance of superiority and the exact irreverent sense of turning cockily against civilizing “taming” efforts which are evident in the original “yawp.” Moreover, *tain tain* with its other meaning of the chattering of parrots hardly comes close to the majesty of the hawk.

The great hawk sees the limitations in the human being, the limited poet. When the poet counters that he “too,” like the hawk, is untamed (a free spirit), and he too is unfathomable (has unplumbed depths), he is simultaneously separating himself from the run-of-the-mill humans, and setting the hawk up as an ideal. The accusation, the complaint of the hawk comes because it has missed seeing this quality in him. Whitman’s lines then, raise the enunciation of the “barbaric yawp” to the level of an assertion of the eastern ideal of submersion of the consciousness in the universe, to become one with it. Because of this yawp then, the poet is one with the hawk, with nature, and as such, achieves a romantic superiority to the unawakened, tamed, “translated” of the world. To me, this translation fails to achieve the grandness of the original spiritual enterprise.

### Works Cited

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### Summary

Walt Whitman’s poetry displays a marked inclination towards oriental mysticism. It is this connection that I seek to examine in the latter day Hindi translation of *Leaves of Grass* by Chandrabali Singh.

**Key words:** comparative literature, translation studies, Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” Hindi literature

**Zagubione w tłumaczeniu: barbarzyńska dusza.  
Komentarz do przekładu na język hinduski**

**Streszczenie**

W poezji Walta Whitmana dostrzec można wyraźne inspiracje orientalnym mistycyzmem. Artykuł stanowi analizę tego właśnie zagadnienia w kontekście najnowszego tłumaczenia *Leaves of Grass* autorstwa Chandrabali Singh.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komparatystyka literacka, studia przekładoznawcze, Walt Whitman, „Pieśń o mnie”, literatura hinduska