



The 'wholeness' in and of *Godan!*

Nitya Pawar ✉

PhD Research Scholar, Ashoka University, India

Abstract

This paper delves into the intricacies of translation through an in-depth analysis of Gordon C. Roadarmel's English rendition of Munshi Premchand's renowned novel, *Godan*. The novel, a poignant exploration of social, economic, and personal conflicts in pre-independence India, revolves around the protagonist, Hori, a peasant whose desire to own a cow leads him through trials and tribulations, ultimately resulting in his destruction. Roadarmel's translation, titled *The Gift of a Cow*, has faced mixed reviews, with scholars such as Ludo Rocher and Robert O. Swan offering varying perspectives on its linguistic fidelity and readability. The paper engages with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of the translation, particularly her assertion that it appears "boringly literal" and lacks a sense of the original as a whole. The discussion expands to explore the broader question of what it means for a translation to appear as a whole. The analysis focuses on Roadarmel's choices in translating metaphors and idioms, arguing that a close reading of the text, rather than adherence to a singular translation approach, contributes to the wholeness of the translated work. This investigation seeks to enrich the understanding of meaning-making in translation practices, emphasizing the nuanced relationship between the translator and the text.

Keywords: translation, Munshi Premchand, Hindi novel, *Godaan*, translation ethics



Quality Education

Introduction

Munshi Premchand's *Godan* (1936) is one of the most celebrated novels in Indian literature. It wonderfully captures the social, economic, and personal conflicts of rural and urban settings in pre-independence India. The novel revolves around a peasant, Hori, and his family. Hori wants to own a cow which will give him the societal status and in trying to fulfill this desire he goes through trials and tribulations which result in him being torn apart leading to his destruction.

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The novel depicts the struggles of the peasant community in colonial times while raising questions surrounding gender, religion, and education among other themes.

The novel has been translated into English and other Indian languages multiple times and has also been adapted as a movie (1963) and a television series (2004). There have been many translations of *Godan* in English, from which only the Gordon C. Roadarmel version, titled *The Gift of a Cow*, has survived the test of time and is the one that this paper investigates. Reviewers, while considering his translation closest to the Hindi novel linguistically, have mixed opinions about its readability as a text in English (Bender, 2017; Rocher, 1969; Swan, 1970). While Ludo Rocher points out that the translation lacks consistency in giving meaning to a word throughout the text (Rocher, 1969), Robert O. Swan observes that the translator has tried to remain as close to the original as possible (Swan, 1970). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also reviewed Roadarmel's translation, and along with commenting on the social realism in the plotline of the novel like others, she looks at the specifics of translation in a more detailed manner. According to her, "The present volume is a poor translation ... [and] is boringly literal" (Spivak, 1970, p. 6). While noting the multiple errors in syntax, consistency, grammar, and translating idioms, she goes on to say that "... the real problem of this translation is not only that its prose is too memorable in its minutiae, but that it lacks a sense of the original as a whole" (Spivak, 1970, p.7). Considering Spivak's criticism, this paper centers itself around the question: what does it mean for a translation to appear as a whole? To answer this question, this paper studies Roadarmel's translation along with the original *Godan*. The paper first demonstrates how the original text makes correlations between the peasant life and the cow explicitly and implicitly. Then, the paper discusses Roadarmel's choice of retaining this connection in its implicit sense by choosing to not translate an important sentence word for word as he has claimed and for which Spivak accuses him of being boringly literal. Then, the article moves to show how a wholesome translation captures the essence by having a deep intimate relationship with the world presented in the text as opposed to being literal. Taking further Spivak's comments on the linguistic schematic of Roadarmel's translation, this paper looks at his choices of translating the metaphor of cow dynamically at a certain instance and maintaining the literalness or formal equivalence concerning idioms and metaphors at other places, while not mentioning anything about this choice in the introduction. This paper argues that an intimate relationship with the text, or in other words, a close reading of the text is what constitutes the wholeness of the translated text, thereby complexifying the idea of meaning-making in translation practices.

The Gift of the Cow

In Hinduism the cow is considered sacred and an embodiment of the Earth and its resources. It is believed that all 33 crore gods of the Hindu pantheon reside in different parts of the body of the celestial cow, Kamdhenu. The symbol of the cow has enjoyed enormous significance across the past and present of modern India and has even been an important catalyst in the Indian struggle for freedom—where the battle of 1857 was cemented on the usage of beef in weaponry. The Indian soldiers were asked to open the gunpowder cartridges laced with tallow with their mouths, thereby maligning the religious choices and identity of the Hindus among them. The soldiers resisted the order, leading to the spark of mutiny. M. K. Gandhi has even said that "the central fact of Hinduism is cow protection" (Gandhi, 1921, 36). In art history too, the metaphor of a cow has remained an important feature and has been used by artists and other

creatives extensively. Munshi Premchand's *Godan* is a prime example for illustrating the significance of the 'cow' in Indian literature.

