

# Women Translators in Urdu: A Survey

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## Abstract

*Like any language that relies on translation for its own enrichment, Urdu also benefitted from translation. In its journey of evolution, Urdu not only witnessed production of great works but also an influx of significant works that were translated from various languages into Urdu every now and then. Besides men who created literary works in Urdu while displaying their talents in various genres, women played their part too and translated many works of fiction and non-fiction. This paper surveys women Urdu translators and their literary contributions in various genres.*

**Keywords:** Women Translators, Urdu Translation, Indian Women Writers.

## Introduction

Translation is rightly considered a cumbersome process. In this process, meaning contained in a text of source language is rendered into target language (Bassnet 2002: 22). For some researchers, it is an “all-pervasive yet problematic medium” (Klitgard 2006: 11). In essence, translation actually serves as a bridge between two languages whereby the text of a language is transferred to another language, with all the features of its style, idea, thought, subject and technique. If literature becomes static and does not change over time, it would lose its sheen. So it must change with time. In this process of change, translation plays a very important role. Through translation, new trends in the literature of a region are created and new horizons are opened for the writers. A wide variety of topics comes up before them. Thus, not only new genres of literature but also new styles and topics are introduced in Urdu through

translation. Though translation is looked at as secondary activity, it is in fact a creative endeavor not less than original composition. It makes cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication possible (Mukharjee 2009: 12). It is through translation only that cultural transactions between different civilizations of the world had been possible. Translation enriched world literatures (Baig 2005: 7). It is due to translation that different languages of the world became acquainted with *Arabian Nights*, *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, *Hikayat* of Shaikh Saadi and plays of William Shakespeare. Because of it, speakers of different languages of the world were able to use the Quran, the Gospel and the Vedas. With the help of translation, the world became enlightened with the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato. It is because of translation that the world is more accessible.

Naturally, like any major language of the world, the Urdu language too began benefitting from translation right from its evolutionary phase. As the language moved towards its maturity, the translation activity progressed as well (Baig 1998: 1-3). Despite the obvious difficulty in accessing the layers of hidden-meanings of the text in a foreign language and modeling it into another language linguistically while retaining its essence, the translation activity continued in every language including Urdu. Various scholars went across the realms and tried to enrich the Urdu language and literature with many precious words, expressions and thoughts. In the journey of Urdu literature's evolution, besides men who created literary works while displaying their talents in various genres, women played their part too. The Romantic Movement has greatly influenced Indian writers, and the subsequent rise of Progressive Movement after the rise of Marxism brought literature closer to realities of life. However, the role of women in creation of Indian literature is minor than their male counterpart. Although women writers have made their

existence felt in various genres of Urdu literature, their presence in the field of translation is apparently low.

The way women are portrayed in Western literature was not only a source of comfort to them, but also a dream to build their future in the literature. In December 1932, a collection of fiction in Urdu was published under the title "Angare". This collection had works of four authors, including woman writer Rashid Jahan. This book of fiction was in fact a rebellious attempt against the then Indian society. Ever since many women writers—inspired by this realism and modern cultural values of Western literature—have translated various genres of Western literature, especially from English, Russian and French literature into Urdu. Notable among such translators are Qurratulain Hyder, Ismat Chughtai and Khadija Mastoor.

In the wake of dearth of research study on women Urdu translators, this paper attempts to explore women translators of Urdu and their translation works with regards to various genres including novel, short story, play, etc. As far as the linguistic and translation analysis of the translated works referred for this study is concerned, it goes beyond the scope of the article. So, we have conducted a brief survey of female translators with the hope that this survey will help researchers working on analysis of women's translations.

Women have produced literary works in almost all genres. Their contribution in Urdu literature is significant. At the same time, their presence in translation is far from significant except for a few notable writers such as Qurratulain Hyder.

