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Kaukab's Magic Powers: Strategies for *Dastan* Translation

VERRIER ELWIN, one of the great scholars of South Asian folklore, did a good deal of translation as well. For his most famous folktale collection, *Folktales of Mahakoshal*, he committed himself to a scrupulously simple approach: in the translations “there should be no extra words, no fresh images, no alien ideas.” He thus managed to achieve, as Dr. Mazharul Islam puts it, a “clear and straightforward” style which “looks like a piece of translation, not an original creation or a boringly literal transference of the text into English.”¹

Other translators, by contrast, set themselves the goal of “transcreation.” They recognize the impossibility of perfectly faithful translation, and proceed to make a virtue of necessity. The transcreator feels free to touch up the text, using his own interpretive sensibility. A commitment to transcreation permits one, for example, to convert Premchand’s two “*vir*,” in the crucial last sentences of “*Shaṭranj kē Kḥilārī*,” into “these two flowers of Moghul chivalry.”²

No doubt practice generally falls somewhere between these two visions. But of the two, my own choice inclines toward the former, especially in working with prose. I’d like to achieve a translation that is as straightforward as it can be, as exact as good English usage will admit. Thus I try to avoid importing any highly marked turns of phrase: no modern slang, no archaisms, no striking idioms or picturesque images, no

¹Mazharul Islam, *A History of Folktale Collections in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan*, 2nd ed., (Calcutta: Panchali Prakasan, 1970), p. 182. Elwin’s remark, quoted by Islam, comes from the introduction to *Folktales of Mahakoshal*.

²Nandini Nopany and P. Lal, trs., *Twentyfour Stories by Premchand* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980), p. 28.

interpretive flourishes. I work toward a language that is willing to “look like a translation” in order to be as far as possible a faithful bearer of a message from another culture. Can one then avoid making a “boringly literal transference” of the text? Can an English style emerge that will capture and convey the appeal of the original? The translator can only try; the rest is not his business. The reader must be the real judge. Translating Urdu *dāstān* literature, while certainly less problematical than translating ghazal, nevertheless involves a formidable number of stylistic choices. There is the omnipresent question of punctuation: how does one deal with a text hundreds of pages long and entirely devoid of sentence and paragraph markers, not to mention exclamation points, quotation marks, etc.? Certainly not by refusing punctuation, for the English reader can’t (and shouldn’t have to) do without it. I try to place paragraph breaks where divisions of time or scene occur in the narrative. This is really not too much of a problem, for the text does sort itself into reasonable-sized chunks with markers like “*us vaqt*” to introduce new action. As for sentences, they can quite legitimately be organized in ways that sound good in English; the difference between a semi-colon and a period, since it often can’t be deduced from the text, must be based on style, on the balance and feel of the sentences in relation to each other.

And when to put an exclamation point? A surprisingly important decision, since the presence or absence of one changes the whole feel of an utterance. The *dāstān-gōs*, who loved sudden drastic shocks, would certainly have used exclamation points if they had had them to work with. This again comes down, it seems to me, to English style: there should not be too many exclamation points, but neither should there be none at all, and they should be placed where they do the best work. In making choices like these the translator must and should rely on his own sense of style. These choices, once made, can perhaps be illustrated more easily than they can be analyzed. My sample text is a portion of volume IV of *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*, by Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh,³ from the forty-six volume *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* published by Naval Kishore during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. This passage was chosen for its liveliness, *ravānī*, and imaginative elegance.

³Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, A.H. 1306 [1888–89]. The edition I used was printed in 1927, and the excerpt is drawn from pp. 1236–40. I thank Shamsur Rahman Faruqi for suggesting this passage, and for his invaluable advice and comments on the translation.

Paragraphs in the translation have been numbered for easy reference, and their boundaries indicated by corresponding numbers in the original text.

