

POST - COLONIAL TRANSLATION: GLOBALIZING LITERATURE?

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Abstract: Translation of classical Indian texts into English was started by orientalist scholars like William Jones with a definite agenda. The agenda was to give the western reader a feel of the Indian mystique. The choice of texts and the strategies employed were in accordance with this agenda. This paper starts off from post-colonial translation. The main body of the paper looks at post-colonial translation as a part of globalization, an attempt to give global dimensions to local/regional texts. It enumerates the changes that a literary work undergoes in the process of being translated, specially when the target language is the language of the erstwhile colonizer and the target readership the so-called first world. The factors that influence the translator and can become problematic are taken up in detail. The first and foremost is the choice of the text in the source language and the reasons behind it. Fidelity to the source language text is taken up along with the strategies that the translator employs in translating what is strictly local/regional like folk songs, folk traditions etc. Condensation or deleting what seems irrelevant in the source language text is another problem area. The paper quotes from translations or opinions on some of these issues

expressed by translators. The paper concludes with the felt apprehension that post-colonial translation can destroy the local/regional identity of a literary work if these problem areas are not tackled sensitively.

To take a look at the term 'translation' and its Hindi/Bangla counterpart *anuvad* or *rupantar* before starting a paper on post-colonial translation would be in order. Translation has been defined by a number of scholars. F.L. Lucas's definition seems the most representative of the western way of thinking. According to him, the aim of translation is "*to try to compensate the intelligent reader for his ignorance of the language concerned, and to give him, however imperfectly, the impression he would be likely to get, if he read the original fluently himself.*" Translated texts therefore are accorded a second rate place and the act of translation itself is considered far from creative.

In the multilingual Indian context the terms *anuvad* or *rupantar* attach no such stigma to the act of translation or the translated text. *Anuvad* literally means 'that which comes following something else' and *rupantar* means 'change of form'. These differences must be kept in mind as one looks at the way translation has evolved and carved a niche for itself in literature in recent years, especially in a multilingual country like India. Creative activity similar to adaptation, which involves rendering classical texts like the *Gita*, the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharata* into languages easily understood by the people, has been quite popular in India for a long time now. Thus translation, to use the term in its broadest sense, has been a common literary practice in this country for a long time now, may be for centuries. This is in keeping with our multilingual

and multicultural set up which allowed translation to evolve freely as a creative activity and not be tied down by theories.

However translation has a western context and was undertaken as a serious venture in the latter half of the eighteenth century in India by Sir William Jones who came to this country as a judge. He is known for his mastery of Sanskrit, for his pioneering efforts in setting up the Asiatic Society in Kolkata and, most importantly, for his English translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. The circumstances leading to his English rendering of the well-known Sanskrit play are curious. In the words of a critic, "*he wanted to know whether Indians had plays as forms of literature, and if they had, what their nature was, and finally, whether they could be of use to him in the context of the administration of justice in India*". (Sastry 1958:33) To start with, he translated a Bengali version of the play into Latin. This satisfied him and he translated it into English in 1789. His intention was to make "*one of the greatest curiosities that the literature of Asia has yet brought to light*" available to westerners. His rendering of the play is in prose (Arthur W Ryder and Laurence Binyon later rendered it in verse).

A look at Jones' translation reveals a tendency to comment elaborately. An example: Shakuntala feels that her blouse made of bark has been fastened rather tightly by her companion Priyamvada and complains to her other companion Anasuya. Priyamvada gives a reply, which that can be translated literally as: "*In this matter, blame your own youth that has enlarged your bust*". Jones' translation runs like this: "*Will, my sweet friend, enjoy, while you may, that youthful prime, which gives your bosom so beautiful a swell?*"

Jones also translated Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*. In his prefatory essay he says, "*After having translated the Gitagovinda word for word, I reduced my translation to the present form, in which it is now exhibited, omitting only those passages, which are too luxuriant and too bold for an European taste*". Thus, his translation is characterized by

- (a) tendency to elaborate and
- (b) selective omitting where *shringara* reaches a point of verbal excess.

One can understand the latter tendency when one takes into account the readership he catered to but the former is somewhat baffling.

