

Pitfalls in the Similes of the Translated Poems of Nirmalendu Goon

by

Abdus Salam

Ph.D. Researcher, Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh

Email: abdussalam@std.iu.ac.bd

Abstract

The reading of similes in the translated poems of Nirmalendu Goon shows a clear bias towards a particular comparator (like) by which the oldest literary device like simile loosely fails to connect the actual purpose of the textual effect it demands. Though Nirmalendu Goon is one of the most celebrated poets of Contemporary Bengali Literature, his translators took a light measure to weigh the gravity of similes and hammered the epistemological concern that disturbs the harmony of the major components (tenor, vehicle, event, and comparator) it possesses. Now, this paper attempts to analyze the components of the selected poems of Nirmalendu Goon and Particularly the comparator (like) which can hardly create any tension on the ground on which similes stand.

Keywords: Nirmalendu Goon, translation, simile, comparator, tenor, vehicle.

Introduction:

The Simile is one of the oldest forms of expressing own language skill in speech and literature as the word records come through the human utterance by which it bears the testimony of its immemorial journey. The Old Testament, for example, is filled with well-known similes like “Multiply as the stars of heaven”, “Unstable as water”, “Still as a stone”, “White as snow”, “Swifter than a weaver’s shuttle”, “Boil like a pot”, “Firm as a stone”, “Melted like wax”, “Sharp as a two-edged sword” etc. The Songs of Solomon is the treasure island of a good number of similes including, “Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet”, “Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury”, “Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing”, and “Cruel as the grave.” In ancient Egypt, the poems of Pentaur were written for the military victory of great Ozymandias. The following examples assert that Pentaur was well acknowledged about the usages of similes as he spoke of Pharaoh like this:

“His heart is firm; his courage is like that of the god of war.”

“His courage is firm, like that of a bull.”

“The King is dreadful as the grim lion in the valley.”

“He appeared like the sun-god at his rising in the early morn.” (Wilstach, 1917)

Most of the ancient masters like Homer, Virgil, Horace, or any other classic authors used similes to their heart content but the prior credit goes to the Pythagorean philosopher Demophilus for presenting the literary expression of similes in the making. Though simile is the favourite figure of speech in English Literature, it took time to shape and reshape its appeal as Old Testament is a time ahead of New Testament in comparison to similes.

Literature Review:

Most of the authors of literary terms carefully limited the concept of simile by just defining and exemplifying with some hackneyed sentences. They, somehow, try to connect two entities by dint of “like” and “as”. Abrams stated that “simile (is) a comparison between two distinctly different things is explicitly indicated by the word “like” or “as.” (Abrams & Harpham, 2005) Then, Abrams put an example of cliché simile by Scottish bard Robert Burns: “O my love’s like a red, red rose.” (Abrams & Harpham, 2005).

Cuddon also conveyed the same message as Abrams. “(Simile is) a figure of speech, Cuddon says, in which one thing is likened to another, in such a way as to clarify and enhance an image. It is an explicit comparison (as opposed to the metaphor, *q.v.*, where the comparison is implicit) recognizable by the use of the words “like or as.” (Cuddon, 2013)

So, both the statement of Cuddon and Abrams is almost the same. But Cuddon extended the idea by quoting an example from prose which opens a door for analyzing a subject matter. He put an example from Graham Greene’s *Stamboul Train*: The great blast furnaces of Liege rose along the line like ancient castles burning in a border raid.

Chris Baldick says Simile (is) an explicit comparison between two different things, actions, or feelings, using the words ‘as’ or ‘like, as in Wordsworth’s line: I wandered lonely as a cloud. (Baldick, 1990) Chris Baldick just added actions or feelings; otherwise, all the above-mentioned definitions of simile are very traditional and missed the major idea of simile as they neither discussed “tenor and vehicle” nor warned about the pitfalls of similes.

The theoretical definition of simile is found in the book of Bernard Dupriez. Simile, Bernard Dupriez says, (is) a comparison in which the comparing element (the *phore* or *vehicle*) is joined to the explicit or implicit notion being compared (the *theme* or *tenor*) by “like” or “as.” (Dupriez, 1991) In his short definition, Bernard Dupriez pointed out the key factor of simile.

There are four major things of understanding simile: tenor (subject of the comparison), vehicle (object of the comparison), event (act or state), and comparator (like, as, etc.). For example, “The room feels like Antarctica.”

Table 1: Understanding similes

Tenor	Vehicle	Comparator	Event
Room	Antarctica	Like	Feel

Difference between simile and comparison:

The major misconception of identifying similes grows when one fails to differentiate between the simile and comparison. The major concept of simile depends on the dissimilarity between two different things—tenor and vehicle—which possess an unbridgeable gap between two entities. For example, “Richard is as strong as a lion” resembles an animal with Richard. Though the ground (strength) of simile is the same, they are different in respect to components. When an entity is likened to the same entity, it does not obtain the quality of a simile; for instance, example “Richard is like Henry” which does not create any gap between the tenor and vehicle.

