

# Translation As Literary Criticism- Text and Sub-text in Literary Translation

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A general theory of literary translation between two or more languages that can explain or anticipate the problems of linguistic and cultural transfer of meanings and set standards of evaluation, appears a near impossibility, given the large number of variables the process of translation has to contend with. However, certain principles for evaluating the nature and function of translations in the Indian context between Indian languages and English need to be formulated. During the last decade, a large number of literary translations from modern Indian languages into English have appeared. Do they constitute the national archives of 'Indian Literature'? Do the translations emphasize the local, the regional or the national? Do the processes of translation into trans-regional languages like English reconstitute a literary work from a modern Indian language? When a European or Latin American text is translated into a modern Indian language, does its 'truth value' suffer erosion? Do separate strategies of translation produce different texts?

I shall confine myself largely to translations between Malayalam and English, though some examples would come from other sources. If one examines the role played by translation in the Malayalam literary history, one is struck by its critical function in the projection of new horizons of expectations. The standardization of literary language itself took place through translation. The publication of original novels in Malayalam was preceded by translations of various prose narratives. Realistic fiction as well as modernist poetry was accompanied by a large number of translations from various European, African, American and Latin American languages. During the period between 1900 and 1975, of the 3367 novels published in Malayalam, 344 were translations. That works out to be 11.5%. In the last decades this figure must

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have marginally grown, as there is growing demand for translated fiction. Of the 2031 books translated under the category of literature 909 are from foreign languages, while 1122 are from Indian languages. The break-up for foreign languages is as follows: English (401), Russian (229), French (115) and German (30). The bulk of translations from Indian languages are from Sanskrit (540), Bengali (266) and Hindi (157). Of late, translations of contemporary writings from Kannada and Tamil have begun to appear in large numbers.

A careful examination of these translations suggests a deeper pattern. Translations from foreign languages are dictated by the shifts in literary sensibility. Often a new literary sensibility uses translations as a means of breaching the hegemony of the prevailing orthodoxies. The translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* in 1925 marked a breakthrough in fiction as it prepared the readers for representation of lower class life and social conflicts. The larger number of translations from Maupassant, Anatole France, Chekhov, Dostoevsky and other European masters of fiction made no concession to the prevailing literary taste. In fact, they could be described as foreignizing translations as they disrupted the cultural codes that prevailed in Malayalam in the 30s and the 40s. The function of these translations was to make available to the society alternate models of thinking and imagining the world. It is significant that very little is translated from Anglo-American literature into Malayalam. English serves as source language or medium for translation as it has large number of translations from other European languages and also from African or Latin-American literature. The literary translations that intervene in culture and project alternative strategies of reading and writing, in effect, function as literary criticism as they force open the very boundaries of what is considered 'literary'.

Here, it may be instructive to distinguish translation as literary criticism from literary translations that reinforce prevailing literary taste. Novels from Bengali, and to lesser extent from some other Indian languages, appear regularly in Malayalam translation. The first Bangla novel to appear in Malayalam was *Anand Math* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, in 1909. This was followed by

*Durgeshnandini* in 1911. Most of the Bangla authors are available in Malayalam translations: Tagore (50 books), Sharat Chandra Chatterjee (48 books), Divijendralal Roy (40 books), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (30 books). Several of these novels were serialized in Malayalam periodicals, something not done from other Indian languages. While Hindi serves as a medium or source language for many of these Indian languages including Bangla, Hindi literature has not really attracted the imagination of Malayalam readers. Translations from Sanskrit have increased in recent years, as there is a revival of interest on classical heritage. This kind of translation cannot be described as literary as a large number of texts such as the Upanishads or the Vedas are not chosen for their literary value alone. Here I would like to argue that translations from other Indian languages into Malayalam do not function as literary criticism. With the possible exception of Tagore, these translations have not resulted in a revision of taste and model for writing in the literary field. The large number of Bangla novels that appear in Malayalam fulfill the demand for popular reading material for the middle class readers. The reason why these translations read like Malayalam may have something to do with the shared values and commonness of perceptions. Here the Bangla texts are reconstituted in the target language of Malayalam in accordance with 'values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist' in Malayalam. What they confirm is the world-views that are obtained in the social novels of Malayalam. The Bangla text does not become a means of destabilizing existing literary value systems.

Domesticating translations become ways of reinforcing certain subject positions already available in a speech community. A good example of this is Malayalam translation of Shivaji Savant's *Mrityunjaya* with the title *Karnan* in 1995. The context of this translation was the extraordinary popularity of M.T.Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (*The Second Turn*), which revisits the *Mahabharat* from Bhim's perspective. *Mrityunjaya*, and this is also true of Khandekar's *Yayaati*, is not received as a Marathi novel but as one of the possible rewritings of the epic story. The translation was not done from Marathi original but from its Hindi translation. The poetics of Malayalam already constituted by indigenous cultural history, reading habits and works like *Bharataparyatanam*,



*Eni Jnanuraangatte, Karnabhooshanam* is reactivated and confirmed by these translations. They result in validating an exciting poetics. Since the *Mahabharat* has already been in circulation in various versions and is a cultural text of great significance any subversive rewriting will be resisted by the existing value systems. In this sense *Karnan* is not a new text but an endorsement of the canonical status of the *Mahabharat* as a cultural text. As far as I am aware play like *Andha-Yug* by Dharmavir Bharati has not been translated into Malayalam. Its translation is not likely to enjoy wide readership.

