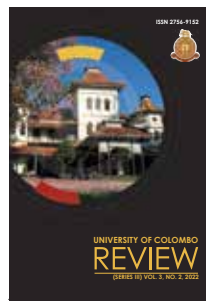


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BOOK REVIEW

Exposure to the World of the Classical Persian Poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī:
A Literary Review of කුටින් පිරිගිය එක් මොහොතක් - A Selection of Rūmī Poems in
Sinhala by Sasanka Perera and Indu Gamage
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224 pages

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At a time when the lexical and phraseological properties, and the linguistic and stylistic conventions of the Sinhala language are being undermined by a younger generation of Sinhala speakers in Sri Lanka, whether in the public media or in informal interpersonal conversations, the effort of Sasanka Perera and Indu Gamage to produce a Sinhala translation of a body of classical poetry by the 13th Century Persian poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī can be interpreted as the fulfilment of a cultural obligation to the Sinhala language. It helps expand the aesthetic interests of the Sinhala reader and provides a roadmap for sustaining and enhancing a highly developed Sinhala language and culture native to the island population of Sri Lanka.

The handsome publication titled, කුටින් පිරිගිය එක් මොහොතක් (*A Moment Filled with Pleasure*) is designed within an academic framework that incorporates 1) a note by the translators; 2) an introduction with a biographical sketch of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and a review of his craftsmanship as a poet by Sasanka Perera; 3) the Sinhala translations of 150 Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī poems aligned under four separate themes - a) bereavement, b) wisdom, c) love, and d) life, each accompanied by the name of the respective translator and the source from which the English translation is taken; and 4) an epilogue to the work introducing an approach to a thematic analysis of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's poetry by Darshana Liyanage of the University of Ruhuna. All these features of the publication are solid in terms of cognitive,

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critical, historical, philological, cultural, and aesthetic value. Altogether, the book provides a substantial guide to the spiritual and social life of the Persian canonical poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and his poetry which has universal appeal.

In an effort to fully appreciate the Sinhala translations of the poems originally composed in Persian, I was compelled to look through their English translations by Bark et al., (1995) in *The Essential Rumi* (TER), and *Rumi - The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing* (2003) because, as Perera and Liyanage acknowledge, they have drawn inspiration from the English versions of the poems. While reading the English and Sinhala versions of a few poems parallel with each other, I realized that the two Sinhala translators have satisfactorily absorbed the materials and devices evident in the English versions. While they have written almost all the poems in simple language, they have seen that each poem's diction and style suit the aesthetic and emotional aspects of the composition dealing with a conglomeration of romantic and spiritual epiphanies. The mysticism of ancient Persian poetry emerges through the versification of each line even in the Sinhala translations. I consider this the main achievement of this volume of translations of Rumi's poetry.

In order to demonstrate how the translations may appeal to the Sinhala readership, I analyze two of the poems translated from the English into Sinhala in තුටින් පිරී ගිය ඔහුගේ මොහොතක් - *Thutin Piri Giyō Ek Mohothak (TPGEM)*. They are සොලමන්ගේ ඇඳ වූ කිරුල by Sasanka Perera (p. 118) and වෝල්නට් by Indu Gamage (pp. 92-3). Overall, සොලමන්ගේ ඇඳ වූ කිරුල (Solomon's Crooked Crown) is an exotic piece of poetry, complete with allusions to the Biblical character King Solomon and the Greek philosopher Plato who are both known in world literature for their wisdom. With the personification of the crown, with which King Solomon has a dialogue, the poem unfolds as an allegory. Although the crown is usually an inanimate entity, it plays a commanding role in the episode depicted in the poem. Rather than remaining irresponsive to surroundings in its inanimate state, the crown audits the King's mental behaviour during his acts of judgement, and obstinately protests his self-opinionated partiality, behaving like a representative of universal justice. With the physical means available to it, the crown does what is exactly possible for it to do:

“පැළඳ සිටියේ ඔහු කිරුල ඇඳවුණු ලෙසකට සිය සිරසේ.

