The Self and the Other: Some Reflections on Self-Translation

IRFAN AHMAD DAR

Abstract

Despite the research in the discipline of Translation Studies (TS) having widened very much over the last couple of decades, self-translation, its sub-field still remains bereft of the extensive and valuable research work. Self-translator is a cross-cultural interlocutor who is in the process of negotiation between languages and cultures. That is to say, self-translation invites our attention on the presence of translator and on the morphing of the self which takes place not only during the process of writing original but also at the time of translation. Therefore, the defining feature of the self-translation is that the author is the same physical person in many versions of a prototypical text. The literature in self-translation is widening very much, and the list of the self-translators is very exhaustive. In fact, there are a number of self-translators who have won great praise throughout the world and many are prestigious Nobel Laureates. This refutes and invalidates the assumption that self-translation and writing in a non-native language is an infrequent phenomenon. Hence, the creative expansion that is the result thereof can more often be seen as food for a process-oriented discourse. More importantly, when we try to understand that as a process, self-translation sets itself to deconstruct the monolithic models perpetuated erstwhile by the translation theorists. Keeping all these points in mind, the present paper is an attempt to throw some light on the problematic nature of self-translation.

Furthermore, it will argue that there are still some instances wherein the concept of self-translation fails to do justice with the source text. For the author being same across the transition, the new version tends to amount more often in deviations due to the subjective factor and the assumed self-knowledge and hence, gives rise to the self- sufficiency and self- identity of the new text.

Keywords: Self, Translation Studies, Research, Original, Problematic.

Introduction

Self-translation for long has been seen as a practice more akin to bilingualism than as a translation proper and this gives rise to the fact that there is relatively lack of study of the phenomenon in its own right. One can never forget the fact that this phenomenon serves a kind of self-asserting function for the cultures that were marginalized and were barely listened to. Rainer Grutman provides the example of Flemish production of 1920s-60s in Belgium, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies,* where self-translation became a tool for the first generation of speakers educated in Dutch and for whom translation worked wonders in reclaiming and reconsidering self-identity.

Self-translation has escaped scholarly attention due to which Cordingley rightly calls it a "relatively neglected species" (2013: 4). Such an assertion takes one back to the historical setting of this phenomenon in the field of translation. Here we have the first text wholly dedicated to the phenomenon by Jan Hokenson and Munson's. A seminal work known as *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation* published for the first time in 2007. The authors readily acknowledge the fact that self-translation is a very much new phenomenon and in fact hasten to assert that their

book "makes a first step toward providing the fields of translation studies and comparative literature with a comprehensive account of literary self-translation in the West". After this, there is no substantial work on the phenomenon for almost 6 years. Very recently some translation theorists worked towards analyzing the phenomenon of self-translation and produced an anthology resting of some good papers touching different important strands of self-translation. The anthology is titled as *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture* published very recently in 2013 edited by Cordingley and in its *Introduction* the editor contends "this is the first book with a collection of articles in English devoted to the art of self-translation and its practitioners" (2013: 4). The chronology of these two texts is a testimony to the fact that self-translation has received little or no scholarly attention. The phenomenon is very young and there is indeed need to touch its different perspectives considering its importance globally. Self-translation, in fact, ensures the survival of a writer in the literary world. Margaret Atwood in *Negotiating with the Dead* is right when she claims:

> To record the world as it is. To set down the past before it is all forgotten. To excavate the past because it has been forgotten. To satisfy my desire for revenge. Because I knew I had to keep writing else I would die. Because to write is to take risks, and it is only by taking risks that we know we are alive … To express myself. To express myself beautifully. To create a perfect work of art. … To make money so my children will have shoes … Because to create is human. Because to create is Godlike … To make a name that would survive death (2002: xx-xxii).

Self-translation is usually understood as a process whereby a text in one language is rendered in another language by the

same author. This becomes apparent from Anton Popovič's earlier definition of self-translation as "the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself" (qtd. in Grutman and Bolderen 2014: 323). This implies that the same author figure holds an aura of authenticity and legitimacy during all his creation which barely can be credited to somebody other than him. The diversity and the shift in the world of cultures and, hence, in languages call into question the notion of the age-old concept of faithfulness in the process. This led to a shift whereby the texts are seen as building and compensating with each other leading to a network of texts in a constant dialogue formulation. Furthermore, it challenges the assumptions that tend to gauge the texts on the basis of hierarchy most often disfavouring the translation as something "other" without its own existence and helplessly dependent on what is the first creation of the author. Herein lays, therefore, an important responsibility on the shoulders of a self-translator who can carve out a niche between the two due to his double allegiance with his creation. It prompts Anthony Pym to voice his reservation for the qualified figure of translator who inhabits a place and gap between the languages and cultures and thereby ensures a kind of proximity is reached across the stands. His understanding of translator is akin to a "living translator" who is always in the process of constructing a zone of intersections in him through his bilingual competence and making himself felt everywhere (Pym 1995: 1).