The sameness of the tenor and vehicle in category defines the feature of comparison (e. g. She sings like Celine Dion). Here, both components do belong to the same category and thus the tenor and vehicle of a comparison intersect one another and fail to be a simile.

Methodology:

In the process of finding the research question, this article has taken the collection “Selected Poems of Nirmalendu Goon” edited by Khondaker Ashraf Hossain and translated by more than half a dozen of translators like Nazmuddin Hashim, Kabir Chowdhury, Farida Majid, Saidur Rahman, K A Reza, Suman Lahiry, Shawkat Haider and the poet himself.

To define simile, this article has taken examples from the book of J. U. Cuddon, Chris Baldick, M. H. Abrams, and Bernard Dupriez.

Results and Discussion:

- A. Some of the uses of Nirmalendu Goon’s translated poems directly start with a comparator. To start a sentence with a simile is not unusual in English poetry: “To a Skylark” by Shelley is an example of it: *Like a high-born maiden, Like a glow-worm golden, Like a rose embower’d*, etc. Some of the poems translated by the poet Goon himself give us a few examples of it:

“Like spontaneous beard, grass, jungle, ditches
and deep grove of weeds grew around the house.” (“Wanted” translated by the poet)

Here, the comparator (like) connects a vehicle (beard) with four tenors: grass, jungle, ditches, and the deep grove of weeds. All the tenors have the same tendency to be grown up like the vehicle. Thus, the word “grew” is the ground of the comparison. But the ground is highly overloaded with tenors. Thus, the overweight of similes does not create any tension in the readers’ minds. Another technical issue of the construction of the simile is that the vehicle is too closed to the tenors. Thus, it hardly creates any effect. The ground is too far away from the comparator as well. Therefore, it has become a clumsy example of simile. To make the idea clear, we can take an example from the poem “Thou Art Gone” by George Linley:

“Thou art gone from my gaze like a beautiful dream,
And I seek thee in vain by the meadow and stream.”

Here, the comparator bridges between two ideas: *Thou* (tenor) and *a beautiful dream* (vehicle). Here the event is “gone”. The tenor of the simile smoothly reaches the vehicle. It is easily understandable that the poem “Thou Art Gone” by George Linley is original while the poem by Nirmalendu Goon is a translation. But in Tagore’s poem *Sonar Toree* (Golden Craft) translated by Brother James, we find an example of a good simile:

“The current of the brimming river/ is as sharp as a razor.” (Tagore, 1986)

Brother James made no mistake making the smooth process of simile in which the simple subject (current) of the sentence makes a fine comparison with a razor. If we provide the missing word of the simile-syntax, it would be like this: “The current of the brimming river is as sharp as *the edge* of a razor.” The *brimming river* has a current and a razor edge. The tenor and the vehicle are connected by the event *sharp*. The edge of a razor cuts things while the current of the brimming river does the same with the riverbank.

- B. Another example of comparison—not simile—can also be testified.

“Like Rabindranath, Shakespeare, and Eliot,

I compose poems and am foremost a poet.” (“The Unfinished Poem” translated by the poet)

Here the problem is graver than the first one: the first one contains a vehicle with four tenors and the second one contains three vehicles with a single tenor. Thus, the construction of comparison becomes imbalanced. First the name of Rabindranath, then Shakespeare, and finally T. S. Eliot makes the comparison overloaded.

- C. This portion would discuss the prepositional phrase that starts with a comparator (like) which connects two vehicles (jeeps and tires) with hendiadys (and). The poet says: “I burn me (myself) like police jeeps and tires.” The prepositional phrase starts after a reflexive pronoun which automatically gets connected with the sentential subject. Thus, the event (burn) which takes time to burn jeeps and tires gives more impression bridging between the tenor and vehicles.
- D. Alliterative simile is not rare of its kind. Examples like *dumb as a dart, right as rain, busy as a bee, fit as a fiddle, cool as a cucumber*, etc. can easily be found in daily usages of the English Language. Usually, this type of alliterative simile is fitted for nonsensical verse as they are overloaded with rhyme and rhythm. But the poem “Man” translated by Sheikh Masud Kamal and Shawkat Haider gives us a serious alliterative simile:

“I am not a man; perhaps, I **stand still** all day,
I **stand still** like trees.” (“Man” translated by Sheikh Masud Kamal and Shawkat Haider)

The alliterative simile (**stand still like trees**) provides the answer to the previous two clauses: *I am not a man* and *I stand still all day*. The repetition of alliteration (**stand still**) in the alliterative simile (**stand still like trees**) resonates the inner meaning of the poem by dint of sound effects the way we find Robert Frost’s “The woods are lovely, **dark and deep,**/ But I have promises to **keep.**”

- E. The poem “Firearm” translated by Kabir Chowdhury refers to the early days after the army crackdown in Bangladesh on 25th March 1971 when all Bangalees were ordered to surrender their firearms. The poet says—

“Frightened citizens, in accordance with the
directive of the occupation army, deposited
their shotguns, rifles, pistols and cartridges
like promised offerings at some holy shrine.