In his book *Orientalism* Edward Said criticizes orientalists in general and Jones (and other translators) in particular for what he considers a problematic attitude towards the Orient on their part. For them the West is rational, developed, humane and superior whereas the Orient is aberrant, underdeveloped and inferior. Secondly, he feels that these scholars prefer abstractions about the orient, particularly those based on texts representing a '*classical*' oriental civilization rather than direct evidence drawn from modern oriental realities. According to him the orientalists regard the Orient as eternal, uniform and incapable of defining itself and are at the bottom of something either to be feared or controlled. About Jones, he says, "*To rule and to learn then to compare the Orient with the Occident, these were Jones' goals, which, with an irresistible impulse always to codify, to subdue the infinite variety of the Orient to a complete digest of laws,*

figures, customs and works, he is believed to have achieved” (Said: 178).

One feels that despite the elaborate commentary that embellishes his translation and omissions that have been mentioned earlier, Jones and his contemporaries were not influenced as much by the biases mentioned by Said as the nineteenth century orientalist as also number of scholars (including translators) who came later. Among nineteenth century translators Edward Fitzgerald, who rendered *Omar Khayyam* into English, is a well-known name. While translating Attar's *Bird Parliament* from Persian, Fitzgerald wrote to Rev. E.B. Cowell in 1851.

It is an amusement to me to take what liberties I like with these Persians who (as I think) are not poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do need a little Art to shape them.

(Trivedi 1993:45)

This is a typical instance of the western translator's patronizing/colonizing attitude to the source language text (though the Persians were never colonized by the British) that according to him (there were very few women translators in the colonial period) was being 'improved' by translation. Even today there are writers and translators who deem it an elevation in status for a regional language text to be translated into English. In the main body of the paper I shall make an attempt to study some works recently translated from Indian languages into English with a view to looking at the changes made by some translators and the possible motives/intentions

behind them. I shall keep in mind this legacy bequeathed by the colonizer.

In his 'Translator's Note' to the English translation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora*, the late Sujit Mukherjee attaches a lot of importance to fidelity to the original. He says that the discrepancy between the Bangla text and Pearson's English translation that left out large chunks of the original motivated him to produce another translation of the novel. In his words, "*This discrepancy more than other reasons made me resolve to produce a new English translation. Let me claim that if it has no other virtue, at least it is a complete and unabridged rendering of the standard Bangla text*". (Tagore 1997:479). In his collection of essays on translation, he reiterated his stand, "*A translation must necessarily be true to the original and act as a kind of lens, a viewing medium, through which the original may be scrutinized when necessary*". (Mukherjee 1981:149). Interestingly, different translations of *Gora* indicate different readings of the novel and Tutun Mukherjee looks at these differences. "*It is a fact*", she concludes, "*that words and language-use have polemical significance in Tagore, especially in this novel which debates issues of nationalism, religion, caste, class, gender and selfhood. The many translated versions of the text draw attention to the omissions, deviations, inflections, and emphasis as perceived by the reader-translators. These serve a greater purpose. The source text is enlarged and gains in what Andrew Benjamin has called 'differential plurality'*" (Rahman 2002).

There is another way of looking at it. Aruna Chakraborty who won the Sahitya Academy award for translation attaches great value to fidelity as well, but she

believes in being faithful to the spirit of the work, the nuances and the cultural context rather than merely to the written word. She believes, "*Some texts suffer a dent even if a line or phrase is taken away, with others it is possible to condense without significant loss to the original*". Incidentally Chakraborty has translated canonical texts like Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Srikanta* and modern classics like Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Those Days (Shei Shamay)* and trimmed them considerably, in the latter case with the author's consent. Her main argument is that most Bangla novels first appear serially in magazines. The repetitions and meanderings are not edited when they come out in book form and therefore the translator is within his/her rights to edit it. A number of translators have very strong views on editing/condensing which they feel should be avoided in any case. Jasbir Jain is one of them. Her stand is very clear. "*The translator is not re-writing*", she says, "*in the sense of ascribing a new meaning to the original text, or borrowing the theme to suit an adaptation, or to shift generic priorities. Therefore either one should translate or be clear about other choices*".

