

Mohan Rana: Living in Language

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Mohan Rana is an Indian poet who has lived in Britain for over 20 years, but always writing in Hindi and, until recently, publishing his work only in the land of his youth and education. Our conversations for *Bread and Salt* are a fascinating exploration of the difficulties and the new perspectives that can be associated from such a relationship with languages.

His poetry is admired in India but is almost invisible in the UK. The Poetry Translation Centre published a [chapbook](#) of his poems, translated by Bernard O'Donoghue and Lucy Rosenstein, but this is a tiny sample of his work. The Translation Centre's website presents some of the poems in [three versions](#): the original Hindi, in a literal translation and in a version by Bernard O'Donoghue. Even without being able to read, still less understand, the Hindi, the pages offer a tantalising glimpse into the instability of meaning.

Yesterday, when we spoke again about the challenges of rendering his poetry into English, he observed:

'I think any 'language' is a translation of an experience. What really is the real language I translate from and how I process the poem as it appears in the dark room of my mind in the language known to me, that is 'Hindi', is a mystery.'

He used the image of being on the other side of a window. I imagined him speaking poetry from other side of a river, so that I don't catch all the words and, even then, they are distorted by being called out.

Mohan's [latest book](#) was published on 29 August 2012. It is called RET (Sand) kaa (of) PUL (bridge) so...'Bridge of Sand'.

A short interview with Mohan appears on this [website](#). The experiences and questions about language we have been exploring will be appear in *Bread and Salt*, which I hope to be able to complete and publish next spring.



A majority of human beings speak at least [two languages](#), albeit to widely different degrees. Because English (or as it is sometimes called 'Globish') is the leading language of international communication, especially among professionals, many native speakers don't appreciate that their monolingual identity puts them in a world minority. Like Romans encountering Latin speakers in far-flung parts of the Empire, those who rely only on English may have a specially unreliable view of what the natives think.

There is something deeper in this than understanding other people though, essential as that is. Anyone who has grown up in two languages, as I did, has a multiple sense of their experience and of reality itself. The word 'table' (English) is not the same as 'table' (French), though they seem identical and signify objects of comparable appearance and function. They just don't mean the same thing because a French table is, in so many ways that articulate a culture, different from an English one.

Developing a consciousness in two languages makes it much harder – for me, impossible – to hold a unitary interpretation of the world or to divide people into Greeks and Barbarians. Far from inspiring any pride in one's knowledge, the ability to understand more than one language teaches humility in the face of incompatible but equally undeniable realities.

Comments

Genaro Delgado About the poetry of Mohan Rana,

Even if only reading the scraps of the scraps, translations of translation, something as strong as it is apparently imperceptible still remains In Mohan Rana's poetry. The experiences journey is first noticed by Mohan from outside language finding its way through him into language. His mother tongue Hindi. Something becomes something: from an experience into a written form, from Hindi to English, from Linguistic English to Poetic language. Even then, and in between, as if all along, without the proper shape or expected form, all along still depth, still force, still something silently grabbing, pulling, and stretching as a reader becomes a translation of himself in the experience of that poetry life evolving force. From one person to another and yet more translations as one reads, decides and deconstructs till it goes, if it can, to where it came from in the first place, through somebody else. Leaving a trail of experiences. Having seeded its way around different grounds. Sometimes even finding fertile soil. Mohan Rana's poetry is just like those good things in life everybody takes for granted and only few value or even notice. In many levels, they are descriptive notes of a mystic daily life, as if sticky notes left for others to see. Quick pictures of experiences in his life journey through mysterious planes of common places. Mystic events, signs go traveling into napkins, forehands, books, computer screens... Like water finding its way back to the ocean it came from. And like water Mohan's Rana poetry is valued only by some thirsty people and few other that can still tell the difference from other beverages or soda drinks. Until it may become bottled and made trendy to have mineral water or better if we start remembering how nothing is better than water to ease the thirst.

Derrida wanted to look beyond the box of language, and Mohan is aware of the limitations of language in our experience. Nonetheless it is also aware it is the tool we got to communicate, and uses language to go beyond language, to hint or sign towards a direction or some space in the experience of existence where the borders of

language are blurry. The edges of human experience through language leaves space for something else language can only infer.

Thanks for this interesting post on talks with Mohan Rana. I guess it would be nice to have a series of them. I am sure the echoes of the conversation will bring new understandings and new conversations, which in turn... well you know... events of the "Rabbit Hole" or The spiral of life towards self-remembering.

Thanks for sharing it.

Namaste.

Genaro Delgado

8 November 2012 Sarita Sharma says:

Mohan Rana is a college days friend. i have been reading him since then. his poems reflect his personality and interval happenings. his perception of nature and intricacies of human relations is rather abstract. the poems deal with mind space and a citizen divided between two cultures.