The role of the author-translator is a precarious one. There is a widely held notion that a bilingual author himself is the best contestant for translating his text in another language, for he is very well versed in the textual and the cultural nuances of the texts and the cultures at hand. But such a generalization has turned out to be a partial one for history is replete with the examples wherein in the process of carving out their own texts in other languages, self-translators have failed miserably.

Modern thinkers like Michael Oustinoff, Corinne Scheiner, Brian Fitch, etc endorse the view that new texts thereof never remain confined only to the source text rather most often the result is a text that lives the life of its own. Their argument stems from the fact that the new texts most often amount in terms of the deviations and these deviations infuse a new life a new vigour into the source text making it live a new life of its own. These deviations, however, are the result of the number of factors that tilt the mind of the author-translator at the time of the translating process. Borges' is further of the view that due to these alterations one should not hasten to question the credibility of translation against the source text. Judging the translation negatively is a false presumption for in these alterations, according to Borges, lay the potential for improving the source text. For example, in Tagore's and Hyder's case, it is due to the authorial design "to reach the wider audience" (Asaduddin 2011: 154). While as in the case of Puerto Rican prominent self-translator, Rosario Ferré, it is due to the continuous evolution of her genius that provided her a second chance after a decadal gap to write what she failed to in the first attempt (qtd. in Byrkjeland 2013: 102). In the course of their grappling with their first write-ups, a new text is born that is imbibed with the new vigour, claiming its own originality. Samar Attar, a Syrian writer and translator, holds a similar view on the variation of these texts. In her paper *Translating the Exiled Self* she contends:

> Self-translators cannot reproduce in one language what they have created in another. Ultimately, what they produce through self-translation is a complementary literary text which does not simply echo the original, but has its own echo and effect in the target language and culture. Unlike conventional translation contexts, self translators do not usually engage in the two-stage process of reading-writing

activity (their reading activity is of a different nature), but rather in a double writing process. Thus, their translated text becomes a version or a variant of the original text, indeed an original work in its own right (2005: 139).

These assertions raise many questions against the label itself. For, if it is translation then there arises an expectation in the bilingual reader to find what they already had in the source text. Now when the deviations are the life and blood of a self-translation, then isn't the label "self-translation" a mere misnomer that camouflages the jolt that a reader receives in the process of his reading. However, there lurks still the element of the distinctive aesthetic pleasure that one receives meanwhile understanding that the author-translator has exercised a kind of violence on the source text

To Self-Translate or Not?

Self-translation, despite having achieved a privileged status, is still rated as a demanding process. Bi-cultural writers with an access to more than one language find it as a tool for the individual self-promotion across the literary spheres of the world. Becoming their own agents, if an author in one language aims his or her text to cross periphery and reach to the numerous other elites, then self-translation is the most apt tool. Thus, the authorial design to "reach the wider audience" is a primary factor that pushes them to put their selves into another and majority driven languages. On the other hand, the process also ensures that the source text is removed from the confines of the structures of one language and bestowed a new vigour that Benjamin calls "afterlife" in his essay *The Task of the Transla*tor (2000: 16). What he aims to say is, by translation the source text gets an extension, a kind of "ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering" (ibid 17). This

becomes relevant to say in relation to the post-colonial translators.

Translators from the cultures that witnessed the colonial insurrection consider translation not only the tool of deconstruction but also through translation they write-back by raising their cultures to equilibrium with the former colonial ones. This stands true if we look at the translation of the African and the Indian translators. From Achebe, Thiango to Hyder and Faruqi, we have translators who instil kind of violence on the colonial English by making it conform to the mould of the native cultural experience. Their translations frequently encompass the native cultural expressions in transliteration. In the Faruqi's case, especially in *The Mirror of Beauty,* these are followed by elaborate explanations making the non-native readers peep into the native culture. By doing so, these authors not only pay due homage to the native culture but also counter the narrative that the native culture is secondary.