The 'fidelity-betrayal syndrome' to use George Steiner's words, is no longer a simple this or that option. Susan Bassnett adds another dimension to it, "*Should the translation be faithful to the author*" she asks, "*or be faithful to those who cannot read the original language*"? Her answer to this question is that "*translation is all about negotiating, negotiating the world of the original author and the world of the reader*". What one has to keep in mind throughout this process of negotiation is that the world of the reader (generally from the first world) should not be allowed to take over the translated text.

The translator has to, in other words, maintain a delicate balance between the source language and the language of translation. The translator might face problems rendering literary works with a folk bias in language, situation etc., but changing those in order to make the translated text more comprehensible (read 'palatable') to the western reader would only bring down their literary value. Equally disastrous would be literal word-to-word translation. Those of us who have read Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay's novels *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* in Bangla would have savoured the rhythm and lyricism of his language. When Gopa Majumdar started translating the latter novel into English she found that retaining every sentence of the original text did nothing to enhance the novel's readability. On the other hand "*What was eloquent and beautiful in the original, in a painstakingly faithful translation, sounded not just stilted, but archaic, fanciful, or positively melodramatic*" (Bandopadhyay, 1999:xvi). According to Majumdar (who has also translated Ashapura Debi and Satyajit Ray and is now working on a biography of Michael Madhusudan Dutt) this is the "worst dilemma" of a translator which one has to solve oneself. In her own works she tries to retain as much of the original as possible and if she wants major changes to be incorporated, she tries to consult the author or the next of his/her in taking permission to deviate from the original. She puts it this way, "*A good translator has to be both brave and wise enough to know where changes can and should be made to the text to enhance readability, without changing or distorting the essential meaning of the original*". (Ibid) This balance between braveness and wisdom helps the text to retain its identity and not get sucked into the global whirlpool.

Translating indigenous/folk literature or even mainstream literary texts that are about tribal or indigenous people, is perhaps more challenging than translating mainstream literature and involves more complex negotiations. In an essay titled '*Are we the "folk" in this lok? Usefulness of the plural in translating a lok-katha*', Christi Ann Merrill talks about her experiences in translating a Hindi short story inspired by a Rajasthani folk tale. She observes, "*For a lok-centric vision of a story would see translation as less of a tangible carrying across in the English sense of the word, and more of an intangible telling in turn, as is suggested by the Hindi word for translation, 'anuvad'*". (Rahman 2002:78) I realized this when I read *A River Called Titash* (Barman: 1992) a novel by Advaita Malla Barman translated from Bangla into English by Kalpana Bardhan. The novel in Bangla titled *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* is about the lives of the Malo people, communities of fisher folk on the banks of the river Titash in Comilla (a district in Bangladesh) at the turn of the last century. The author was himself from this community, its first educated man and writer. The novel, autobiographical to some extent, was completed shortly before the author succumbed to tuberculosis and published posthumously by a group of his friends.

The translator does not talk about her experiences in particular, but a reading of the preface along with the two texts, original and in translation, enables one to make some observations. In her preface Bardhan quotes Boris Pasternak who said "*The translation must be the work of an author who has felt the influence of the original long before he begins his work*". She talks about how she had wanted to translate this

novel for a long time and how it had left such a deep impact on her that she wanted to share it with the English language reader. *"I felt in the presence of a marvelously told tale of a people's capacity for joy and love, music and poetry, transcending their utter lack of material wealth and power, a tale of being human and in harmony with nature, of a community's vitality in ethics and aesthetics... The flowing narrative weaves scenes and viewpoints, events and reflections. And the amity portrayed between Hindu fishermen and Muslim peasants affirms and honours Bengal's trans-religious folk culture"*. (Bardhan 1992: preface, ix).