It can easily be seen that I have aimed at something approaching Verrier Elwin's simplicity. In a very few cases I have "improved" and clarified the text, mostly by replacing pronouns with proper names where the reference might be unclear, and by correcting what seem to be minor errors (the text places "*gā'ō-savār*" in Kaukab's army in paragraph [7], though it later becomes clear that these are really "*nīl-gā'ō-savār*"; and the number of bits of paper Kaukab throws can only be made to come out right by some fancy verbal footwork). I have also eliminated a number of introductory *aur*s, to make for crisper sentence divisions. But I have tried *not* to do anything on a larger scale, preferring to let the text choose its own devices and work in its own way to hold the reader's attention. (In particular, I was tempted to edit the repetitive magic combats of paragraphs [9] and [10], but I resisted.) There are two specific points which I'd like to discuss with readers of the *Annual*. The first concerns names and epithets: when does one translate them, and when does one not? This always seems to come down to a case by case, *ad hoc* decision. It is not tempting to call Kaukab "Star" or "Constellation," yet it seems right to render "*raushan-zanīr*" as "Radiant." I have always felt that "*tilism*" is untranslatable and should be adopted as an English word, but should the "*tilism-e nūr-afshān*" become the "Dazzling or Light-shedding Tilism"? I've just used my own intuitions, and it seems impossible to make them consistent with any abstract principle. Perhaps this is one more area in which the claims of English style, and the effect of certain words in English, should legitimately be paramount.

The second point is a particularly intriguing one: that of the frequent tense changes that occur in the text, as the normal narrative past tense gives way at times to the present. Where such changes are confined basically to one single occurrence, as in paragraph [5], sentence 2, and paragraph [15], sentence 3, I have normalized them into the past tense. However in the special case of name-explanations, as in paragraph [4], the last sentence, and paragraph [8], sentence 2, I have retained the present tense and added parentheses to show that these are asides to the reader. In all other cases, I have preserved the tense shift.

Sometimes the tense shift occurs in cases where direct discourse is involved. This takes the form of the direct mental discourse so common in Urdu: people's thoughts, perceptions, observations are reported as inner self-address. In paragraph [2], sentence 2, "Amr saw that the man's face now appears black," etc.; the man's changed appearance is reported

in ‘Amr’s inner direct discourse to himself. Similar cases occur in paragraphs [16], [17], and [20], where Kaukab and his party notice their surroundings; they report their observations to themselves in the present tense of their direct discourse at the time. I believe that a very good case can be made for *not* preserving this kind of tense shift in *most* cases, since it is so much less common in English than in Urdu. By preserving it one turns an “unmarked,” normal-seeming grammatical choice in Urdu, into a highly conspicuous “marked” one in English. I have preserved such tense shifts in this passage partly experimentally; my choice would otherwise be, I think, to report such observations as indirect discourse in the past tense.

In a few other cases, however, the tense shift is based on a seemingly excited, spontaneous mode of direct discourse from the *dāstān-gō* to the reader, as though they found themselves present together at the scene, reacting with amazement to the extraordinary sights before their eyes. A classic case in point is paragraph [6]. Only the first verb is in the normal narrative past tense, and all the rest are in the present: “When the light returned, there is no ‘Amr to be seen,” etc. This tense shift from past to present corresponds perfectly to the mood, for the light returning is merely a means for the bizarre spectacle to be revealed: all of the characters have vanished from the scene, to be replaced by a red wall bordering on a vast field of freshly severed human limbs dripping with blood. In this case, since no observer is present at all, the shift of tense can only be ascribed to the *dāstān-gō* sharing the excitement with his readers. But then how to account for the use of “*tō dekḥā*” in the first sentence in the paragraph, since no one was present to actually look around and see? Perhaps it is just casual construction.

