

On Translating the Postmodern Novel *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco into Bangla

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[**Abstract:** It all started, according to the Italian author Umberto Eco, with the simple idea of writing a novel about poisoning a monk, and the ultimate produce *Il nome della rosa* (1980) was the first attempt of his in the genre that became a literary phenomenon almost as soon as it was published. In William Weaver's exquisite translation, the novel turned into *The Name of the Rose* (1983), from which it was rendered into Bangla, by the writer of the present essay, as *গোলাপের নাম* (*Golaper Nam*, a calque of the English title). Simple as the germinating idea of the novel was, the voluminous tome that it flowered into is not an easy read at all. A murder mystery set in a Benedictine monastery in north Italy in the 14th century, in 1327 to be very specific, and replete not only with events concerning politics and religion in the beginning of the late Middle Ages, but also with topics related to aesthetics, medieval philosophy, language, poetics, semiotics, skepticism, as well as with innumerable allusions to fictional, mythical, and historical characters, the novel in its scope becomes an erudite postmodernist one without losing its highly enjoyable readability. This paper tries to put forward not only the experience the Bangla translator had while translating the novel of this grand stature, an experience that can best be described as a trial by fire, but also some of his observations regarding the very complex phenomenon called translation.]

The immensely famed novel *Il nome della rosa* of Umberto Eco was published in 1980, six years shy of a half-century ago. In terms of the bare story line, the novel is a whodunit that involves the gruesome and sequential murders, in seven days, of no fewer than six monks who lived in a Benedictine monastery in Italy in the early fourteenth century, in 1327 to be exact. A Franciscan monk turned investigator William of Baskerville accompanied by a Benedictian novice Adso of Melk happen to be there to take part in a debate on the poverty of Christ with the envoys of the Pope, and the duo ultimately solves the murder mystery. The publication of the novel in 1980, the English translation of it in 1983, the film version by Jean-Claude Annud in 1986, and translations of the novel into a host of languages resulted in, so far, a staggering sale of 50 million copies worldwide, making it one of the bestselling books ever published. Perhaps, there is not much to be surprised at this, one may think, as unique murder mysteries or mystery thrillers or fantasies sometimes achieve phenomenal sales. Here lies the crux of the matter: the skeleton of the novel's storyline mentioned above puts on ample flesh as Umberto Eco brings about a host of arguably pertinent topics, and combine semiotics, debates concerning Christianity and heresies, medieval studies, literary theories, aesthetics, intertextuality, etc., to add to it using a language style not commonly used by modern thriller writers. On top of that, the novel refers to many a historical

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event and variegated range of medieval personality both historical and fictitious. Saints named Agiluf, Aldimar, Angela of Foligno, Clare of Montifalco, heretical bands Amoldist, Beghards, Bizochi, Waldensians, Williamites, and mythical characters like Cockaigne, Cimmerian fog, Blemmyae, Bull of Phalaris have been mentioned too. And, apart from the long and meandering complex sentences that sometimes seem to go on forever, the text teems with words, phrases and sentences in Latin, French, and German unaccompanied by almost - any footnotes or explanations. The English translator of the novel, possibly to remain faithful to the original, kept them intact without caring for providing any clue to them in the form of translation of those words and phrases; he did not write even an introduction about one of the most complex novels of world literature or why and how he embarked on the task of translating this debut novel of the author, and, why he kept those foreign texts intact. Since the setting and the historical background of the story are supposed to be much familiar to the European readership, both the author and the English translator might have thought that these references as well as the untranslated texts will not be lost on them. But three people named Adel J. Haft, Jane G. White, and Robert J. White thought otherwise. They came forward to the rescue of not only the European readers but also readers in general producing a book named *The Key to 'The Name of the Rose'* where they incorporated a few essays on the novel, and most importantly, translations of the untranslated Latin, German, and French texts used in the original novel, along with glosses regarding the erudite references to different personalities, historical events, texts, and mythical figures.

When Umberto Eco wrote the novel, he was 48 and a renowned medievalist semiotician with a few significant books to his credit; and it is worth mentioning here that, writing a theses on the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas in 1954, he had earned a Laurea degree which, 'until the introduction of the "dottorato di ricerca" (PhD-level education) in the mid-1980s, constituted the highest academic degree obtainable in Italy and gave the holders access to the highest academic positions' (Wikipedia). And we come to know from a piece of writing by Umberto Eco "How I wrote *The Name of the Rose*" published in *The New York Times* on October 14, 1984 that he:

began writing *The Name of the Rose*" in March of 1978, prodded by a seminal idea: I felt like poisoning a monk. I believe a novel is always born of an idea like this; the rest is flesh that is added along the way. The idea must have originated even earlier. Afterward, I found a notebook dated 1975 in which I had written down a list of monks in an unspecified monastery. Nothing else.

