

Translating Indian vernacular literature: Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's English translations of Prākṛit love poetry and *bhakti* verse

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In the novel *In Custody* which records the decline of Urdu poetry that once dominated the literary scene of Delhi, the Indian novelist Anita Desai talks about “the politics of language” (53). And indeed, if the close relation between language and power has often been foregrounded, the expression “politics of language” seems all the more relevant in a multilingual society like India where languages have competed with one another for centuries: from the thousand-year old opposition between Sanskrit and Prākṛits, to the asymmetrical relation between the colonial language, English, and the vernacular languages, and of course the more recent conflicting linguistic demands that accompanied the drafting of the Constitution at the time of independence and continue to agitate the nation.¹ Consequently, translation emerges as a major issue in India where the Orientalist translation of vernacular texts into English collided from the onset with the purposes of colonialism as argued by Trivedi and Bassnett in *Post-Colonial Translation*² and where translation between the different languages of India is crucial to guarantee the unity of the nation. It is not surprising therefore that translation is a central concern for one of the most prominent poets and critics of contemporary Indian literature: Arvind Krishna Mehrotra.

Mehrotra published two books of poetry in translation but interestingly, he also published several collections – *Distance in Statute Miles* (1982), and his *Collected Poems* (2014) – in which translations of poems from Hindi, Gujarati and Bengali poets appear among his own verse.³ He was very early on engaged with the relevance of translation for literature in general and Indian literature in particular, he devoted many essays to the centrality of multilingualism and translation in Indian literature (“The Emperor Has No Clothes”, “What Is an Indian Poem?”) and edited a volume entitled *Periplus* (1993)

¹ The Constitution recognizes 22 major languages (Annexe 8) whereas the 1961 Census of India numbered 1652 dialects. There is no national language but Hindi and English are official and associate official languages of the Union. Soon after Independence, a commission was set up to reorganize the states according to linguistic borders, an idea that Nehru originally resisted to prevent a further balkanization of India (1956 State Reorganization Committee). The linguistic claims continue to cause violent clashes such as those that erupted during a Telengana march in favour of the creation of a separate state for Telugu speakers in Andhra Pradesh in 2012.

² See for instance: “[...] it is, of course, now recognized that colonialism and translation went hand in hand.”; “Translation was a means both of containing the artistic achievements of writers in other languages and of asserting the supremacy of the dominant, European culture.” (Bassnett 3, 6).

³ Among these poets are Nirala, Muktibodh, Dhoomil, Shakti Chattopadhyay and Mangalesh Dabral.

that reads like an anthology of both theory and practice of poetry in translation and seeks to make up for the invisibility of Indian poetry in English translation.⁴

But in order to interrogate the link between translation and politics, and language and power, this paper will take a close look at two works of translations. *The Absent Traveller*, translated from Maharashtri Prākṛit,⁵ was published in a bilingual edition by Ravi Dayal in 1991. It gathers Mehrotra's translations of 207 short love poems that he selected from an anthology called the *Gāthāsaptasatī* (meaning '700 verses in the *gātha* form'),⁶ a collection that was compiled by the Sātavāhana king Hāla in the 2nd century BC. *Songs of Kabir* (NYRB, 2011) compiles Mehrotra's English renderings of Hindi⁷ devotional songs attributed to the 15th century north Indian *bhakti* saint named Kabir. This paper will discuss Mehrotra's choices as a translator – his selection of texts, sources, poetic traditions, source and target languages – in order to outline the politics which informs his practice; his politics being understood as the principles that underlie his practice of translation, his vision of the relation between cultures and languages. By analysing the translated texts and also the different elements of paratext – such as the Introductions, Prefaces, Afterwords, or Translator's Notes – this paper will argue that Mehrotra's poetics is at the service of a politics of translation which contests dominant traditions in language, literature and culture.

Subversive poetic traditions and voices

It is first by choosing to translate texts from vernacular poetic traditions with a subversive quality that Mehrotra contributes to contesting dominant Indian cultural traditions. Indeed, *The Absent Traveller* and *Songs of Kabir* can be regarded as subversive in more than one respect. *The Absent Traveller* is a collection of love and erotic poems in which the speakers are very often outspoken women of different ages – Mehrotra says that they range from "an ingénue" to "an ancient crone, reminiscing about past affairs" (*Collected Poems* 197). The references to sex are sometimes very straightforward, the tone is free and the perspective is that of Indian women, traditionally silenced in

⁴ The introduction to the volume ends with the following statement: "*Periplus*, like *Modern Poetry in Translation*, features European poets – a new generation of European poets – but at the same time explores an area hitherto neglected, the verse traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Almost a century into the age of translation, perhaps it is time to see if we cannot have a new balance of poetic power." (viii).