නිවැරදි කළ ද ඔහු එය, නැවතත් කිරුල

ගියේය ඇඳ වී. සිඳු විය මෙය අට වතාවක්.” (*TPGEM*, p. 118, ll. 4-6)

When these lines are juxtaposed with the English version, it is evident that Perera has captured the most appropriate Sinhala equivalents to the lexis used in the English version by Coleman Barks et al, to convey the original idea without distorting its meaning.

“His crown slid crooked on his head.

He put it straight, but the crown went awry again.

Eight times this happened.” (*TER*, p. 190, ll. 4-6)

The conversation between the King and the crown projects a conflict, therefore, over the contradictory pattern in which justice is administered under the King's patronage.

“ ‘ඇයි ද ලිස්සා යන්නේ ඔබ දෙනෙත් වසාලමින් මාගේ’?
 ‘එසේ කළ යුතුය මා. බලය ඔබගේ අමතක කරන විට කරුණාව,
 දිස්වෙන්නේ ඒ තත්ත්වය කෙසේදැයි පෙන්වා දිය යුතුය මා.’” (*TPGEM*, p. 118, ll. 7-9)

Evident in this dialogue is a hierarchy in which the crown censures the King for his tendency to be intoxicated by power, thereby forgetting his obligation to be a compassionate ruler.

" 'Why do you keep tilting over my eyes?'
 'I have to. When your power loses compassion,
 I have to show what such a condition looks like'." (*TER*, pp. 191, ll. 7-9)

The mismatch between the King's norm of royal justice and the universal norm of natural justice emerges here, exposing his idiosyncrasies which interfere with his judgements. Yet, the King's humility in rectifying his limitations also mirrors his wisdom: "To be simple is to be great" (Ralf Waldo Emerson).

“සැණෙකින් තේරුම් ගති සොලමන් සත්යය.
 දණින් වැටී, අයැද සිටියා ඔහු සමාව,
 හිඳගති එවිට කිරුළ නිසිලෙස නළල් තලය මැද.” (*TPGEM*, p. 118, ll. 11-13)

King Solomon's quick response to the crown's protest reflects not only his wisdom in recognizing his fault, but also respect (in his gesture of genuflection and verbal plea for forgiveness) for the one who points out his shortcomings. In turn, the crown's acceptance of his apology and appreciation of his willingness to correct himself are implied in how it re-positions itself on his head.

"Immediately Solomon recognized the truth.
 He knelt and asked for forgiveness.
 The crown centered itself on his crown." (*TER*, pp. 191, ll. 11-13)

Rumi uses this anecdotal account to convey to the reader a moral about wisdom. He promotes self-criticism by illustrating human frailties common to even world-renowned intellects like Plato and Solomon, and points out the necessity for recognizing the sources of one's cruelty towards others.

“යමක් වැරදුන සැම විට, දොස් පවරන්න මුලින්ම ඔබට ම,
 ජලේටෝගේ හෝ සොලමන්ගේ ඥානය වුව ද,
 කොර වී ඇද වී යා හැකියි.
 සවන් දෙන්න ඔබගේ කිරුළ මෙනෙහි කරවන විට ඔබට,
 කුමක් නිසා දැයි නො සලකන්නේ ඔබ අනුන්ට,
 සුරතල් කරන විට ඔබ කැදර තෙදබල ඔබ තුල ම ඇති.” (*TPGEM*, p. 118, ll. 14-19)

Rumi gradually exposes the King's self-importance at the expense of his subjects as indulgent here and makes clear that judgement fails when the judge is self-centred.

"When something goes wrong, accuse yourself first.

Even the wisdom of Plato or Solomon
can wobble and go blind.
Listen when your crown reminds you
of what makes you cold toward others,
as you pamper the greedy energy inside.” (*TER*, pp. 190-191, ll. 14-19)

The critique here, of egotism as the root cause of irrational judgement in all matters, conveyed through a complex aesthetic framework incorporating allegory, personification, paradox, and oxymoron, applies to the current socio-political situation of Sri Lanka as well. This makes the poem accessible to the Sinhala readership.