14 November 2012 Arup K Chatterjee says:

Mohan Rana's poetry has a unique melancholia. It is as if language is crying from within it like a little child on its tantrums. Sometimes that child makes mischief, sometimes it would melt your heart by its lispng speech. Sometimes it would create a whirlpool around you, spiralling outwards and you would be left standing unable to find put the way

15 November 2012 A'zam says:

I like Mohan's poems very much!

Mohan Rana: Cartographer of the space between

First published on 'Parliament of Dreams', 27 February 2021.

A few months ago, I had a call from Mohan Rana. His calls tend to come out of the blue: they neither give nor need an introduction. We live far apart, but have been friends for 30 years, and our conversation is like a path that follows a river: sometimes the land separates them but when they reconnect, it's the same ground and the same water.

Mohan wanted my opinion about the possible title of a forthcoming collection of his poems, translated into English. Over the next few days, we exchanged thoughts about ten or a dozen candidates, any of which, to be honest, would have been fine. *Another Word for It* is very fitting for a book that makes Hindi and English embrace each time it is closed. *Did You Hear It Too?* might be the unspoken thought that makes the poet pick up a pen. Personally, I've always loved *A Standard Shirt*, the poem which closes this book with its quiet moment of hopeful acceptance, in which ordinary is enough and life, this life, is possible.

At the end, as it did at the start, *The Cartographer* fitted best, like the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle, like one hand in another. It fits because Mohan Rana is the cartographer of a territory that gets too little attention, the space between or beyond those we claim and pretend to own in the everyday life of getting and spending, having and holding. He maps in poetry the space where nothing happens.

You might think that in-betweenness arises from the fact that Mohan lives in a different country to that of his birth and upbringing:

... resident of an unclaimed place
 With two windows, one on each side
 Looking out on two stateless places

'Of No Fixed Abode', Mohan Rana

It is a standard fact, common to so many lives, but one that defines a linguistic border this poet has learned to make prosper, like a smuggler, although his poetry is nothing if not above board. L. P Hartley's assertion that 'The past is a foreign country' has become famous for its ache of nostalgia, but Mohan is not a nostalgic poet; indeed sentimentality is absent from his poetry and, I can say from our years of friendship, from his character too. He is not nostalgic, but his past is another country, even if it is one to which he always returns and where his poems are published and celebrated.

Nevertheless, that diasporic removal is an ordinary fact (though still open to interpretation) and anyone who uses a language away from its main current risks opening a gap between their private imagination and that of its community of speakers and writers. Perhaps that is why Mohan writes:

I have faith in poetry, but my trust in language is gone

'Of No Fixed Abode', Mohan Rana

I do not speak Hindi, but I trust the English translations so meticulously crafted by Lucy Rosenstein and Bernard O'Donoghue. In them, language releases its grip on chronology and geography. Timelessness is the quality I most often sense and value in this poetry.

For all the specificity that allows the reader to see a robin, a parasol pine or a yellow shirt, it is impossible to fix any of these poems to a year, a decade or even a century. Nor do they bind themselves to place, despite their roots in small and common things such as a door

or a cloud or a leaf. Indeed, Mohan has a rare ability to make simple nouns universal and abstract ones concrete, without ever losing the reader's confidence in the lived reality that is each poem's genesis. His poems are not difficult to read, or even to understand; but they can be hard to fathom.

Mohan Rana's concerns are not with the minutia of the day's events, or the constantly renewed feelings that blow through our minds. He is in search of deeper, more elusive ideas that touch on the nature and meaning of existence. That involves testing other borders than those humans make between countries or even languages: nameless, invisible boundaries, in his own words.

Although I have little affinity for science, I have often been captivated by Mohan's exposition of new ideas in physics and the natural world, and his ease in bridging scientific and spiritual ways of apprehending reality. The American philosopher, John D. Caputo, writes that:

The natural sciences give us causal explanations of mathematically measurable phenomena, while in the humanities we reach an interpretive understanding of [...] phenomena which have a non-mathematical meaning.

Hermeneutics, John D. Caputo, Penguin 2018

Mohan Rana's poetry accommodates both these ways of understanding the world, declining politely to see any meaningful opposition between them. This ability to apprehend profound, unchanging truths in the specificity of things seen and felt is one of the most precious aspects of his poetry.

W. H. Auden's dictum that 'poetry makes nothing happen' is usually taken to express the political limitations of the art. But I prefer another interpretation. Nothing, like something, must happen somewhere: and one of the places it comes into being is in Mohan Rana's extraordinary poetry.



This text was written for an online panel presentation of ‘The Cartographer’ at Swami [Vivekananda](#) Cultural Centre in Durban (South Africa) streamed on [Facebook Live](#) on 28 February 2021.

The other speakers were Dr. Ram Prasad Bhatt, University of Hamburg, Germany; Prof. Mini Gill, University of Delhi, India, Dr. Bhoo-wan Prakash Singh, Author and Educator, South Africa. Mohan read three of his poems in the original Hindi, and I had the pleasure of reading the translations by Lucy Rosenstein and Bernard O’Donoghue.

The Cartographer is published in paperback by the Poetry Translation Centre: [click here to order a copy](#).