The Theophany of Text in Translation

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Abstract

The translation is an essential act throughout the history for maintaining the textual traditions of any civilization. As a historical practice, we find that narratives get morphed through various processes and the cultural knowledge is preserved through processes of translation. Such processes make the texts 'appear' and 're-appear' in various forms – this article attempts to understand such processes as 'the theophany' of texts and knowledge contained in the text. This article tries to study such processes of 'theophany of text' through various examples in history and then attempts to explain these processes through various examples from history and mythology.

Keywords: Narratives, Texts, Knowledge Traditions, Morphing.

Discussion

Text in itself is often supposed to be the work with authorial intentions – the translations of a text may also be authorial though often it is not considered so. Translation as an act reveals the 'text' which has the authority and the authorial intentions and the possibility of otherness are the sources of meanings and interpretations. Translation is supposedly rooted in this possibility of interpretations and the translatorial intentions cannot be ignored. History has proved time and again that the translatorial intentions often reveal the textual meanings to readers, to listeners, to the receptors of the text through translation in various forms. The interpretative task of a translator has often in history played the role of transforming the cultures – as the translator brings new ideas and new texts to a given culture which is the receptor of the target text. Europe has seen the entire process of Renaissance and several

intellectual movements with the translated appearance of several original Greek texts. Even Latin is supposed to have received a lot of its classics through the translated appearance of Greek texts. *The Bible* itself is an example of this 'theophanic' translatorial process from Hebrew to several modern languages. The languages which did not engage into translations often led to the gradual erosion of textual traditions and erosion of tradition of intellectual growth. India itself may be a case before us – we don't find much works being translated towards Indian languages since 15th or 16th century and there is a gradual erosion of intellectual traditions since that time. The intellectual poverty was entwined with the political powers becoming weak in Indian subcontinent – a situation which suited very well the European explorers and gave them the opportunity to gradually make inroads in political and intellectual scenario of the entire subcontinent. This was the time when the translations were happening towards Persian from Indian languages – and even Persian was a power open to these explorers. Yet, the translation and intellectual activities were vibrant enough and the incumbent powers could not make inroads in those areas. The interaction at the level of languages, thus leading to the exchange of knowledge in various fields, is a sign of a place or an empire which is politically, economically and subsequently militarily strong.

The importance of translation in maintaining the political and economic powers has been time tested – not only since Renaissance in Europe but even earlier in various civilisations. We easily conjecture that the old Greek civilization reached at its zenith after having received a lot from the Phoenicians, the Hebraic and several other cultures of the areas today known as Middle East and others adjacent parts (https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/asbook07.asp). If the

intellectual interaction through languages had not happened, the ideas would not have evolved. And the examples of this may be found in the Eastern Roman empire among many others. They did not engage much in the translation nor in rejuvenation of the old Greek philosophical traditions – even though they remained very respectful to them and also did not try to disown and kill their ideas. Still the Academy of Plato was closed in Athens and that was a sign of the intellectual downfall which gradually perhaps lead to the disintegration of the empire. They did not learn much from the Arabic neighbours – we hardly find evidence of translations from Arabic to the languages spoken in this Empire. The Empire remained militarily and economically very strong – so strong that the word 'numisma' which was originally their currency is still used in various formation of words related to currency like 'numismatic' and 'numismatics'. Its political governance remained very strong even after the closure of Academy – the Justinian Code and its later governance and taxation systems are examples of this. Yet, gradually the empire did not make much impact intellectually – except for that it became the root for Arabs to discover the knowledge of the Greeks which gradually passed to the Europeans for Renaissance (https://www.ancient.eu/Byzantine_Empire/). Gradually in the absence of rich intellectual work, which needs lots of translations from various sources, declined so much that the word 'Byzantine' itself received connotations which were not very positive as it meant of such sophistry which had little knowledge and has little cause-consequence methodological rigours. The French, the inheritors of the legacies of Charlemagne who had actually replaced the position of the kings of Eastern Roman Empire as the king of Christian Europe, used the word 'Byzantin' for connoting the intellectual arguments 'dont on finit par ne plus savoir la cause, la matière, par suite de leurs complications inutiles' (Larousse 1989) [the

English rendering of this sentence may be somewhat like this: 'in which we finish by not knowing the cause nor the subject and thus they are considered uselessly complicated]. This may be a consequence of the cessation of evolution of philosophical ideas as the knowledge was not being perhaps transacted by vivacious traditions of translation as we may notice happening during the later periods of Renaissance in other parts of Europe.

