Rendering the Commonplace: The Task of Translating Dostoevsky into Malayalam

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Abstract

It is a hurdle to translate the mundane, commonplace materials from everyday life that are non-existent in the target language. The translator is forced to find an equivalent in the target language or to coin a new term, or provide a description as footnote or in the glossary or in the main body of the text. Certain materials such as food, cloth, fashion, utensils, currencies, weapons and ornaments are culture-specific. The varying nature of these materials across nations can be because of the (non)availability of raw materials needed for the manufacturing, peculiar climatic conditions, or convenience. These commonplace household commodities are very closely linked to the economic, social and cultural history of a nation.

The above mentioned factors may sound utterly insignificant or banal but these materials can cause differences in the outlook of a translation. They have the power to make the translator visible or invisible while (s)he implements the strategies of domestication or foreignization. This research traces and studies the role of the commonplace and worldly materials in translation, with special reference to the translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's fictional works in Malayalam. All the three primary texts are indirect translations from English: An Honest Thief (short story), *The Gambler (novella), Crime and Punishment (novel). The paper gives due emphasis to the task of the translator and challenges (s)he faces in the process.*

Keywords: Translator's Invisibility, Domestication, Foreignization, Commonplace, Malayalam, Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Introduction

In the attempt to translate mundane and commonplace materials from everyday life that are non-existent in the target language, the translator is forced to gloss cultural specificities. Sometimes the translator chooses to retain the term in the source text instead of replacing it with an equivalent and thereby throws a foreign word at the 'smooth' rendering of the commonplace. As Paul F. Bandia suggests that the process of accommodating source language world-view "goes far beyond merely substituting linguistic and cultural equivalents. It is a negotiating process in the sense that two divergent sociocultural systems that are in contact attempt to arrive at a happy solution" (Bandia 1993: 74).

Foreignization, according to André Lefevere, "leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him" (Lefevere 1977: 74). But in the case of an indirect translation (in this study it is Russian → English → Malayalam), it is a bit problematic since the first/direct translation serves as the source text for the indirect translation. At the same time the direct translator is completely invisible since his/her name is mentioned nowhere and the indirect translation is never marketed as one. Thus the paper does not delve into the issue of authorship since it is beyond the scope of this study. Here all the three primary texts are indirect translations in Malayalam and the direct (English) translations are considered as the source texts.

Malayalam literature has imbibed the spirit of Russian literature into its language polysystem by virtue of the abundance of translated Russian literary works. Through these translations Malayalis get the opportunity to make the acquaintance of not only the literary conventions, tendencies

and techniques, but also catch a glimpse of the people, the society and the everyday life in Russia.

It was in early twentieth century that the translations of Russian literary works began to appear in Malayalam. There was a sudden rise in these translations after 1930, particularly for the next three decades. Inspired by the first Russian revolution and the October Revolution, many of the youngsters in Kerala believed that revolution is the solution for the socio-political and economic problems in Kerala. As recounted by the veteran diplomat and freedom fighter, A. K. Damodaran in an interview given to *India International Centre Quarterly*, "[Maxim] Gorky's *Mother* became an important influence in Kerala in the early forties and was read even in jail. So the pre-political, pre-Soviet presence of Russia is certainly not imaginary—it is very much there" (Damodaran 1994: 69). In addition to this influence another factor which prompted the flow of the translations of Russian works into Malayalam was the accessibility to the critical articles on Russian literature written by Malayali scholars. These articles appeared in some of the Malayalam periodicals at the beginning of the twentieth century.

One of the key factors that may cause difficulties while translating any Russian fiction into Malayalam would be the element of cultural sensitivity. The importance of defining culture is not only about an academic exercise, but also about delimiting how it is perceived and taught. The culture under discussion here is internal, collective and is acquired rather than learned. Peter Newmark, one of the main figures of Translation Studies in the English-speaking world, discussed translation as the "product of paradoxes and oppositions, triadic as well as dyadic, that is, the moral and material facts of the truth as well as the old yawns: the writer and the readership, the word and the text, the two languages, the two

cultures" (Newmark 1993: 12). While converting the given message of a source language (SL) into the target language (TL) the translator has to consider the culture(s) of both the languages. In order to avoid mistranslation, the translators should be cognizant of the dynamics of the value systems, ideologies and ways of life in a given culture and should make sure that they know beyond the lexical content and the syntax of the language(s).