There is a dictum universally acknowledged that a translation should be done from the language it was originally written in. Of course, there is no surety that the translation done this way is bound to produce the best result, and instances, not rare, testify to this, especially in the case of Bangla translation. Although, if the translator is enamoured with a book, and yet handicapped by not knowing the language it is originally written in, he or she is left with the Hobson's choice of translating it from a third language, which, in most of the cases here, is English. *গোলাপের নাম* (*Golaper Nam*), the Bangla translation of *The Name of the Rose* - done by the present author of this article - itself an English rendition by William Weaver of Umberto Eco's bestselling debut novel in Italian *Il nome della rosa*, is a case in point.

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Enthralled right from the very first page by the dramatic beginning of the intriguingly erudite story, the translator had no other option but to finish reading the almost 500 page-volume almost in one sitting and to come to the conviction of rendering it in Bangla, his mother tongue, despite having been uninitiated into the knowledge of the Italian. The impetus for this apparently questionable decision came, of course, from the experiences the translator had gone through before while rendering a few voluminous as well as significant pieces of fiction into Bangla from English translations, e.g., *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Gregory Rabassa), *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder (Paulet Moller), *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino (William Weaver), originally written in, respectively, the Spanish, the Norwegian, and the Italian.

As regards the translation of the novel into Bangla, the decision was taken instinctively almost as soon as the reading of it began, even before there was any inkling of the daunting task looming large in the innumerable pages ahead. As the reading progressed, the prospective translator became more and more convinced that the Bengali readers would love to have a translation of the novel into their mother tongue and, are in need of an elaborate introduction regarding not only the context and historical as well as religious backgrounds of the novel, but also a translation of the untranslated Latin, German, and French texts along with footnotes to provide information about the personalities, historical events, texts, and mythical figures referred to in the novel, since the common Bengali readers are foreign to many of the paraphernalia of topics and references brought together in the novel. Needless to say, *The Key to 'The Name of the Rose'* came in handy for this purpose, making the 'task of the translator', understandably, much easier, since even taking recourse to Google to get the meaning of each of the untranslated texts and gathering and editing information about the references could have proved to be an odyssey, lengthening the time to complete the Bangla translation to infinity.

Accommodating the indispensable footnotes to a suitable place of the Bangla translation posed a technical problem that needed to be solved with discretion. First and foremost, providing footnotes to a work of fiction itself is not a very welcoming idea, and often detested by many readers and critics. The point of its necessity mentioned earlier was enhanced by an example set by Satinath Bhadury, a renowned writer of Bangla literature who, in his famous novel *Dhonrai Charitamanas*, (1949, 1951) inserted occasional brief explanatory notes in the very body of the novel. Providing footnotes to translations of fiction too is not a rare thing at all, and a Chinese translation of the novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce is famously furnished with more than five thousand footnotes. As mentioned earlier, to place them at the bottom of the pages could have been an easy solution had not the number of the relevant footnotes sometimes been too many and their length too long to accommodate in a single page. Placing them at the end of the book could be clumsy and unmanageable for readers, marring their pleasure of reading. Hence taking recourse to the golden mean of situating the corresponding ones at the end of each chapter.

The translation of the novel into Bangla involved taking into consideration certain things that deserve to be specified. As mentioned earlier, the novel is not an easy read at all. The simple storyline of a murder mystery got immensely complex by the introduction of topics from the realm of different areas of knowledge and interest, and they are presented before the readers, arguably, not so seamlessly, in a language, as told earlier, that modern whodunit writers try to

avoid. In most of the cases they prefer short, terse, and precise sentences evoking a sense of urgency and tension, avoiding long and convoluted sentences that trigger ambiguity. This is not Umberto Eco's forte, at least not in *The Name of the Rose*. This is not to say that he completely shuns the usual language used by mystery writers; there are pages full of it. But when he chooses to talk about the architecture of the abbey library which is placed in a fortified tower called the Aedificum, the reliefs and frescos of the Abbey Church, the Babylonian captivity of the Papacy/Avignon Papacy, medieval European history, theologies, different forms of heresies, debate over poverty and the Inquisition's hostility toward the Fraticelli -- an offshoot of the Franciscan order -- long, complex, convoluted sentences take over, making the Bangla translation very challenging as Bangla is not at ease with lengthy sentences and lacks apt terminologies and vocabulary for discussing the topics mentioned.