The word *godan* is derived from the Hindi words '*gau*' which means cow and '*daan*' which means 'to give away'. The meaning of *godan* lies somewhere beyond a gift of the cow, that is donating it for charity. The practice of *godan* is considered auspicious as the cow itself is considered a holy animal. The cow is also considered a symbol of economic status as it provides milk which is essential to produce dairy products, and its dung can be used as fuel (DeMello, 2012). This associates the animal with sustenance and prosperity, along with the narrative based on faith. The cow, thus, appears as a marker of farm and peasant life as it can make a peasant self-sufficient, while providing food and fuel, both necessary for sustenance. Since the cow is not merely significant in the spiritual world but also in the material, possessing a cow functions as a symbol of status and respect in society.

In the novel, the one thing that Hori truly desires is to own a cow. As mentioned, the loaded significance of the cow explains Hori's need to have a cow by his door. Hori himself seems to demonstrate this desire in a variety of ways: "*Gau uske liye keval bhakti aur shraddha ki vastu nahin, sajeev sampatti bhi thi. Vah us se apne dwaar ki shobha aur apne ghar ka gaurav badhana chahta tha*" (Premchand, 2015, p. 36). This is translated by Roadarmel as: "For him, the cow was not only an object of devotion and worship; it was also the living image of prosperity" (Premchand & Roadarmel(Tr.), 2002, p. 53). Along with this, there is also a hint towards being able to provide for his own family when he first thinks about having a cow:

... vah pachchai gaay lega. Uski khoob seva karega. Kuch nahin toh 4-5 ser dhoodh hoga. Gobar dhoodh ke liye taras kar rah jata hai. Is umar mein na khaya-piya, toh fir kab khayega? Saal bhar bhi dhoodh pi le toh dekhne layak ho jaye. Bachchuye bhi achche bail niklenge. 200 rupaye se kam ki goin na hogi. (Premchand, 2015. p. 8)

Roadarmel translates this as:

...he would have a western cow, a Punjabi cow, and he'd take such good care of her that she would give at least four or five quarters of milk. Gobar longed for milk. And if he couldn't be properly nourished now, when would he be? If Gobar could just get milk for a year, he would be a boy worth looking at. Besides, the calves would become such good bullocks, and a pair would bring a good two hundred rupees. (Premchand & Roadarmel(Tr.), 2002, p. 17)

It is important to note here that economic prosperity is important for Hori, as he used to be a mahajan (moneylender) in his good days, which earned him a respectable status in society. However, in his present state as a majdur (laborer or peasant), he stays riddled with debt. He longs for the good times when he was free and held status in society. He desires his debts to be paid so that he can provide a good life for his family. The cow here appears to be a symbol of respect and self-sustenance, hence, providing a possibility of absolving him from his numerous troubles.

The cow Hori gets from Bhola dies when Hori's brother, Heera poisons her. The text describes her death as following: "*Saaf vish diya gaya hai; lekin gaanv mein kaun aisa muddai hai, jisne vish diya ho; aisi waardat toh gaanv mein kabhi hui nahin; lekin bahar ka kaun aadmi gaanv mein aaya*" (Premchand, 2015, p. 98)! Roadarmel's translation: "It was obvious from the symptoms that she'd been poisoned. But who could be the culprit? The village had never known such an outrage. But what outsider would have come in" (Premchand & Roadarmel(Tr.), 2002, p. 231). The thing to note here is the emphasis on two facts: one, that this kind of act of poisoning cattle has not occurred before, and two, that it is done by someone from within the village. Situating

these lines in the historical context of the novel being written, that is the 1930s, we could think of the act of poisoning the cattle as poisoning of the Indian labor by the British Empire by exploiting them through the village or their people, that is, the Zamindar or Mahajan or the Daroga. It has been argued that Premchand's literature reflects the social reality of the peasant class in the colonial period (Pratap & Singh, 2000-2001). Premchand has also been influenced heavily by Gandhi's ideology which emphasized India's future primarily depending on the development of villages and the peasant class (Singh, 1980). In light of these reflections, it becomes clear that Premchand is thinking of village and peasant life as the core unit for a workable national economy.

