

Ambapali's Verse in Therigatha: Trajectories and Transformations

SUPRIYA BANERJEE

Abstract

Translation is a methodological democratic tool. It not only uses the 'original' discourses as its means to create awareness for texts in various language forms; it can also be credited for recreating adaptations, interpretations, and retellings as a knowledge form. An entire semiotic body of work is exchanged into another expansive body consisting of different registers and temporalities, which furthermore interfaces with a new social, political and cultural context. The role of time as a chronological factor only is a fallacy, as it meanders through the translation process and marks its presence through the transcreation processes. The paper proposes to delve into the lives of the Buddhist nuns as described in the Therigatha, and highlight how the fluidity and inter-textual nuances of translation in English language influences the reception of the centuries old text. Reading for the purpose of understanding a text is not only individualistic, but is a social and political process which may sometimes colour the entire spectrum of receiving a discourse.

Keywords: Translation, Reception, Chronology, Culture Controlled Preferences, Transcreation.

Introduction

Almost all the texts make a journey dodging variables akin to metamorphosis, hemi-metabolism, progeria or stagnation. The question we need to ask ourselves is that do we need to apply certain tools or methodologies specifically and systematically to map a discourse in a definitive framework *ala* Algebra? Etymologically, *Algebra* comes from an Arabic word which means "reunion of broken parts". Does a reader look at a reunion of variables in a text, finding its value, or encourage the chaotic randomness trying to evaluate their impact without pronouncing judgements? In the case of translated texts, the bone of contention lies with issues of accuracy with the source text, suitability of language, vocabulary and the cultural contexts. Whether a translated text can be read as a completely metamorphosized one, is it repetitive and stagnated, or in-between?

This paper proposes to analyse three translations of '*Ambapali - The Poems of Twenty Verses from the Therigatha*'. To begin with, the *Therigatha* is an anthology of poems by the first Buddhist ordained nuns in India. Although the poems are not as old compared to the Rigveda, they are still some of the "first" poems in India by women, and as a collection it is the first anthology of women's literature in the world. The usage of the adjective first is to point something of primary importance to us. However, how do we define first? Does this first define our readings, or our reception? Or does it predispose us towards finding the historicity, or does it in any way influence the aesthetics of its imaginative, expressive or emotional content?

These poetry, or songs, as we receive them today are in translation. *Therigatha* was originally composed in ancient

Indian vernaculars, or in various Prakrits which was reworked in Pali by Dhammapala, the Srilankan Bhikkhu. The imprints of linguistic, cultural and textual peculiarities of these songs/poetry, their definitive associations and expectations for audiences and the messages about impermanence leaves us with the question of mapping of broken parts through a methodology. If we refer to the *Therigatha* as a text which a student of literature decides to study, the ambiguity would lie in the numerous translations, which show remarkable trajectory of cultural and historical effects which marks the entire discourse. The labyrinth of traversing a discourse which is received in translation originally, becomes a paradox in itself as it is dated to the end of third century BCE.

What translations should one refer to, how one reads '*The Therigatha*', and what should be the concerns when one picks up a translation of the same. The translated version of Dhammapala had been translated in the sixth century CE. from different vernaculars or Prakrits, the time when Pali as a language also underwent certain standardization processes as a language in the scriptural canon. It is a part of the Theravada Buddhist religious canon, and John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, when considering the *Therigatha*, say that 'it is a religious work, meant to inculcate a certain set of religious and ethical values and a certain manner of perception of life and its problems and their solutions'.

The *Therigatha* although in many different Prakrits did not fall into the canon of classical Sanskrit religious text, however, unlike other works in Apabhramsa or Prakrit compositions, it drew various translations in English. In *An Essay in Definition*, Sujit Mukherjee writes that 'absolutely literal translations, in any case, is impossible in literature, whether in ancient or modern works, but the degree of

correspondence sometimes decreases in inverse proportion to the distance in time between the original composition and the translation. For instance, the liberties taken by P. Lal in translating ancient texts was a case in point of churning out a *mélange* of interpretation, readability, and an attempt to bolster reception of classical texts in terms of one's own socio-cultural contexts.