⁵ Prākṛits are Middle Indo-Aryan dialects that were spoken between the 3rd century BC and the 4th century CE. The name 'Prākṛit' is from the Sanskrit meaning 'original source', 'nature' and is thus opposed to 'Sanskrit' meaning 'well-refined', 'cultured' (*The Absent Traveller* 71).

⁶ In the Afterword to the collection, Martha Ann Selby describes the characteristics of the *gātha* in the *āryā* metre: it is a song composed of 30 syllables in the first line (itself divided into two *padas* or feet of twelve and eighteen syllables) and a second line of 27 syllables (also divided into two feet of twelve and fifteen syllables). The *āryā* metre is based on the length of syllables in a line (*The Absent Traveller* 73). According to Selby, "The *gāthas* are generally free of rhetorical embellishments and the vocabulary is refreshingly simple, making these poems clean, sleek transmitters of meaning through *dhvani*." (*The Absent Traveller* 84).

⁷ Kabir's language was called *Rekhta*, it was "a mixture of Persian, Hindi and other North Indian dialects" (Zecchini 7).

15th century Brahmanical society and still dominated in contemporary India. Here are a few examples of verse in which a woman's voice can be heard:

The way he stared, / I kept covering myself, / Not that I wanted him / To look elsewhere. (73)

He groped me / For the underwear / That wasn't / There: / I saw the boy's / Fluster / And embraced him / More tightly. (351)

That / Is my mother-in-law's bed / My bed / Is here / And those / Are the servants' / Don't trip over mine, / Night-time traveller. (669)⁸

What is especially striking is how these subversive voices resonate in the space of the poem, and it is particularly true of Kabir's iconoclastic voice. In *Songs of Kabir*, Mehrotra draws from the tradition of north Indian *bhakti*, a devotional movement which originated in South India but reached its peak between the 15th and 17th centuries in North India.⁹ *Bhakti* was a spiritual movement that rejected any kind of religious or social orthodoxy and its advocates, the *bhakti sants*, were wandering ascetics who preached the existence of a personal god and took no heed of boundaries such as between Hindus and Muslims, high and low castes, and men and women as the following lines reveal:

Listen carefully, / Neither the Vedas / Nor the Qur'an / Will teach you this: / Put the bit in its mouth, / The saddle on its back, / Your foot in the stirrup, / And ride your wild runaway mind / All the way to heaven. (KG 81)

Tell me, wise one, / How did I become / A woman from a man? (KG 160)¹⁰

The *bhakti* songs are characterized by a straightforward informal language and instances of *ulatbamsi* or poems in upside down language which reveal the iconoclastic dimension of the movement:

Brother, I've seen some / Astonishing sights: / A lion keeping watch / Over pasturing cows; / A mother delivered / After her son was; / A guru prostrated / Before his disciple; / Fish spawning / On treetops; / A cat carrying away / A dog; / A gunny-sack / Driving a bullock-cart; / A buffalo going out to graze, / Sitting on a horse; / A tree with its branches in the earth, / Its roots in the sky; / A tree with flowering roots. / This verse, says Kabir, / Is your key to the universe. / If you can figure it out. (KG 116)

For Mehrotra, the recovery of 2nd-century and 15th-century vernacular poetry has nothing to do with a nativist return to the traditions of pre-colonial India that would fit into the nationalist agenda

⁸ The numbers of the poems indicated here are those used by Mehrotra who chose to number the *gāthas* according to Albrecht Weber's *Das Saptācātakam des Hāla* (Leipzig, 1881).

⁹ "*Bhakti* began in South India, in the country of the Tamils, in the sixth century CE but over time acquired a pan-Indian character. It moved to Karnataka in the tenth and Maharashtra in the twelfth centuries, but it was in North India, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, where it found perhaps its fullest expression." (*Songs of Kabir* xxi).

