

## Interview

### “Translation Should be Seen as a Dialogue Between Cultures”: An Interview With Prof. M. Asaduddin

Professor M. Asaduddin is an author, academic, critic and translator in several languages. His books include: *Premchand: The Complete Short Stories* in four volumes (editor and translator), *Premchand in World Languages: Translation, Reception and Cinematic Representations*; *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand and Ray*; *A Life in Words: Memoirs*; *The Penguin Book of Classic Urdu Stories*; *Lifting the Veil: Selected Writings of Ismat Chughtai*; *For Freedom's Sake: Manto*; and (with Mushirul Hasan) *Image and Representation: Stories of Muslim Lives in India*.

He is a Professor of English at the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He was a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA, and a Charles Wallace Trust Fellow at the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. He speaks regularly at literary festivals, serves as a jury member for several prestigious awards, and his translations have been recognized with the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Katha and A. K. Ramanujan awards for translation, as well as the Crossword Book Award.



**Kalyanee Rajan (KR):** Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview with FORTELL. Let us start with what got you interested in translation.

**M. Asaduddin (MA):** To begin with, I was always interested in language and had great fascination for people who could write in or speak many languages. More languages meant annexing more worlds, more world views and more perspectives. Apart from Bangla and English, I studied Hindi, Urdu and Arabic in school. In my childhood, I read a lot of literature in Bangla translation [*sic*]. Apart from the tales of Arabian Nights and Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyyat*, I read European and Russian literature in Bangla translation. I had a fascination for creative writing as well. But I soon realized that creative writing was not my forte. So, the next best thing was translation, which allowed me to stay in the world of letters.

**KR: Did you feel that translating texts required a formal training in translation methodology?**

**MA:** No. I didn't come to translation through any formal training. Of course, in school we had to do translation exercises as a part of the curriculum where we had to translate sentences and passages from Bangla to English, as part of learning English. This made me aware of how languages behave whimsically and arbitrarily, as human beings do. It was intriguing to discover that the same thing cannot be said in *exactly* the same way in a lot of languages; that there are *faux amis* (false friends) which means, you assume that you know the words, but you do not know them, actually. Formal training in translation might help some at the elementary stage, but ultimately it is one's sense of language and instinctive understanding of the way a good sentence/paragraph is written and works in the target language that will determine the quality of translation. Among the great translators in history, very few had any formal training in translation.

**KR: So we could say that ultimately, translation is more of an intuitive activity. As a translator in these global times, in your opinion, how far is the knowledge of the two cultures important? Is there a clash of cultures felt while translating?**

**MA:** Well, translation is both a bilingual and bicultural activity. It is seminal that the translator should not only know the two languages, in case of bilingual translation, but also the two cultures well. As a matter of fact, linguistic transfer is easier than cultural transfer. Cultural specificities are more resistant to translation. As cultural information is easier to find and access in the current globalized world, translation has become a lot more fun and easier than before. Translation mitigates clashes of cultures and establishes bridges between them. Translation should be seen as dialogue between cultures rather than a clash between them.

**KR: Talking about the actual process of translation, generally, what considerations go into choosing a particular text for translation?**

**MA:** There may be a number of considerations, and these may vary from translator to translator. Professional translators, who depend on translation for their living might translate any material they are asked to do, provided they have the required expertise to do so. An amateur translator might choose his texts for translation depending on his interest in a particular text, the significance of the text in a literary and cultural tradition and his desire to take that text beyond its linguistic boundaries, etc. Texts are translated to bring to light and the notice of a larger audience, [the] lives of people who face marginalization and discrimination of one kind or other, e.g. minorities, Dalits, women. Religiously inclined people undertake translation because it would help them spread the message of their faith and earn them merit in the eyes of God. Academics undertake translation to build a corpus of reading materials for their students, etc. Similarly, strong ideological orientation might drive translators to choose ideologically aligned texts for translation.

**KR: What is your opinion about omissions made by translators while translating a text? Do such omissions go against the very spirit of representing the parent text in another language?**

**MA:** A translator is not entitled to take recourse to omission or addition in her translation. It is simply unethical. But in actual practice, omissions are sometimes resorted to by mutual consent of the author and the translator. While translating Amrit Rai's Hindi biography of his father, *Qalam ka Sipahi*, Harish Trivedi was instructed by Amrit Rai to leave out certain portions of the original. The translation was published in 1982 by People's Publishing House with the title, *Premchand: A Life*. Similarly, Aruna Chakrabarty excised significant portions of Sunil Gangopadhyay's historical novels, *Sei Samai* (Those Days, 1997) and *Prothom Alo* (First Light, 2001) with the author's consent. Abdullah Hussein, one of the greatest novelists of Urdu from Pakistan has described how he was persuaded by the editor at Oxford University Press, London, to omit several portions of his monumental novel, *Udaas Naslen*, 1963 (The Weary Generations, 1999), while translating it from Urdu because, those portions, in the editor's opinion, did not "work" in English. One can cite any number of examples of this kind. Such omissions happen more often when authors themselves are translators of their texts. But as I said, translators should not undertake such surgical operations on their own.