There is a plethora of cultural elements to be considered while venturing into the task of translation. The real hurdle is not translating the linguistic expressions and idioms that are non-existent in the target language. It is translating the mundane, commonplace materials from everyday life. These factors have the potential of acting as obstacles in the process of translation. Then the translator will be forced to foreignize the word, find an equivalent in the target language, coin a new term or provide a description as footnote or in the glossary or the main body of the text. Certain materials such as food, cloth, utensils, currencies, weapons and ornaments are culture-specific.

Endeavour to theorise everyday life is always hindered by its 'ordinary' nature, and its unavoidable associations with the familiar. Everyday life is significant as the physical site upon which society is constructed which is a consequence of the interplay between culture and individual. Social theorists are increasingly using everyday life as an analytical model in their attempts to conceptualise the processes through which society is fashioned. In *Culture and Everyday Life* (2005) Andy Bennett, a social theorist, discusses the "highly complex and fragmented concepts" of culture and everyday life "in the context of late modernity".

Rather than espousing singular and essentialist meanings, they express a range of highly differentiated and contested

meanings which are underpinned by the competing knowledges and sensibilities of an increasingly heterogeneous society (Bennett 2005: 4).

Linguistic contacts between different societies result in the integration of many words and usages into the languages involved. These changes happen at the 'commonplace' level, and most of the times these adjustments and refinements are taken for granted.

An Honest Thief: The above mentioned factors may sound utterly insignificant or banal but these materials might cause a notable difference in the outlook of a translation and these factors have the power to make the translator visible or invisible. One such example is in the Malayalam translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's short story "An Honest Thief" (1848). When Emelyan Ilyitch is narrating the incident of two women fighting in the street, he mentions one of the women upsetting the "basket of cranberries" of the other by accident (Dostoevsky 2008: 8). In *A Complete Manual for the Cultivation of Cranberry*, B. Eastwood states that

> On many of the vast steppes of Russia wild cranberries abound, and even amid the wastes of Siberia it is occasionally to be met with. Indeed the Russian cranberries proved for a long time to be no inconsiderable exports of that country, […] for the use of the lords and ladies of London. […] (Eastwood 1857: 14-15).

Cranberry is a fruit in deep red colour and found throughout the cooler regions of the northern hemisphere. But in the Malayalam translation by T. K. Premalata, the same thing is mentioned as "pazhakkutta" or fruit basket (Dostoevsky 2010a: 19). It is not cultivable in Kerala with its characteristic tropical climate and the translator might have replaced 'cranberry' with 'fruit' in order to avoid an unfamiliar term.

In *An Honest Thief*, Astafy Ivanovich moved by Emelyan's pathetic condition, ventures to take care of him even though he did not have much money. Feeding two stomachs was not a difficult task for Astafy, since he was "no great eater himself" and Emelyan being a drunkard, "as we all know, never eats."

> At midday I should have to give him another bit of bread and an onion; and in the evening, onion again with kvass, with some more bread if he wanted it. And if some cabbage soup were to come our way, then we should both have our fill (Dostoevsky 2008: 6).

By the seventeenth century cabbage was a basic Russian food and was an easily available commodity. Most Russians grew their own cabbage in their gardens, and thus market transactions were few. These commonplace household commodities are very closely linked to the economic, social and cultural history of a nation. Cabbage soup, kvass or bread have no relation to the staple diet of Malayalis. The Malayalam translator has retained the linguistic and cultural differences of the source text by conforming to the strategy of foreignization. The same material can be used for different purposes in different societies and some entities are totally unfamiliar to the target readers. Its cultural and religious significance will be lost unless the translator cares to mention it.

Translating humorous accounts and witty conversations involving puns can be extremely challenging because the target readers may not appreciate it or even understand it. Beyond their linguistic expertise, translators need to have a thorough understanding of the culture of the source language as well as that of the target language. There are terms, expressions and words which have multifarious associations, more or less independently of their meanings. It depends on the context and the perception of the individual because language is not neutral and is not equally available to all

people. In *Eminent Rhetoric: Language, Gender and Cultural Tropes* (1994) Elizabeth A. Fay states that

> The significant advantage of cultural tropes is that they . . . , attain a transparency through repetition so that we as audience do not even recognize their presence. And . . . , cultural tropes use words to enact affective responses that disengage our logic from our emotions (Fay 1994: 4).