¹⁰ In *Songs of Kabir*, Mehrotra also follows the numbers given to the poems in the editions he used for his translation. The abbreviations refer to one of the four source texts for his version of the *bhakti* songs.

which has gained ground in the last decades in India and promotes a Hindu, Brahmanical and thus one-dimensional conception of Indian culture. On the contrary, Mehrotra's translations enhance the subversive dimensions of the Prākṛit and *bhakti* traditions and allow him to contradict the idea of a recognizable and 'authentic' Indian-Hindu identity promoted by the advocates of *Hindutva*.¹¹ According to Zecchini, this feature is characteristic of Indian poets' contemporary retellings of *bhakti* songs: "Contemporary translations of Kolatkar, Mehrotra or Chitre, by recovering the transgressive, irreverent and demotic voice of *bhakti* precisely resist such purgative nativist endeavors and ideological appropriations." (16).

Questioning linguistic hegemonies

In the paratextual commentaries to both collections, the emphasis is laid on Mehrotra's choice to translate vernacular-language verse, thus questioning the linguistic and cultural hegemony of Sanskrit. In the Introduction to *Songs of Kabir* Mehrotra reminds the reader that the *bhakti* saints deliberately turned to the vernaculars in a challenge to the cultural domination of the Brahmins exercised through Sanskrit: "In a well-known verse, Kabir compared Sanskrit, the language of the gods and the preserve of Brahmins, to *kupa jal*, the stagnant water of a well, and *bhasha* (vernacular, in which the *bhakti* poets sang) to the running water of a stream." (xxi-xxii). In the Afterword to *The Absent Traveller*, Martha Ann Selby also insists on the difference between Sanskrit love poetry as epitomized by "Kālidāsa's idealized, perfect universe inhabited by lotus-eyed, moon-faced men and women" with the Prākṛit poems' "earthy description of love in all its many different and sometimes 'indecent' forms" (74), foregrounding Mehrotra's choice to recover, through translation, the tradition of vernacular literatures characterized by a more popular, informal idiom with respect to the ornamental language of Sanskrit. Thus, if it is clear that by favouring vernacular or folk traditions, Mehrotra's translations question the cultural domination of Sanskrit in Indian literature,¹² what can be said of his choice to rewrite vernacular texts into English?

The translation of Indian vernacular poetry into English has long been part of an Orientalist tradition of making indigenous literatures available for a Western readership that is still going on in some measure. In the introduction to *Post-Colonial Translation*, the editors argue that:

the old business of translation as traffic between languages still goes on in the once-and-still colonized world, reflecting more acutely than ever before the asymmetrical power relationship between the various local 'vernaculars'

¹¹ *Hindutva* is a cultural and political ideology which defines Indian identity in exclusively Hindu terms. The concept of 'Hinduness' at the core of Hindu nationalist parties' political agendas.

¹² Martha Ann Selby also warns that Maharashtri Prākṛit and Sanskrit are nevertheless both literary languages that influenced each other and that a simple opposition between the two is irrelevant (72, 77-8).

(i.e. the languages of the slaves, etymologically speaking) and the one master-language of our post-colonial world, English. (13)

Yet, if it is true that there is still a “hegemonic ascendancy” (Bassnett 10) of translations from the various Indian languages into English, this assertion needs to be qualified in the view of Mehrotra’s work. First because his English is pointedly different from the colonial language. In the Note to his *Collected Poems*, Mehrotra explains how he turned away from English poetry because it was too closely associated with the Romantics and he reveals, in other essays, how the verse of the modern American poets helped him create a language in which to express his Indian experience.¹³ In *The Absent Traveller* and especially *Songs of Kabir*, it is through the use of a slangy American idiom that Mehrotra deconstructs the association of English with a master-language. In the Preface to the Kabir volume, Wendy Doniger describes the “shock effect” (xvii) of Mehrotra’s mixed language on the contemporary reader – an effect meant to recall the similar impact of Kabir’s voice on his 15th century audience – which weaves together images from Indian devotional poetry and a modern and colloquial American idiom. As Doniger points out, Mehrotra’s Americanese is replete with slang, neologisms and anachronisms. Words like “bootlicker”, “ferry”, “handcuffed”, and “anorexia” are a few examples of Mehrotra’s ample resort to anachronism, especially in *Songs of Kabir*:

At all times / Keep it cool. / Don’t covet / Another man’s wife or wealth, /
And wipe the bootlicker’s smile / Off your face. (KG 77)