Hori and the cow lie at the center of *Godan*. Does that suggest that the cow is used as a metaphor for peasant life? In the novel, the trajectory of the cow and Hori follows the same course. The cow gets transferred from Bhola to Hori because Bhola isn't able to feed her properly. As it prospers in Hori's house, his house prospers with the arrival of the cow simultaneously. Later, the cow dies at the hands of an insider, and Hori too, dies while struggling to pay the debt of the mahajans, sahumars, and zamindars, who are supposedly his people. Even in the moment of Hori's death, the last image he sees is that of the cow. When people say that Dhaniya should do a *godan* for Hori, she says that there is nothing in the house, there are a few *paisas*, people could take that and consider it Hori's *godan* (Premchand, 2015, p. 328). Hori's death could be read as his giving up his life in order to have the satisfaction of *godan*, which again puts Hori and the cow in equivalent positions. Thus, Hori and his desire to own a cow appear to be intertwined to an extent where Hori and the cow can be understood to have similar fates in the narrative.

The cow acts as a symbol of the good days which included respect and self-sustenance, thus, the novel *Godan* isn't only about having a cow— but the peasant class *being* the cow, exploiting which leads to the death of the nation. *Godan* reveals the social reality of the peasant class; thus, the metaphor of the cow and the notion of self-rule are significant to the text.

Translating 'cow'

Given that there exists an intertwining between Hori and the cow, what does it mean when Roadarmel decides to choose not to translate one instance which is about self-rule, and the other where Hori is explicitly referred to as a cow?

In the introduction to the new edition, Vasudha Dalmiya mentions two instances where Roadarmel has avoided translating the sentences. One is when Dhaniya talks about "*suraj*" which means "*swaraj*" or self-rule, and the other is when Gobar calls Hori 'a cow'. The point to note here is that in the first instance, a few lines have been completely omitted and in the second instance, the metaphor of the cow has not been used. Interestingly enough, Roadarmel does not even mention these choices in his introduction to the text. He discusses the difficulty in translating idioms, one example of which would be the moment where "*Jab dusre ke paanv ke tale apni gardan dabi hui hai toh un paanvo ko sahlane mein hi kushal hai*" (Premchand, 2015, p. 7). is translated as "when someone's heel is on your neck, it's best to keep licking his feet" (Premchand & Roadarmel(Tr.), 2002, p. 15). By translating literally Roadarmel claims to be giving more voice to Premchand. However, this formal translation has less readability.

When Hori's cow dies, an inspector comes and blames the death of the cow on Hori unless he bribes him. On this Dhaniya, Hori's wife, yells at everyone, including Hori, the inspector, and all the well-known people of the village who are in a position of power but are trying to exploit

Hori in this situation. She says, "*Us par Suraj chahiye. Jail jane se suraj na milega. Suraj milega, dharam se, nyay se*" (Premchand, 2015, p. 106) (And then you demand Swaraj. You won't get it by going to jail. You can only have swaraj through righteousness and justice.) A question that arises out of this incident is that whilst talking about the cow, why does Dhaniya suddenly shift to the struggle for freedom? It appears that this is Premchand's way of using rhetoricity to again equate peasants with cows. Like the injustice where the cow had to die due to someone else's feud, similarly, in this incident, without being at fault, Hori has to suffer the insults of the inspector. The translator, by choosing not to translate this particular line, is restricting the flow of meaning. "Levy ... insisted that any contracting or omitting of the difficult expressions in translating was immoral" (Basnett, 2002, 31). He emphasizes the translator finding a way to convey the meaning by styling or form of the text. Similarly, Spivak mentions that "[t]he task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay" (Spivak, 2002, p. 398). In this situation, Roadarmel appears to be thinking in binaries of source language and target language instead of a free-flowing relation that Spivak is talking about. By omitting these lines from the translated text, Roadarmel is refraining the readers from reaching the lived reality of the freedom struggle and the importance of peasant or farmer life, which seems to be the intended vision of Premchand.

In the second instance mentioned by Dalmia, Gobar, upon returning from the city, witnesses Hori's condition who has paid dearly for not being able to pay *lagaan* and taking in a lower caste woman to his house, while Bhola too, claims his bullocks and has taken them away. Here Gobar says to Hori, "*Yah hai Gau hone ke fal*" (Premchand, 2015, p. 194). This is the result of being a cow, Gobar says to Hori. Dalmia does explain the omission of this translation by Roadarmel. She states, "He also omits another telling sentence, in order perhaps not to belittle Hori..." (Premchand & Roadarmel(Tr.), 2002, p. xv). There is no denying that the cow is a symbol of naivete and goodness, however, the cow is also a symbol of farmer life, a symbol which is more central to the narrative of *Godaan* and the voice of Premchand. Thus, this paper would disagree with the aforementioned explanation. Premchand is deliberately trying to show the miserable condition and the importance of the peasant class by using rhetoric across the text and putting the cow and the peasants' lives at center of his novel. Thus, by explicitly using this metaphor of a cow to talk about Hori, Premchand is linking the cow and the peasant (or the farmer class) more lucid to the reader.