The Therigatha is included in the ninth section of the book *Khuddaka Nikaya* of the *Sutapittaka*. The Pali canon has three divisions or *Tripitakas*, translated as the three baskets, along with the abstract doctrine or the *Abhidhamma*. *The Therigatha* is traditionally juxtaposed with a much larger collection 'The *Theragatha*'. These two anthologies, which were originally in different vernaculars of ancient India, date back to the earliest period of Buddhist history, though committed to writing perhaps only around 80 BCE. They were first printed in the West as translations from Dhammapala's '*Paramattadipani*' in the 19th century in versions edited by R. Pischel and H. Oldenberg respectively from Pali. The *Therigatha* has had a remarkable history of modern translations, beginning with the translation into German by Karl Eugen Neumann, into Bangla by Bijoy Chandra Majumdar, and into Sinhala by Martin Wickramasingha, who in turn, mentions an English translation by Caroline Rhys David. The *Therigatha* has been translated into many languages, the latest being in 2015 by Charles Hallisley, a professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard, made available in paperback by Murthy Classics.

The paper explores three translations from the *Therigatha* which is generally attributed to Ambapali. She was a famous courtesan who turned a *bhikkhuni*, and is popularized in Bollywood as 'Amrapali'. The first of these translations is by

Catherine Rhys Davis (Oxford, UK), titled as *'The Psalms of the Sisters'* in 1909, the second translation is by Thanissaro Bhikku in 1995, and the third one by Charles Hallisley (Harvard, USA) in 2015. All three translations refer to Dhammapala's text in Pali as their primary source, and all three translations add to the text the rubrics of division of names or 'nipata' as followed by Dhammapala. The three translations are in English language, however it is a translation of a translation, thus it is problematic to acknowledge an absolute fidelity to the lexical or the linguistic, or cultural adjustment to the original.

When we look at a particular text in translation, especially in the case of religious texts, the maze begins to unfold regarding its structure, time and history. How do we read the translated texts, how do they differ in their choice of words, meter, meanings, sometimes they go as far as depicting a lady's eyes from blue to black, or arms from twin cylindrical pillars to rounded door bars to iron cross bars for holding doors shut, thighs from coils of a snake to the trunk of an elephant? The translator of older works may not have the advantage of inhabiting practically the same world that of the original author, which may give rise to generalizations due to the availability of readership of the original text, coupled with unfamiliarity with the world of the source text.

For instance, from 1909 to 2015, there is a difference of over a hundred years, which may explain why Catherine Rhys Davis uses the term 'mother of pearl' to describe Ambapali's neck, signifying rarity; whereas the other two translators use a more common 'conch shell' to describe the same. Before the creation of cultured pearls in the early 1990s, natural pearls were so expensive that they were reserved only for the noble and very rich, and when the pearl fever had reached its peak,

the historian Suetonius wrote that the Roman general Vitellius financed an entire military campaign by selling just one of his mother of pearl earrings. From the queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, who had a special fascination for pearls in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in which one can find the purported uses of 'Pearl' to a Buddhist monk. Thanissaro's interpretation, who does not distinguish a pearl from a conch shell, marks the distance in historic terms. Pearls started being commercially manufactured; the economic value of pearls came down, the Conch scored better as it had a religious significance in Theravada Buddhism and thus the preferred choice of words used. The culture controlled preferences, the linguistic choices a translator exercises constantly explains why modern versions of the texts can vary so much from earlier ones.