I’m waiting for the ferry, / But where are we going, / And is there a paradise
anyway? (KG 54)

I’m handcuffed to death. / Throw me the key. (KG 44)

‘Stop laughing, what have you / Got to do with anorexia? / I go through this
every summer,’ / She says between tears. (613)

If Mehrotra sometimes restricts the use of colloquial expressions to particular moments of the poems in order to achieve a striking effect – such as in the poems which open with dramatic lines (“Friend, / You had one life, / And you blew it.” (KG 60) or “Easy, friend. / What’s the big fuss about?” (KG 62)) – the language of the following poem is popular and slangy throughout:

To get a big head / Is easy. / Food on the table, / Cash in the pocket, / And
you walk with a swagger. / Be street-smart / And you can rake in / Twice as
much. / But money’s like the leaves / Of a forest’s trees. / You didn’t bring it
with you when you were born, / It won’t go with you when you die; /

¹³ Mehrotra also admits in his *Collected Poems* that he turned to French Surrealism to fashion his own voice, thus foregrounding the importance of translation to his own creative practice: “For me, who started writing in the 1960s, the discovery of surrealism helped resolve the awful contradiction between the world I wanted to write about, the world of dentists and chemist shops, and the language, English, I wanted to write in. How do you write about an uncle in a wheelchair in the language of skylarks and nightingales? It’s as though I’d said to myself that since I cannot write about these things in English, let me do so in French, so to speak.” (xv-xvi).

Greater kings than Ravana / Have vanished in the blink of an eye. / Parents,
children, wife, You'll leave them behind. / You must be mad, says Kabir, /
Not to sing of Rama, / And to screw up your life. (KG 73)

Many poems from the Kabir collection also owe much to the speech of American blues. In the following poem, Mehrotra directly acknowledges the influence of the blues musicians as the quote from Leadbelly, used as a sort of epigraph, suggests:

It take a man that have the blues so to sing the blues – Leadbelly
O pundit, your hairsplitting's / So much bullshit. I'm surprised / You still get
away with it. / If parroting the name / Of Rama brought salvation, / Then
saying sugarcane / Should sweeten the mouth, / Saying fire burn the feet, /
Saying water slake thirst, / And saying food / Would be as good as a belch. /
If saying money made everyone rich, / There'd be no beggars in the streets. /
My back is turned on the world, / You hear me singing of Rama and you
smile. One day, Kabir says, / All bundled up, You'll be delivered to
Deathville. (KG 179)

In this poem, the language, rhythms and images also reveal how Mehrotra connects the *bhakti* and blues traditions, a conflation that is also characteristic of Arun Kolatkar's translations of the *bhakti* saint Tukaram as Laëtitia Zecchini argued: "Kolatkar conflates the untrained and improvised voices of the American blues and folk singers with *bhakti* voices, using the same casual familiarity and slangy idiom, irreverence and ecstasy that we find in both traditions." (8). As she also points out, Mehrotra, in his edition of his friend Arun Kolatkar's *Collected Poems*, commented on the two traditions in order to cast a light on Kolatkar's affiliation to American folk music in his reworkings of *bhakti* songs:

Blues (though it can have a spiritual side) and *bhakti* poetry are, in intent, markedly differently from each other. One belongs to the secular world; the other addresses itself to god. There are, however, parallels between them. Each draws its images from a common pool, each limits itself to a small number of themes that it keeps returning to, and each speaks in the idiom of the street. [...] In his use of diction, Kolatkar saw himself very much in the blues-*bhakti* tradition. (30)

Delineating alternative lineages in Indian literary history

Aside from defying any pre-conceived ideas about the relations between languages, Mehrotra's translations also develop a challenging conception of literature and trace alternative lineages in Indian writing in English. The two works of translations draw attention to the collective dimension of Prākṛit and *bhakti* poetry and the multiplicity of sources for the vernacular texts, thus

questioning the Western concepts of 'original' and 'copy' and the relevance of the preoccupation with origins, which is precisely the contribution of Indian postcolonial translation according to Trivedi and Bassnett:

In India, with its long history of oral composition and transmission, and the dominant early phase of *bhakti* or devotional poetry in all its modern languages in which the poet surrendered to and sought to merge his identity with his divine subject, the distinction between different composers of poetry within the same tradition or between an original writer and a translator was never half as wide as it has been in the West. (8)

In both works, the paratextual commentaries insist on the inadequacy of the notion of a single author to account for moving oral traditions. Martha Ann Selby explains that the *Gāthāsaptasatī* is a collection of verse composed by different poets whose identity remains uncertain: "Since a full list of authors varies from commentary to commentary, it is difficult to draw any conclusions regarding definitive ascription." (*The Absent Traveller* 74), while Mehrotra's seemingly contradictory assertion conveys the paradox of Kabir's voice: "despite the thousands of poems ascribed to Kabir, not one can be attributed to him with certainty. His is a collective voice that is so individual that it cannot be mistaken for anyone else's." (*Songs of Kabir* xxiii).