In the next paragraph, Kaukab’s enemies—all 48,000 of them—enter the scene in the past tense. Then Kaukab appears, closely followed by a mysterious golden cloud, and with his face intriguingly pale from his recent sickness; all this happens in the present tense. Soon afterwards Kaukab’s teacher appears: he is dignified and venerable, but his appearance is not at all shocking or bizarre, nor is he a central figure in the *dāstān* as is Kaukab. So he is accorded only the past tense. In paragraph [11], a door in the wall opens to reveal a figure so monstrous and terrifying that it is accorded two present-tense verbs; and in paragraph [20], the corpse of a magician—usually signaling the end of a *ṭilism*, and thus a change of scene—is similarly marked with present tenses. Yet the reader will notice in the text other bizarre and striking occurrences that are not marked with the present tense at all.

There is certainly some logic to the changes of tense that occur in Urdu *dāstān* literature. But it also seems not to be an entirely consistent or carefully calculated stylistic device. And it looks more obtrusive and “marked” to the English reader than it would to an Urdu reader who is used to lots of direct discourse in the present tense. Should this kind of tense-shift be preserved in translation? Is it a literary device with valuable narrative meaning, or a kind of stylistic tic that says more about grammatical structures than narrative ones? My own opinion at present is that it is somewhere in between, and that a translator might legitimately take either approach. But I would welcome comments from readers of the *Annual* about this, or about any other aspect of the translation.

The translated passage begins at a point of success for ‘Amr the *‘ayyār*, Ḥamza’s faithful companion. He has captured the wicked magician Afrāsiyāb and stashed him in his magic bag “*zanbīl*,” into which he can put whatever he wishes, and out of which he can pull whatever he wishes. The (relatively) good magician Kaukab has been put out of action temporarily by ill health, and ‘Amr has stashed Kaukab’s daughter Burrān and two of her cousins in “*zanbīl*” as well, for safekeeping. ‘Amr’s magic gear, including his Cloak of Invisibility, has all come to him from impeccable, divinely inspired figures like Ḥazrat Ilyās and Ḥazrat Khizr; for while he may be tricky, ‘Amr is *not* a magician. Elated by his victory over Afrāsiyāb, he is perhaps not as alert as he might be; and so the excerpt begins . . . □

Kaukab's Magic Powers: An Episode from *Tilism-e Hoshruba*

Now when 'Amr looked, he saw two very precious thrones, and a chair of red ruby, arranged in the midst of the court. On the chair sat an individual with an ornate turban on his head, and on the turban was an aigrette made with the feathers of the *huma* bird; his clothing too was gold-embroidered at the neck. When he saw 'Amr, the man stood up. Approaching 'Amr, he said, "Congratulations! Afrasiyab's army has been defeated, and Kaukab the Radiant's unlucky days are over; he is now in good health. Through God's grace that king is in fine condition! Please bring out those prisoners from Zambil, and don't delay." 'Amr went over and sat on a throne. Feeling very happy, he first brought out Afrasiyab and Hairat and Khayal Jadu from Zambil. Then he brought out Afrasiyab's magic puppets as well, and set them down outside the bag. Through affection he let Burran and Majlis and her sister, all three, stay inside Zambil. [1]

When Khvaja 'Amr then looked at the man with the aigrette on his turban, he felt uneasy at heart. He saw that the man's face now appears black, while formerly it had looked ruddy, and his beard which had been white is now red, and his hands are black as pitch. When he saw this, the Khvaja sought to wrap the Cloak around himself. Just then that man pulled out a pear-shaped pearl, and blew over it into 'Amr's face, so that he lost consciousness. When the man worked a magic spell, a golden chain wrapped itself around 'Amr's neck, hands, and feet. And Afrasiyab and Hairat and Khayal Jadu, who were also present, all regained consciousness. [2]

Then that man said, "Oh Afrasiyab, you'd come very close to destroying yourself, when Lord Daijur looked into his magic book, and sent me to release you and capture 'Amr. Now get out of here fast!" Afrasiyab said, "I won't go until I've killed 'Amr." [3]