As regards the first problem, the much practised easy solution is to break the sentences into parts at convenient points, and to use common words and expressions so that target readers do not lose track while reading them, and read the text with ease. Convenient as it may be for both the translators and the readers to deal with the book, the writers turn out to be the loser, as their styles do not get transported in the translation, and readers, after going through a number of translations done in the same vein, tend to think that the authors penned the texts in the same style using almost similar diction despite writing in different languages, times, and regions of the world. The present translator did not want to follow this much trodden path as his prior experience of translating a few intimidatingly difficult texts, namely *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola into Bangla, provided him with the necessary self-confidence to tackle the others. This gave rise to addressing two age old as well as inevitable points that every conscious translator is beleaguered with: fidelity and readability.

Writers are free birds, at least in comparison to translators who are almost slaves to authors in terms of fidelity to the text's content, style, diction, etc. Writers are on their own to choose their story or subject matter, setting, writing style, etc., though the intrinsic rules or dictums of what they choose to write have a sway on them, making them adhere to those rules or dictums. On the contrary, it is common knowledge that translators are poles apart from the writers in the sense that except for choosing the text they want to translate, everywhere else they are in chains. A 'specter' haunts them—the specter of fidelity (to the original). Hence the catch phrase 'lost in translation'. Integral to this point of fidelity is, as mentioned earlier, the problem of readability. We are very much aware of the fact that translators through history have been at loggerheads with the two points mentioned above, and many a translator has shown preference to fidelity over readability and vice versa. It is needless here to reiterate their views simply because, at the end of the day, it is the subjective choice of the translator that matters, as there is none who can give a final word about it, and readers too are at liberty to choose translations of their own liking.

Books like *The Name of the Rose*, with the theme, setting, storyline, and language this intricate, need to be translated into Bangla, for the simple reason that people want to read things in their mother tongues, and when they don't find translations, especially of difficult texts like this, into their mother tongue, most of them show lack of interest in reading the original version.

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The famous litterateur Buddhadev Bose delineated in his preface to his translation of *Meghdut* by Kalidas another important reason for doing translation:

এক এক সময় এক একটি অনুবাদ বা অনুবাদগুচ্ছ এক এক দেশের বা মহাদেশের সাহিত্যের ধারা বদলে দিয়েছে। এবং যাঁরা মূলের সাথে পরিচিত তারাও কোনো কোনো ক্ষেত্রে অনুবাদ পড়ে লাভবান হতে পারেন, কেননা ভালো অনুবাদ কেবল মূল রচনার প্রতিনিধিত্ব করে না, তার যুগের অনুবাদকের ব্যক্তিত্বের স্বাদ দেয়।

Taking cue from these words of Buddhadev Bose, we can refer to the third chapter entitled ‘Translators and the Emergence of National Literatures’ of *Translators through History* edited and directed by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth and published by John Benjamin Publishing Company (2012). Here the topic of the chapter is, as its title aptly suggests, how translation played a pivotal role in the rise of literatures of different nations.

Moreover, translations of difficult books like this, inspire other translators, especially those who have just tried their hands in this art. They get infused with the confidence that it is possible to translate such books into their language which is capable of accommodating a text of this stature. And then they go for translating even more difficult or significant ones. This is not all. Those who want to produce so-called “original” books are also motivated; even translators themselves switch to writing “original” texts -- short stories, novels or poems. Geoffrey Chaucer is a very illustrious case in point. Instances like this are not rare in the history of World literature, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, F. Scott Fitzgerald, being a few instances. And looking away from familiar ones, we can pick up a not-so-known translator. In the book *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* the editor Frederick Burwick writes:

...Coleridge was able to establish himself as a translator early in his career, with his English version of Friedrich Schiller's *Wallenstein* in 1800. Schiller's work was translated into English as *The Piccolomini* and *The Death of Wallenstein*, which both contain several thousand lines. After translating Schiller's work, Coleridge continued in his role, as interpreter and commentator on German literature and philosophy.

In the discussion above, the writer, apart from attempting to give some ideas about the impetus and modus operandi regarding translating a very significant novel of world literature, namely *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, tries to put forward his reflections on the art we call translation. And he is of the opinion that the task called translation enables the target language to test its capacity by accommodating different traits of the source language during the transference of the style of the author, especially in the case of fictions; and translation of difficult texts like *The Name of the Rose* plays a very significant role in encouraging other translators, especially budding ones, and paving the way for reaching uncharted territories in this field.

Reference

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Delisle, Jean and Judith Woodsworth (ed.), *Translators through History*; John Benjamin Publishing Company (2012)

Eco, Umberto, "How I wrote *The Name of the Rose*", *The New York Times*, October 14

কালিদাস, মেঘদূত; বসু, বুদ্ধদেব (অনুবাদক); ১৯৫৭