

Literature Without Borders: Mapping Vikram Seth's Cosmopolitan Sensibility

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Abstract

This paper will examine Vikram Seth's, Three Chinese Poets and Beastly Tales From Here and There, two works of translation and analyze them as texts which enable us to redefine the idea of translation itself by reflecting on issues of translation and cosmopolitan aesthetics. These two texts show that when translation is undertaken by a creative writer the roles of a creative writer, translator and creator intertwine and produce interesting results. The primary focus will thus be to explore and enunciate the cosmopolitan and globalized aesthetics as reflected in the act of translation.

Key Words: Translation, Cosmopolitan Translation, Indian Writings In English.

Introduction: *"I think it's possible to be multi-rooted, rather like a banyan tree, without being deracinated."*

-Vikram Seth

Translation by definition involves straddling different cultures, bridging diverse worlds and world views, a meeting of the Self and the Other. This paper will examine Vikram Seth's, *Three Chinese Poets* and *Beastly Tales From Here and There*, two works of translation and analyze them as texts which enable us to redefine the idea of translation itself by reflecting on issues of translation and cosmopolitan aesthetics. These two texts show that when translation is undertaken by a creative writer the roles of a creative writer,

translator and creator intertwine and produce interesting results. The primary focus will thus be to explore and enunciate the cosmopolitan and globalized aesthetics as reflected in the act of translation.

Discussion:

Vikram Seth was born in 1952 in Calcutta, studied in America and China and has travelled and lived all over the world. Though he had published some works earlier, he burst into the popular imagination in 1993 when he was given an advance of \$375,000 for *A Suitable Boy* by his British publisher Phoenix House and \$600,000 by Harper Collins in New York. One recalls how Mulk Raj Anand's first novel *Untouchable* was rejected by nineteen British publishers and it was only after E.M. Foster's intervention that Lawrence and Wishart accepted it. Seth is one of the writers who has been instrumental in drawing the world's attention to Indian writings in English. Interestingly though, compared to the response he elicits among the common readers and the press, Seth has been a subject of very few academic studies. The reasons may be many. For one, he radically changes genres and setting with each of his creative enterprise. Though he calls himself a "lapsed poet" and six of his works are in verse, the truth remains that, "Vikram Seth has defied the rule of modern publishing, which demands that an author stick to a single sort of book. American publishers even say of authors who strike out in new directions that they face 'brand disintegration'. Blissfully unaware of such concerns, Seth has progressed from one genre to another". (Beever, 9) Along with this difficulty of pigeonholing him as an exponent of a particular genre is the difficulty of categorizing him. A polymorphous writer he is as much at home in India as he is in China, America and Europe. He has written among other things an American novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*; a European novel, *An Equal Music*; a travelogue *From*

Heaven's Lake; a biography *Two Lives*. The importance of Vikram Seth lies in the new dimension he has given to Indian English Literature. He has gone far beyond the frontiers of post-colonial writing to develop a cosmopolitan aesthetic. His two works of translation *Three Chinese Poets* and *Beastly Tales From Here And There*, are two striking examples of this very aesthetic.

When does a writer choose to become a translator?

To understand this, the views of U.R. Ananthamurthy becomes important. Ananthamurthy said that he read other poets when he felt that his own writings failed to express himself and the world around him. In the process he translated W.B. Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, Rainer Maria Rilke, Edwin Muir and Lao Tzu to Kannada. These writers provided him with a new paradigm of seeing the world.

Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales From Here And There (poems)* is a collection of ten fables. As he writes in the Introduction,

“By the time I had finished writing” ‘The Crocodile and the Monkey’...all ten of these beastly tales were born- or *re-born* (emphasis mine).

Of the ten tales told here, the first two come from India, the next two from China, the next two from Greece, and the next two from Ukraine. The final two came directly to me from the Land of Gup”.

These tales as (re)told by the author is refreshingly new without losing its original flavor. It has none of the exoticizing elements of Richard Francis Burton's *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night (1885)*. As a cosmopolitan writer Seth translates

fables from around the globe thereby highlighting the universality of not only certain literary genres but also of thematic concerns. These stories come to us composed in rhymes, retold and reinterpreted all in a delightfully witty manner. While maintaining a broad faithfulness to the original, Seth also gives his own clever turn to some tales. In the fable of 'The Hare and the Tortoise' Seth gives it a contemporary flavor when it is not the tortoise who is feted, rather it's the "hot and heady... hare (who is) pampered rotten/ and the (slow and steady) tortoise was forgotten". Animals of all variety from the louse to the hare to the tragopan populate these tales with the humans if at all present are simply there in the background. Stephen O. Murray in a review writes "The protagonists take on human characteristics thus highlighting human failure and emotion... the content generally makes me smile with one clever and/or resourceful animal in each tale, including a monkey (having to manage an ungrateful crocodile), a mouse (doing extended battle with a snake that swallowed its friend), a goat bluffing wolves, a cat outwitting a fox (to save the cat's friend, a not very bright rooster), a beetle (avenging its rabbit friend cruelly decapitated by an eagle), and a frog (avenging itself on a nightingale who produced more beautiful sound). The Tragopan becomes a martyr, though its comrade, the elephant may prevail in the longest of the tales where a confederation of wildlife opposes humans building a dam and flooding their habitat."

