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Pakistani Shades of Humour: Finer Nuances in Patras' Humour

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Abstract:

This paper falls basically on my own translation of Patras Bokhari's three selected essays, first person narratives, from the source language Urdu, Pakistani national language, into the target language English in order to introduce them to the wider audience for the appraisal of humour written in Urdu. This paper also aims at the introduction of rich humour in Urdu Literature lying intact for the contemporary researchers in translation studies. Patras, known for his Urduness, describes an experience as it is lived and his tone is suggestive and not conclusive. He invokes readers' imagination and demands their active participation in the reading where they correlate their schemas with that described in the writing to amplify the finer aspects of humour to the fuller blossoms. The use of situational humour in his writings has established Patras Bokhari humourist of class in Urdu Literature and influenced his descendants and heirs in humour.

Key words: Pakistani Humour, Urdu Literature, Patras Bokhari, Translation Studies.

Introduction:

Patras Bokhari is *nom de plume* of Prof. Syed Ahmad Shah (1898-1958). He is the most celebrated classic humourist in Urdu literature. He was an original humourist par excellence.

His humor is centered on overstatement and exaggeration. He creates humor by creating situational irony. Ansari introduces Patras, "His collection of essays, "Patras Kay Mazameen", published in 1927, is said to be an asset in Urdu humour. It is undoubtedly one of the finest works in Literature. Despite the fact that it was written in first half of the twentieth century, it seems to be relevant even today. [. . .] He also rendered great services at the United Nations (UN). One of his major contributions was fighting the case of UNICEF during meetings which were convened to discuss its closure because it had fulfilled its designated task. Patras argued successfully that UNICEF's need in developing countries was much greater than its role in European countries after WWII. His arguments forced even Eleanor Roosevelt to change stance of her country, United States" (A Proud Son of Land).

Patras impersonates his self as a narrator and shares the oddities and eccentricities of his experiences as Keenoy (1944) defines humour, "Many states of mind, such as those which produce satire, sarcasm, wit, by not speaking at all of one's own participation but merely ridiculing the situation of others, thereby take on a certain appearance of objectivity. But humour, concerned though it is with viewing life, modestly confines itself to the consciousness of the individual's *own* participation, and does not take any direct statement on others" (117-118). Hence, Patras laughs with his audience by sharing funnier aspects of his observed and experienced life and does not laugh at them.

My work on humorous essays partly owes to Longo's (2010) position about humour that has been "relegated to the margins of rational-obsessed Western thought and scientific inquiry. Paradoxically, rational thought cannot explain social reality in full" (124). It means that discourse of humour is complementary to serious discourse and contributes to another aspect of social reality. The present paper will bring the humorous aspect of human life and experiences to light. *Patras*

Ke Mazameen (Patras' Essays) is a collection of humorous essays written in Urdu ever fresh. I have selected essays of general interest and universal experiences that readers from across cultures can read, familiarize and enjoy. Great care has been taken during the interlingual translation that the finer nuances in Patras' humor are kept alive. The present translation work is based on the idea of interlingual translation as categorized by Roman Jakobson. The nearest possible English equivalents have been taken up to vitalize the intercultural transfer of humour and realize the equivalent effect, as Jakobson explains: "The translator recodes and transmits a message received from another source. Thus translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes." (Jakobson 1959/2000: 114)

It is predominantly "sense-to-sense" translation and word for word translation has been followed in the translation of direct speech especially where it does not compromise the sense of humor of the character and the reader. Major chunks of comic situations have been focused and translated, and other details have been summarized to contextualize the experience for the reader.

Patras Ke Mazameen:

To begin with, we can recall Bertrand Russell's (1950) "Preface" to *Unpopular Essays* in order to appreciate tinge of humour in Patras' preface:

> "A word as to the title. In the Preface to my Human Knowledge I said that I was writing not only for professional philosophers, and that 'philosophy proper deals with matters of interest to the general educated public.' Reviewers took me to task, saying they found parts of the book difficult, and implying that my words were such as to mislead purchasers. I do not wish to expose myself again to this charge; I will therefore confess that there are several sentences in the present volume which some unusually stupid children of ten

> might find a little puzzling. On this ground I do not claim that the essays are popular; and if not popular, then 'unpopular' " (xvi).

Similarly, Patras' "Preface" is quite witty in his overstatement: "If someone has mailed you this book for free, I am grateful to him/her. If you have stolen it, I am all praise for your passion. If you have bought it, I am all sympathetic to you. Now, you had better prove yourself a goof by appreciating this book. . . . The person who wants to publish its translated version in a foreign language, s/he better ask, aforetime, for permission from the compatriots" (5).