The Indian experiences in history have also perhaps been similar. We may notice the importance of re-inventing the text and re-searching the ideas along with the change of times all along till about 16th century – however, this tendency appears to have declined since then and as a result when the European power came to India, they found the fragmented, emaciated, intellectual skeletons shining here and there all through the Indian sub-continents. They resurrected some of them, they used some of them, they learnt from some of them – but overall the Indian intellectual scenario was ready only to borrow or only for exhibitionism of what has existed in the past. Since then new trends of translation started in the modern Indian languages – this was after the decline of the Bhakti movements. The scholars started translating from Indian sources and from all the world sources they could find through English. The tradition gradually became strong in 19th century and even today we find lots of scholars and researchers engaged on the studies of translations as happened in the 19th and early 20th centuries. People became aware of 'translation' per se – it was mostly used for an act of rendering of some texts into any contemporary language by a contemporary 'author' or a 'poet' or a 'thinker'. Terms for the activity of translation in this modern sense were being coined.

Today, various terms are found for translation in various Indian languages. We find terms like Anuvada, Bhashantara,

Bhashavivartanam or other such terms which somehow indicate that a certain amount of bilingualism is involved in translation. Anuvada may be understood as the 'elucidation that follows'. It does not necessarily predicate the bilingual scenario. The words like Bhashantara or Bhashavivartanam, though indicating the involvement of two languages indicates also the idea of 'change' or 'morphing'. The use of the term 'vivartanam' is of particular interest in the context. Vivarta is a philosophical concept in the Indian intellectual traditions used in various philosophical systems of India in various meanings and contexts. According to one of the definitions, 'vivarta' means "The cyclonic process of manifestation by which the one becomes the many. It is an essentially Vedantic concept of cosmogonic as well as psychologico-philosophical implications" (https://glosbe.com/en/en/Vivarta). In this sense the term 'bhashavivartanam' for translation is very interesting – translation is a continuous process of linguistic manifestation in various forms, whether intralingual or interlingual, of a text. This manifestation implies that one 'text' gets trans-formed in to multiple forms – a possible meaning of 'translation'. We may note that the word 'trans' is common to both the words – translation and transformation. And 'lation' and 'formation' etymologically may be considered in the same semantic web of meanings as both of them are related to the basic verbs of movement and action. Besides the text assuming multiple linguistic forms in the process of translation, the process itself is supposedly 'cyclonic'. The 'cyclonic' process not only pre-supposes the movement in 'cycles', thus indicating the possibility of same movements again and again, it also pre-supposes the various manifestation centrifugally attached to a central text or, if we enlarge the notion of text, to a central narrative. The multiplicity of discourse is ingrained in the process of translation – there can perhaps never be one interpretation of reality; and similarly there can never be

possibly only one translation of a text. And each possible translation may have its own 'cosmogonic course of evolution' – deeply affected by the psychology and philosophy of the translator and the process of translation.

As in the discussion now, the 'translator' and the 'process of translation' have both been implicated, we may ask if they are necessarily related to each other or if they are only the sufficient aspects of a translatorial manifestation of a particular text. To some extent, every translator is a product of his or her own times – the age and the times, the social and the ideological forces often determine the thought processes of the translator. And that also determines often the process of translation. In this sense, the 'translator' and the 'process of translation' are intertwined and deeply related to each other. Yet, a translator may be distinct from the other translators of the same ideological orientations in the same temporal framework. The spatio-temporal framework, though genuinely affects our creativity, may not necessarily determine all the dimensions of the creative processes. Many times the creative processes grow out of the creator's ideas and origins. This happens often to the lost texts – when they are found and re-created, they are no more related to the original author of the text. The originals are gradually forgotten and lost – who knows today who was Homer, or who was Ovid? They are all read in the translations in various contemporary languages of the world. A lot may have been lost about the age of Valmiki or about Vyasa who are supposed to have authored the foundational epics of several Indian cultural narratives. Yet the texts remain with their names. And same may be true of the translations. Who knows what the original form of *Brihatkatha* was? This is a text supposed to have been translated in its original version itself – the text narrates the story of its own origins. The narrator has not hidden the 'translatorial

