

Translation Review: A Review of Reviews

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Abstract

This paper will look at some of the primary issues in reviewing translations — by whom, for whom, when, and how. Examples will be drawn from twelve reviews that appeared in the December 2006 issue of the journal 'The Book Review'.

All the questions to be discussed cannot be enumerated here, but here are a few:

- a. Who should be preferred as the reviewer of a translated text: one who knows the original language or one who does not (the intended reader)?*
- b. Who should the reviewer be addressing? General reader? Those concerned with Translation Studies? Readers within the country? Readers anywhere who know the language of the translated text?*
- c. How much emphasis should be given in the review to the year of original publication? How important is it for the reviewer to know if the text had been translated earlier? If it is an older text, is it necessary for the reviewer to foreground her awareness of the changes that happen over time— in language use, in social practice, in literary taste?*
- d. What should be the priority for the reviewer: providing the context, analyzing the text, commenting on the act of translation?*

This paper is written neither as a translation theorist nor as a practising translator, but in my capacity as a long time reader of

translated texts, mostly fiction. I have literally grown up reading translations. (Indeed most of us have. I am not claiming any uniqueness in this, but merely taking my case as an example.) From the time I could read fluently, I have been devouring, in Bangla translation, a range of English texts — from children's books like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* to what our parents considered classics, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Ivanhoe*, *Les Miserables* and *Don Quixote*, oblivious of the fact that some of these were actually edited or abridged versions. Later as a student of English literature in the university we read Ibsen and Strindberg, Tolstoy and Balzac, Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann in English, without anyone ever alerting us to the fact that as translated texts these books should be approached differently. The writers through whose work literary modernism came to be institutionalized in the English-speaking world included authors like Proust, Kafka and Camus, none of whom were available to us in their original language. When I started teaching I taught Homer's *Odyssey* in the Penguin prose translation by E. V. Rieu to English Honours students in Delhi without once wondering in class about the Greek originals of unusual metaphors like 'the wine-dark sea.' In those sylvan pre-theory days there was hardly any awareness that what we were reading were mediated texts and we should take into consideration the possibility of loss or alteration in transit. In maturer years I have gone on to read and enjoy Gunter Grass, Milan Kundera, Italo Calvino and a host of other novelists—including the South American magicians Marquez, Lhosa, Allende and Borges without losing sleep over the fact that I do not have access to the original. In 2004, I discovered a novelist — he continues to be a favourite — Orhan Pamuk who probably sells more in translation today than in the original Turkish. Rather than participate in the online hair-splitting on the quality of different versions of Pamuk in English which some scholars have been engaged in, I would much rather spend time reading all the six Pamuk books so far available in English, specially because in the absence of any knowledge of Turkish on my part, such discussions can at best be abstract and polemical.

This disquisition is an empirically oriented one rather than

theoretically formulated, and might run the risk of being academically, if not politically incorrect. I have in the past done some actual translation myself — one novel from Bangla to English and one novel from Hindi to Bangla — but that is not the experience I draw from in this paper. I write in the role of a reader who is addicted to reading fiction not always stopping to discriminate between a translated text and an original text. When I read Paul Zacharia or O.V. Vijayan, I am only marginally concerned about the fact that the original language of their books was Malayalam. I read that hilarious novel *Raag Darbari* by Srilal Shukla first in a Bangla translation; although since then I have gone on to read the Hindi original as well. Thus I represent the general reader who reads novels because she enjoys fiction, and reads reviews because they help her to decide which titles she should choose to read. Quite fortuitously, when I was looking for a peg to hang my ideas on, the December issue of the journal *The Book Review* came to me and I thought of focusing on the 13 reviews of translated books in this issue to make my points and to use these reviews as illustrations of different kinds of practices.

The broad issues that I would take up can be divided under four categories:

- a. Who should be preferred as the reviewer of a translated text: one who knows the original language or one who does not (the intended reader)?
- b. Who should the reviewer be addressing? General reader? Someone concerned with Translation Studies? Readers within the country? Readers anywhere who know the target language?
- c. How important is the temporal dimension in a review? If it is an older text, is it necessary for the reviewer to foreground the aspects of changes that happen over time—in language use, in social practice, in literary taste? If an earlier translation of the same text exists, should that also be a relevant reference point?