If Sasanka Perera has chosen his diction carefully to project Rumi’s message in its original form by being faithful to the English translation by Barks et al., a similar level of English-Sinhala bilingual competence is evident in Indu Gamage’s translations as well. Although it takes a romantic trajectory, her Sinhala translation of “Walnut” by Rumi succeeds in projecting a serious issue Rumi raises in the original. The poem begins with the philosophical view that humans are fond of music because they are, by nature, like the rest of all living beings - be they floral or faunal - part of a universal symphony that connects all spheres together. In “වෝල්නට්” Gamage efficiently adopts the Sinhala equivalents of all the technical terms used in the English translation in evoking Rumi’s original message about this humanity-musicality combination.

“පවසා ඇත්තේ දාර්ශනිකයන් රිසි බවයි අප මියැසියට
සම වන බැවින් එය විශ්ව නාදයට
එකමුතුවේ. වූයෙමු අප කොටසක් සන්ධිවතියේ
පෙර කල ද, ඉදින් මේ උච්ච සහ මන්ද රාව නිමේෂ
රැකගනී මතකය අපගේ නැවුම්ව.” (*TPGEM*, p. 92, ll. 1-5)

The poem evokes the power of rhythm as a natural condition common to all humans who are connected by a vast scheme of music.

“Philosophers have said that we love music
because it resembles the sphere-sounds
of union. We’ve been part of a harmony
before, so these moments of treble and bass
keep our remembering fresh.” (*RTBLPEL*, pp. 27-28, ll. 1-5)

The poet provokes in the reader, a fascination with the potential for a human to be musical, in the lines which reveal that the mind is liable to be crowded with negative feelings.

“... එනමුදු කෙලෙස ද
ඒසිදු වන්නේ මේ මුග්ධ සිරුරු තුළ
පිරී ඇති විමතියෙන්, සැකයෙන් සහ
සොවින්?...” (*TPGEM*, p. 92, ll. 5-8)

The poet's perception that a musical instrument needs space to produce sound is also conveyed here from a different perspective. He focuses on the mind and the obstacles to free thinking.

"...But how
does this happen within these dense bodies
full of forgetfulness and doubt and
grieving?" (*RTBLPEL*, p. 28, ll. 5-8)

Rumi further compares the musicality of the mind to the fluid quality of the body which produces liquid by-products of metabolism such as urine, which are likely to change taste, and have the potential to extinguish a fire.

"... එ'සරිය අප තුළින් ගලන දිය දහරකට.
පෙරළනද එය ඇඹුල් හා තින්ත රසකට
සුළු දිය මෙන්, රැඳෙයි එහි දියේ ගුණ.
නිවැලයි එය ගින්නක්!..." (*TPGEM*, p. 92, ll. 8-11)

"... It's like water passing through us.
It becomes acidic and bitter, but still as
urine it retains watery qualities.
It will put out a fire! ..." (*RTBLPEL*, p. 28, ll. 8-11)

This comparison helps to establish the healing power of music, along with its multiplicity of elements signifying different forms of emotions. The potential of music is also enumerated in terms of repulsing frustration, sustaining willpower, engendering affection, boosting romantic contemplation, shaping imagination, and energetically tempering the spirit.

"... ඉඳින් ඇත මේ මියැසිය
ගලායන අප සිරුර අතරින් දරමින් හැකියාවක් නිවැලිය හැකි
අසහනය. ඇසෙද්දී ඒ හඬ, අත්පත් කර ගනිමු අපි
ඔද බල. දැල්වෙයි පෙම සර සරණයෙන්. මියැසිය
වඩවයි පෙම්බරයෙකුගේ සමාධිය, ගෙන දෙමින් හැඩරුව
සිතූම් සැරියට, ගන්නේ හුස්ම මියැසිය
පුඟුල් ගින්නෙන් මුවහත් කරමින් තව තවත් එය." (*TPGEM*, p. 92, ll. 11-17)

The diction used here is effective in retaining the sense in the English version that reads as follows:

"... So there is this music
flowing through our bodies that can drowse
restlessness. Hearing the sound, we gather
strength. Love kindles with melody. Music
feeds a lover composure, and provides form

for the imagination. Music breathes
on personal fire and makes it keener.” (*RTBLPEL*, p. 28, ll. 11-17)

