



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Volume 6:2

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

July 2025

Excerpt from *Ūrvashi* by Ramdhari Singh Dinkar

*****Translated from the Hindi original by Professor (Dr.) Ashok Kumar Mohapatra***

Introduction

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar (1908-974), doyen of Hindi Literature, was the recipient of the Jnānapith Award in 1973 for the magnum opus and classic *Ūrvashi*, a poetic play in five acts. It is an adaptation of the Vedic story.

The above excerpt is from Act III, a poetic exchange between Ūrvashi and Purūravā that dramatizes a tension between eros and divinity, as each affects the other. Eros in the Indian sense, rather than in the Western sense, is *kāma* (desire), a component of Purushārtha. The other components of Purushārtha include worldly duties, social obligations, which Purūravā, a Candravanshi king of Prayāga, embodies along with his erotic longing for Urvashi. The divine love that apsara Ūrvashi signifies is not disembodied in an abstract spiritual way. Both categories are liminal in that *kāma*, for erotic longing is also conjoined with duty and the consequential repression and hence dialectically fraught, according to Herbert Marcuse. He argues:

Civilization is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts. The uncontrolled Eros is just as fatal as his deadly counterpart, the death instinct. Their destructive force derives from the fact that they strive for a gratification which culture cannot grant: gratification as such and as an end in itself, at any moment. The instincts must therefore be

deflected from their goal, inhibited in their aim. Civilization begins when the primary objectives—namely, integral satisfaction of needs—is effectively renounced. (*Eros and Civilization* 11).

For her part, an *apsarā*, roughly a divine danseuse, also combines sensuality and charm even to arouse Indra's jealousy. She is promiscuously amorous and an object of carnal desire in a reductive sense, but a necessary actant of *śṛṅgāra* (the aesthetic *rasa* of love). Apsaras are described in *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature* as follows:

APSARAS. The Apsarases[sic] are the celebrated nymphs of Indra's heaven. The name, which signifies 'moving in the water,' has some analogy to that of Aphrodite. They are not prominent in the *Vedas*, but *Ūrvashi* and a few others are mentioned. In *Manu* they are said to be the creations of the seven Manus. In the epic poems they become prominent, and the *Rāmāyana* and the *Purānas* attribute their origin to the churning of the ocean...It is said that when they came forth from the waters and neither the gods nor the Asuras would have them for wives, so they became common to all. They have the appellations of *Suranganās*, 'wives of the gods', and *Sumad-ātmajās*... The Apsarases[sic], then, are fairylike beings, beautiful and voluptuous. They are the wives or the mistresses of the *Gandharvas*, and are not prudish in the dispensation of their favours. Their amours on earth have been numerous, and they are the rewards in Indra's paradise held out to heroes *who fall in battle*. (*italics mine* Dowson 19-20)

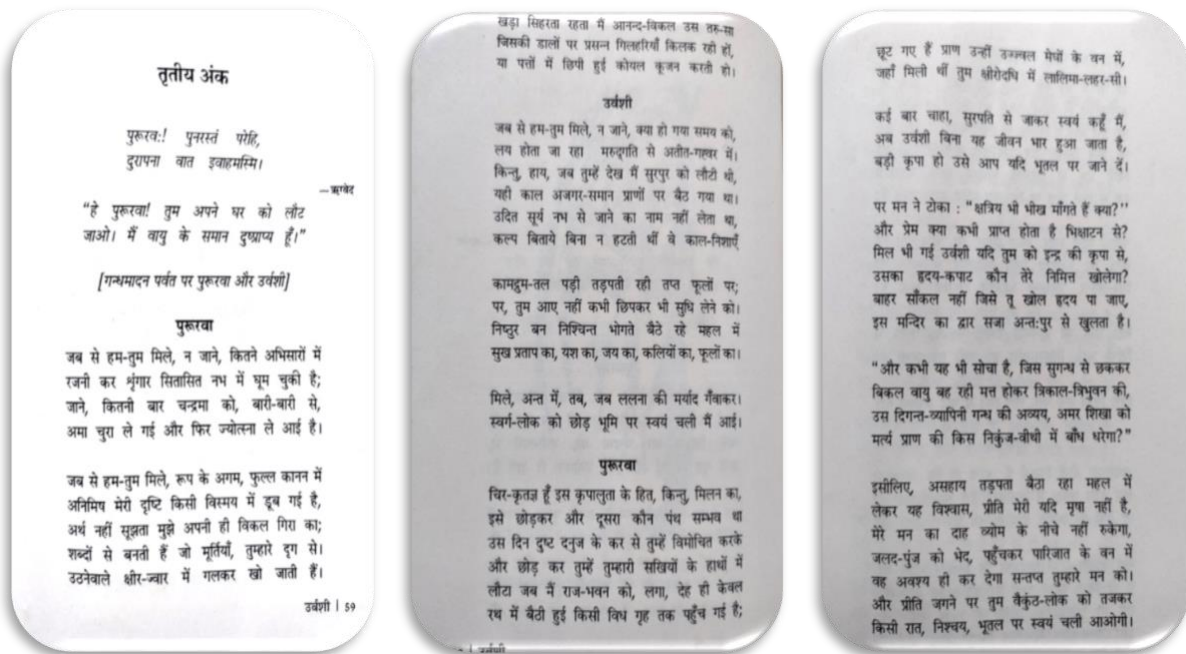
So, the inherent contradictions make *Purūravā* and *Ūrvashi* liminal. It is through them that the larger dialectic between the earthly and the divine, bodily desire and worldly duties, flesh and spirit takes place. The dialectic sustains itself through a tragic irresolution of the story as Indra claims back *Ūrvashi*. She leaves behind *Āyu*, her son with the father *Purūravā*. *Āyu* or the time of one's life, a signifier of mortality serves to link *Ūrvashi*, now a dream of the celestial and the sublime for the lonely and love-lorn *Purūravā* and his mortality.