Like the Preface to *Unpopular Essays* by Bertrand Russell, Patras' "The Preface" to Patras key Mazameen (Patras' Essays) is quite entertaining. Unlike Thomas Hardy's stance in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* "Happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (385), the readers, in Patras' Essays, would, quite inversely, find that pain was but the occasional episode in a general drama of happiness shared in the following essays, namely, "Kuttey (The Dogs)," "Mureedpur ka Peer (The Saint of Muridpur)," and "Mebal aur Mein (Mebal and I)."

I-Kuttey (The Dogs):

The exposition of this essay, "The Dogs" is quite snappy, "Asked to the professors of Zoology; inquired from the horse doctor; cogitated for oneself but understood nothing, "What, ultimately, is the use of these dogs?" (59) The narrator is fed up with dogs' habit of excessive barking and narrates an interesting incident: "Just yesterday, around 11'o clock at night, it happened that a dog felt impulsive and flirty, came outside to the roadside and broached one verse from the couplet. After one and a half minute, a dog from the opposite bungalow sang out an opening couplet. Now sir! an industrious maestro, out of anger, sprang out of a confectioner's oven and recited the full *ghazal* (genre of

Urdu poetry similar to sonnet) till the closing couplet. From the side of northeast, a devotee dog lavishly and loudly lauded. Now sir! That *mushaira*, an evening social Urdu poetry gathering and contest, started that beggars detail. Some wretched had come with two or three composed *ghazals*. Many a dog had recited extempore *qaseedas*, laudatory poems. That hue and cry was raised which did not ever subside (59).

I blurted out "order!" "order!" from the casement for a thousand times but, in such circumstances, no one listens to even to a sovereign. One should ask them if one may if that *mushaira* was a must, they could have tried it on the airy riverbank. How is it ennobling to wake up the sleepers by crowding the streets? . . . And again, our dogs, of the local people, have been somewhat uncivilized in an odd way. . . . Some of them (the dogs) are as avid nationalists as they start barking at the sight of (a man wearing) pantcoat. . . . I have happened to visit *Sahabs* (English colonial administrators') bungalows. By God! Their dogs are so much civilized and decent that we returned full of praise for them. As I got inside the gate of bungalow, the dog, while standing in the veranda, braked in a low tone as "BUKH!" and stood tightlipped. I stepped forward, it also advanced a few steps and again growled in a delicate and sanctified voice as "BUKH!" You have two—a watchman and music— compacted in one (dog). Our (local) dogs are without a beat or rhythm—vocalizing relentlessly, caring neither for time nor for occasion and taking pride in the birth of Tansen (Mogul Emperor Akbar's court musician) in the same country (60).

The protagonist shares with the readers that he has always been at odds with the dogs. However, he has never beaten a dog with a stick. He can never stand the sight of barking dog. The readers may visualize him to be a chicken-livered. One night, on his way back from the theatre, on a turn, there was a goat right in front of him but his eyes mistook it for a dog, and he was all sweat. He was careful enough not to be bitten ever by a dog.

> "My greatest objection to barking is that the very sound suspends the whole thinking process. . . . God has created pious people in all nations and the dogs are not an exception to this law. You must have noticed a compassionate dog. Invariably, the marks of penance are visible on its skin" (63).

It walks with such humility and meekness that the consciousness of sin's burden does not allow it to raise its downcast glance. . . . A car driver honked incessantly (to such a type of dog), banged its (car's) different parts, got people to intervene, himself shouted many a time, that dog just opened its red drunken eyes while the head spread on the ground, took notice in a glance and again shut its eyes. If someone whipped it, it rose with all tranquility to stretch itself nearly a yard away and again reconnected the strain of thoughts obstructed for a while. If a bicyclist rang a warning bell, while lying understood, "It is a bicycle." Stepping aside for such a pretty ordinary thing violates its saintly stature (64).

The narrator relates if you, unintentionally, run over the dog's tail, it ferociously growls back at you. Later, for several nights, you have nightmare of numberless dogs clinging to your legs and when you wake up, you find your legs entangled in the cord of *charpai*, portable string cot.