- d. What should be the priority for the reviewer: providing the context, analyzing the text, commenting on the act of translation?

Even though I am enumerating the issues neatly, I am aware that they cannot be disentangled completely. Out of the thirteen reviews I have before me eleven are done by persons who know the original language. Evidently the editors of the journal consider such people more suitable than the ones who know only the target language. I do not know their reasons for this preference, but I can think of a few advantages: such reviewers can place the author in context, situating him in the tradition of that particular language, as Satchidanandan does in reviewing a novel by M. Mukundan (*Kesavan's Lamentations: A Novel*) by comparing Mukundan's style with O.V. Vijayan's and Anand's, two other contemporary Malayalam novelists available to the reader in English translation. He also compares this recent novel with Mukundan's own earlier books, telling us about the 'bricolage' mode, its novel within a novel structure, and its dissolving of the boundaries between biography, fiction and descriptive prose.

In addition Satchidanandan joins issue with the Introduction in the English version written by the well-known scholar of intellectual history K. N. Panikkar. Panikkar seriously believes that the central theme of the novel is 'the formation and articulation of the Left political consciousness of Kerala' with the figure of E. M. S. Namboodripad at the centre. Satchidanandan argues — with examples that convince me completely — that the author's intention is entirely parodic and subversive. If it is indeed a history of left consciousness in Kerala, it is a tongue-in-cheek history.¹

Satchidanandan's review is quite exceptional, and I should say, exemplary. Very few of the other reviews take the trouble to contextualize the book in hand. The general pattern of reviews seem to be a summary of the story (or stories) followed by a routine pat on the back for the translator in the last paragraph or a sharp rap for not doing a good job. Such a routine exercise does not need the expertise

of a native informant. The reviewer of Sivasankari's stories does not even use the word 'Tamil' except in the last sentence—she is content to talk vaguely about the 'South Indian' ambience of the stories, which for her are contained in the mention of idli and utthapam! Reading her you would imagine that Sivasankari is the only story writer in Tamil and the only one ever to talk about idlis. Take another reviewer who knows the original language. Talking about Premchand's film translations he gives us the astonishing news that Satyajit Ray's film *Sadgati* was based on Premchand's story 'Kafan' when anyone remotely connected with either Premchand or films knows it was Mrinal Sen who made the Telugu film *Oka Oori Katha* based on 'Kafan' while the original of Satyajit Ray's film was a story also titled 'Sadgati'. What special knowledge is the Hindi-knowing reviewer bringing to us?

The negative aspect of choosing a reviewer who knows the source language is that he is not likely to be satisfied with any translation because it will never approximate to the original. Also if he has read the original, he is probably using that memory to write the review, rather than read the translated version with care for the purpose of comparison—a tedious job at best of times. I have three English translations of Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali* sitting on a shelf for a year and I have the good intention of writing a comparative review one of these days. But I know it would never get done because nothing can be drearier than going through a familiar text again and again for the sake of academic nit-picking.

It is not enough to know the original language, one must be a habitual reader in that language, familiar with its literature and the tradition in which this particular text has to be placed. A more important qualification for the reviewer—whether one knows the source language or not—is an involvement in the larger translation scene as a critical reader. I would like to be assured that the reviewer reads translated texts often and of her own volition, and not only when she is asked to review. I am not suggesting that a Telugu-knowing person should make a habit of reading Telugu novels in English translation. That would be

absurd when she has access to the original. But to be taken seriously, a reviewer should have read enough Hindi, Marathi or Malayalam novels in translation to know what the issues to be highlighted in this particular review are. She must also be familiar with the scene well enough not to be taken in by wily publishers who try to pass off old translations as new. One particularly gullible reviewer in this issue naively discusses David Rubin's translation of Premchand's *Nirmala* as if it is a recent publication (Orient Paperback indeed presents it as such) when it had first appeared some time in the eighties. '*Nirmala* deserved a better translation than this one,' the reviewer sighs sanctimoniously, blissfully unaware of Alok Rai's later translation published by OUP. In fact more and more publishers are playing this trick today, Rupa being the biggest culprit, especially in their reissue of old Tagore translations—most of them sadly dated in style and atrocious in the liberties they took with the original—giving them new chocolate box covers and withholding the fact that the translations were done long ago. It is the reviewer's job to call the publishers' bluff.