(epinions.com/review/Vikram_Seth_Beastly_Tales_from_Here_and_There) All in all these are tales of Love, Greed, Revenge, Ambition meant to entertain and edify albeit with a twist.

Three Chinese Poets contains translations of poems by Wang Wei (701-762), Li Bai (701-761) and Du Fu (712-770) three great literary giants of China. These three were contemporaries and

have been described as a Buddhist, a Taoist and a Confucian respectively. The three Tang dynasty poets lived in the eighth century AD, in an age of great cultural glory interrupted by a disastrous civil war. Seth makes some important observations in the Introduction to the text. He writes, “Works in translation from languages I do not understand have had a deep influence on my own writing as works I can read in the original. In some cases the translations have so moved me that I have tried to learn the original language of the work. In others, the form or the spirit of the writing has served as a template for my own inspiration. Life is short, and I doubt I will ever have the delight of reading Pushkin in Russian, Moliere in French, or Homer in Greek. But to have at hand Charles Johnston’s *Eugein Onegin*, Richard Wilbur’s *Tartuffe* or Robert Fitzgerald’s *Iliad* has allowed me at least some ingress into worlds that would otherwise be unreachable and most likely unimaginable”. He further writes that his work on translation is a “dual offering- as thanks to those three translators of one generation who have meant so much to me, and as thanks to the three Chinese poets of another generation whose original poems have meant even more”. (Seth xviii-xix)

Regarding the similarities among the three poets we see, “Their stance with respect to the court and affairs of state, and the value they placed on friendship in a world of slow transport and great distances, where parting from a friend held the real possibility of never seeing him again”. (Seth xxi) Also common among them is the theme of nostalgia, love of nature and appreciation of music. Yet there are significant differences among them. As Angela Atkins points out, “Wang Wei retreats into nature, Li Bai is full of the intoxication of poetry or music or wine while Du Fu reflects often sadly on society, history, the state and his own disturbed times”. (Atkins 15) Though these three poets are Chinese, the tone and tenor

of their poetry, their thematic concerns are universal and cosmopolitan.

Regarding his method of translation Seth writes that he “admit (s) the primacy of the original and attempt(s) fidelity to it”. He understands the limitations he faces as a translator, “Even in prose the associations of a word or an image in one language do not slip readily into another. The loss is still greater in poetry, where each word or image carries a heavier charge of association, and where exigencies of form leave less scope for choice and manoeuver.” However if the reader feels “the limited access to the worlds of these poems” the job of the translator is accomplished. (Seth xxxii)

It becomes imperative now to work out a definition of the terms- ‘translation’, ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘cosmopolitan translation’. In the process I will also see how these terms are intrinsically linked and seeks a redefinition in the curious case of Vikram Seth.

The Oxford dictionary defines translation as, “A written or spoken rendering of the meaning of a word or text in another language”. Translation simply means rendering a text (source) in one language to a text (target) in another language. By definition translation therefore involves two languages. J C Catford defines translation as ‘a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another language’. His focus is on the difference between the target language and the source language. Translation, as understood in a Western context has been broadly understood as a rewriting of text from one language to another. In Sanskrit the word ‘anuvad’ is understood differently as will be discussed later.

The Cambridge dictionary defines cosmopolitanism as containing or having experience of people and things from many different parts of the world: The idea of cosmopolitanism existed long before the idea of nationalism. It was the Cynics in the 4th century BC who first coined the term cosmopolitan i.e. “citizen of the cosmos”. A citizen – a *polites*- belonged to a particular polis, a city. The cosmos referred to the world implying the universe”. Kwame Anthony Appiah lays down the two basic tenets of cosmopolitanism, “So there are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value of not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance”. (Seth xiii)

So what is cosmopolitan translation?

In *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi writes, “...translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is a part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems”. (Trivedi and Bassnett 3)

The oft used phrase ‘lost in translation’ does not apply in the case of Vikram Seth. His rewriting/ translation infuse these ancient