Certain mundane things and practices hold particular meanings (may even have some historical or social significance) in different societies. Objects, images and words have the capacity to impact upon the construction of meaning while simultaneously constituting traces of multiple meanings.

Material culture as expressed by food, cuisine, fashion, artefacts, etc. is always a valid reflection of regional cultures. Uniform and costume act as communicators of rank and bestowers of recognition within various power structures and dress has the capacity to act as a metonym for the social position of a person. Clothing is a source of social status and it plays a role in the construction of social identities. Fashion embodies a range of symbolic values which are collectively understood within and across different social groups. The local fashion acts as a framing device for individuals in inscribing cultural resources with meaning. As stated by the French historian Fernand Braudel, the history of costume is in large measure dependent on factors like "raw materials, production processes, manufacturing costs, cultural stability, fashion and social hierarchy. Subject to incessant change, costume everywhere is a persistent reminder of social position" (Braudel 1992: 311).

The Gambler: There are lots of factors that are common and diverse in human experience; the experience itself is never pure but historically and culturally conditioned. It is

impossible to deal with perception as sensation untouched by our past experiences, education, and uninfluenced by our ideas and knowledge. With its directness and immediacy, experience provides a powerful means to dig beneath the layers of accrued meanings and cognitive habits.

The Gambler is autobiographical in nature, at least in some of its aspects. This short novel to a certain extend describes Dostoevsky's passion for the roulette table. The despotic and rich 'granny' is believed to be the caricature of a wealthy aunt of Dostoevsky. It is written in first person and the characters' personal tone reveals the contrasts and contradictions of human ego. In the preface to *Choothattakkaran* (2004), the Malayalam version of *The Gambler*, the translators Venu V. Desam and T. V. Baburaj have admitted that they had taken some liberty while translating the source material. There is no harm in doing so, because even the English translators who have directly translated it from Russian had taken their own share of freedom while translating.

In the first chapter of *The Gambler* the protagonist-cum-narrator Alexei Ivanovich boasts about how he "tried to spit in Monseigneur's coffee" (Dostoevsky 1957: 4). In another instance when he and Mr. Astley visit a café, he recounts that "[t]hey brought us some coffee" (Dostoevsky 1957: 44). In both these occasions the Malayalam translator has used "chaaya" or tea instead of 'kaappi', the Malayalam equivalent for coffee. Drinking tea is a very commonplace thing in Kerala, probably inspired by the traditionally tea-drinking British. But coffee house gatherings and coffee culture are supposedly part of artistic and intellectual centres in the West. Definitely coffee is not unknown to Malayalam readers; however the translator chose to attribute the commonplace-ness to tea rather than coffee.

Crime and Punishment: If there are references to colours in the source text (ST) which has some connotative meaning or has the potential to stir up the imagination of the readers causing a specific visual imagery, the translator has to be cautious. Individual colours have a variety of cultural associations and might even come under colour symbolism. For instance white is usually associated with mourning in Asian countries like Japan and India (especially in northern states), whereas in the UK, among other western countries black is the colour which denotes grief.

Different colours signify varied affairs and concerns in different legal systems. In the English translation *Crime and Punishment* (1866) by Constance Garnett, when Semyon Marmeladov talks endlessly to Rodion Raskolnikov about his family and their miseries in a drunken state, he mentions his daughter Sonya having "a yellow ticket" (Dostoevsky 2003: 15). In the Malayalam translation also it is mentioned as a "yellow card" (Dostoevsky 2010: 21). But the fact that it is a reference to the legal system of licensed prostitution that existed in St. Petersburg till 1909 is totally lost. Prostitutes carried a yellow coloured card/ticket/passport as part of a public health measure.

In David McDuff's English translation of *Crime and Punishment*, while giving an account of the tavern where Raskolnikov meets Marmeladov there is a description of the counter where "sliced cucumbers, black *sukhar'* and some cut-up pieces of fish are kept" (Dostoevsky 1991: 42). But Constance Garnett who is also an English translator, rendered 'black *sukhar"* as "dried black bread" (Dostoevsky 2003: 13). In *Kuttavum Shikshayum*, the Malayalam translation by K. P. Sasidharan, it is simplified as "roti" (Dostoevsky 2010: 18). McDuff cared to retain the Russian word *sukhar'* which is a kind of rusk, whereas Garnett and Sasidharan domesticated the

food item at the risk of losing information from the source text. These strategies directly correspond with and are imbued by forms of local knowledge.