Just as these words were being spoken, a black cloud appeared. From that cloud a crow emerged, and the crow gave a piece of paper to the man seated in the chair. Afrasiyab said, "I'd rather die than live like this! I won't go until I kill 'Amr." With these words, he drew his dagger, and

was about to kill him. The seated man seized his hand, and again a cloud appeared from the direction of the fort of Nur-Afshan. (The name of this man seated in the chair is Lieutenant Devil-leader.) [4]

When that cloud came near, the crow began to turn somersaults, and loud crack-cracking sounds were heard. With each cracking sound, thousands of crows were produced. Then one crow opened its mouth. From its mouth a Pari emerged. She was of small stature, and she stood with her feet resting on the crow's claws. She said elegantly to Afrasiyab, "Oh King of Kings, please move along, you have to go to [the] Wheat-field." Saying nothing more than this, she turned a somersault, and darkness descended. [5]

When the light returned, there is no 'Amr to be seen, nor Afrasiyab, nor that one seated in the chair. A red wall passes along from north to south, and on the far side of the wall is a field with heads in it, freshly cut off, piled up a whole yard high on the ground. Thousands of arms, and thousands of legs freshly cut off from the thighs, are on the ground. Thousands of torsos are piled up on the ground. Fresh blood is flowing from them all into the field. [6]

Another cloud came there from the fort of Nur-Afshan, and when that cloud split open, 12,000 bear-riders, 12,000 nilgai-riders, 12,000 donkey-riders, and 12,000 tiger-riders, all armed and equipped, appeared. On a jeweled throne rides Kaukab the Radiant. At his back a golden cloud follows, rumbling like thunder. Kaukab's face is pale from his sickness. Now there was a flash, and another cloud, a white one, appeared behind the golden one. And from that cloud a throne inlaid with jewels emerged. On this throne sat an old man, extremely dignified, aristocratic, and venerable, with a pure white beard down to his breast, an ornate turban on his head, a dark woolen cloak fastened around his throat. [7]

When this throne arrived near the throne of Kaukab the Radiant, Kaukab rose and respectfully greeted the old man and kissed his hands. (The old man is Nur-Afshan Jadu, the Polestar of the Tilism, Kaukab the Radiant's teacher.) This elder taught Kaukab some Names. In the meantime, a beardless youth arrived on horseback; greeting Kaukab respectfully, he taught him some Names. Then these two went away, and now Kaukab proposed to conquer the Desert of Oblivion. [8]

With this intention, he began to recite the Name which Nur-Afshan had taught him. Then one head flew up from the field and fell on those bear-riders. Some drops of blood dripped from this head, and fell like flaming arrows on the bear-riders, so that they burned to ashes. Then a hand flew up, a cracking sound was heard, and thousands of drops of

blood turned into flaming arrows and fell on the tiger-riders' necks, so that they too burned to ashes. The donkey-riders and nilgai-riders, drawing their swords, advanced on Kaukab. [9]

Kaukab was reciting a Name, when a leg rose up on high, and drops of blood emerging from it turned into flaming arrows and fell on the donkey-riders, so that they too burned. Then drops of blood from the torsos turned into flaming arrows and fell on the nilgai-riders, so that they too burned. Then Kaukab recited some spells and clapped his hands, and an army of hundreds of thousands of men attended him. The whole army had bags of magic devices slung around their necks, and kept hurling tangerines, coconuts, and oranges as they came. [10]

Now as Kaukab caused his throne to advance, a wall became visible, filled and covered with blood. When the throne arrived near that wall, the sound of a crack was heard, and lightning flashed, and a door appeared in the wall. From that door a man emerged who had three heads: one of a donkey, one of a boar, one of a man. In fact, his appearance is so terrifying that if Satan himself saw it he would feel fearful and afraid! He has five hands: in one hand is a sword, in another a burning branch, in another a spear, in another a stone, and in another a head, freshly cut off. [11]