manifestation' into Sanskrit from Paiśācī language or perhaps languages. We have lost the original language, the original text, and the name of the translator. Yet, the translated manifestation of the text survives – and that too with the loss of the original and with the loss of the original author. Even the author or rather the translator who passes as an author of the Sanskrit text of *Brihatkatha*, is also supposed to have originally written the text in Paiśācī. It should be amply clear that the translated manifestation of the text has become more important than the original text which has been lost to the tradition of Indian scholarship. This loss in the context of Gunāḍhya, the writer or the translator of *Brihatkatha*, is not unique to the context of this text. Similar examples are available in Greco-Latin traditions. Who knows about the original author of *Gilgamesh*? In fact most of the original texts or various scriptural or textual narratives are void of the original authors. The *Gurugranthsaheb* as a text is a collection – but we may not know about the original poets who 'created' the *abhanga*s collected in this text as the text may not provide sufficient biographical information. Unless we corroborate from the sources other than the *Gurugranthsahib*, or more specifically from the Marathi sources, we may not know who Namdeva was. The textual traditions of Sikhs or other cultural narratives of various parts of the world may exhibit similar trends. For the folklores, often there are no original authors available to the tradition. And perhaps to a reader, the original author may be lost as the reader is negotiating with the translated manifestation of the text and that is the actual 'original' for that reader at that moment. If the original author and the original translator are relegated in the background, and if the text remains the main focus for the reader, the 'process of writing' of the text is more important than the 'translator'. This 'process of writing' is the 'process of translation' in the context of a translated text. So, the 'translator' and the 'process

of translation' may actually differ in their approaches – in the same way as a poetic creation may be understood variedly in different contexts by different readers. The 'process of translation' may even include the 'process of manifesting' the text on part of the 'translator' and also on 'part of the reader'. The reader's understanding of translator and the translated text are the parts of the 'process of translation'. The selection of target reader and accordingly translation of the text is a prerogative of the 'translator' – similarly the understanding of the 'translation' and the 'process of translation'. Thus the 'translator' and the 'process of translation' for creating a particular 'manifestation of a text' may not be necessarily related to each other, even though they are sufficiently related to each other as their names would certainly be placed in the context.

As regards the translation in the context of textual renderings in various forms, often the original is not even invoked while talking about a particular intersemiotic or interlingual or even intralingual translation. For example, we may talk about the *Mahabharata* of Teejan Bai, or of Peter Brooks and nobody would frown upon such usages. Rather it may be odd if we say that 'it is the Teejan Bai's rendering of the Vyasa's *Mahabharata*'. Each rendering or representation of a text becomes the rendering of that particular 'creator' of that version of the text. Even if a particular rendering of a text is not known as a translation, it is a representation of the text or the knowledge in the text. The 'creator' of that text is, in common parlance or even in intellectual discourses in the context of India and various such other civilization of the world, is known as the original author of the text. For example, the film *Moulin rouge* (2001), with all its similarities to the plot of *Mrichhakatikam* by Shudraka did not need to attest that the movie is based on this play; and that too when various

versions of the same play by Shudraka is available in various forms in English and French cultures since 19th century. The play by Shudraka has been well debated in the theatrical parlance of Europe since long with various adaptations and translations. The issue of 'copyright' to the original is hardly present before the maker of the movie *Moulin Rouge*. And the same may be true of various other intersemiotic translations – and it is naturally so perhaps because, except for the knowledge related to the military-industrial complex of nation states, knowledge has never been a 'copyright' of a particular person or a particular culture. However, we may say that certain groups of Indians were deprived of reading and studying certain texts of the Indian traditions, the knowledge was never hidden nor anybody was ever stopped from using and practising the knowledge. The ordinary examples from the Buddhists using the Upanishadic knowledge, or the Vedantic knowledge being used and translated by several Bhakta poets never created a social problem – it was only their presence or entrance in the temples that got debated. The knowledge was never questioned even though particular renderings of that knowledge were kept privy to certain people. This implies that the translation was open to all – the translation was rather privileged because it could render the knowledge for others, to those who were not privy to that 'text' or to that particular 'textual tradition'. Caste was not an issue when texts were rendered by folk artists – the *naṭas* of Bharata were not necessarily to be drawn from a particular caste. They could render the plays of all types representing even the gods and the characters or stories from the *Veda*s. So, the issue of keeping knowledge hidden from the people on any ground was not perhaps even considered in the Indian context. And perhaps same may be true for most of the cultures of the world – as we hardly find any tradition to hide the knowledge available with various groups of people. Occasionally, we may come across

