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Premchand's Encounter with Tolstoy

SUMMARY: The present article deals with the issue of when and how the famous Hindi writer Premchand (1880–1936), following Gandhi's attitude towards Tolstoy, expressed his deep admiration for him, namely in the critical review of *Anna Karenina* and in translating into Hindi the 21 short stories Tolstoy had written for his peasants in Yasnaya Polyana. In the latter case it is pointed out that it was an effort to re/indianize those short stories, which Tolstoy himself said to be of Indian origin.

KEYWORDS: Hindi literature, Russian literature, Premchand, Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, short stories, translation/transcreation.

It should immediately be made clear that Premchand's encounter with Tolstoy never took place in reality because of the distance, both chronological and physical, between the two writers: Tolstoy lived from 1828 to 1910, Premchand from 1880 to 1936, and neither ever had the opportunity to visit each other's country. It was, first and foremost, Premchand who enabled Hindi readers to approach Tolstoy as a writer, for a number of reasons related to the nationalist movement, which he joined, following Gandhi's inspiring philosophy and actions. In the years between the Russo-Japanese War of 1902–04 until 1917 with the birth of the RSFSR, India consistently assumed a position of sympathy, if not open friendship, initially with Russia and later with the Soviet Union.¹

¹ The same friendly relationship was maintained until World War II and afterwards, keeping the structure of the Asian region based

Among the events that intensified this relationship is the brief correspondence between Tolstoy and Gandhi,² who was active in South Africa on a front that was not only political but also social. One should also remember the great admiration which Gandhi felt for the Russian aristocrat, who was so generous in educating his peasants and renouncing the privileges he had by birth. This is not the place to explore the scope of all these matters; we can only emphasize Gandhi's enthusiastic attitude towards both Tolstoy's activity as a teacher of the peasant children at Yasnaya Polyana and his literary works, which served as a spur to Indian literature during the struggle for independence. In short, Tolstoy became in India a kind of an iconic figure, representing free and selfless benevolence, all the more appreciable as a European who endorsed social and educational aims which unexpectedly corresponded to the ideals of the Indian tradition as the nationalist movement was revitalizing: the recovery of the past values, the affirmation of human dignity quite apart from the situation of birth, the acceptance of new rules of civil life, and higher standards of knowledge based not so much on morality and religion but rather on the faith in the humanity itself.

The review of *Anna Karenina*

Premchand, who remained a Gandhian for most of his life,³ followed Mahatma's attitude in his esteem for Tolstoy. He regarded the great Russian as a kind of wizard of the pen, as he stated in his 1933 review of Tolstoy novel *Anna Karenina*:

on the alliances between different states, including the two blocs with power-centers in the USA and the USSR.

² It consists of only seven letters: four from Gandhi and three from Tolstoy, written in 1909–1910. See Bori & Sofri 1985. Also note that in honour of Tolstoy, Gandhi called his first community in South Africa the “Tolstoj Farm” (1910–1913).

³ He broke away in part only in 1935, joining the group of progressive writers (*pragativādī*), with a more left-wing orientation.

His compositional skills and imagination were beyond human. There is no fraction or part of life on which his sharp eyes did not rest. And when something came into his mind, it ended by exceeding the limits of the human. He was able to depict with the same greatness and the same truth a picture of the upper layers of society as well as one of the lower ones, without falling into stereotypes or any sign of ignorant inexperience (...). Take *War and Peace*: there are thousands of characters, each with his or her own personality (...); all beneath his pen come to life, they begin to talk. They arouse your interest as if they were old acquaintances. His first book was printed in 1852 and the last in 1910: what he did not write in these sixty years of literary life! Novels, short stories, essays and political dramas, works of realism, he wrote everything and left his personality on everything. He had a revolution in his blood, that revolution which stimulated his literary creativity. There are few people in this world who (...) feel the need to gain knowledge through devotion (*sādhanā*) and self-sacrifice (*tāpa*). Tolstoy was one of these. His knowledge, his dedication, his spirit of sacrifice were born from his doubts and thoughts and mental conflicts, all experiences that were at the root of so much power and passion. Literary creation stemmed from the inner conflict, that conflict which never failed in Tolstoy. His was an age of revolutions, in which the echoes of the French one were still in the air. It was what his state wanted, what his birth's right to govern the men [subjected to him] wanted; yet at the same time his mental integrity and the determination of its mildness expected better in the near future. Now, the secret of his greatness lies precisely in this inner conflict. He was always eager to escape from the temptations of life. Repeatedly he promised to reform his conduct in the future, but often the desire [of the moment] forced him to break these resolutions and then make new ones. In his youth, the falsehood, wickedness, attachment to self-interest inherent in the soul, in religion, in society, in the sense of national belonging had begun to awaken his aversion. (Premchand 2002: 886-888).⁴

Premchand's analysis continues with the recognition that, in the long run, all that remained to Tolstoy was faith in human improvement, which had to take place primarily through education. The discussion included the assessment made by the Russian writer of the utility that people have in society, where "he who fails to obtain sustenance with physical labour has no place" (*ibid.*: 888).⁵ This implies that artists and

⁴ All the translations from Hindi included in this article are done by me.