Another innocent reviewer (presumably Hindi-knowing) starts off her review of an anthology of contemporary Hindi stories with the statement 'Ever since the translation of indigenous literature, mainly into English, was initiated almost a decade ago, it has triggered off reams of publications and gradually evolved into a specific genre.' I have at least three problems with this first sentence. One: What is indigenous literature? Two: If she does not have the elementary knowledge that Indian language novels have been translated into English for more than a century, she is not a person whose opinion about any book needs to be taken seriously. Lastly, why should translated books constitute a 'specific genre'? If a travel book is available to us in translation it would still belong to the genre of travel writing, if an autobiography is available in translation it still belongs to the genre of autobiography, and even among novels, the distinctions between detective fiction, romance, pulp fiction, political novel, historical sagas all remain valid in their translated avatars. This attempt to homogenize all translated books into one category I think has done serious damage to their dissemination and reception.

In case any of you are wondering about the existence of detective fiction, pulp fiction, etc., in translation, let me show you a random page of book advertisements from the most recent issue of the Bangla magazine *Desh*. It lists the complete works of Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie in Bangla translation, novels of James Hadley Chase, Alastair Maclean, Nick Carter, Harold Robins. On the same page we find mention of Jim Corbett, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne and so on. This is a huge industry Translation Studies scholars do not take into account. A vast market exists for these, and gives a lie to the claim of the reviewer I quoted just now that most of the translation work in the last decade has been from ‘indigenous literature’ into English. I am giving you examples from Bangla, but I will be surprised if similar activities are not taking place in Malayalam or Hindi and other languages. These books are seldom reviewed, but they are read widely.

Let me presume that we discuss reviewing of only serious books of literary value and only other language texts translated into English. In that case our parameters are clearer. If I am reviewing Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul*, something I have actually done, I would look at it as a memoir that connects the author with his city and not comment on the quality of Maureen Freely’s translation because I have no qualification to do so. But if I am reviewing Bankinchandra’s *Anandamath* in English translation —also something I have done— I can vent my anger against the translator for mercilessly truncating the original and for making simplistic choices in order to become accessible to an imaginary foreign reader.

If the reviewer is engaging with matters connected with the act of translation, s/he has to do so in specific terms, and with actual illustrations. General observations about ‘good translation’ or ‘bad translation’ mean nothing. In this issue of the journal on reviews, the only reviewer who makes intelligent comments that would interest those in the field of Translation Studies as well as the general reader is Mahasweta Sengupta. She raises two questions while reviewing an anthology that brings together a century of Bangla short stories. One

is about diachronic changes in the source language and the need to reflect that change in the target language. In the volume she is reviewing, an older story (the author born in 1880) and a contemporary story (the author born in 1950) are translated in the same idiom. This might make for easy readability but does it not sacrifice some amount of specificity? she asks. Parsa Venkateshwara Rao, reviewing a similar anthology of Telugu short stories, might have also raised this question, but he seems content to summarise the stories he likes and listing the stories he does not like. He is singularly unconcerned with the texture and quality of the language of translation. Mahasweta's second point is about the deliberate confusion created by the publisher by calling Aruna Chakravarty the editor of the volume and never mentioning the fact that she is the translator as well. This is very likely not an oversight. It arises out of a belief (probably right) that books in original English sell better than books that are translated. There might be just a chance that the casual buyer in a book store will pick up the volume as a book written in English. Chakravarty writes an Introduction which is full of platitudinous wisdom on the act of translation, but even she forgets to mention that she is herself the translator. The reviewer rightly chides her for the dated assumptions in this Introduction.²