the stories about particular 'architects' being either imprisoned or killed so that they may not re-create a structure of the same type. Or perhaps they were sometimes imprisoned so as to keep the secrets involved in their constructions. For example, in the Greek mythology, we find the story of Daedalus and Icarus. Daedalus was imprisoned with his son Icarus after having created the Minotaur's labyrinth on the Crete island perhaps for being simply too skilled a craftsman and an architect (https://www.ancient.eu/Daedalus/). If we visit the Tajmahal, stories are abundant that the architect was either killed or imprisoned – depending upon which version of the story one is being narrated by the local guide of the monument. Here, the historical truth is not so important as the narration and the mindset behind the narration which is to show the importance of 'knowledge' for the sake of creating and maintaining a strong empire. Yet, historically we know that another Taj could not be created because the surplus wealth was never accumulated with similar goals of an empire. And in the Greek story, Daedalus actually escaped with another of his inventions – with the wax and feather he could fly with his son Icarus. And as a master craftsman, he succeeded in his flight – but his son made a mistake of going too close to the son and thus met his watery grave in the ocean, still known as the Icarian Sea following the fall of Icarus. So, the inventions and knowledge could not be stopped – as the knowledge has never been a copy-right in the history until recent times. The societies have excelled by inventions and creations of knowledge and the translation of existing knowledge has always been an important aspect of this invention and creation of knowledge.

As we mentioned above the *naṭas*, we know that the text of Bharata, is often called the 'pacama Veda' (the fifth Veda) in the tradition. This Veda was always available to anyone who

wanted to practise this. Bharata never mentioned any restriction in practising this – and this kind of representation and literary creation was always a part of the tradition of the society. In fact, the stories were mostly rendered by these artists with the orientations that suited the requirement of the audience and the play being enacted. In fact, in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, an entire chapter has been dedicated to the local usages in terms of body movements and 'conventional practices' related to a particular area. Such conventional practices are called *nāṭyadharmī* – in the context of dramatic enactment, the 'conventional practices' suitable to a particular area is acceptable as part of the conventional practice. For example, in the fourteenth chapter, the 69th verse explains, "If a woman for whom marital connexion with a particular person in actual life is forbidden by the Śāstras is made to appear in a play in the role of woman with whom such connexion is permitted, it becomes an instance of Conventional Practice. The same will be the result if the situation in the above case is reversed."(Manmohan Ghosh 1967) This implies that there is a possibility of breaking away from the traditions of Śāstras and the local practices, as *nāṭyadharmī* can be accepted. This is part of the translation of a play which may be staged in an area to which the play does not belong – thus creating the confusion in the role for people. And in this context, the 'conventional practice' related to the drama is acceptable – so the people's habits in that area may be in contradiction to what is being shown in the play. This kind of contradiction does not create any problem for the *naṭa*s. Thus, the original remains and the particular instance of representing the play may be a 'translation' shown as part of the textual 'conventional practice'. So, the original poetic source is more important in the context of character representation. For example, in a poetic source, the animals or birds can speak like human beings. It is a part only of the 'conventional practice' of the

literature. In reality, we may not find it. Hence, the birds and animals may speak like humans in the play. And in this sense, the play and its conventions are more important than the actual practice. However, in the context of the *vācika abhinaya*, the situation may be contrary. In the eighteenth chapter of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the verse 46 declares, "The producer of plays may however at their option use local dialects for plays may be written in different regions (for local production)" (Manmohan Ghosh, 1967). Thus the translation and the adaptation of a play or any story to be enacted have to be continuously undertaken as per the linguistic requirements of the region in which the stage has been set for that particular representation. Though the entire play need not be adapted, the language has to be preferably always adapted. The variety of language to be used should be preferably drawn from the *lokadharmī* aspect of the usages of language – even though the character presentation may continue to be *nāṭyadharmī*.

We may find that the text or texts of a culture are being presented time and again in different forms. Translations appear like the one possible instance of the 'authorial intentions' contained in a text. Text becomes the God – and the translations required by its time and area are varied appearances of the text. Translation thus invokes and resembles the pagan practices so much valued by great civilizations of yore, some civilizations of today and the tribal societies of modern times whose values are being increasingly appreciated more and more. And no wonder that the unifying tendencies of the modern world in terms of its economy and political thought processes leave little scope for any respect for diversifying practice like that of 'translation'. Yet, the epiphany of each reader, and the 'aha experiences' of each target culture with the appearances of translation maintain the tenacity of the act and processes of translation. And since

times immemorial, translation in various forms has remained a valued practice and hopefully will continue to remain so. The healthier debates on translation and Translation Studies in contemporary times leave much to hope for the evolution of humanity in future. We need translations of every text to appear and re-appear again and again. 'Translations of every text' is the way to light – *asato mā sadgamaya*. May there be as many translations for each text as the languages of the world!!! And that is perhaps the minimum we may wish for the enlightenment of humanity.

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