

# Writer-Translator Discourse: Translating Australian Aboriginal Women's Writing

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Australian Aboriginal Literature protests against the two centuries of colonial rule, loss of indigenous rights, culture, languages and identity. It tries to reconstruct the identity and history of the aborigines from an aboriginal perspective and deconstruct the same that have been created by the whites. The stolen generation, which was one of the atrocious consequences of colonialism, is the crucial theme of Aboriginal Literature given the fact that most aboriginal writing is autobiographical and most aboriginal writers were stolen children. They were stolen from their people and culture in the name of education and etiquette and trained to become good domestic servants in white households. Another major issue of Aboriginal Movement as well as Aboriginal Literature is the issue of half-castes, who were born out of the relationship between white men and aboriginal women, sometimes vice-versa, but considered illegitimate for most of the them were born outside wedlock. They were neither accepted by the whites nor admitted by the blacks and were removed by the government saying that since they had white blood, aboriginal mothers were not eligible to look after them and that they could be trained to become civilized beings. Thus, Aboriginal Literature, like our own *Dalit* Literature and like any literature of the marginalized, comes out vehemently with resistance and a plea for restructuring the system. Hence, every word is crucial and every expression is loaded and deeply rooted in aboriginal consciousness and experience.

In this background, translation of an Aboriginal text is crucial as well as difficult. It is crucial because not just a text but a situation is being translated. It is difficult because every word is loaded and the text has multiple layers of interpretations that come directly from the depths of the writers' pathetic and horrendous experiences. The problems that the translator of Aboriginal

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Literature faces are not new or different from the problems that the translator of any other text faces. But, discuss and debate any number of times, issues and problems of translation spring up fresh. Every time the translator faces the task of translation or the problems of translation s/he does it as if it is the first time that s/he is doing it. Culture specificity, use of dialect, multiple interpretations, language intricacies and silences in the text are some of the problems that the translator of this literature faces. Problems may not be the right word here for these are the issues that bring revelation to the translator and provide clues to the interpretation of the text.

I would like to discuss some of the issues that I faced while translating two texts written by aboriginal women, *Wandering Girl* by Glenyse Ward, an autobiography and *Karobran* by Monica Clare, an autobiographical novel, in connection with translation as a writer-translator negotiation and translation as research. Original text is a negotiation between the writer and the readers whereas translation is a negotiation between the writer and the translator. What, how, how much, when and why the writer wants to say or not to say decides the text. This is where the writer negotiates with the readers. How much, how and why the translator understands or tries to understand and conveys to the readers decides the translation. This is exactly where the translator negotiates with the writer. Thus, the translator's location and context decide the translated text.

If a text is deeply rooted and is a product of political, cultural, social and economic conditions, knowledge of such history becomes important before approaching the text. For the translator, this knowledge becomes not just a means to access the text but also a responsibility to convey the writer and the text to the extent possible to the readers of the translation. Thus, problems of translation, translation as writer-translator negotiation and translation as research activity become interconnected and interdependent.

To start with, it was a challenge to translate the titles *Wandering Girl* and *Karobran*. Because, wandering girl can be a girl from the

wandering mission as well as a girl who is wandering. The protagonist is both: Glenyse is a stolen child and is brought up in a German mission called Wandering mission. We see her journey from one place to another in this autobiography. She is taken to the mission as a child and as a girl she is taken away as a domestic servant in a white household. From there she escapes and ultimately reaches her destination of leading an independent life. It is difficult to decide in which meaning the writer used the title. It is also difficult to choose a title which can convey both the meanings. At the same time, it is injustice to the writer and to the text to leave out that title. This difficulty of translating the pun on the word "wandering" is a challenge that the book throws at the translator at the very first instance. Regarding the second text, 'Karobran' is a northern New South Wales aboriginal word, which means living together or togetherness. But it is not co-existence for co-existence on equality basis is not possible between the oppressed and the oppressor. Is it a desire to live together with her family, with her people and with whites? Is it ironically used to depict the situation of not living together? The protagonist loses her mother as a child and is separated from her brother and father. The main theme of the text is Isabelle's search for her father and her brother. It never materializes because she comes to know that her father has passed away and her brother has moved away to a far off place. How to convey all this in the title is the biggest question before the translator. No doubt the title looks a hurdle in translating the text in the beginning, but it also enables the translator to revise her awareness of parallel movements and literatures to search for a similar word in a similar context.