> The teller shares a couplet of Urfi, the Persian poet:
> O Urfi! Don't be discouraged by the uproar and commotion of your adversaries,
> As the dogs' barking does not erode a beggar's livelihood. (65)

Finally, the narrator shares, "There is an English maxim, *barking dogs seldom bite*, it is fine but how to know when a barking dog stops barking and starts biting." (65)

II-Mureedpur ka Peer (The Saint of Muridpur):

This humorous essay is about a resident of Mureedpur who unwittingly turned into a venerable leader out of coincidence.

He used to report the proceedings of Congress procession held in his city back to his native town through writing letters to his nephew who shared them with a local newspaper editor and read to the simpleton audience. These letters were published in the "Mureedpur Gazette" to his ignorance. His people invited him to visit Mureedpur and deliver a speech to public gathering. He was dumbfounded to see the audience of five to six thousand people. The introductory speeches started and was said, "Folks! The person who has been invited to give a speech is a well-known and of high statured leader of India. . . . To whatever degree the city of Mureedpur may take pride on him is negligible as only a few men (of his caliber) take birth in every century and country"(89).

The narrator cum leader expresses his stage fright and nervousness in this manner:

By listening to the word "speech," I tried to recall the introductory words of my speech but, at that time, mind had become hideout for several impressions and the need arose to consult the scribed notes (for the speech). I reached into the pocket but the hand returned empty; suddenly felt light wave of cold in the hands and feet, asked heart, "Wait! Still I have many more pockets so don't panic," searched out all the pockets while trembling, but to no avail. The full hall was fading out of my view. The heartbeat started galloping, lips drying. Many a time, I searched all the pockets but nothing could be found. I felt like weeping at the top of my voice, bit my lips in helplessness when the president kept reiterating in his speech, "To whatever degree the city of Mureedpur may take pride on him stands negligible as only a few men (of his caliber) take birth in every century and country"(89).

The narrator goes jittery and forgets completely what to say. He tries to recollect the contents. He would sketch the present state of Indian affairs, say how idiotic they were but it is uncivilized. He tries to plan where to talk about Hindu-

Muslim unity and where to smile. He dragged himself to dais and started talking with parched throat:

"My dear countrymen!" Unexpectedly, the voice was really shrilly. A few laughed at it. I cleared the throat and they again laughed. I braced my courage and began speaking loudly. As I pressed my lungs that heavily, the voice was a quite noise that made many laugh and once they fell silent, I said, "my dear countrymen!" I stopped for a moment and resumed, "my dear countrymen!" and could make nothing what to say. . . "some say that the climate of India is very bad, I mean, that, here you find a lot of problems . . . Do you understand? (Pause). There are problems. . . (91).

"Oh Yes! The matter of fact is that two bulls used to live together at a certain place which despite foreign domination and climate. . . Loud laughter. . . For example take the example of a bundle of sticks. Sticks are sold costly. The reason is that there is great impoverishment in India. As majority of people are poor so, that is why. Like bundle of sticks. Just try to understand! If you do not rely on reason, your nation would be annihilated. Bad omen is imminent . . . . Laughter and noise. "Get him out. We want no more of him(the people said)" (92).

His jumbled speech is reflective of chaotic political scenario in colonized India. He narrates further

> "When they persisted (on my exit), I thought it appropriate to get rid of this nonsensical crowd. Jumped from the stage and rushed out of the door. The crowd followed at my heels. I never looked back and kept running straight" (93).

The narrator concludes that neither anyone ever invited him again to Mureedpur and nor did he ever wish it.

His exit is comparable to Leacock's (1910) narrator's bank fright in "My Financial Career" where the narrator after passing some anxious moments in bank and giving certain nervous tries, fails at banking and, finally, exits the bank, "As the big door swung behind me I caught the echo of a roar of laughter that went up to the ceiling of the bank. Since then I

bank no more. I keep my money in cash in my trousers pocket and my savings in silver dollars in a sock" (4).

III-Mebal aur Mein (Mebal and I):

The narrator shares the story of his university fellow, Mebal—a girl. They were enrolled in the same subject, had many common interests like paintings and music, would go to galleries and concerts. Both were students of English literature.

The narrator recalls:

"We used to argue on books. If one *discovers* a new book or an author, one would, definitely share with the other and, afterwards, we together would pass a positive or negative judgment on it. However, there was one "problem" in spite of all concord and solidarity was that we both were brought up in the 20th century. Ostensibly, we were quite convinced about gender equality, however, our ideas and approach towards life, sometimes, would belie it. In certain cases, she would take the privileges reserved for the softer sex as granted, and, often, I would become patronizing and ordaining –my duty as a male (113). It used to hurt particularly my masculine pride that she was comparatively well read. Sometimes, it would make my Asian ancestral blood in my body boil and my heart would rebel against civilization to assert, "*man* is the crown of creation". . . .Likewise, Mebal would exaggerate the gender equality to the extent that, sometimes, she would visualize women as world leaders and men, merely, insects. . . . Mebal would buy ten to twelve books per day and deliver them to my room and asked, " I've read them all and you should also go through them for the discussion" (114).