As part of one of his dreams Raskolnikov recollects the occasions on which he used to visit the church with his parents in order to perform burial rites for his grandmother. On these special days "they always took with them some *kut'ya* on a white dish wrapped in a napkin, and the *kut'ya* was the sugary sort, made of rice, with raisins pressed into it in the form of a cross" (Dostoevsky 1991: 90). Again McDuff chose to retain the Russian term while Garnett domesticated *kut'ya* as "a special sort of rice pudding with raisins stuck in it in the shape of a cross" (Dostoevsky 2003: 42). For Sasidharan it is "kuruvillaatha munthiri kurissuroopathil vachittulla oru pudding" or a pudding with seedless grapes arranged in the shape of a cross (Dostoevsky 2010: 54). In the Glossary, McDuff describes *kut'ya* as "a kind of sweet-rice gruel eaten at funeral meals" (Dostoevsky 1991: 636). Domestication and foreignization are not just about the (in)visibility of the translator. It has its impact on the way target readers receive the translation. Foreignization allows the target readers to be more familiar with the source culture and source language.

The colour of the cupola of the church which Raskolnikov and his parents visited for performing the burial rites has a symbolic status.

In the middle of the graveyard stood a stone church with a green cupola where he used to go to mass with his father and mother, when a service was held in memory of his grandmother, who had long been dead, and whom he had never seen (Dostoevsky 2003: 42).

It is noteworthy in connection with the "big green *drap de dames* shawl" which Sonya picks up to cover her head and

face before "lay[ing] down on the bed with her face to the wall" (Dostoevsky 2003: 17). In fact a *drap de dame* is a fine cloth used by ladies. She wears the same protective cloak of suffering when she accompanies Raskolnikov to the police station to make his deposition. In the Malayalam translation, it is just a shawl. The absence of the recurring image of the 'green' shawl in the Malayalam translation fails to raise the material to an iconographic level.

According to Dostoevsky's second wife, Anna, during her first visit to his apartment in 1866, as she rang the bell the door was opened by an old servant-woman with a green checked shawl thrown over her shoulders. Perumbadavam Sreedharan, in his fictional biography about Dostoevsky entitled *Oru Sankeerthanam Pole* (1993), depicts the same scene vividly: "Anna rang the bell in front of apartment number thirteen. Within seconds a woman clad in a long gown of light green colour opened the door and looked Anna inquiringly[1]" (Sreedharan 1993: 35). The servant-woman named Fedosya was a mother-like figure in Dostoevsky's life. Anna and Fyodor first met on a professional basis, her being posted as his stenographer to help him finish *Crime and Punishment* on time. Dostoevsky might have taken inspiration from the real life presence of Fedosya in his apartment. This proves how leitmotifs, be it colours or objects, converge on one another to give the imagery a wholesome status as symbol and function as links to the author's biographical details.

Conclusion

Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), observes that for the past four centuries, in the Anglo-American culture, translator was supposed to leave the impression that the text was originally written in the

[1] My translation

language into which it has been translated. He criticises the method of judging translators with the criterion of fluency irrespective of its critical acclaim or wide reception. Meaning being utterly unstable and constantly under flux, it is almost impossible to have any accurate semantic equivalence or one-to-one correspondence in translation. A text offers scope for a plethora of semantic possibilities and thus disseminates itself among innumerable alternatives, negating any specific meaning. On the basis of varying cultural assumptions, specific social situations, changing political sympathies and different historical periods, a translator is seemingly left with an excessive amount of interpretative choices.

The feasibility of a translation, to a great extent, depends on the way it interacts with the cultural and social conditions under which it is produced and read. Translation presents the cultural other as the recognisable and the familiar, even though it results in an extensive domestication of the source text, wherein it functions as an "appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political" (Venuti 1995: 19).

Translating a fictional work is not just about preserving the meaning of the words and the underlying emotions of the story. It is also a means to propagate knowledge about different cultures, communities, their language and life style. Though human nature and condition are not so different across the world, it is the depiction of everyday life, and commonplace customs and materials that makes them culture specific. Invisible or not, it is the translator who brings these tales to the reader or vice versa.

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