texts with new vitality. His translation can be better understood as defined by the Brazilian translator Haraldo de Campos “may be likened to a blood transfusion, where the emphasis is on health and nourishment of the translator... (it) is a dialogue, the translator is an all - powerful reader and a free agent as a writer” (Trivedi & Bassnett 5) Seth’s translation can be called in the words of Andre Lefevere ‘rewriting’ or as Sujit Mukherjee calls it ‘new writing’. In his translations Seth also belongs to the Indian tradition of rewriting. “In India with its long history of oral composition and transmission... the distinction between different composers of poetry within the same tradition or between an original writer and a translator was never half as wide as it has been in the West’ (Trivedi & Bassnett 8). For centuries translation has been a one-way exchange with European worldview and literary practices defining the norm. This controlled the texts that were chosen for translation and the manner in which the translation process was carried out. When a writer like Seth translates Chinese poems and fables from different parts of the world it subverts the colonial hegemony and makes us reassess the term ‘translation’. Monier-Williams writes “The word for translation in Sanskrit, which persists unchanged in most of the modern languages, is *anuvad*, which etymologically and primarily means ‘saying after or again, repeating by way of explanation, explanatory repetition or reiteration with collaboration or illustration, explanatory reference to anything already said the underlying metaphor in the word *anuvad* is temporal – to say after, to repeat- rather than spatial as in English/Latin word translation- to carry across.’ (qtd Bassnett and Trivedi 9), Tulsi Das (1523-1635) is regarded as one of the greatest poet ever in Hindi for having (re-) written the Ramayan. “His reformational act of the appropriation of the Ramayana ... marked rather, a natural process of organic, ramifying, vegetative growth and renewal, comparable perhaps by a

process by which an ancient banyan tree sends down branches which then in turn take root all around it and comprise an intertwined family of trees : *quot rami tot arbores*” (Bassnett and Trivedi 10)

In the case of Vikram Seth the term ‘translation’ seeks a redefinition because he translates a text written in another language to English. What is significant is that he is not a native speaker of either the source or the target language. His translation of the two texts can be called ‘**cosmopolitan translation**’. It goes beyond the concerns of one or two cultures only. As Maria Tymoczko writes “In the case of many former colonies, there may even be more than one culture or one language that stand behind a writer’s work”. (Trivedi and Bassnett 20)

If Seth is an Indian by birth he translates a Chinese text into English and while doing this is able to effortlessly straddle all cultures because of his cosmopolitan outlook. For a long time translation has been seen as purely an aesthetic act, in Seth’s case the act is both aesthetic and ideological as seen from the texts he translates and the manner in which the translation is carried out. In Vikram Seth’s translation there is no sense that he is writing from a superior and privileged world view. Instead “... in this post-colonial period, when as Salman Rushdie puts it, the Empire has begun to write back, it is unsurprising to find radical concepts of translation emerging from India, from Latin America, from Canada, from Ireland- in short, from former colonies around the world that challenge established European norms about what translation is and what it signifies”(Bassnett and Trivedi 4) Maria Tymoczko writes that there is a fundamental distinction in translation studies in ‘bringing the text to the audience’ and ‘bringing the audience to the text’ and that the greater the prestige of the source text, the easier it is to require that the audience come to the text. However in the case of

Vikram Seth, being an outsider to both the source and the target language/culture there is no privileging of one over the other.

Is it problematic that he chooses to translate the texts into English? Should our concern just be thematic and not linguistic? It is important to recall Raja Rao's Foreward to his magnum opus *Kanthapura* "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own... I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us". Though, one must say in the case of Vikram Seth that English is not just the language of his 'intellectual make-up' but also of his 'emotional make-up'. And Seth does and can 'write like the English'. He does not have to resort to the verbal pastiche of a Salman Rushdie to prove his post-colonial credentials.

The history of translation has been a history of unequal power relations. An awareness of this western hegemony has led some post-colonial theorists to promote a rather radical approach which eschews translations to and from western languages. They see the continued use of western languages as perpetuating western dominance. Regarding this issue Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi writes, "They have a point, of course. But to restrict translation is to tread perilously close to other forms of censorship. A ban on translation can lead one down the same pathway that ends with the burning of books judged unacceptable by a tyrannous regime." Instead they prefer a more moderate approach like that of Homi Bhabha, "who argue(s) persuasively for a new politics of in-betweenness, for a reassessment of the creative potentialities of liminal space. 'We should remember that it is the 'inter'- the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging nationalist anti- nationalist histories of the

‘people’. And by exploring the Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (Trivedi and Bassnett 5- 6)

We live in an age where identities are fluid, a sense of being an exile is not the privilege or the burden of a few migrants, diaspora rules the roost and in the words of the comedian Russell Peters we are all turning beige. Seth has translated himself into becoming a cosmopolitan. James Joyce spoke of the impossibility of writing freely about the Irish culture in Ireland. It was only as an exile that he could become a true artist. Sherry Simon points out that writers like James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Salman Rushdie and Derek Walcott, are never ‘at home’ in any language. Culture and language is no longer a unifying force. For Simon an understanding of translation today both as reality and as ideal involves discontinuity, friction and multiplicity. The question of Seth’s location has been an issue of debate among critics. Seth himself in an interview said that he doesn’t feel a complete stranger in California where he lived for nine years or England where he went to university as an undergraduate. He was also in China for two years. In this context GJV Prasad writes, “Seth belonged to the center, which was elsewhere. But it is not that Seth belongs to the Western world (who doesn’t)as much as that he among the Indian writers in English shows the greatest level of negative capability, the capacity to enter into the lives and cultures absolutely; the culture he thus enters including the Indian. It is not so much that the center from which Seth writes is elsewhere, but that he is the center of his writer’s universe”. (Prasad 14) In this very decentering lies the genius of the writer-reader-translator.

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