It is not just the words but the tone that also poses questions to the translator in these two texts. In *Karobran*, there is a deliberate attempt to justify well-intentioned whites. So after every incident and statement criticizing the whites comes an incident or statement defending whites, some good whites. Whether the writer intended to do so or the posthumously published autobiographical novel had to take in the white editor's interference is out of the scope of this discussion, no doubt. But, selection of the tone of the writer that has to be represented becomes a debatable question for the translator. There is no deliberate attempt to justify the whites in *Wandering*

*Girl* as it is in *Karobran*. In this background, when the writer says, "Through the misguided minds of earnest white people we were taken away from our natural parents. This affected all of us. We lost out identity through being put into missions, forced to abide by the European way". Does the literal meaning of the word "earnest" really fit in there? Does it work in harmony with the text as a whole? Does the tone of the original play the decisive role in translation? If that is so, how to decide what is the tone the writer intended to use and what is the tone used and what is the tone that the translator wants to represent in the translation to the readers of the target language?

Talking of language, Australian English subtly and sometimes overtly echoes the Australian contempt for Queen's English. Aboriginal English reflects it more. Australian English has its roots in the colonial history and the settlement of convict colonies and Aboriginal English has its roots in its thousands of aboriginal languages, their interacting with English speaking people and the forcible displacement they are subjected to. Thus, like Aboriginal Movement and Aboriginal Literature, Aboriginal English also works with protest as its driving spirit. The dilemma before the translator while translating this English is whether to choose the standard target language (if something like that exists at all) or to go for a dialect and to go for which dialect. While translating aboriginal texts into Telugu the translator may not find it difficult to translate Aboriginal English for Telugu, like any other language, offers a wide variety of dialects. But, the question is what is being conveyed here by translating in to one of the dialects of the target language? That the English aboriginal people use and write is not "standard" English? Is it merely that? Or also to signify the cultural background of the language that has been thrust on the colonized and that it led to the elimination of the indigenous languages? Even if the translator is offered a variety of dialects in the target language, which dialect has to be chosen and what should be the criteria? It is a well-known fact that a dialect represents the history, culture, society, class, caste, gender, race, region and religion. All these factors interlinked and interconnected produce a dialect. Hence, a dialect is used just to show that Aboriginal English is not Standard English. Is this not violently displacing the cultural

context of Aboriginal English? Is it also not violent attribution of a Telugu dialect to an aboriginal situation? For instance, Telangana dialect is loaded with the history of the long, atrocious rule of the *Nizam* dynasty, poverty and famine of the area. If it is Rayalaseema, the dialect is loaded with the dry landscape, craving for food and water, and a lifestyle which is centered on the word 'scarcity'. Not less is the impact of factionalist politics on this already natural calamity-stricken dry land. As I have said earlier, it is not just region, but factors like class, caste and gender also which contribute to the birth and survival of a dialect.

Another crucial issue that Aboriginal Literature is concerned with is the issue of half-castes. Most aboriginal writers are half-castes and their autobiographies reflect their trauma and conflict with the society and their identity crisis for being recognized as half-castes. This is not a mere term which just introduces us to the people born of two races. This term carries the colonial experience of the Aborigines and the elimination of their culture, race, identity, languages, land and independence. This term also carries with it the sense of shame and humiliation that aboriginal people experience for being or for being recognized as, half-castes. This term also reminds the readers of the term 'full bloods' in contrast with half-castes and its connotations in aboriginal usage and white usage. This term also reveals of the agony and nostalgia of the aborigines for their aboriginal past and for their gradually disappearing aboriginal physical traits like colour, features and texture of hair. This term also throws light on the historical and social situation of the half-castes who are owned and admitted by neither whites nor blacks. When the writer has chosen to use this word, it is with the intention of conveying all the above-mentioned connotations of the word, may be many more. How to translate this word with all the connotations it carries? If I translate it as *Shankara*, the available word that means hybridization, it may not convey the agony of the Aborigines and the atrocities of whites. It may not convey the sense of shame and humiliation that Aborigines associate with this word. It may not convey the trauma of the Aborigines who are neither whites nor blacks. The choice is before the translator to negotiate with the writer, through the text, about the term and convey it to the readers of the target language.

