Translating Literary Texts Through Indian Poetics: A Phenomenological Study

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The simulacrum is never what hides
The truth-it is truth that hides
The fact that there is none.
The simulacrum is true.

--Ecclesiastes
(as cited by Jean Baudrillard)

The translator is a writer whose singular originality lies in the fact that he seems to make no claim to any.

--Maurice Blanchot
(as cited by Lawrence Venuti)

With the beginning of the post-colonial period in India, and especially in the last fifteen years or so, the act of translation can be said to have come of age, and its activity expanded a great deal. Penguin India, Macmillans of Madras, for instance, are coming out with translations in English of classics in all the regional languages of India.

If you believe in the strong/weak dichotomy of languages, English being a 'strong' language, then for once, it seemed, power flowed in the reverse direction: or, conversely, the strong language appropriated to itself whatever best is available in the 'weak' languages so that it can grow stronger! English being a strong language in this sense also represents a strong culture that is globally influential and appropriative. To put it differently, that is, to view the phenomenon in global terms, even as the Indian nation state opened up for capital flows from the west, and is now on its fast track globalising itself in the process, it is also engaged, it can be said, in an internal process, an implosion of meaning where by

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linguistic boundaries are being crossed through a massive programme of translation practice, for there will soon be a great pool of literary material available from all the national languages of India. However at this point in time, due to historical reasons, English representing a minority culture in India occupies the rallying point and a point of convergence for all the literary output from different languages through the instrumentality of translation.

Remember, for instance, Richard Schechner's theories in the context of performative arts. They plead for the *avant-garde* "cosmopolitan style" and the "multi-cultural thinking" for the western theatre so that it can "produce works across various borders political, geographical, personal, generic and conceptual". In this process, it can appropriate into the theatrical practices all the indigenous styles and techniques, both folk and classical, from the Indian, Balinese and Thai theatres. The effects of power implicit in such a syncretic global knowledge were all there for us to see in Peter Brook's version of the *Mahabharata.* It was an effort to globalise a culture-specific text, to remove it from its cultural moorings and take it onto a neutral ground wherein a more sanitized, universal version of the epic could be projected. It was translation with a vengeance!

Readers usually ask how faithful is a piece of translation to its original, or how authentic it is. Their anxiety to be faithful is often very touching. The original text is like a wife who happens to be very demanding, and the translator tries hard to be faithful to her/it. But there are always hurdles, distractions on the way, I mean verbal distractions. While the translator is apt to philander quite a bit with words, it would be dangerous when it comes to translating a philosophical treatise. By and large, it may be admitted, that translating expository prose is fairly easy. However, where the translator needs to be extra cautious is with philosophical concepts. For as George Steiner emphasizes, "polysemy, the capacity of the same word to mean different things, such difference ranging from nuance to antithesis, characterises the language of ideology". Therefore the translator requires an inter-textual knowledge, and an awareness of the historical evolution of the concept in its philosophical tradition, and its culture.

Let me cite an example: The concept of *Maya* has often been translated as 'illusion'. The mischief, perhaps unintended, was first committed in the 19th century by W.D. Whitney, when he translated into English from a German translation of the *Vedic* Sanskrit, *Atharva Veda Samhita*. There are more than hundred occurrences of the term *Maya* in the *Vedas* as scholars tell us, and it first refers to *Mitra* and *Varuna,* and their powers of creating objects characterized by forms and dimensions. '*Ma*', the root word, means etymologically to measure, also to know. It is the phenomenal world with measurable, visible forms. And when the concept traverses down to Shankara, it does acquire a certain illusory aspect, but only in the context of *Brahman. 'Ya'*, the suffix in *Maya*, according to Yaska's *Nirukta,* means 'by which the objects are given specific shape'.

When it comes to literary texts, the story gets more complicated. Here the translator is not only an ideal reader, but also an intimate reader, and he surrenders his self to the text. He realizes that the translation is not a matter of looking for synonyms, arranging syntax and throwing a bit of local colour. Reading is the most intimate act, and one begins to understand why Roland Barthes emphasizes that the act of reading is like a "juissance", an erotic experience. You need to savour the sound and semantic values of words and to be in love with them. Surrendering to the text in this way means most of the time being literal-for the 'spirit killeth and the letter giveth life'. That is how you retextualise the original in the receiving language. To maximize the problematic of translation, for purposes of analysis, you need that the language you translate from and the one you translate into are alien, and not cognate languages.