By translating '*The Therigatha*', Catherine Rhys David in 1909, and '*The Theragatha*' in 1913 reversed the order of the translation of Dhammapala by putting the women's writing first in the order of preference. She, in her introduction, went to some lengths in highlighting the uniqueness of the women's writings and rejected the doubts about feminine authorship cast by the German translator K. E. Neumann of both the gathas. She proclaimed on the universality of religious experiences, she drew the attention to need to remember "since the patriarchal age set in has women succeeded in so breaking through her barriers as to set on lasting record the expression of herself and of things as they appeared to her".

This period significantly coincides with the Suffrage movement in Great Britain, the women's right to political equality. In reading Catherine Rhys David, we take in the entire social political contexts of translating from a colonized nation that she brings into her writings. Note the difference in

“Such and not otherwise runneth the rune, the word of the soothsayer” and the next two translation’s *“it is just as the Buddha, the speaker of truth, said, nothing different than that”*. The dictionary gives us three meanings of the word ‘rune’: Rune is a letter of an ancient Germanic alphabet; Rune is a mark of mysterious or magical significance, or stones or bones bearing divinatory symbols. The Buddha is significantly absent from her translation.

The translation by Catherine Rhys Davis focuses the position of the senior ordained nuns, as a testimonial to their religious achievement, personal expression and self-realization processes. This is a period when feminists were fighting to be accorded the position of a logical rational human being, and not creatures prone to emotional attacks, hysteria and smelling salts. Translation thus became a discovery process; evidence used for social and political causes, the texts from the past became a point to recognize the literary quality among the native women, withstanding pseudo socio cultural heresies of the colonial present.

When we look at a translation of the same by Charles Hallisey in 2015, published by Murthy Classics, originally from the translated version of the Pali text of Dhammapala, which was a further transcription of the verses by Bihalpola Siri Dewarakkhita Thera, revised by Mahagoda Siri Nanissara Thera, published in the Sinhala script in the Simon Hewavitane Bequest series in 1918. The rubrics on the length or Nipata are found in both Dhammapala’s commentary and Rhy Davis’s translations. However, Dhammapala’s commentary is a much elaborate work which provides background information on each writer, highlights the contexts, and historiographical insights to the poems.

In his notes on Ambapalli, Hallisey refers to Pruitt (Pruitt 1999: 260) inferring that Ambapali was made a courtesan by a judge because the princes fought over her to woo her over saying 'let her belong to everyone'. Charles Hallisey made a commendable attempt to integrate work from a non-western canon, so as to 'let it belong to everyone'. The translated verses come to us as a chorus from a social institution of women who have renounced the worldly pleasures and the objects therein. The minute details lie in the selection of words which perhaps did not exist in those days. 'The perfume box' which is referred by Hallisey is a 'casket of perfumes' by Rhys David, the 'colour of bees' is a transcreation from 'as the down of the bee', rabbit is derived from hare, and there is no mention of Rhys David's 'fallen fair plaits' but replaced by a more culturally appropriate 'held in by a bunch of pins' referring to Ambapali's hair. The Rune is absent here; substituted by again a more historically appropriate: 'It is just as the Buddha, the speaker of truth, said nothing different from that'.

Unlike Rhys Jones, one can find a sharp distinction in Charles Hallisey's translation used to describe Ambapali in the poem where she had described herself in Prakrit, translated by Dhammapala in Pali. Note the difference in the terminologies used by a colonizer as Rhys Jones translates Ambapali's eyes as blue and long lidded, swarthy plaits in head dresses, jewelled and golden, pencilled brows, arms like cylindrical pillars, thighs like coils of snake, and so on. However, in 2015, the advent of post-colonial thinking prompts the Harvard scholar uses a more anthropological thrust by using the corresponding adjectives as black eyes, hair adorned with gold, brows as contoured lines drawn by a good artist, arms as iron crossbars and thighs as the trunks of an elephant.