Another word that invites a discussion and discourse with the writer is 'mate'. Mate is a very commonly used word in Australia. But translating it into Telugu becomes difficult because spoken Telugu does not permit such addressing since it sounds archaic and bookish. For instance, if literally translated it is, *snehitudu*, *mitrudu* or *nestam*. These words are not used in colloquial Telugu. In *Karobran*, Tom and Bill are two characters who seem to be aware of and very active in workers' union activities. When they address each other as 'mate', it also talks about their social, economic and cultural context. When this context and that word have to be translated into Telugu, not only a similar word but also a similar context has to be kept in mind. It is quite clear that the average working class character will not use words like *snehitudu*, *mitrudu*, and *nestudu* while talking to each other. These words may be used while referring to friends and co-workers but only in the context of speaking from the dais, but not while talking among themselves. A word that is used in a similar context in Telugu is 'comrade', though it sounds a bit dramatic and not used frequently and in a way used in formal occasions like the above mentioned Telugu words.

Some of the words that are quite common in the source language may become quite formal in the target language and may transform the nature of the character if viewed from the standards of the target language. For instance, Isabelle, in *Karobran*, in some context says, "No, Thanks." The literal equivalents of 'thanks' in Telugu, *krutagnatalu*, *dhanyavadalu*, no longer exist in colloquial Telugu. English words have taken their place. But, at the same time, if the word 'thanks' is used as it is in the source text, readers may not be in a position to locate the working class (domestic servant) and may find it odd. Thus starts the dilemma of the translator to choose between the writer and the readers.

When Aboriginal Literature is translated, it is not just language, but certain concepts that are used in the original that become difficult to be translated. For instance, 'black servant' is the word used for the protagonist in both *Wandering Girl* and *Karobran*. Telugu readers, through translations, are familiar with the concept of slavery. But, aboriginal writers deliberately avoid the use of the word 'slave', though it was slavery in a sense that was inflicted on the Aborigines by whites. The choice before the translator is to

either use the word *baanisa*, which is the literal translation of the word slave, which is accessible and easily understandable to the readers or translate the term 'black servant' literally in order to be closer to the original. Does the translator want to convey the interpretations of the loaded word to the readers or chooses not to talk about it depends on the translator's willingness or reluctance to understand the writer and translate not just the text but the writer to the readers of the target language.

In a literature which is the outburst of the silence long inflicted, even silences become eloquent. While Glenyse Ward decides to narrate only a major and crucial part of her life as a slave, Monica Clare decides to leave out a major and crucial part of her life. This can be related to the selective memory, the writer's option of selection of narrating or leaving out the most crucial part of one's life. It can be related to the strategies of the writer to evoke questions in the readers. If this is the negotiation between the reader and the writer, the so-called tightening up of the narrative, for it is dull and unadventurous, decides the writer- translator discourse. I use the word dull and unadventurous because the publisher of the translation may take that stand about the translated text or the translator and the publisher may assume that this may be the response of the target language readers, who are used to a particular literary tradition. And it is here that the unheard dialogue between the writer and translator begins and the translator decides whether the translation should be reader friendly or writer friendly.

Another aspect that comes to the translator as a revelation about the interpretations of the source text is the question of singular and plural in Telugu. The conversation between Isabelle and Tom and Bill in *Karobran* is very significant in this context. Bill and Tom invite Isabelle to join them while sitting in the restaurant. In English, there is no problem of the connotations associated with the singular and plural second person. But, in Telugu, this becomes a crucial issue. Since Isabelle is a woman, a half-caste and a working class woman, how do Tom and Bill address her? Tom and Bill's white male identity also matters a lot in this context. Do they talk on the level of being equals? Or, is there any discrimination? This can be conveyed in the use of the singular and the plural in this conversation. If the translator ignores it, thinking that the writer

may never have thought about this aspect of the text, he is losing out a very good opportunity to depict the situation. At the same time, if the translator does it, when there is no such obvious effort in the original, it may be reading too much into the text.

Not only that translation involves research but also it can be said that translation can be viewed as one of the best means of research too. Especially with a literature like aboriginal writing, it is more so. For instance, reference to "the tribals" in *Karobran* raised questions in my mind about the divisions among the aborigines when I read the text as a researcher. But when I was translating the text, many more questions about the identity cropped up. I translated aborigines as *adivasis*. Tribals become *girijans*. Are these words not used as synonyms in Telugu? While aborigines are tribals according to the main stream, there are people who are considered tribals by the aborigines. Then who are these tribals according to the mainstream society and according to the aborigines? How do the tribals look at Aborigines and the mainstream society?

The problems like cultural specificity, the use of dialects, multiple interpretations and others of translation in fact culminate in research. Thus, they prove they are not problems but only tools for the closer examination of the text. I write about my above experiences of translating two aboriginal women's texts, not to discuss how many problems I faced in my task, but only to share how the supposed-to-be-problems of translation give rise to thought-provoking discussions and debates and help the researchers and help connect research and translation.