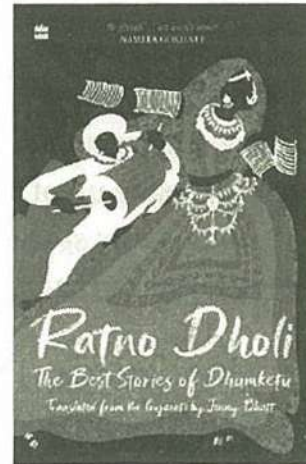


Presenting a pioneer

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While translation is commonly perceived as a conversation between two languages, it can also be, in certain contexts, a conversation between two eras, between the past and the present. Periodic retranslations of ancient epics as well as classical and medieval poetry have become fairly routine. They are undertaken because such works still occupy a place of importance in the culture of the source language, and there is a perceived need to render them intelligible to contemporary readers. In contrast, prose fiction works of the early modernist era in Indian languages, when translated, serve a different purpose. They provide us a view of the literary universe of our forefathers, their preoccupations, and the nature of the social world of that era. Equally, they help us to understand the evolution of craft and technique in the source language and the diverse layers of imagination – social, political, personal – that fuelled and shaped the literary works of that era. In short, they provide us yet another way, through the medium of art, to construct “genealogies of the present.”

The pioneers of early modernist literature become even more important when we realise that prose fiction and other forms of modern literary expression came to Indian languages only in the late 19th century. Faced with both the necessity of inventing new forms and interpreting a society and people in the throes of transition to modernity, these pioneers rose to the occasion in style, learning from the work of European masters – such as Leo Tolstoy, Guy de Maupassant, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe and O Henry. They also drew on the repertoire of folk and folktale traditions in their own language. Their work was responsive to the societal currents of their time as well as the need for continuity with an intensely remembered past. But very few of these early pioneers – with the exception of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in Bengal and Munshi Premchand in the Hindi heartland – have been translated into English



Ratno Dholi: The Best Stories of Dhumketu, translated from the Gujarati by Jenny Bhatt; HarperCollins India, New Delhi, 2020, pp.318; Rs.399/-

and presented to a pan-Indian audience. It is in this background that *Ratno Dholi: The Best Stories of Dhumketu*, translated from the Gujarati by Jenny Bhatt, represents a welcome addition to this genre.

Dhumketu (meaning comet) is the pen-name of Gaurishankar Govardhan Joshi (1892-1965), who was born in a Brahmin family in Gujarat. A schoolteacher formally trained in Sanskrit and literature, Dhumketu also had wide exposure to music, drama, sculpture and poetry. Starting in his school years, Dhumketu wrote throughout his life, publishing 500 short stories in 24 volumes in an oeuvre that ranged from novels, plays and travelogues to essays, literary criticism, memoirs and translations. The 26 stories collected in *Ratno Dholi* are made up of one story from each of his twenty-four collections along with two iconic stories, *The Post Office* and *Kailas*, both coincidentally about ageing fathers grieving the absence of a child.

In these stories, Dhumketu presents an impressively diverse cast of characters caught up in both ordinary and extraordinary situations. His imagination goes wherever life happens: mountain villages, households, riversides, government offices, red-light districts, palaces and more. The one thing that he seems to be saying through all these stories is that there are no eternal verities about human nature. Through the turn of events in the story every individual discovers what they can, about themselves and the world, and chooses what's important for them in the private core of their being. Dhumketu takes us through common human frailties in a nuanced manner, with deft use of language to draw characters and situations with minimal strokes.

In the iconic story *The Post Office*, an old man waits for a letter from his daughter who lives in a distant land, for what seems like years, with the mostly unsympathetic staff at the post office jeering at him throughout. It's only after his death and when the postmaster finds himself in a similar predicament that the latter comes alive to his own failure at empathizing with the old man. 'It was stinging him that he had not understood Ali's heart as a father himself... Set aflame by the three kinds of fires of surprise, doubt and repentance, he sat in his living room. And a sweet warmth began to radiate from the nearby coal stove.'