The translator usually faces problems in four overlapping areas. They are, to use the Indian aesthetic categories, that is categories that characterise the four major schools of criticism in Sanskrit, which flourished in India during the first millennium AD: *Rasa, Riti, alamkara* and *dhvani*. Let me briefly explain, while delimiting the range of these concepts, what they mean in close relevance to the act of translation. *Rasa* is a complex and a composite term. Its meaning ranges from the mystical to the gastronomical. For my purpose, since one strand of *Rasa* concept is relevant here, it can be

described as the shaping principle, or what Nietzsche would call "the form creating force", in a literary test. It is the 'inscape', to use the term from Hopkins, which gives the text its distinction of being. To get at this *Rasa*, this inner rhetoricity, working through the text and shaping it, is therefore the first requisite of a translator. When once he gets it right, he is on the right track. *Rasa* would give him the overall orientation of the text.

Then comes *Riti*, the stylistics working within the text-the phonetic and the syntactic limits within which the text enacts, performs. Here the western notion of the rhetoric may not help. For rhetoric in the western tradition is an all-inclusive term. It subsumes both the stylistic and the tropological in a text, while in Sanskrit criticism, the stylistics of a piece of literature is distinguished from the tropes, or the figures of thought. In a phrase like 'rhetorical tropes', often used in western criticism, both aspects of a text have been telescoped into one unit with a composite sense. In this case it would be hard to know what function the tropes render in the overall rhetorical structure of the text. Furthermore, we would not know if the tropes are reactive, as they sometimes are, and if reactive, how radically so, so as to upset/subvert the rhetorics of the text.

While attending to the *Riti* of the text, it is possible to simulate the prose rhythms of the original text in the receiving language. How do you, for instance, translate Hemingway? He goes in for the Anglo-Saxon word, often for the monosyllables. So at the lexical level, while translating him into Hindi or Kannada, you need to look for the *desi* not *marga* words. In contrast, when you want to translate, say, Faulkner with his heavy constructions of the periodic sentence, you have to go in for the *marga* words.

But this is not the complete story. *Riti* literally means 'the ways of saying'-what Robert Frost called 'the sound of sense' or 'voice tones'. The translator must have a keen ear for this 'sound of sense', the attitude the writer has formed toward the experience he is narrating. He needs to notice how this sound of sense is exerting its pressure on the syntax, subtly altering its structure, even transforming it at times. The translator here is like an actor interpreting a script. If many translations fail, the reason is obvious:

they simply flatten out the several sounds of sense, which usually qualify, modify human experience embodied in the text. This is particularly true and all the more relevant if one is translating poetry. For if there is in the text a delicate consonance or assonantal music, one can work out in the receiving language 'a structural mimicry', to use A K Ramanujan's phrase. The translator can mimic, feign, simulate verbal effects in his translation. Isn't he, after all, an actor in words? Furthermore, you have here the entire material for constituting a speech-act theory-a theory to discriminate between 'sentence-sounds', statements, conditionals, postulates, assents, and denials.

Now to move on to the third aesthetic dimension: in a fictional text, the context is often internalised, and can be glimpsed in the use of *alamkaras*. If it is a poetic novel, say, *Samskara*, a novel by U R Ananthamurthy, then a translator like A K Ramanujan succeeds pre-eminently because his poetic sensibilities respond to the *alamkaras*, the figure of thought in the novel. Some of the most moving experiences come through with a cluster of images, and become memorable in translation. But then if the translator is dealing with a complex poetic text, he may have to look out for the inherent opposition, which often results in disruption, between the *alamkaras* and *Riti* of the text that is between the rhetorical vector and the logic of ideology. They often work at cross purposes letting the text deconstruct itself. One can discern in *Samskara*, for instance, the ideology propelling the protagonist of the novel against his inherent *samskara* or predisposition, placing him in an aporetic situation. The irresolution of such a dilemma adds to the complexity of the novel, and the translator needs to be conscious of such a deconstructive eventuality taking place.