In the light of the above discussion we are in a position to say that all literary translations do not have a critical function. For translation to perform the role of literary criticism, the language should already have a clearly defined literary field with its own internal dynamics. To use Pierre Bourdieu's term, only when a field of cultural production is well established in a speech community, translated texts can accomplish the critical function which, to a great extent, may be subversive in its orientation. Bourdieu writes:

..the social microcosm that I call the literary field is a space of objective relationships among positions...and one can only understand what happens there if one locates each agent or each institution in its relationships with all the others. It is this peculiar universe, this 'Republic of Letters', with its relations of power and its struggles for the preservation or the transformation of the established order, that is the basis for the strategies of producers, for the form of the art they defend, for the alliances they form, for the schools they found, in short, for their specific interests.

We shall come back to this inclusive view of literary field to review translation as cultural production.

In his study of the German reading public, A. Ward suggests that the average middle class reader prefers works which are 'within his own experience and range of emotion, reflecting his own interests and not conflicting with the demands of his morality'. The idea of foreignizing translation implies certain translating strategies. These strategies operate in a culture where various centres of power

exist simultaneously. These centres of power organize discourses by canonizing or marginalizing them. Schleiermacher who in 1813 advocated foreignizing translation recognized the fact that this kind of literary translation could flourish only in languages which were "freer, in which innovations and deviations are tolerated to a greater extent, in such a way that their accumulation may, under certain circumstances, generate a certain characteristic mode of expression".

Lawrence Venuti has commented that Schleiermacher's concept of foreignizing translation is marked by 'bourgeois individualism, cultural elitism, Prussian Nationalism and German universalism'. What is pertinent to our discussion is that what is foreign in a foreignizing translation performs a revisionary act within the target language. Since these translation strategies recover or reassemble discourses from within the target language, they reconstitute literary discourse. It was pointed out above that Malayalam rarely translates texts from Anglo-American culture. The foreignizing translations in Malayalam can be seen to make a careful selection of foreign texts. Is there an attempt to resist the hegemony of English or at least the cultural values embroidered in Anglo-American texts? The literary discourses favoured by the middle-class and the working class reproduce the hegemony of the prevailing value system. In the choice of foreign texts and in their rendering into Malayalam in a manner which resists the hegemony of prevailing or popular taste, the elitist literary translation in Malayalam clearly address a chosen few, largely the creative writers in the language and those whose sensibility finds the existing cultural products limited and limiting.

## (2)

One could make use of Pierre Bourdieu's idea of 'symbolic capital' for a clearer understanding of the critical function of translation. He argues that symbolic forms or symbolic systems of exchange cannot be set apart from other modes of practice in a society. Writers and translators are part of a complex institutional framework, which authorizes, enables, empowers and legitimizes them. Literary or artistic value is not the prerogative of every cultural product in a society. What Bourdieu describes as the field

of restricted cultural production, by virtue of its greater autonomy from the field of economic capital, is able to achieve greater symbolic value. The production of literary texts cannot be understood in terms of its internal structure alone. This applies to translated texts in a culture too. We need a larger view of cultural production that regulates and organizes texts in a literary field. As shown above, the choice of foreign texts for translation as well as the strategies of translation in Malayalam is dictated by the prevailing systems of power in its culture. In the case of Malayalam foreignizing translation deliberately restricts its addressivity to exclude the middle class readership, thus taking literary translation out of the orbit of mass culture. The organization of the field of culture into such segments is to be seen in the context of relations between culture and capital. The world of social differences is institutionalized in the fragmentation of cultural products. Translation as a cultural process cannot escape this larger fate of social hierarchies and divisions.

Translation is a contributing factor in the process of consecration and legitimation. Products of popular culture do not seek consecration as artistic products as they are mass-produced for economic gain. It is significant that novels, poetry or drama that are commercially successful in the west are not translated into Malayalam. The recent Nobel Prize for Naipaul has not resulted in any excitement about Naipaul's works. However, a well-known Latin American novel *Experanto* by Maria has appeared in Malayalam translation with great publicity and fanfare. A recent travelogue that describes Brazil, with special reference to its people and literature has been received very well. Most of the novels by Marquez are available in Malayalam. A volume of Latin American stories has just been published. This interest in Latin American literature does not extend to the common middle class reader. It is largely used to consecrate and legitimate a particular modernist or post-modern style that is yet to gain wide acceptability. In this sense, it is a part of cultural struggle between the marginal avant-garde and the entrenched elitist or highbrow writers. The space for symbolic goods is highly limited in any literary field and it is here that the conflict between heresy and orthodoxy is most intense. Translation is employed as a strategy to project a new writing style



or to legitimate a new avant-garde view of art. Andre Leffevere's distinction between conceptual grid and linguistic grid may be relevant here. When translation acts as literary criticism, it intervenes in the conceptual grid of a speech community.