When Hector, in Iliad, offered Achilles an agreement of paying winner’s respect to the dead body, Achilles refused and said: “...as between lions and men there are no trustworthy agreements, / and wolves and sheep are not of like mind, / but constantly they ponder evils for one another, / so it is not possible for you and me to strike a deal, nor at all/ will we make agreements...”

The simple translation of the statement from Samuel Butler’s Iliad is like this: “Fool, prate not to me about covenants. There can be no covenants between men and lions, wolves and lambs can never be of one mind but hate each other out and out and through. Therefore, there can be no understanding between you and me...”

Achilles cannot make a pact with Hector as he thinks of himself as a lion and Hector man. Again, he believes he is as clever as a wolf while Hector is a lamb. So, the deal would be mismatched. Thus, the “Frightened citizens deposited their shotguns, rifles, pistols, and

cartridges like promised offerings at some holy shrine” as they cannot hold the aftermath of keeping the arms. That is why; they have submitted their arms the way people submit themselves to the divinity. The comparator (like) connects the “Frightened citizens” with the “holy shrine.” So, the frightened people are more akin to divinity. Thus, they cannot feel the heat of keeping arms with them as Achilles cannot make a pact with Hector.

- F. The poem “Nixon’s Ships” translated by the poet makes us remember the tension arisen from the Bay of Bengal when Richard Nixon, the then US President, deployed the Seventh Fleet in December 1971. The Seventh Fleet was capable of maintaining 10-14 destroyers and cruisers and these surface ships carry Theater Ballistic Missile interceptors, long-range Tomahawk land attack missiles, and anti-aircraft missiles. Thus, the poet requests Trisia, the daughter of Richard Nixon:

You don’t know how dangerous these ships are:
they can go straight through the golden crops
as beautiful as your golden hair. (“Nixon’s Ships” translated by the poet)

Here, the tenor (golden crops) and vehicle (golden hair) is connected by the event (beautiful) with the help of the comparator (as). It’s just the surface meaning of the simile. But the common adjective of tenor and vehicle is the word “golden” which serves as a vivid image of the golden paddy of Bangladesh. The next example given below of the same poem is also an address to Trisia whose golden hair oscillates in the air. Here, the word “tremble” suits the motherland; but it also serves the meaning of the oscillation of hair.

“Like your hair, my motherland
is trembling in the gaping jaws of a shark.”

Conclusion:

So, it is easily understandable that the translators of Nirmalendu Goon’s poems could not measure the balance between tenors and vehicles of simile; thus, they failed to proportionate the simile in most of the cases. I hope this study help future translators think critically. Moreover, the detailed discussion of similes including tenor, vehicle, comparator, and event will pave a new way for the Bangladeshi English Translators by which the Bangladeshi poets might get more attention in the international arena.

References

- A Tree in a Forest, A Collection of Ajahn Chan’s Similies.* (1994). (D. G. Group, Trans.) Chungli: Yuan Kuang Publishing House.
- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (2005). *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* United Kingdom: Michael Rosenberg.
- Baldick, C. (1990). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms.* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cuddon, J. A. (2013). *A dictionary of literary terms and literary theory.* West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Dupriez, B. (1991). *A Dictionary of Literary Devices*. (A. W. Halsall, Trans.) New York: University of Toronto Press.
- Goon, N. (2018, August 15). *Who wrote the first poem about Bangabandhu after his death?* K. A. Ahmed, (Ed). Retrieved November 20, 2021 from <https://www.dhakatribune.com/special-supplement/2018/08/15/who-wrote-the-first-poem-about-bangabandhu-after-his-death>
- Hazhar, A. R. (2020a). Philosophy of Feminism and Suffering of Western Women Concurring to Charlotte Bronte’s novel “Jane Eyre.” *Electronic Research Journal of Literature*, 2 (2020), 45-52.
- Hazhar, A. R. (2020b). The Formularization of the East Simulacrum in the Poetic Consonance of Walter De La Mare. *Journal of the University of Raparin*, 7 (1), 563-574.
- Kleiser, G. (1910). *Similes and Their Use*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
- Ramadhan, A. H. (2020a). Poet as a Messenger of Aesthetic among Society. *Journal of Arts, Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 48, 452-456.
- Ramadhan, A. H. (2020b). The Impersonation of Nature in the Poetic Consonance of Emily Dickinson. *Journal of Arts, Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 55, 373-383.
- Ready, J. L. (2011). *Character, Narrator, and Simile in the Iliad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Samuel Butler, E. (n. d.). Homer, The Iliad. *Perseus Digital Library*. Retrieved January 25, 2022 from:
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0217%3Ab ook%3D22%3Acard%3D232>
- Sommer, E. (2013). *Similes Dictionary*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press.
- Tagore, R. (1986). *Sonar Taree (Golden Craft)*. (B. James, Trans.) Dhaka: University Press Limited.
- Wilstach, F. J. (1917). *A Dictionary of Similes*. Boston: Norwood Press.