Not many reviewers in my sample are concerned with these translation related issues or any larger issue of any kind. The reviewer of a Marathi novel translated into English is not only unconcerned with the fact that the book in hand is the translation of a translation (done from a Hindi master copy as is the practice of NBT) but she also neglects to mention the date of the original. Since she invokes Tagore's *Gora* and Forster's *A Passage to India* in comparison, presumably the book is of early twentieth century vintage, but there is nothing in the review to confirm this. The other book from Marathi reviewed here is a play *Kirwant* and even if it does not discuss translation issues in any detail, this one satisfies most of my criteria of a good review. It talks about the time lag between the original performance of the play (1991) and the date of the English translation published by Seagull (2005) to point out how much Dalit discourse has changed in the meanwhile. It also locates the playwright's

controversial position in the Marathi literary milieu by pointing out how his humanitarian concerns (in this play he focuses on the exploitation of one set of Brahmins by another) alienated him ‘from the literary coterie of both the brahmins and the Dalits.’ The translator is a well-known Professor of English but the reviewer also informs us of his active association with the parallel theatre movement in Marathi for more than three decades. The reviewer himself, apart from being a lecturer in English in Wadia College, Pune, is also an actor, director, theatre teacher and theatre critic. There is something in this review that reconfirms my already existing view that drama is one of the most vibrant and alive sectors of translation activity in our country. It is done out of a real and immediate need (performance) and there is a spontaneous feed back from the audience. From the seventies—when playwrights like Badal Sarkar, Mohan Rakesh, Utpal Dutt, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad used to be performed simultaneously in Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Pune in four different languages, till today, as with the plays of Mahesh Elkuncvar or Mahesh Dattani, the practice of translating plays for performance has continued unabated in theatre circles even if their printed versions do not always become available to the public. Drama reviewers evaluate the performances as theatre and not as translation.

To come back to my sample of thirteen, among the few that satisfy me, one is an excellent essay by Susan Viswanathan combining reviews of two books *Legends of Kerala* and an anthology of women’s short stories from Malayalam. She does comment on translation in passing but much more rewarding is her sociologist’s perspective that places the books in a larger frame of reference, talking of magic and religion in the light of recent work done in different parts of the world in reviewing the first book. Even her review of the collection of short stories—admittedly the most difficult genre to review---refreshingly steers clear of the plot-summary school of reviewing. Uneasy with the monotony of the victim complex of second rate feminist writers, she raises the level of discourse by theorizing rape in unexpected ways. She can recall earlier stories by Sara Joseph while commenting on the present one included in this anthology and raise questions about the

truth value of fiction. I quote a line randomly from the review to indicate the quality of her response: ‘A.S. Priya’s “Onion Curry and the Nine Times Table” is hilarious, the only really funny story in the lot, which captures an existential sadness with the delicate tracery of un-slit veins.’

It is ultimately the quality of the mind of the reviewer, her intelligence, her awareness of the different dimensions of life that come together in a text and her willingness to do the homework for performing the task at hand that matter in a review, not her chance affiliation with the language of the original or her casual experience of translating a text or two on assignment from a publisher. You cannot lay down a fool-proof recipe for the success of any review—translated text or not. I would at the most venture to suggest a three point formula. We expect the reviewer to provide the context (historical, political, linguistic, comparative—within the language tradition or across language—whatever is relevant. All that we want is that the book should be located). Next we would like to know about the text—not the summary of its content, but more about its scope, its focus, its mode of operation—something that will not only describe the text but critically engage with it. Lastly, if there are specific issues about the translation that the reviewer would like to share with the reader that would be welcome, but please, no recycling of stale wisdom about translation bridging cultural differences or platitudes about languages being jealous mistresses or the impossibility of capturing the local flavour of idioms. It is better to skip that mandatory concluding paragraph about translations if the reviewer has no fresh insight to impart.

Notes

1. Here are two extracts from the novel quoted by Satchidanandan in the review:
‘Appkuttan would be lying (in his cradle) moving his little arms and legs and looking at E. M. S’s picture. He would talk in his own language to E. M. S. and laugh. As long as he could see E. M. S he felt no hunger, no thirst.’

... ‘Kesavan quipped that his chair was arthritic. The trouble was within its joints. Let it tilt either to the left or to the right (but hasn’t any kind of tilt become irrelevant after the advent of perestroika and glasnost?’

2. Mahasweta Sengupta writes:

‘The assumptions that underlie this Introduction are dated. ... The Introduction appears to be pleading for the consideration of “local” or “regional” cultures by the “international” and “powerful” of the world. This is disturbing. I thought that we had outgrown our intention to serve our goods in the English-speaking world just because we want them to consider our existence on this part of the planet. I thought that our identity did not depend on the acknowledgement of the so-called international or the cosmopolitan...’