⁵ He also added: "His thoughts on the subject were completely socialist" (Premchand 2002: 888).

writers, lawyers and doctors should be regarded as entirely superfluous, in fact that their presence in the civil society is a disaster. In particular, he focuses, albeit briefly, on Tolstoy's theory of art, which is based on the principle that "it is not art if it only gives pleasure to a few educated people. An art that does not have the ability to make a mark in the hearts of men is just a waste of time and wealth..." (*ibid.*). These ideas are also valuable in understanding Premchand's own theory of art—he developed them in his essays on the composition of novels, short stories and literature in general.⁶

The important side of Tolstoy's personality, for Premchand, was connected to his military career. It is a well-known fact that the army- and especially war-experiences brought him pain and sufferings rather than satisfaction and pride, given his pacifist ideas. On the other hand, exactly this experience made possible the creation of his universal masterpieces, such as, for example, *War and Peace*. And here we come closer to another part of Premchand's review of *Anna Karenina*, in which he introduced a comparison with *War and Peace*, judging it a novel of lesser scope but no less literary excellence, especially because of the subtle psychological investigation conducted on the protagonist: "It seems that in Tolstoy there is a hidden passion that enabled him to read the feelings that arise in her mind like an open book" (*ibid.*: 889).

What is also interesting to note is the praise that the Indian writer expresses regarding the introspection of the character's personality, which is yet another element testifying to the author's great artistic ability, as well as two notes, at first glance of secondary importance, in the criticism of the work. These are of particular relevance for our analysis. The review ends with a paragraph, containing a couple of very important observations on the relationship between the two writers:

I read this book some twenty years ago. (...) As I read it I felt the urge to see it translated into Hindi. It would be a wonderful thing. It is a great

⁶ The main theoretical works of Premchand are: "Upanyās", "Kahānī kī kalā" (parts 1, 2, and 3), "Sāhitya kā uddeśya"; these and other articles are a part of his collection *Kuch Vicār* (Premchand 1965). See also: Dolcini 1997.

pleasure that today the Messers.⁷ Chabinath and Vinod Kumar with the help of Vyāsa⁸ have fulfilled my wish. (*Ibid.*)

We feel that this last part is of considerable interest because, as can be seen, it offers two clarifications that will be of great use for us later on in connection with other materials concerning Premchand's encounter with Tolstoy. It reveals, first of all, that Premchand must have read *Anna Karenina* in about 1913, apparently in an English translation, and, secondly, that in the 1920s there were Indian translators—the ones respectfully mentioned by Premchand, Chabinath (Pandey) and Vinod Kumar,⁹ who were capable of translating a novel from Russian into Hindi.

The Hindi version of *The Tales of Tolstoy* (*Talstāy kī kahāniyām*)

Seeking to educate the peasants of his estate, or at least their children, Tolstoy conducted courses at Yasnaya Polyana, for which he wrote a number of texts, above all collections of short stories that had a strong educational impact on the pupils. In describing such collections, he labelled them as “Indian”, explaining that most of them came from Indian sources,¹⁰ which he had come across at the time of his early Oriental studies.¹¹

⁷ Translation of the epithets *Śrī* and *-jī*, both indicating respect.

⁸ Vyāsa is the legendary author of the *Mahābhārata*.

⁹ Unfortunately, no biographical information has been found on Chabinath and Vinod Kumar.

¹⁰ With the exception of “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” and “Seeking Freedom”, taken from the *Four Reading Books*, which, in its turn, derived from *The ABC* (1872), Tolstoy's own invention based on his biographical material. Tolstoy himself pointed out that “Work, Death and Disease” was of Latin-American origin, and “Too Expensive” of French for, as C. Muschio reported in her lecture (see footnote 13), I feel that there might be small differences in the translation of the titles from Hindi to English.