### **Novel and Novella**

Novel as a genre in Urdu has developed under the influence of the West. Translations from various European languages played a very important role in it. Among women Urdu translators of novels, Fatima Begum's name appears on top

(Baig 1988: 192-251). She translated Henry Sharp's novel *Hashishin* into Urdu, which was published in 1928 from Lahore, the capital of Punjab. She is also the first known female translator of English novels in Urdu. Another women translator of novels is Syeda Nasim Hamdani, who had translated some works of French novelist Balzac into Urdu through English. Among them is *Old Goryo*, a well-known novel translated as *Budha Goryo*. This novel was published in 1953 from Modern Lahore. In addition, she translated Nathaniel Hatharan's English novel as *Lal Nishan*, which was published from Sawera Art Press, Lahore. Mumtaz Shereen is also an important translator who translated John Steinbuk's English novel *The Pearl* into Urdu as *Durru Shehvar* and published it from Karachi in 1958. Razia Sajjad Zaheer translated an English novel of Brune into Urdu as *Phool aur Samoom*, which was published in 1965 from Aaina-e-Adab, Lahore. In addition, she translated Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Seven Summers* as *Saat Saal* into Urdu, which was first published from Maktaba Jamia Ltd., Delhi in 1962. Shahid Begum translated Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivon Hoe* as *Rubina*. Khadija Azeem published an Urdu translation of Russian national poet Alexander Pushkin's romantic novel *The Captain's Daughter* as *Kaptan Ki Baiti* from a publishing house in Russia. Altaf Fatima translated Harper Lee's English novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* as *Naghmay Ka Qatl*, which was published from Lahore in 1969.

Urdu's leading novelist Qurratulain Hyder had been instrumental in the translation, especially of novels. She translated famous Belarusian novelist Vasil Bykau's novel *The Alpine Ballad* (1964) as *Apls ke Geet*, which was published from Maktaba Jamia, Delhi. She also translated James Henry's novel *Portrait of a Lady* into Urdu as *Hamien Charag, Hamien Parwane*. It is a 600-page long novel in which the novelist has used the stream of consciousness technique. Further, she

translated Chinghiz Aitmatov's Russian novella *Mother Earth* as *Maa Ki Kheti*, which was published in 1966 from Maktaba Jamia Ltd. In addition, she translated Vera Panova's *Yevdokia* (1965) and published it from Maktaba Jamia Ltd. She also rendered Truman Capote's novella *Breakfast at Tiffany* into Urdu as *Talash*. To her credit are also translations of a Russian novel into Urdu as *Khayali Pulao* (1967) and Ruvim Isaevic Fraerman's English novel *The Dingo*.

Qurratulain Hyder has not only translated several English works of various genres into Urdu but also some Urdu works into English. For example, she translated *Nishtar*, a series published in Awadh Punch into English. In fact, *Nishtar* itself was brought into Urdu from Persian by Sajjad Hussain. In addition, Hyder has translated her own works into English (Zeba 2012: 365-66). Among such works are: *Patjhar ki Awaz* (1965) as *The Sound of Falling Leaves* (1994), *Aag Ka Dariya* (1959) as *The River of Fire* (1998), *Aakhir e Shab kay Hamsafar* (1979) as *Fireflies in the Mist: A Novel* (1994), and *Mere Bhi Sanam Khane* (2004) as *My Temples Too*. She also translated her novelette *Chai Kay Baagh* as *The Garden of Sylhet*. It was known about Hyder that she would not allow anyone to translate her novels into English. The only exception in this case was CM Naeem, whom she allowed to translate *Sita Haran*. Hyder's translation of her own Urdu fiction into English is an interesting topic for researchers to critically explore and analyze self-translation from the point of view of art of translation.

### **Short Story**

Like novel, short story as a genre in Urdu has its direct connection with the Western literature. In this genre, Mumtaz Shirin stands out as a prominent translator. She is a Pakistani author who translated the German fiction through English into Urdu. Her translated collection of short stories such as *Phoot*,

*Moti Bacchi*, and *Ham Asr German Afsane* were published by Froze Sons, Lahore. The latter collection is jointly translated by Mumtaz Shirin and Mohammad Saleem ur Rehman (Baig 1998: 192-251). Another major translator of short stories is Qurratulain Hyder. She translated Mikhail Sholokhov's short story *Fate of a Man* as *Aadmi Ka Muqaddar* (1965). In her early days as writer, she translated Bengali writer Syed Waliullah's short story *Nav* (1958), which was published in Karachi based monthly magazine *Mahe Nau*. She also translated *Jila Watan* as *The Exiles* which was published by Pun Pakistan in 1955 (Zeba 2012: 365-66).