**KR: That is a crucial point for translators to pay attention to. What is your opinion about self-translations by authors? How far are they to be trusted? I have in mind cases of self-translations by the likes of Premchand, Qurratulain Hyder and others.**

**MA:** Right. Self-translation is a part of our literary history, and is usually treated as a separate category within Translation Studies. In India, to my knowledge, Tagore is our first great self-translator (Bengali to English), followed by such others as Premchand (Hindi-Urdu/Urdu-Hindi), Qurratulain Hyder (Urdu-English), Krishna Baldev Vaid (Hindi-English), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya (Assamese-English), Manoj Das (Odia-English/English-Odia), and a host of others in different Indian language combinations. Writers translating their own work feel less inhibited in tampering with the original, and often, their translations turn into re-writing. There could be different motivations for such an approach—a certain notion of the perceived readership in the receptor language, to look in sync with the current trend (if the translation happens after a long gap), a desire to improve the work, to align it with the ideological position of the author at the moment, and so on. For TS scholars, such translations/re-workings provide much more fun to work with. The original and the translation, taken together, may be taken as an optimal or cumulative text, and can reveal the author's anxieties in a way that a single version may not be able to do.

All this may be acceptable, particularly, if the author-translators are upfront and honest about it. What, however, is unacceptable, is the publication of the translation as though it were an original creative work in the target language. Sometimes, the author-translator may be complicit with the publisher in marketing the translation as an original work which, to me, is unethical and unacceptable. It might be a great boost to the ego of the author, particularly if the target language happens to be a dominant one, with global penetration, but it does not serve the cause of translation and does not enhance the status of the translator in any way.

**KR: So, self-translations are complicated activities. What could be the standards of judging the validity or quality of translations in these times, especially when we have moved away from the fidelity narrative?**

**MA:** There are several valid criteria for judging non-literary translation, accuracy being the most prominent among them. However, in [the] case of literary texts, which are, admittedly, amenable to multiple interpretations, judging the quality of translation is not easy. Fidelity should not be defined in narrow, limiting and reductive terms. Fidelity to what, the letter or the spirit? Form or the content? Individual parts or the whole? Moreover, apart from the points of formal, structural, semantic, cultural, communicative and tonal congruence, factors which must be taken into account while evaluating a work of literary translation: how to evaluate the “literariness” of the source text, coming from a foreign/different literary tradition, against the “literariness” of the target text sought to be assimilated in a different literary tradition? Yet, we must develop

or have awareness of some evaluative criteria for judging the quality of literary translation, given the fact that we are often called upon to distinguish between good and bad translations, and translated books are selected for awards and other distinctions. The comments made by jury members who judge/select translations for awards are often too generalized to give the reader any clear idea about why a particular translation is selected against so many others. One needs both sound multilingual literary scholarship and translation scholarship to properly judge a work of literary translation, failing which such works will continue to be judged on personal preferences and idiosyncratic grounds.

**KR: Sir, again looking at the process of translation, which kinds of translations are more difficult to undertake in terms of genres, whether it be poetry, drama, fiction, prose, etc.?**

**MA:** There cannot be any generalization regarding this. It depends on what kind of prose and what kind of poetry one undertakes to translate. Some kind of prose may be more difficult to translate than some forms of poetry. However, in general, as prose is more expansive and poetry is cryptic and distilled, as poetry tends to be more suggestive than prose and makes use of more figurative language like symbols and metaphors than prose, it is commonly understood that poetry is more difficult to translate than prose. This may not always be the case. However, in poetry translation, additional demands are put on the translator if she decides to translate the form along with the content. There are two general strategies of translating poetry—metrical translation and prose translation. Each strategy has its challenges, advantages and pitfalls, which have been discussed in detail by André Lefevere in his essay, “The Translation of Poetry: Some Observations and a Model”. In fact, he has a book-length study on the subject. In the translation of plays, the translator has to keep in mind the performative aspects of the original text and must endeavour to recreate the same aspects in the receptor language version, to achieve what Eugene A. Nida has called “equivalent effect”.

