

Language is the medium of writing

By Atle Hetland

The most important tool of writers, notably language, was given attention in two key sessions at the Islamabad Literature Festival yesterday mid-day. It was about writing fiction in English on the sub-continent, and in particular in Pakistan, and it was about translation to and from Urdu from other languages. The sessions were moderated ably by Muneeza Shamsie, Karachi, and Taimor Shahid, Lahore.

“I feel we still have a colonial mind in the sense that we are willing to translate into English, but less into French and other foreign languages”, said Taimor Shahid.

“And some will say that to write in English in Pakistan is elitist. Yet, we keep doing it and we will probably do more of it in the future”, a participant suggested. “English is not only the main business language today, still much ahead of Chinese”, said Aamer Hussain, one of the most prominent writers from Pakistan, who is indeed an “owner of English”.

“I came to live in England at the age of fifteen, and English is therefore my mother tongue”, he said. “I am working on my Urdu”, he added. “But there was no question for me when I started writing that it would be in English. I could have used Italian since it is another of the languages I grew up with. But I lived in the UK and my life and context was UK. English has always been my literary medium”, he said.

Sabyn Javeri said that for her, too, English was the natural choice for her when writing. She said that at home, she had grown up with Urdu, but at school English was the only permitted language. She reflected on what the readers would prefer, and said that when she began writing, she actually wrote for herself, and later, she got a wider audience. Her next book, still in-print, has been entitled *Nobody Killed Her*. “And with such a catching title, it may sell well”, a participant suggested.

Dr. Syed Nomanul Haq and Dr. Framji Minwalla had more academic approaches to the language issue. They said that nobody really owns a language. And Aamer Hussain chipped that perhaps the language owns the writer. It was added that Samuel Becket, who first wrote in English, but later also wrote in French, had once said that language can be a mask. In other words, if one changes language, the content may also change.

“The context is important for the choice of language style, said Sabyn Javeri. “If you only live in Pakistan, it is difficult to write only in English. When abroad, especially in English speaking countries, it becomes more natural”, she said.

Several of the speakers mentioned the world-famous writer Salman Rushdie, noting that although he writes in English, he is at the same time deeply embedded in the sub-continent, and many of his metaphors are indeed from Urdu.

“Translation is often seen as a side-activity, and nobody does it for the money”, said Fahmida Riaz from Karachi in the session about the art of translation.

“But to translate literature, especially poetry, is a very difficult task, and it needs both language skills and broad general knowledge. And still, it is an impossible task”, said Professor Waqas Khwaja, who works at Agnes Scott College in USA, and has recently edited the spring/summer volume 2014 of “Atlanta Review” about Pakistani poetry.

Professor Anwar Ahmed from the Sialkot campus of University of Gujrat and other speakers agreed that there is a need for more university courses in translation and creative writing.

The moderator suggested that ‘machine translations’ in our technological age may be helpful to get a rough idea about a text in a language one doesn’t know, but he stressed that there is a need for systematic work and methodology.

Masood Ashar, a leading Urdu journalist and fiction writer, said that the translators help keeping local languages and cultures alive. “It is important that translators are true to the original content and style without distortions. But that is easy to say, much more difficult to do”, the panelists stressed.

“We all love our work. I am basically a literary person”, said Fahmida Riaz, and added that somehow writers and translators of all shades are interlinked, as the world of literature is also interlinked, and that goes beyond language, ethnicity and nationality.

“In the end, language is a tool for the writer to communicate with his reader; it is not an end in itself, at least not prose. It is the story, the way it is told and the atmosphere, that is important”, said Atta Abbasi, a young student in literature at the International Islamic University, Islamabad.

Photos attached

Photo captions:

1. The literature festival discussed the importance of translating books from foreign languages into Urdu – and from Urdu and other regional languages in Pakistan into English. There is need for more university courses in translation and creative writing, it was noted.
2. The literature festival discussed the importance of translating books from foreign languages into Urdu – and from Urdu and other regional languages in Pakistan into English. There is need for more university courses in translation and creative writing, it was noted.

(-Photo by the writer)