### **Plays**

Plays or drama is an established genre popular across literatures and ages. Many plays have been translated into Urdu from the Western languages, particularly English. Among the translators of plays are Abdul Halim Sharar, Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi, Majnun Gorakhpuri and Saadat Hasan Manto. One of the notable woman translators of the plays is Shahida Hameed Khan. She translated Greek playwright Sophocles' play *Oedipus* from English into Urdu (Baig 1998: 192-251). Besides her, Qurratulain Hyder translated T S Eliot's lyrical drama *Murder in the Cathedral* into Urdu as *Kalisa Me Qatl*. Henrik Ibsen's trendsetting play *A Doll's House* was also translated into Urdu as *Gudiya ka Ghar* by Qudsia Ansari. It was published in 1957 from Azad Kitab Ghar, Delhi. In addition, Shaheena Badar Ansari translated Chekhov's Russian play *Ward No. 6* into Urdu from English. It was published by Maktaba-e-Shahkar, Lahore. In modern drama, George Bernard Shaw is a major name. His play *Arms and Man* was translated as *Mohabbat aur Jang* by Khurshid Nighat.

### **Biographies and Autobiographies**

Biographies and autobiographies are popular as genres in Urdu too. Many biographies and autobiographies of prominent

people were translated into Urdu from different languages. Bano Qudsia translated a biography of Jacqueline Kennedy (Baig 1998: 192-251). The book *Jacqueline Kennedy*, which was compiled in English from the 31st American First Lady's private letters, photographs, journals and newspaper clippings, was translated by Qudsia and published in 1966 from Aaina-e-Adab, Lahore. Razia Sajjad Zaheer translated Maxim Gorky's biography as *Zindagi Ki Shahrah Par*. In this biography, Gorky describes his life conditions from 1868 to 1936.

### **Children's Literature**

In children's literature, some women writers have made important contribution. For example, the Urdu translation of Eleanor H. Porter's story *Pollyanna* was translated by Fahmida Niaz Ahmed. It was published from Lahore in 1964. A Russian novelist Lazar Yosifovych Lagin's children work *Starik Hottabych* was translated into Urdu by Qurratulain Hyder as *Jin Hassan Abdur Rahman*. It was published in 1962 by Maktaba Jamia Limited (Zeba 2012: 413-460). Further, Syeda Nasim Hamdani not only translated a book of stories in English as *Sacha Khwab Aur Doosri Kahaniya* but also Leonard Weisgard's work as *Nat Khat Hathi Bacha*. The works of Weisgard was compiled by the Child Study Association of America.

### **Religious Texts**

Religious translation is an important field of translation. The translation of religious books, especially the *Quran*, is a very delicate, important and challenging task. The translation of the *Quran* into Urdu has a long history. Right from Shah Abdul Qadir, there have been numerous translators of the sacred book but a few of them are women. Though many women may have undertaken the task of translating the *Quran* into Urdu, two women successfully completed the translation of the whole *Quran* in their lifetime. Mahmuda Begum stands out as the

first woman who translated the *Quran* in a very sophisticated and easy language. It is considered as the first translation of the *Quran* by a woman. She belonged to a respected scholarly family of Hyderabad Deccan. This translation was completed in 1943 and published by *Darul Tabã Sarkar Aali*, Hyderabad Deccan (Huda 2017: 75). Another woman translator of the *Quran* is Suraya Shehna, who hails from the Indian state of Karnataka. Her Urdu translation is also simple and came out in 2012. Of more than 1,000 Urdu translations of the *Quran*, these are the only two translations done by women.

### **Conclusion**

In the field of Urdu translation, women have contributed significantly in various genres of literature even though they are less in number. The study reveals that women translated important works from Greek, French, Russian and English cultures into Urdu. They also translated sacred texts. A detailed review of the services of the women Urdu translators could be an important research area with the potential to add value to the history of translation in Urdu. In addition, there is a strong need to highlight services of contemporary women in the field of Urdu translation.

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