Bardhan does not talk directly about the problems she faced while translating this novel. However from the preface one gets the impression that she intensively researched the author's life, the community, the time and location and the songs, discussing the novel with the few surviving friends of the author who were involved in its publication. Bardhan says that a translation puts the novel firmly in its context and one appreciates the fact that there is no attempt by the translator to make it more palatable for the western reader. A novel like *Titdash* would lose its inherent spontaneity and *joie de vivre* if liberties were taken with it. The translator realizes this and does not attempt to universalize the specificities of the text or blur its focus. One is not very happy with the songs in English but it is amazing that they have been translated at all. One would have thought they were untranslatable. Also one looks at the possibility that the novel might be translated again in the future, may be improved on this translation. It is worthwhile to remember that every translation is always an ongoing process, incomplete and relative. No translated text can be taken as the

ultimate rendering of the source language text. There is nothing like a definitive or absolute translation.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has translated a number of stories by Mahasweta Devi. As an academic/translator based in the US her translations, one feels, are mainly for the western reader, though she maintains in her *'Translator's Preface to Imaginary Maps'* that she caters to both. In her words, "*This book is going to be published in both India and the United States. As such it faces in two directions, encounters two readerships with a strong exchange in various enclaves. As a translator and a commentator, I must imagine them as I write. Indeed, much of what I write will be produced by these two-faced imaginings, even as it will no doubt produce the difference, yet once again*" (Spivak 1995). How does she negotiate *'these two-faced imaginings'* or, more pertinent to the issue under discussion, does she gloss over the specifically indigenous, in an attempt to universalize the appeal of these stories, which in Bangla have a sharply etched tribal context?

To some extent one feels that the issue of the tribal woman and the injustice done to her in a story like "Draupadi" has been changed to the issue of the woman activist in a patriarchal set up, as a result of Spivak's "reading" of the story "influenced by 'deconstructive' practice" to quote from her *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. While this has been done with the author's consent, the implicit dangers in such a trend should be considered seriously, in an effort to make the translated text stand on its own and appeal to the first world reader, the translator might do away with what he/she considers problematic/irrelevant areas, which are actually

crucial according to the author and help to place the text in its right context.

One has perceived this trend in fields other than literature, the tendency to stereotype everything from developing countries with the result that they lose their identity and appear second rate. In literature too, there are writers (mainly of Indian origin) who portray India as the western reader would like to see it - exotic, mysterious and of course disorganized, in works that are projected as "post colonial" literature. There are writers like Chitra Devikarani who are "translating" culture in works like *The Mistress of Spices* for the benefit of the western reader. I was told that this novel was sold with a sachet of Indian spices to get the packaging right. In such a scenario when local/regional identities are often glossed over, one is highly apprehensive that the multiple layers of meaning, symbolism etc. of texts in Indian languages would be lost in English translation if the translator is only concerned with the market and saleability of the translated text in an attempt to fit it into the category of 'global literature', an insidious locution, which has gained currency of late.

Reading for the purpose of translation is extremely demanding and not influenced by external considerations like market forces, if it is done in the right spirit. To quote Sujit Mukherjee, "*Reading for translation may be placed at the highest level because not only must the translator interpret the text reasonably, he must also restructure his interpretation in another language while striving to approximate the original structure. He cannot subtract from the original. And he adds only at great peril*". (Mukherjee 1981:139).

A translator with these priorities firmly fixed would not succumb to current fads and let his/her mindset be dictated by forces that are swayed by a tendency to globalize everything. While translating literary works from one Indian language into another one is usually free from such influences, translating something into English is not, and the person/s undertaking it has/have to be very careful in order to let the translated text retain the identity it had in the source text.

Since knowledge of both source language and the target language, along with the socio-political-cultural nuances and connotations, is essential for quality translation, a team of translators, rather than an individual would be a better option, provided that the team works in consonance, the members complementing each other's efforts. This sort of team especially when it includes persona with a sound knowledge of the source and the target languages, the text and its context, would avoid the pitfalls of translating literature with an eye on the global market. The latter, often a commercially viable proposition, though not an authentically literary one, unfortunately appears to be the easy option at times. Of late, translation has become an important literary/academic pursuit and many universities in the west have an entire department of Translation Studies. On some counts it is an encouraging factor that the study of just one literature is never enough: it breeds an insular outlook. Only when one studies literatures from different countries/regions of the world, one can put them in perspective. So translation (done in the right spirit) is an important instrument in making post-colonial literatures accessible to readers worldwide. However, this can be achieved only if the translators resist the temptation to

universalize/globalize a text that is firmly rooted in its socio-cultural context.

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