Dalmia's observation is also not quite right, for Roadarmel does translate that particular line but to this: "This is what comes out of being too good" (Premchand & Roadarmel(Tr.), 2002, pp. 261-262). By doing this, he does not particularly let Premchand's vision enfold in front of the reader. His translation, in fact, seems simplistic, because Hori's situation is not such only because he is good, but also because he exists in the lowest strata of his society. This is the only moment in the text where the peasant is actually explicitly compared with the cow. Hence, it's one of the most important plays of rhetoricity in the text. It appears that while Roadarmel thinks that he has let Premchand speak, he has not actually understood Premchand. Hence it becomes important to think about translation as an act of reading.

Spivak notes that "the translator must surrender to the text. She must solicit the text to show the limits of its language because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner" (Spivak, 2002, p. 398) What does it mean to surrender to the text? In the introduction Roadarmel notes that, "...it has

seemed wise to let Premchand speak for himself as much as possible, leaving him as the judge of what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it" (Premchand & Roadarmel(Tr.), 2002, p. xxiv). Through these lines, it seems that possibly Roadarmel has surrendered to the great Indian writer in Premchand, but not to the text or in other words, Premchand's ideology or vision of the text. Surrendering to the text as defined by Spivak, means to understand its core, to *read* it closely so as to see its limits and present them in a way that blurs the boundaries of the original and the translation, that is, to converse with the other and reflect on the self, and yet present it as whole in itself. Spivak's idea of whole means to be continuously in transition, in conversation with the self and the other, in this case, the original and the translation. She notes:

In order to earn that right of friendship or surrender of identity, of knowing that the rhetoric of the text indicates the limits of language for you as long as you are with the text, you have to be in a different relationship with the language, not even only with the specific text. (Spivak, 2002, p. 400)

According to her, it's only by realizing the limitations of the text, that is, its rhetoricity, that one can understand the text and by extension, the language and the culture, in its entirety and hence, *translate* it. Her emphasis on reading can be made clear through these lines when she quotes from her "Translator's Preface":

Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate ... Reading and surrendering take on new meanings in such a case. The translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other—before memory—in the closest places of the self. (Spivak, 2002, p. 398)

Thus, the main reason Roadarmel seems to fail in translating *Godan* through these instances or seems to lack its wholeness is that he has failed to read Premchand's text in its entirety. When Spivak says that his translation lacks a sense of the whole, she is arguing for a lack of rhetoricity in the text which as has been illustrated is due to his inadequate reading of the text. His inadequacy in reading the importance of these two instances, by extension the whole text, can also be substantiated by the fact that he doesn't say anything about his choices in the introduction. If he had mentioned it somewhere, it would mean that he understood what Premchand was doing but made the choice to not translate these. As he does not articulate the nature of his choice of omitting a certain instance, it affirms that he isn't aware of the importance of these moments.

Conclusion

Given that Roadarmel's reading isn't sufficient, he has failed to reproduce the text. Roadarmel's reading is lexical and reductive rather than semantic. The lack of semantics in his reading of the text translates into the lack of rhetoricity in the text, which in turn does not let the text fray. Spivak's idea of the whole is to surrender to the text in a way that the two – translation and the original – cannot be distinguished. Fraying is Spivak's way of allowing for rhetoricity where one realizes the limits of the text by surrendering to it and hence, one doesn't have to think of translation as a finite process, but continuously evolving by reflecting on itself, and precisely this continuous movement or conversation makes the text appear as a whole. Thus, the paper concludes that Roadarmel's *The Gift of a Cow* does not seem complete on its own or to have its identity, because he lacks an intimate relationship with the source text and Premchand's ideology, thereby restricting the conversation of his translation might have with the original.

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Nitya Pawar is a PhD scholar at Ashoka University, India. Her research focuses on Marathi bhakti from the perspective of translation. Her research shows that the knowledge produced by and of, a Hindu lower caste woman saint-poet, Janabai—of medieval India, particularly the state of Maharashtra—is the result of acts of *anuwaad*, *rupantar*, *bhashantar*—various forms of the Indian tradition of Translation. The research highlights questions of gender and caste as they come together in the domains of bhakti and translation. Broadly, she is interested in thinking about bhakti, transformation, and translation.