The multifaceted role played by music in the life of a human is in the anecdote that ends the poem. Again, Indu Gamage commands diction and style in matching the wording in the English version:

“දියපොකුණ ගැඹුරුය. පිපාසිත මිනිසෙකු නගී
වෝල්නට් ගසකට පොකුණ අසබඩ වැඩෙන,
අනහරියි ඔහු වෝල්නට් පල එකිනෙක
අසල ඇති සොඳුරු තැනට. සවන් දෙයි සැලකිල්ලෙන් ඔහු
ඒවා පතිත වන හඬට නරඹමින්
මතු වෙන දිය බුබුළු....” (*TPGEM*, p. 118, ll. 18-23)

The walnut picker’s episode is so aptly worded that the reader can sense his blithe picking of fruit and imagine what goes on in his mind.

“The waterhole is deep. A thirsty man climbs
a walnut tree growing next to the pool
and drops walnuts one by one into
the beautiful place. He listens carefully
to the sound as they hit and watches
the bubbles.” (*RTBLPEL*, p. 28, ll. 18-23)

The plopping sound the walnuts produce when dropped into the water, and the view of the bubbles that emerge to their rhythm blend with each other to please the man so much that he forgets his thirst. Rumi suggests that his auditory and visual enjoyment of the walnuts may look absurd to the average spectator. The rationalist, who warns the man about regret when there will not be any walnuts left for him to collect after he has climbed down from the tree, represents a materialistic value system developed under a utilitarian principle common to the average human being.

“වඩාත් සබුද්ධික මිනිසෙක් දෙයි ඔහුට උපදෙස්,
පසු තැවෙනු ඇත ඔබ ඔය කරන දේ ගැන. දුරය ඔබ බොහෝ
දිය පොකුණෙන්, බැස එන විට ඔබ
ඇහින්දින්නට වෝල්නට්, තිබේවි දිය දහර
ගෙනගොස් ඒවා ඇත....” (*TPGEM*, p. 118, ll. 23-27)

Here it is also clear that, in the process of translation, all the structural and functional features of the English version are preserved.

“A more rational man gives advice,
‘You’ll regret doing this. You’re so far
from the water that by the time you get down
to gather walnuts, the water will have
carried them away’.” (*RTBLPEL*, p. 28, ll. 23-27)

The walnut picker's plain answer to the query made by the so-called rationalist conveys a powerful didactic message. His real intention in climbing the tree to pick walnuts is to listen to the percussion produced by the nuts as they drop on the surface of the water: a sound that cannot be captured in any other way. So, his desire is not for the walnut kernels but the unique music they produce. This applies to everything we do, suggesting that we define the objectives of all the actions we take.

“... පිළිතුරු දෙයි ඔහු එයට මෙලෙසින්. ‘නො ආවෙමි මා මෙහි
වෝල්නට් ඇහිදින්න, අවැසි වුයේ මට මියැසිය යි
ඒවා දිය මත වැටෙන විට නගනා.’” (TPGEM, p. 118, ll. 27-29)

“... He replies, ‘I’m not
here for walnuts, I want the music
they make when they hit’.” (RTBLPEL, p. 28, ll. 27-29)

Thus, the magic of music to overwhelm one with pleasure and expel one's worries is illustrated in the psychosomatic transformation the man undergoes.

The above analysis of two of the translations in the volume by Sasanka Perera and Indu Gamage alone demonstrate how articulate their translations have been in doing justice to Rumi's poems they encountered in English. Each of the 150 translations are of fine quality in terms of semantic accuracy and linguistic appropriateness. “Dedicated to preserving the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of humanity” - the tagline the English translation displays on its dustjacket - applies to the volume as well.

On the basis of the professional quality of the translations which succeed in preserving the texture of the meanings as well as the complexity of the phrasings in the English versions of Rumi's poems, this volume makes an important contribution to modern Sinhala literature and the Sinhala reading community in general. I wish the example set by Sasanka Perera and Indu Gamage would be followed by the new generation of Sinhala speakers in Sri Lanka in cultivating their taste as literate individuals.

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