



What does a writer want from a translator? Acclaimed Indian writer, critic and musician Amit Chaudhuri interviewed by Guildhawk Advisory Board Member Roger James Elsgood.

Roger: Welcome to the Today Translations' interview. I am Roger James Elsgood, and I am with writer and critic, Amit Chaudhuri. Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta in 1962, but brought up in Bombay. He is a graduate of University College London, and was at Balliol College, and later, as Creative Arts Fellow, at Wolfson College at Oxford. He has published five novels and a collection of short stories, and his work has appeared in various publications, including the London Review of Books, the Times Literary Supplement, Granta, and the New Yorker. He is the winner of the Betty Trask Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book, the Encore Award for Best Second Novel and the LA Times Book Prize for Fiction. He lives in Calcutta with his wife and daughter, but spends some of the year in the UK where he is professor of the Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and also an acclaimed musician and singer having released two albums – "This Is Not Fusion" and "Found Music", as well as being an acclaimed singer in the Hindustani classical tradition. He has been described as being "upsettingly multi-talented".

Amit, your work, both your non-fiction and your fiction, has been translated widely into a multitude of languages. What does a writer want of a translator?

Amit: You know, it has never been something that I thought about. I have translated myself, and I suppose there are two kinds of translation – the translation that gives us a text from a foreign language in a target language, which might be English, capturing something of the style and the hallmarks of language that have made the writer well known in that language that they write in. that is what I would like to do when I am trying to translate a writer, who, I think, deserves attention outside of their own linguistic constituency. I would then try my best to be as faithful to what it is that

made that writer unique and deserving of attention without necessarily putting anything of my own interpretation of what is important into the translation. I would try to approximate that uniqueness, if possible, in the target language.

There is the other kind of translation, which is a re-working, and where you might actually take something that is canonical and very well known, and update it in a different kind of language, which might be periodic. That is a good thing to do to give a fresh lease of life in translation to self that might be well known, but might have become a bit too canonical.

Roger:

Your work thrives on close observation, social nuance, and above all the energies of poetry. Is a faithful translation of such an approach to writing possible?

Amit: I do not know, but having translated myself a writer, who wrote, for the want of a better word, poetically, although he wrote great novels, Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee in Bengali, who wrote Pather Panchali, which was just made into film by Satyajit Ray. Having translated his chapter of that book for the Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature, and having confronted those long, kind of serpentine, sentences, in which a huge amount of stuff is going on, I know that it is possible to try and do that in another language, without simplifying and breaking up. I do not think that simplifying somebody's language or making it different is a good idea. If you cannot handle that person's language and style as you are translating, then I would say: "don't do it". In my case, I do not know if it is a simple task – translating, I have been told it is not a simple task – maybe because of what is going on in my writing has more to do with what is happening on the level of style and language. That is not to say that that kind of writing is a purely static object. A lot is happening there in terms of what is being said, and how it is being said. I have been told that people cannot rely just on event to get them through as they are translating. I have been told that people over-translate at times, and that is not particularly easy to do – that is what I have been told, but thankfully I do not have access to these translations myself.

Roger:

So which is preferable – a translation, which sacrifices language to meaning, or one, which sacrifices meaning to language?

Amit: I do not think it is a sacrifice. I think meaning is always secondary. Writing is about language and there is no great writing, in which meaning can be extricated and made separate from the language of the writer. What makes a particular writer succeed as being unique is not only the uniqueness of what they are saying, but definitely, to put it in a very banal way of saying it, it is the writing. Unless we get essence of that through process on paper, which is what language is in great writing, and which is what it is, let's say for a writer like Roland Barthes. If we just divorced that from what Barthes is trying to say, then we do not understand why Barthes is unique. I think that language as creative process, as intellectual process is what's important.

Even among English writers – writers, who are very well known in Britain, are not necessarily as well known in France. Relatively minor writers are sometimes very well known in those translations.

Roger:

My final question: how do you know if the translation is accurate and representative of your writing? Assuming you do not, does it worry you?

Amit: I do not know whether it is accurate or not. It does worry me a little bit. I have to say that the translation scenario now is very different from what it used to be in the early 20th century or in the middle of the 20th century. Especially with the country like India, it is very random and you do not know what kind of readers you are reaching if you are translated into German or French or whenever in Europe. Random sorts of people get translated into those European languages. You do not know how it works. Even among English writers – writers, who are very well known in Britain, are not necessarily as well known in France. Relatively minor writers are sometimes very well known in those translations. So you basically have no clue about what is going on because translation now also seems to be an act, at least when the translation is taking place into European languages, – an act, which divorces you from literary history. It is almost as if we begin on a clean slate. That in itself, forget about whether the translation is accurate or not, is worrying. The people, who are reading you, whether they are reading Jonathan Coe, who is very popular in France, or Hilary Mantel, who is not as popular, or reading you, it is worrying that there is no kind of context or critical parameters, in which those translations are being received. You are being read outside of literary history.

Roger:

Amit Chaudhuri, thank you very much.