The battle of life is far too perilous to be won. In an ordinary martial battle with *Danuj* whom he defeated, king *Purūravā* thought the trophy *Ūrvashi* was the object of chivalrous love

and adoration. But the crux of the matter is the irony, if we go by Dowson's glossing that the vanquished are offered a berth in paradise. One wonders if the Paradisal luxuries and sensual gratification are not for the true heroes. Indra, the lord of Swarga, is a timorous god, always afraid of the asūras and losing his seat. Little wonder, therefore, that in his tragic suffering Purūravā has not just won the battle of life while having inherited mortal time or Āyu. He is a true Kṣatriya to win the battle of life through suffering and a perfect tragic protagonist.

Ūrvashi is one among many poems in World Literature, particularly in the Romantic tradition in Sufi poetry of Rumi, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, numerous poems by Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Yeats, not to mention the Eros-Psyche story by Apuleius in his *The Golden Ass* of the second century AD.

The Excerpt from the original text



Translation

*Returneth thou to thy abode,
For I am rare as the wind. (Rigveda)*

(The conversation between Purarava and Urvashi takes place on Mount Gandhamārdana)

Act III

Purūravā

Ever since we met in countless love-trysts
By night and day through contraries across the sky,
Who know how many times,
Has the moon been stolen by darkness and by light reclaimed?

Ever since we met, my gaze has been lost
Somewhere in the unreachable beauty, in a garden in bloom,
Unblinking in wonderment.
Meaning I find not for my own words of disquiet.
The statuettes of syllables I form
Dissolve in the waves of milk from your breasts.
I stand shivering in ecstasy liked a tree,
On my boughs the squirrels scurry up and down,

Or in my foliage the cuckoo calls.

Ūrvashi

Ever since we met, what has happened to time I wonder;
It seems to dissolve so fast, wind-like, in the cavern of past.
When I returned to my realm, after I had seen you,
Time wound like a python its mortal coil around every life.
The sun never set from the sky,
Shady stupor of time would not wear off unless desires were burnt.

The fallen tree of desire racked in pain on the burning petals,
But you never ever came to me in stealth to find me,
Ensconced as you were in your palace, cruel, self-assured,
Drunk up on your authority, trophies, buds, flowers.

Came you did, only when I descended from heaven to earth,
Of my own, parting with my maidenly honour.

Purūravā

Grateful I am to you for this kindness,
But excepting the love-tryst was there any destiny possible
When I rescued you from the clutches of Danujⁱ, the monster
And left you with your sakhisⁱⁱ?
On the way back to the palace I felt
As though the body returned home somehow,
And in the luminous forest of clouds my life had been lost,
Or where you met as scarlet waves merge with the milky ocean.

Many a time I thought I should urge upon Sūrapatiⁱⁱⁱ
That without Urvashi this life was a burden;

If only he allowed her to visit the earth, I would plead.

But my mind reproved me: “Kshatriyas beg not,
Can love be begged at all?
By the grace of Indra even if she comes,
Will the portals of her heart for you open?
No door it is that opens outward,
Which you push open, unfastening the chain to reach the heart;
It is a temple with hallowed doors latched from within.

Have you ever considered how the wind blows
Maddened by the pervasive, celestial, unremitting fragrance,
Through the three realms and in the time that was, is, and to come?
How can that unlimited aura of aroma be contained
In the bower of the life of flesh on the earth that dies?”

Therefore, I sat in this palace, helpless, listless,
Hoping if my love is not unreal,
The fire of the heart will not simmer only close above the earth,
But will blaze through the masses of clouds,
Afflict your heart in the wish-granting Pārijāt^{iv} grove,
So that love will awaken to prod you
To leave Baikuntha^v and descend upon the earth...

Notes

ⁱ A demon from whose clutches Purūravā rescues Urvashi. Many also believe that Danuj is an earthly woman who imprisoned Purūravā with her charm, and played an antagonist the Ūrvashi, the embodiment of heavenly love. Reading of Dinkar’s *Urvashi* persuades us to regard him as a demon. However, there is no mention of Danuj in the original stories of the *Rig Veda*, *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, *Vishnu Purāṇa* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

- ii A female companion, confidante, sometimes servants in Indian mythological stories.
- iii Indra, Lord of the *Suras* or *Devatās*.
- iv The Parijāta grove is mentioned in the ancient Indian mythology as a clump of divine, celestial trees, often described as having emerged from the Samudra Manthan (the Churning of the Ocean of Milk). The embody divine beauty, fragrant flowers, and supernatural properties, divine beauty, and the power for wish-fulfillment.
- v Baikūntha variously means Vishnu's abode and heaven.

References

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