¹¹ For a period he attended the courses in Sanskrit at the School of Oriental Languages of Kazan University. His penchant for India and its culture

It is known that in the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, the fastest growing genre of fiction in Indian literature was the short story. For Premchand, this genre was of paramount importance, in his own words, “the tale is written for ordinary people, who have neither money nor time” (Premchand 1965: 29), or “The short story in an instant, without wasting time, reveals a certain feeling of the soul” (*ibid.*: 44). A firm believer in the goodness of the short story for the education of the new Indian readers—no longer limited to the upper classes, but progressively being enlarged to other categories of public once unaccustomed to reading—and stimulated by his admiration for Tolstoy, in 1923 Premchand published in Hindi twenty-one of the stories written by Tolstoy for the pupils at Yasnaya Polyana.¹²

are also visible from his interest in writing a work on the life and sayings of the Buddha and a similar on Krishna.

¹² Following the index of the volume we refer to (Premchand 1980), the corresponding titles in Hindi are: “Kṣamādān” (“The gift of forgiveness”), translated into Italian as “L’offerta del perdono”; “Rājput kaidī” (“The Rājput prisoner”), in It. “Il prigioniero rajput”; “Dhruv-nivāsī rich kā śikār” (“Polar bear hunting”), in It. “La caccia all’orso nordico”; “Manuṣya kā jīvan-ādhār kyā hai?” (“What is the base of the human life?”), in It. “Su che cosas basa la vita dell’uomo?”; “Ek cingāri ghar ko jalā detī hai” (“One single spark is enough for setting a house on fire”), in It. “Una scintilla dà fuoco alla casa”; “Do vṛddh puruṣ” (“Two old people”), in It. “Due vecchi”; “Prem meṃ Parmeśvar” (“Love is God’s abode”), in It. “Dio sta nell’amore”; “Murkha Sumant” (“Sumant the idiot”), in It. “Sumant lo scemo”; “Dayālu swāmī” (“A merciful owner”), in It. “Il padrone misericordioso”; “Sukh tyāg meṃ hai” (“Happiness is in sacrifice”), in It. “La felicità sta nella rinuncia”; “Bāl-līlā” (“Child game”), in It. “Gioco infantile”; “Bhūt aur rotī” (“The fiend and the bread”), in It. “Il diavolo e il pane”; “Ek ādmī ko kitnī bhūmi cāhiye?” (“How much ground does a man need?”), in It. “Di quanta terra ha bisogno un uomo?”; “Aṇḍe ke barābar dānā” (“A grain like an egg”), in It. “Un chicco grande come un uovo”; “Dharma putra” (“The god-child”), in It. “Il figlioccio”; “Dayāmaya kī dayā” (“The compassion of a compassionate man”), in It. “La compassione del compassionevole”; “Surat kā cāy khānā” (“The tea-house in Surat”), in It. “La casa da tè di Surat”; “Mahaṅgā saudā” (“A high-priced

“Bog pravdu vidit, da ne skoro skažet”; “Kavkazskij plennik”; “Oxota pušče nevoli”; “Čem ljudi živjy”; “Upustiš’ ogon’ – ne potušiš’”; “Dva starika”; “Gde ljubov’, tam i Bog”; “Skazka ob Ivane-durake i dvux ego brat’jax: Semene-vojne i Tarase-brjuxane, i nemoj sestre Malan’e, i o starom d’javole i trex čertenjatax”; “Vraž’e lepko, a bož’e krepko”; “Devčonki umnee starikov”; “Il’jas”; “Kak čertenok krajuš vykupal”; “Mnogo li čeloveku zemli nužno”; “Zerno s kurinoe jajco”; “Krestnik”; “Kajuščijsja grešnik”; “Suratskaja kofejnaja”; “Dorogo stoit”; “Assirijskij car’ Asarxadon”; “Trud, smert’ i bolezn’”; “Tri voprosa”.

Although some critics¹³ judge that this collection was not important in the context of Premchand’s writings and is of little literary interest, we believe, on the contrary, that it was a significant and meaningful achievement, especially bearing in mind the impression that Tolstoy had made on the Indian nationalist movement. It is undeniable that these translation is only a minor literary accomplishment for Premchand, but one cannot help recognizing that he showed great spirit in undertaking this enterprise, being motivated by a high ideal.

merchandise”), in It. “Merce costosa”; “Rājā Dṛḡpāl aur Candradev” (“King Dṛḡpal and Candradev”), in It. “Il re Dṛḡpal e Candradev”; “Rog aur Mṛtyu” (“Sickness and death”), in It. “Malattia e morte”; “Tīn praśna” (“Three questions”), in It. “Tre domande”.