**KR: In the same vein, what according to you is the role of para-texts, like the translator’s note, introduction, foreword, afterword, etc., in literary translation?**

**MA:** Para-texts are extremely important to contextualize a translated text in a foreign literary environment, and they often indicate the seriousness of the translator’s engagement with his subject. All scholarly/academic translations are accompanied by an array of para-texts to help the reader enter the life-world of the alien text. When Tagore translated *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* in English, it was accompanied by a forty-four-page introduction written by Evelyn Underbill, Tagore’s assistant, explaining Kabir’s historical circumstances and thematic

concerns, to prepare the western readers to appreciate his *dohas* in their true spirit. In this context, I may mention two extremely well-crafted volumes of translation of Ghalib's and Mir Taqi Mir's poems in Bengali that I had read long ago, and I dip into them occasionally. The translator is Abu Sayeed Ayyub, an extremely erudite Tagore scholar of Bengali literature, who received appreciation and encouragement from Tagore himself. The two volumes—*Ghaliber Ghazal Teke*, 1976 and *Mirer Ghazal Teke*, 1987—are rather slim, about 130 pages each in crown octavo size, out of which about one third is taken up by paratextual materials consisting of the poets' brief biographies, the literary tradition they belonged to, their historical circumstances and their thematic engagements. Ayyub has tried to introduce both the Urdu poets (they also wrote in Persian) to the Bengali readers by explaining their couplets in terms of Bengali poetic tradition from Tagore onwards. Not only that, he also knew that Bengali readers were by then familiar with Charles Baudlaire's poetry through the translation of Budhadeb Bose, and T. S. Eliot's poetry through several translations. He used this entire poetic tradition as a referential framework to establish correspondences between it and the two newly translated poets into that tradition. But for his erudite and imaginative introduction, much of the Bengali translation of Mir and Ghazal would have remained hazy or inadequately understood to [*sic*] the Bengali readers. Other Bengali translations of Ghalib and Mir have appeared since, but the appeal of these two volumes have remained intact.

**KR: These days there is a spate in cinematic and stage adaptations of canonical authors like Shakespeare. I have in my mind films like *Haider* and *Omkara* for instance. Do you think translation is in anyway losing its ground to transcreation and adaptation?**

**MA:** Transcreation and adaptation are also modes of translation. They were there in the past, and they will continue to remain so in the future too. It depends on the medium to which a text is translated and the readership or the viewership (in case of films) to which it is addressed. Just as some universal plots are adapted in different languages and cultures, depending on their local situations and demands, translation will continue to be adapted to serve local and specific needs. For his Kannada play, *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad drew upon Thomas Mann's novel, *The Transposed Heads*, which in turn was based on a tale from *Kathasaritsagara*. Adaptation studies is a fairly developed field, sometimes explored within the framework of TS. It offers important insights to translators, and expands the ambit of TS, rather than narrowing or undermining it in any way. The term transcreation, attributed to P. Lal of Writers Workshop fame, is of Indian provenance. The expression, not yet included in many dictionaries, serves

to explain a mode of translation where there are wide divergences between the original and the translated version. P. Lal demonstrated this translational practice in his book, *Transcreation: Seven Essays on the Art of Transcreation* (1996). The term also provides a fig leaf to those who want to escape being judged through the conventional, standard criteria of translation. Qurratulain Hyder was hugely criticized for mangling her works in the process of translating them into English. So, when she translated her magnum opus, *Aag ka Darya* (1959) into *River of Fire* (1998), she used the phrase, “transcreated from Urdu”, in an effort to silence her critics.

In the western tradition, such a practice is called Re-creation or Re-writing. Like adaptation, translation is in no way threatened by transcreation. On the contrary, it may bring new life to translation, as the volume, *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from Urdu* did. Aijaz Ahmad paraphrased Ghalib’s ghazals to a dozen or so young American poets, providing them all linguistic and cultural information needed, and asked them to recreate the ghazals in English. They did so, with varying degrees of success. It was an interesting experiment. Harivansh Rai Bachchan’s transcreation of Omar Khayyam in *Madhushala* revitalized the Hindi poetry scene, and its impact travelled from Hindi to Marathi and other Indian literatures.

**KR: Moving on to another vital area of great interest to the readers of FORTELL, what are the specific issues faced while teaching translated texts? Is there a different pedagogy, should there be a different pedagogy?**

**MA:** Teaching translated texts puts much greater demands on the resources of the teacher than teaching a text in the original. The teacher and the students have to be aware of the languages and the literary traditions of both the texts involved.