The same failure of empathy, this time with an innocent child's wish to hear a story, is described poignantly in *On the Banks of the Sarayu*, set inside an ordinary household with its quotidian exigencies. Vakil-saab, the head of the household, is unable, despite his best intentions, to free himself from all the demands being made on him by the world at large, and narrate a long pending story that takes place on the banks of the mythical river to his child,

who keeps waiting endlessly for the narrative to unfold. Written as a series of exchanges and conversations, the narrative is one of the many examples of Dhumketu's splendid craft of storytelling, which is on display throughout this fine collection.

At the end of *Svarjogi*, a story of elemental grief expressed through the shehnai of an itinerant musician, the nameless narrator feels, on hearing the language of music only the soul understands, as if 'the soul had rendered the body and all its senses helpless and had taken over the body.' To counter this tyranny, the narrator searches for wisdom but realises that 'what appeared to be wisdom was but an argumentative account of received prejudices,' and it flies away in no more than a couple of moments. The story ends with: 'Not just the people, it seemed as if the birds and animals and plants too, even the moonlight flowing from the sky, had forgotten themselves in it – or, you could say, they were seeking to find themselves in it.'

An uncommon aspect of Dhumketu's stories, considering the time of their writing, was his portrayal of women characters who were brave and dignified in the face of many trials that the world brought their way. Dhumketu does not wish away the fact that women are constantly beset by difficulties, demands and expectations not of their making, but describes how they handle this condition with intelligence, courage and self-respect.

In *Tears of the Soul*, Amrapali, the princess of Vaishali, is not only forced to consort with Bimbisar of Magadh for the sake of the kingdom but also to give up her son as heir to the faraway kingdom. At the end of the story, where the kingdom of Vaishali demands nothing less than her soul, we see an anguished but brave Amrapali coming to terms with arrangements dictated for the convenience of others. *The Queen of Nepal* finds a woman spurning the endless selfishness of a feckless suitor to mourn for a dead husband. In *A Memorable Day*, the writer-narrator comes across two women in a single day: the first, a woman forced into prostitution by unscrupulous relatives, and the second, able to lead a fulfilling if mediocre life. The destinies of both women have been shaped purely by circumstance. The more unfortunate of the two is forced unfairly to fight constantly for self-respect and dignity, which should have been her right.

The device of *deus ex machina* is used in a few stories, but with great subtlety. *Kailas* and *Gulabhahu* are two stories in which the idea of divine justice springs up at an unexpected moment in a completely plausible way. Though he deals most of the time with injustice, cruelty, deceit, weakness of character, power play and wrongdoing, Dhumketu's narrative style is free of any kind of cerebral grandstanding. His grasp of how people cope with and

live under less-than-ideal circumstances is so certain that he seldom creates a false note in his narrative, characterisation or dialogue. He gives each of his characters an inviolable dignity that could only come from deep empathy, understanding and compassion. It is by these qualities that Dhumketu emerges as an important writer not only of his time but even for ours, where our narratives are driven less by observation and insight but by pre-conceived notions of right and wrong and an *a priori* moral reckoning. One hopes that more of this exemplary writer's work will be made available in English in the years to come.

The translator, Jenny Bhatt is also an accomplished writer of short stories in English. Her translation of Dhumketu's prose is relaxed and even-toned, never slipping into performativity. The translator is deeply engaged with the context of each story and follows each dip and tremor in the narrative flow with practised ease and linguistic flair. The retention of certain verbal exclamations and expressions as in the original serves to replicate the tones and cadences of ordinary speech when it is rendered in English. With this collection, Jenny Bhatt drives home a fact that is not often recognized in the milieu, that the translator is also a literary explorer and evangelist whose initiative in selecting works of important writers and presenting them in another language is unique in the world of publishing, and deserves acknowledgement and recognition. ■