¹³ There are only a few studies dedicated to Premchand and Tolstoy in comparison with a large number on Tolstoy and India. It seems that the earliest one is “Review of Premchand’s translation of L. Tolstoy’s stories” by A.P. Barannikov, published in 1927 in Russian. As for the little consideration paid to this Premchand’s work, we can say that, for example Dh. Verma (1963) placed them in the category of “Translations”, while C. Muschio, in her lecture on “L. N. Tolstoj: Folk tales, Premchand and India” (Centro Culturale Italia-Asia, Milano 02/11/1997), spoke of it as a “transcript” or “re-telling”. Perhaps “transposition”, taken in its strict etymological meaning, appears the appropriate term, all the more that Premchand himself added a subtitle to this book: *Bhāratīya rūpantacakara*, i. e. “Indian transformation”.

The stories, while focusing on the characters common in the rural world, skirmishes in wartime or everyday events of the kind that appealed to Premchand,¹⁴ have plots that generally bear a Christian stamp; moreover, the settings and human characters recall Russia in the first instance. Consequently, Premchand found—and it shows at many points—the need to create a kind of Indian patina, so as to restore these stories to their proclaimed origin. The result is a clear distortion, a kind of makeshift masking, which involved replacing names, situations and physical types, without, however, being very convincing; a diffused atmosphere that contrasts with the strains characteristic of the Indian writer, usually vibrant with situations that reveal the author's intimate involvement¹⁵ in the events depicted.

This brings us back to the review of *Anna Karenina* and the doubts that could be resolved through the interpretation of its last paragraph. The first question is whether the translations of Tolstoy's works into English circulated in India fairly soon after the publication of the originals in Russia. The second is whether Premchand, for all his tireless and effective militancy in favour of Hindi (Dolcini 1980), had access to the texts in English. Basing on the above-mentioned review, we could suggest that the answer to both the questions is positive.

However, it is not decisive, and in fact gives rise to further questions, in particular about just how far Premchand felt free to indianise Tolstoy's writings. Then one would like to know to what extent he drew on the cooperation of other Hindi writers in his work on Tolstoy's stories, and finally, why he devoted himself to this undertaking.

The first question cannot be answered, since we do not know the exact publication from which Premchand came to know about

¹⁴ Compare, for example, the following sayings of Premchand: "The basis of literature is life", "The fundamental essence of the novel lies in highlighting the human and unravelling its mysteries", "What the writer has created is based on tangible experiences" (Premchand 1965: 8, 11, 47).

¹⁵ "It is the writer in person who speaks through the mouths of his characters" (*ibid.*: 11).

Tolstoy's stories. On the second, the evidence suggests that in his review of *Anna Karenina* the assistance of colleagues who knew Russian must undoubtedly have been useful, at least in order to create a better Indian setting for the various events narrated.

As for the third, regarding Premchand's intentions, one could, perhaps, suggest that it may not be wrong to describe this project as Premchand's experiment in reconstructing a tradition.¹⁶ The greatest writer of Russia regarded the narrative heritage of India as a repository of wisdom, open to all the humanity, and treated it with great interest. This fact is acknowledged and cherished by many Indian nationalists, who, the proponents of the new independent India, believed with conviction¹⁷ that such and similar cultural exchange was a worthy cultural operation. This publication not only significantly increased the esteem and prestige of Tolstoy among Indian nationalists, but also consolidated his charisma in India, as he was recognized as a guru in the field of education and moral philosophy.

By transposing Tolstoy's collection in an Indian atmosphere, first and foremost created by the language understood by majority in the North of India, Premchand made sure that readers of all kinds were able to treasure it. His version was certainly off-key at various points, but more or less disguised, so as to be in some way attributable to an Indian source, nevertheless it could be seen as an instrument of education, that could produce development and harmony, in the first instance civil, and also human, that Tolstoy had worked

¹⁶ In this case, passing from an Indian origin, albeit disguised, to a Russian appropriation and then a return to India, however imperfect, might have exerted a particular fascination on a mentality like that of the Hindus, naturally inclined to see in the phenomena of the world a continuous, dynamic circularity of development.

¹⁷ "And we can still cherish the hope that (...) when the morning comes for cleansing the blood-stained steps of the Nation along the high-road of humanity, we shall be called upon to bring our own vessel of sacred water—the water of worship—to sweeten the history of man into purity..." (Tagore 1992: 76).

to spread, and that the “great souls” (*mahātmās*) engaged in reconstructing, and that the Indians of late Colonial times hoped would be attained in the short term.

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