Dhvani, the fourth overlapping area, which is a metalinguistic reality, a force-field of meanings, often culture-specific, is probably the most elusive aspect of a text for the translator. A context not fully internalised in the text, but that surrounds the text and is often suggested by a key word or an image, this semiotics of culture that envelops the text, is often lost in translation. For instance, how do you convey the *dhvani* in *'Saraswati':* she is not simply a goddess, but someone who would give an exalted feeling to millions of readers in India! Sangam poetry in Tamil (3rd century BC to AD

100), for instance, is a real challenge for any translator. These poems portray landscape and human emotions as being closely interwoven so that mountain, forest, river, sand and coastline take on poetic meanings, yielding myriad overtones-how will a translator ever deal with them? There is a whole parallel web of meanings being woven, a web which mirrors the "topologies of a culture", to use a phrase from George Steiner. Can a translation recreate this web by recontextualising it in the receptor language? Further it is the region of puns and polysemy, of personal allusions, esoteric symbolism, and indigenous myth, which often commune beyond words. The form of life that surrounds the text or those echoes and references to other and earlier texts of the same culture, one concedes, can hardly be revived in translation. Robert Frost once said that poetry is what is lost in translation. He was perhaps far wide off the mark: for poetry can be translated. What is lost, though in translation is the resonance, the essential intertextuality. *Dhvani* can operate wide rangingly even in a deceptively simple poem such as, say, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

To show that it is irretrievable in a translation, take the last stanza of the poem. The stanza presents the farmer in the poem, who is returning home, as resisting the fascination he feels for the snowy evening, for nature lures him with a death wish. Behind this momentary fascination, there is the whole puritan history which highlights the sinfulness of man, and of nature which the puritans viewed with a sense of fascinated horror. The *dhvani* or resonance of this puritan history, which characterises nature as harbouring dark and sinister forces, exercising their fascination on the human mind, this entire emotive history is captured by the collocation of three simple epithets: "lovely, dark and deep". This intertextual knowledge, though often modulated and muted in Frost, is based on one's reading of earlier writers such as Jonathan Edwards, Edward Taylor and Emily Dickinson, a knowledge which helps one to grasp the conotational range of a poem, but which reminds the translator that he can hardly render it in the receiving language. Closer home, the *Mahabharata* is said to have close links with the *Vedic* sources while the *Ramayana* is much nearer to *kavya* literature. In translation the proximity of these epics to their sources or their affiliations to subsequent texts cannot be suggested in translation

specially when the receiving language happens to be alien, and not cognate.

Now a word is to be said about the necessary orientation of the translator, for he is virtually dealing with two cultures. When it comes to his readers, it is not enough if he brings an alien text to their proximity, it is essential that he carries/transposes his readers into the alien culture through his rendition. Furthermore, there are one or two open questions regarding the role of the translator: Should a translation bear the imprint of the translator, and the traces of the source language? How do you translate ancient classics? Can modern idiom do justice to ancient classics and the cultures they represent? The classics, as we know, get translated time and again in the idiom of every age with the new demands of readers. The translator in this context feels the compulsion to decide on the right registers and idiom that his contemporary readers would expect to find in his translation.

Having said all this, one should concede that there is an inherent symmetry at the core of translation. For we cannot get the original by translating back from the received language. The translator, effecting, though, an intercultural mediation, is essentially a linguistic amphibian working with two different media. He stands midway between dualities, culturally, linguistically.

The relation between the original and the facsimile is the ineliminable relation that the translator, therefore, needs to posit between the signified and the signifier. The signifiers of a literary text, as it is well known, are often subject to centrifugal forces of meaning. To constrain and arrest therefore the play of key signifiers from the inescapable dissemination, all the four categories described above offer a conceptually integrated frame, which, when grasped by the alert translator, can be seen as functioning synchronically in the text so as to ensure that the identity of the original is preserved in the rendition. Furthermore, what is involved in the rendering is the constant manoeuvring between distanciation which the original text thematises through its cultural moorings and the proximity the translator enjoys with the receptor language. In the final analysis every translation (especially when an alien

language is involved) becomes a homology, seeking some kind of identity in essential difference. Otherwise both the source and receiving languages have different histories, cultures, and varying rhythms of growth.

Now let us acknowledge that there is a crucial if somewhat intriguing aspect to the act of translation: It is a collaboration between the original author and the secondary translator, a collaboration which, ironically enough, results in the erasure of the original and its reinscription in the receiving language. Think of Tolstoy and Dostoevski: Their mighty Russian souls come through with their agonies and ecstasies in Constance Garnet's English translation! So do Sophocles and Aristophanes, in Gilbert Murray's translation, erasing for us the source language. It is not the source therefore but the simulacrum which precedes, as Jean Baudrillard insists. Consequently, the simulacrum is the real, for the Real really does not exist anymore-not, anyway, in the cyberspace of our universe! If you still insist that all translations are failures, they are, surely, fascinating failures!

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