Interestingly, the disenchantment with possessions as a Buddhist world view has adorned the verse of Ambapali by Hallisey with analogies to bracelets 'finished' to perfection, 'polished' conch shells, 'polished' slabs of gold, 'smooth' rings of gold, 'smooth' anklets made of gold, a visual treat of opulence contrasting with modern objects of decay like 'falling' plaster, 'empty' leather water bags, 'out of shape' body parts. The tropes of opulence are contrasted with tropes of decay in nature to serve spiritual entropy, which eventually becomes the turning point. This particular verse by Hallisey focuses on how women reflected pragmatically on their defining traditions, and learned to change it towards a newer orientation. This is an entirely different perspective from Rhys Davis who translated *Therigatha* as of voice of the women from the distant exotic parts.

Furthermore, when we read Thanissara Bhikku's (Geoffrey DeGraff) translation, we find the use of hemp for hair in the place of jute by Hallisey, in the place of casket or box of fragrance we find a basket, the hair discovers a comb, no contour artist for the brows, the arms become door bars instead of crow bars and iron pillars and the elephant trunk remains the same as in Hallisey. However, the Rune and the Buddha translates into 'the truth of the truth speaker's words doesn't change'. Buddha's teachings is summed up in what is called the three noble truths, four universal truths and the eight fold path which together is translated as the Dharma for the global audiences. It is obvious that connotative and denotative importance of the word 'Truth sayer' by a monk who as a westerner, is the receiver of the word 'Truth', has however skirted aligning it to the principle of 'sva-prakasa' or that truth is knowledge which is self-illuminating. Satya which is a Sanskrit word for truth is one of the five yamas, the virtual restraint from falsehood and distortion of reality in one's

expressions and actions. The Indian philosophy treats truth within an epistemological context, and various knowledge is connected to various truths. If truth is veridicality, or pramana, then the truth sayer becomes attached to a series of cognitions and a series of beliefs, perceptual, inferential testimonial and hypothetical as a result of effort and action or karma. This then generally defeats the idea of an unattached self-hood proposed by Buddha.

Sujit Mukherjee writes in his *Essay on Translation as Discovery* that ‘the foreign translator is a rare creature since his affiliation with Indian literature is a by-product of his academic specialization in some Indian language’.

However, all the three translations refer to spiritual upliftment, inspired by the Dhammapala ‘Udanas’ which are inspired utterances about the joy of freedom and spiritual elevation. *Rupantar* (change in form) or *Anuvad* (speaking after) are commonly understood senses of translation, however, neither demands fidelity to the original. None of the hair splitting in the translations mentioned here is aimed at denigrating the uniqueness of the works and their contribution to the society on the whole. These translations are transformations which are new creations, adapting to the uniqueness of the comprehending translator.

So, can we take a leaf out of the page from here when we read, treating each text as a transcreation? The ambiguities of understanding a text completely, especially when we do not have an access to an original text, and one is only reading a translation of a translation, the smaller details though of great consequence can be brushed aside for a while for the greater good.

References

- Carter, John Ross, and Mahinda Palihawadana (trans.) 2000. *The Dhammpada: Sayings of the Buddha*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Choubey, Asha. 2009. Voices from the Yore: Therigatha Writings of the Bhikkhunis. *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, 5.2.
- Garg, G. R. (ed.) 1992. *Encyclopedia of the Hindu World*, Vol-3. New Delhi: Concert Publishing Company.
- Hallisey, Charles. 2015. *Therigatha Poems of the First Buddhist Women*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Jha, Bhaskar. (trans.) 1987. *History of Indian Literature: Buddhist Literature* by M. Winternitz. Delhi: Bhartiya Vidya Prakashan.
- Mukherjee, Sujit. 1994. *Translation as Discovery*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited.
- Pischel, Richard. (ed.) 1883. *Therigatha* (2nd edition, with an appendix by L. Alsdorf). London: Pali Text Society.
- Pliny, *Natural History*, IX.59.119-121; also Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, III.17.14-17.
- Pruitt, Willam, (ed.) 1998. *Therigatha-atthakatha*. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Rhys Davids, C. A. F. and K. R. Norman. (trans.) 1989. *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therigatha)*. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