In the same way, Mehrotra emphasizes the impossibility of authenticating an original text. In *The Absent Traveller*, Mehrotra acknowledges that he translated the love poems by relying on the Prākṛit text, on Marathi and Sanskrit commentaries, but also on several editions of the poems by Indian critics who themselves followed the German Indologist Albrecht Weber's version of the text. Not only is it impossible to ascribe a specific origin to the *Gāthāsaptasatī*, but Mehrotra also defies the dichotomy between Indian and Orientalist texts and reveals the influence each set of texts had on the other. The Kabir corpus is also this "open-ended" field of traditions and texts into which modern material continues to be added by contemporary singers and performers (*Songs of Kabir* xxxi). According to Mehrotra, the impossibility of singling out an authentic text is in keeping with Kabir's iconoclastic personality and the subversive quality of *bhakti*: "there is a sense in which there can be no authoritative edition of the work of this supremely anti-authoritarian master, who is present in the many manifestations of his work through a kind of infinite regress" (*Songs of Kabir* xxix). By foregrounding the fact that his effort is yet another take on the Kabir tradition, Mehrotra's translation is also an act of resistance to authoritative views of literature.

Moreover, the two works of translation constitute a major critical gesture that consists in reclaiming the importance of vernacular poetic traditions for modern Indian poets writing in English. In *Clearing a Space*, the Indian novelist and critic Amit Chaudhuri articulated the issue in those terms:

I have tried, in some of these pieces, to clear a space for not only myself, but also those writers and traditions (principally the writers and traditions in the Indian vernaculars, but also the Indian English tradition that predates Rushdie and, in certain invisible tributaries, is contemporary with his work) that the critical language of post-colonial theory engages with very sparingly. (12)

I would argue that a similar recovery takes place, in Mehrotra's work, through the act of translation. In this, it is reminiscent of the work of another poet and close friend of Mehrotra, Arun Kolatkar, who also translated *bhakti* poetry in a jazzy American idiom in order to stake his claim to what he conceived of as his tradition. The influence of both vernacular Indian poetry and modern American poets on the verse of the Indian English poets (lines by William Carlos Williams and Pound make up the epigraph of *The Absent Traveller*) reveal how these poets create a distinctively Indian modernity by drawing from different traditions as the French scholar Laëtitia Zecchini argued in "Contemporary *Bhakti* recastings":

It is the coexistence of these literary lineages – medieval *bhakti* poetry and modern Euro-American poetry – and the complex interplay of translations, affiliations and languages that have fashioned Indian modernism, at least when it comes to the linguistic traditions (English, Hindi and Marathi) of the poets under study. (2-3)

If according to Homi Bhabha, "it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (56), Mehrotra's poetics and politics of translation reveal that, to him, Indian literature and culture is precisely at such a place of articulation of varying traditions. *The Absent Traveller* and *Songs of Kabir* never cease to call attention to the importance of translation to Indian literature as a creative practice but also as a metaphor for thinking the processes of negotiations and affiliations that underlie it. To conclude, I would like to quote Mehrotra's closing remarks on Kolatkar's poem 'Three Cups of Tea' in the essay "What Is an Indian Poem?" which perfectly convey his inclusive definition of Indian literature and foregrounds the importance of translation as a mode of relation to other cultures as well as the interplay of multiple linguistic and literary traditions that shape modern Indian poetry in English:

So there it is, your Indian poem. It was written in a Bombay patois by a poet who otherwise wrote in Marathi and English. It then became part of two

literatures, Marathi and Indian English, but entered the latter in a translation made in the American idiom, one of whose sources, or, if you will, inspirations, was an American translation of a 19th-century Roman poet.
(*Arun Kolatkar, Collected Poems* 359)

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