A text assumes its meaning in its contexts. When it is translated from the source language, it is de-contexted from its source traditions and has to be re-contextualized in the literary tradition of the receptor language. So, a knowledge of both the traditions and their contexts becomes important in the teaching of a translated text. It will, of course, involve a different pedagogy. The teacher should be able to give the students some idea of what Juliane House terms, “the source text with its linguistic-stylistic-aesthetic features that belong to the norms of usage held in the source lingua-cultural community, (and) the linguistic-stylistic-aesthetic norms of the target lingua-cultural community”. Sometimes, a text, to be understood in all its dimensions, requires that its reception history in the source language be taken into account. All this may be a tall order and the kind of scholarship and commitment it requires may not be easy to come by. But given a certain commitment and the technology available at hand now, it is not impossible either. What it also requires is that the classroom should be a multilingual space in

the true sense of the term. Teaching a translated text as though it were originally written in the target language will defeat the very purpose of teaching it.

**KR: What is your opinion about the efficacy of translation studies courses and their growth across the universities in India and abroad? Do you think they serve their purpose well?**

**MA:** Translation Studies has assumed the nature of a discipline deserving independent study and research, rather than being studied as an adjunct to Linguistics or Comparative Literature. It is as efficacious, or has the potential to be as efficacious, as any other human discipline, provided the syllabus makers, course designers and finally, teachers teaching these courses bring appropriate knowledge and rigour to bear on it. The objective of Translation Studies courses is to explore the history of translation in different languages and cultures, engage with different kinds and categories of translation, translation strategies, multiple translations and their roles, the concept of re-translation, translation and representation, translation and gender, translation and interpretation, translation reviews and criticism. Practice should be an important component of all TS courses, because most, if not all our formulations in TS emanate from practice. However, the primary objective of TS is not to produce translators, as sometimes people tend to believe, but to enhance and promote translation scholarship. For producing translators, we should have good translator training programmes. Certificate and diploma courses in translation endeavour to do that to some extent. But in India, a lot needs to be done to provide value addition to these courses, wherever they are administered.

**KR: Sir, I often review translated texts and this question has bothered me: how should translated texts be reviewed? Do you think the current scenario is producing fair and justified reviews?**

**MA:** This is an important and pertinent question. Though translation has grown phenomenally in India, reviews of translated works and translation criticism have not kept pace with it. Too often, translated books are reviewed as though they were written originally in the language in which they have been published. Sometimes reviewers even comment on the style of the original writer, forgetting the fact that it is the style of the translator and not the original author that is under discussion. Even relatively informed reviewers would give just a paragraph at the end of their reviews to comment on the process of translation, and that too may be couched in clichéd phrases like how well it reads, or how close it seems to the original. Often, they are simply opinions and does [*sic*] not give any insight into the actual process of translation. The climate of review and criticism of translated works needs to change.



**KR: Sir, you were awarded by Katha, the Central Sahitya Akademi and Crossword Book Award for your translations. Please tell us, what are the other major awards instituted to recognize and encourage translation?**

**MA:** In addition to the Central Sahitya Akademi, many state Sahitya Akademis also have introduced awards in translation, which is a welcome step. Then there are Crossword Award, DSC prize, SAARC Literary Award, Hindu Literary Award, and possibly others that I do not know about. In fact, there is a general move to recognize and award translated works both nationally and internationally. Translation cannot be considered a secondary literary activity, as the works of Nobel Prize winners are judged, year after year, in translation, to award them the prize. Sometimes, writers of great reputation also undertake translation as another facet of their genius, which only goes to prove that for them, translation is as important as their creative writing. The latest example in this regard is that of Jhumpa Lahiri, who has recently been nominated for the National Book Award, not for her original work, but for her translation of Domenico Starnone's Italian novel, *Trick*, into English.

**KR: So many prizes and counting! Maybe translation-themed literary fests are not so far away. Finally, sir, what advice would you give to budding translators?**

**MA:** Why not! And, the only advice that can be given to translators, budding or otherwise, is to read more and more in the source and the target languages and never lose their humility. Language demands unquestioned commitment and can both trap or liberate translators, depending on how much efforts they have brought to bear on their art and craft. Translations by many well-known translators are replete with howlers. Each text brings with it its own kind of challenges, and those challenges can be met only when the translators have brought to it a wide range of literary, linguistic and cultural experiences.

**KR: Thank you so much sir for this fairly exhaustive interview. I am sure our readers will not only get fresh insights, but will also be able to look at translation differently.**

**MA:** It is my pleasure.

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