History stands testimony to the fact that self-translators throughout were driven towards the process due to the bilingual and bi-cultural competence they contained. The furthering of their ideas in one language needed a revisit. The great displacement of the writers erstwhile can be seen as a mirror for self-translation. Ariel Dorfman, Eileen Chang, Marco Micone, etc are some of those who took to migration and therein stimulated their literary impulse in other languages. Some of these authors took the migration as a workshop whereby they could learn the tricks of the languages of their host. The result is what Edward Said relates in his essay *Reflections from Exile* (1984):

> Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, emigres, and refugees. In the United States, academic, intellectual and aesthetic thought is what it

> is today because of refugees from fascism, communism and other regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents … (E)xiles had similar cross-cultural and transnational visions, suffered the same sufferings and miseries, performed the same elucidating and critical tasks (2000: 137).

The first easier thing to do was to translate their texts in the cursory level until their art would reach fruition. This implies that the political upheavals act as a kind of metaphor for a bilingual author who could forge a kind of identity in exile and thereby contribute to the global body of literature. Jan Hokenson and Marcella Munson further uphold:

> Most modern dual-language texts, and most choices of writing languages, do not arise from purely artistic concerns or aesthetic decisions, but rather from the social displacement of writers into a second or third language amid political upheavals and exile. It is within this modernist literary context between the world wars, when language is being recapitulated as the medium of literature and many writers themselves are moving out of native languages into new ones, that the self-translated texts begin to recur, perhaps more widely than at any time since the Renaissance (2014: 157).

 Moreover, self-translation also gained impetus from those bilingual authors who either faced the harshness of the censorship in their native set-up or felt dissatisfaction with the translation of their works by some other hand. A creative writer would like to traverse these limitations set upon him and would never like to see his vision be tinkered with by someone less competent. The self-translators who can be categorised in these categories include Syrian Samar Attar and Andre Brink in the former while as Rosario Ferré, Nabokov, Beckett,

Hyder, etc in the latter. What strikes us here is the idea that these authors never finish with their work and take care of it throughout their lives. To augment a text by enriching and embellishing it semantically and syntactically can be readily attributed to the writer's deep, genuine concern and respect for his work which like a child needs constant care. Every writer, therefore, would like to enhance and complete his work to the best of his understanding though it is possible via the second attempt.

There are widely held assumptions that translating one's own work is akin to repeating the same thing twice and hence, a mere wastage of time. This negative perception caused many writers to refrain from indulging in self-translation. A recurrent theme in many author's accounts of self-translation is an emphasis on the difficulty of the task. There are numerous such cases wherein self-translation is rated very low by the bilinguals and the polyglots. Most often, this all is due to the fact that an author-translator has to provide space to the multiplicity of the subjectivities in a culture that has its own limitations and boundaries. In such a situation, to forge the connection among these demands a herculean effort on the part of an author-translator. In his letters, Beckett described self-translation as a chore:

> sick and tired I am of translation and what a losing battle it is always. Wish I had the courage to wash my hands of it all [...]. I have nothing but the wastes and wilds of self-translation before me for many miserable months to come (qtd. in Shread 2009: 62).

One of the important reasons is supplied by Elsa Triolet who herself skilfully translated between Russian and French. Her renouncing the practice stems from her belief that parallels with what I hinted in the previous discussion. She relates her personal experience wherein she realised that bilingual writers

lack the skill of the ideal translators (others than these) due to the subjective factor. That is to say, the output more often turns out to be a deviation, for, against other translators, self-translators follow "their own creative bent at the expense of someone else's text- even if that someone else was the author himself or herself at the previous time . . ." (qtd. in Grutman and Bolderan 2014: 325). In the process, the source text is sidelined and new tensions are created in the text. Once the line is crossed new text defies its holistic resemblance to source text providing us sufficient bases to question the label self-translation.

Scottish poet Christopher Whyte voices her dissent for self-translation on political ground. In her essay *Against Self-translation*, her points of contention are equally valid and can never be sidelined. She is of the view that self-translation threatens the othering and marginalising the source text, making it "superfluous", insignificant and a marginal one (Whyte 2002: 69). This disqualification and pushing the source language and text under the carpet is reasonably a sound argument considering the competition between the languages. One may also take a note from Tagore's case. His *Gitanjali* in English rendering has attracted the attention of the number of Western writers who take the English version as the source and translate it into numerous other languages of West.

Conclusion

Self-translation as a process has reached to a certain point where there is a consensus among theorists considering it an original practice, a self-sufficient one. There is a view held by many the self-translations should depart from the source texts and the standard translation. For the author-translator shares more effect on the process legally, intellectually and morally than the others would fathom. However, this should not limit the discussion on the phenomenon, rather more scholarship is

needed in order to generalise the things and explore further the complex relationship that the self-translation and the source texts and even the other translations share with each other.

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