Coming out the door, he flung this head toward the sky, so that thousands of shooting stars broke and fell, and thousands of men from the army burned with a crackling sound into ashes. Then he turned the sword on his own heads, so that they were cut off, fell to the ground, and began to revolve. The one that was the donkey's head began turning itself in all directions, putting out its tongue, and looking around. [12]

Then Kaukab the Radiant pulled out from his pen-case a piece of paper; reciting some Names over it, he tore it into six fragments. And he threw one fragment at that man, so that his hand was cut off and fell to the ground. Now the man's torso, shouting "Kill him, kill him!" ran toward Kaukab in rage. Behind him was a clerk wearing a robe and turban, carrying in his hand a pen-case full of many leaves of paper; he too was coming. [13]

In the meantime Kaukab struck that man with a different sheet of paper, so that a second hand was cut off and fell to the ground. Then the man advanced and sought to fling himself on Kaukab. Kaukab threw four fragments of paper, so that the man burned to ashes. Now the clerk wanted to attack him. The clerk had not even managed to raise a leaf of paper, when Kaukab threw at him the one fragment of paper remaining out of the six, so that he burned to ashes. And then, taking out two sheets

of paper, Kaukab threw them at the wall and at the heads and hands in the Field of Oblivion, so that they were all obliterated as well: they burned to ashes. Now only that terrifying desert remained—there was neither the wall bathed in blood, nor the heads. Only the corpses of two magicians lay there. [14]

Then Kaukab, having conquered the Desert of Oblivion, went on until he reached a mountain pass. This pass was in thick darkness, no one could see his hand in front of his face. The army which Kaukab had summoned was with him. Now Kaukab walked into the pass. When he had gone halfway across it, he called out, “Oh Qahqaha Jadu!” Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when a voice came, “At your service!” and Qahqaha Jadu presented himself. He was a magician who had a bag of magic devices hung around his neck. Kaukab said to him, “Well, provide some light.” [15]

Qahqaha, taking a magic pearl out of his bag, recited a spell, and the pearl lit up. He threw it down on the ground to one side. And when they came out of the pass, they saw that it is dark here too. But a black cloud gathered, with thousands of moons in it, and in every moon was a lighted torch. Now everything became clearly visible, and they saw that there’s a road, and chips of black marble line the road, and on both sides of the road are jasmine and *ketaki* bushes which give off a sweet smell. [16]

Kaukab, enjoying the scenery, went on. He and his entourage had traveled for the whole afternoon, when they reached a very large mountain pass with thousands of arches built along it. And the breadth of this pass is two miles, and its length four miles, and in every arch is hanging a very large pearl. Then just as his entourage arrived in that pass, those pearls crackled and exploded; dust came out and settled on that army and closed over them like a ceiling. At that spot there was a very tall tree on which a kite was perched. [17]

Then Kaukab said to Qahqaha Jadu, “Launch your attack.” Qahqaha Jadu at once pulled out some black lentils. Reciting a spell, he threw them, so that thousands of holes appeared in the ceiling. But the kite gave a dreadful cry, and screeched very loudly. No sooner had she screeched than lightning flashed, and thousands of burning coals began to fall through those holes. A tumult arose in the whole army. [18]

Then Kaukab called out, “Oh Vulture, come here!” As soon as he called out, everyone saw that a Parizad was approaching from behind them. Coming forward, she stood before Kaukab. Kaukab said, “Oh magical Vulture, go, kill this kite.” Hearing this order, she went on for some distance and became a vulture. She struck her wings against that

ceiling which enclosed them like the sky, so that the ceiling was torn apart. Then this vulture approached the kite. The kite prepared to strike at her, but the vulture seized the kite's throat in her beak and squeezed the kite dead with her claws. [19]

Darkness descended and a clamor was raised: "The magician named Sparrow Jadu, who was the guardian of this place, has been killed!" When they looked, a magician's corpse is lying there; around his neck is an emerald collar. Kaukab said to Vulture, "Take that collar, it will be of use to you." The vulture went and took the collar. [20] □