The following commentary on the book reading and gender race is quite interesting:

"First of all, it was hard for me to finish reading of these ten to twelve books in a week. Suppose, in order to protect the adrenaline ego if it had been possible to study them all by

sacrificing sleep and reading through these sleepless nights, still there would have been two to three indigestible books on philosophy and criticism that required longer time for developing understanding. Consequently, after brow sweating of a week, I would have to confess to the woman sitting opposite to me that I lagged behind from her in this race. While sitting in my room, she would have talked scholarly by raising her eyebrows and I would have to listen to it in dishonor" (114). "When I would open door for her, light match for her cigarette, vacate the most luxurious chair for her, she would take it not as her feminine right but rather accept it as a teacher's privileges" (114-115).

He recalls:

"Next time, when Mebal called on, I started commenting on the unread books, but I said with utmost care whatever I said and said not in detail. My criticism would have been superficial and would give shade of novelty to my argument with wisdom and ingenuity. Mebal asked me about a certain novel. My reply was quite audacious, "Yes! It is fine but not that good. The writer could not do justice with the modernist viewpoint. However, some stances are unique so (novel is) not that bad I glanced at Mebal with slanting eyes but she could not see through my pretention. Now she asked about drama. I replied, "Of course, I have read it! But still I cannot decide if its impact would be the same on stage as it is with the reader. What do you say?" (115). "This would not only save my honour but also would lay burden of talk on Mebal's shoulders. I would say about books on criticism, "This critic seems to be under the influence of eighteenth century critics but only slight (influence), at certain places only minor and his attitude towards poetry is very interesting, very amusing." Slowly and steady, I got expertise in this art. I was too dazed at the fluency and finesse with which I could talk about the unread books" (116).

The writer suffers from light stroke of influenza and his conscience chastised him about his deception to Mebal regarding books. He comments without reading when, *supposedly*, Mebal first reads them all and then takes part in the discussion. When Mebal tuned up with a flower to ask after his health in the evening, he finally confessed,

"Mebal, for God's sake, forgive me! Mebal, the three books which you gave me last week and I have critiqued them much without reading even a single word. I must have said something that would have made you see the plot." "Not at all!" she said.

The writer asks for her permission to leave her books with him so that he can now really read them. "Of course! I have already read them. Ok! I leave them here(with you)" (119). Once she left, I opened those books for the first time. None of those three books was ever sliced open (for reading). Mebal too had never read them. The narrator concludes, "Now I do not ever doubt the gender-equality" (119).

We can compare this ending with Jerome's idea in "On Vanity and Vanities" and find parallelism in their thought about gender "All is vanity and everybody's vain. Women are terribly vain. So are men — more so, if possible" (49).

Patras' narrator discovers Mebal's erudition and his misperception as the narrator in Leacock's (1916) "A Study In Still Life—My Tailor" comes to know about his tailor later in life, "They said the worry of his business had helped to kill him. I could not have believed it. It always seemed so still and tranquil—weaving his tape about his neck and marking measures and holding cloth against his leg beside the sunlight of the window in the back part of the shop. Can a man die of that?" (66).

Patras' Mebal and Leeckock's Tailor are type characters whom we deal with in everyday life. With all our assumptions, suppositions and faulty judgments, we know these people at surface level as good acquaintances. The sudden revelation

about their innerselves is shocking but, at the same time, it also brings us to the bitter reality that a human being is a complex social-psychological being who is quite harder to understand yet the internal contradiction in our perception and reality also makes the scene comic.

Conclusion:

Patras' selected essays are rich source of humour preserved in Urdu language. The present study has brought the lighter vein of Pakistani society and its readership to light. The comparison of humour in Urdu with English shows that there is universal appeal to humour across cultures, boundaries and languages. People around the word keep living with their eccentricities and oddities, enjoy their humorous indirect description, relate these written experiences to their own lives and laugh away them. Patras writings stand him in good stead with the renowned classic humourists writing in English language who have left a legacy of laughter that has been bloomed and brought to full blossom by their descendants.

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