### (3)

The value or the meaning of translation thus can only be ascertained with reference to the entire field of literary production. The internal dialectic of its divisions directs and determines the reception of translation. The translated text is not only constituted by the strategies of translation from inside but also by the dialectic between the economic and the symbolic capital in the culture of the target culture. We have seen above that the entire field of cultural production that is fragmented into the elitist and the popular determines the translation of the creative literature into Malayalam. Does such a situation obtain for Indian Writing in English Translation? How are the literary works born of the historical and social context of a particular region received in Indian English context? I shall briefly discuss some of the questions by comparing the well-known Malayalam novel *Khassakkinte Itihasam* (1969) by O.V.Vijayan with its translation *The Legends of Khasak* (1991) by the author himself. While the original in Malayalam has gone through 28 reprints in the last 32 years, the translation in English has had only two impressions. In his 'Author's Note', O.V.Vijayan says:

It has been difficult translating this book. It is full of dense images of nature, old folk customs, evocations of caste differences, the rich play of dialects, all of which are difficult to render into English.

The nature of addressivity in the fictional text of *Khasak* undergoes a complete change in its translation. The Malayalam original uses a large number of speech genres that may be traced to the caste differences in the lively sub-culture of a rural locality situated in the interiors of Palghat that borders on Tamil Nadu. In his translation these dialects are rendered opaque and the caste differences are projected on to religious differences. In the second chapter titled "The Return" in the original, while describing the founding myth of Khasak, Vijayan writes:

The Ravuthars and the Ezhavas of Khasak offered regular prayers to the spirit of Sheikh living there.

(അവിടെ പാർത്തുപോന്ന ഷെയ്ഖിന്റെ  
പ്രേതത്തെ വസാക്കിലെ രാവുത്താന്മാരും  
ഇഴവരും ഉപാസിച്ചു പോന്നു)

(Pg 18. *Avide parthuponna Sheikhide prethatte Khasakkile Ravuttanmarum Izhavarum upaasichhu ponnu.*)

Vijayan's translation reads like this:

Both the Muslims and the Hindus of Khasak look upon the Sheikh as their protecting deity. (*Legends, p 11*)

The question of religious identity is not central to *Khasak* where the magic of legends, fables and myths weave a sacred realm of shared belief. *Khasak's* consciousness can accommodate contradictions without allowing them to erupt into violent conflict. What makes the original text polyphonous is not merely the presence of proliferating dialects but the enactment of multi-voicedness of this community. In the sixth chapter titled "The Schools" (*Vidyaalayangal*) we have a scene where the villagers debate the conflicting positions of the *Mullah* who is opposed to the school and the young *Khazi* who is in favour of it. In their conversation we have these dialogues:

"The Sheikh's is the truth," they said."

"Then, is the Mollacka a lie?" they asked again.

"Mollacka is also truth."

"How can that be?"

"Truths are many."

This passage is crucial for the entire novel as it denies an essentialist view of reality. However, in translation this passage is rendered as follows:

"The Khazi's truth" they told themselves, "is the Sheikh's truth"



"If that be so," troubled minds were in search of certitude, "is the Mollacka the untruth?"

"He is the truth too"

"How is it so?"

"Many truths make the big truth"

The references to the 'troubled minds being in search of certitude' and 'many truths making the big truth' completely falsify the original. The dialogic nature of the original is turned into the monologic assertion of the translated text. This amounts to an ideological corruption of the original narrative. In his review of the translation N.S. Madhavan points out:

Vijayan not only rewrote the novel but did some writing also. He wrote the novel afresh in parts, selectively, choosing those areas where the authority of the day's political correctness is most domineering, namely sex and politics.

It is not merely a question of political correctness. By the time Vijayan came to translate *Khasak*, he was a changed person who had turned deeply spiritual. The transgressions of *Khasak* which made it a radical text in Malayalam could have well appeared pedantic and trivial in English where the realm of restricted production is largely occupied by apolitical, pan-Indian texts. This also brings a deeper problem of the subtexts here. The historical context of *Khasak* is Vijayan's own disenchantment with ideologies in general and communism in particular. The verbal energy of the original came from a celebration of the transient, the carnal and the physical. Vijayan radicalised the discourse of Malayalam fiction by problematizing the normative. The symbolic value of *Khasak* derives from its heretic function in Malayalam fiction. Now the problem with the translation into English is that no such slot in the realm of restricted cultural production exists in Indian English fiction for works translated from modern Indian languages. Indian Writings in English Translation do not constitute symbolic capital that can reconstitute what is literary. In the absence of such critical function, Vijayan's avant-garde text slides into a nameless limbo where its function is not critical but celebratory. It consecrates Vijayan as an Indian writer. *Khasak* becomes an Indian Macinda where everything happens in another time and place. In the absence

of social and political sub-texts, the translated text becomes the other of the original something which Vijayan would not have anticipated or even endorsed.

## References

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