

THE HIDDEN RHYTHMS AND TENSIONS OF THE SUBTEXT: THE PROBLEMS OF CULTURAL TRANSFERENCE IN TRANSLATION

TUTUN MUKHERJEE

Abstract: The theories of translation prevalent in the West in the earlier centuries derived largely from Platonism. Critics in the twentieth century invoked the hermeneutical tradition of the great German Romantics and stressed that language was not instrumental in communicating meaning, but was constitutive in reconstructing it. Linguists emphasized the possibility of translation equivalence through the readability of linguistic features, levels and categories as well as a potentially infinite series of cultural situations. Culturally sensitive research in the 1990s suspected "universal meanings" and "transparent translations" and indicated the existence of subliminal social-historical differences underlying all processes of interpretation, including translation. The theoretical focus called upon attention to the illusions of "transparent language" and fluent (seamless) translations. The functions of both the translator and the praxis of translation changed. The translator

became the critical reader-analyst of the text and the process of translation grew sensitive to the sub-textual determinations of ethnicity and race, gender and sexuality, class and nation. The translator as an analyst was alert to the rhetorical play in the use of the language. Three different kinds of texts are offered as examples of three types of translation process to illustrate the problems of cultural transference in translation.

"...The origin of philosophy is translation or the thesis of translatability."

- Jacques Derrida

One of the many significant achievements of the twentieth century has been the coming of age of new disciplines of learning, among which Translation Studies occupies a prominent place.

After centuries of incidental and desultory attention from linguists and literary scholars, the subject of translation has moved to the centre-stage from the periphery by attracting increasing research interest. The Second World War marked a turning point in its reception in the academies.

Through the succeeding years, the progressively growing interest has drawn scholars from adjacent fields of linguistics, literary studies, logic, sociology, anthropology, as well as from mathematics, information technology and media studies, who have brought into the discussion of translation new models and terminology, paradigms and methodologies towards the formulation of the different theories of translation.

Having run the entire gamut of experimentation rather in the manner of the 'evolution of cosmos' - with ontogenic terms such as *the art, the craft, the theory/principles/fundamentals, the science*, and with epistemological metaphors such as *bridge, treachery, interpretation, invasion, even excavation, cannibalization, and parricide*, the accepted nomenclature is now taken unequivocally to be: *Translation Studies*. The vastness envisioned by the name indicates the dialectical richness of the subject.

The changing cultural philosophy of the world finds remarkable parallels in the paradigm shifts in Translation Studies. Developing out of the legacy of Western theories of translation of earlier times, an ambitious array of conceptual exercises and analysis of texts has been offered through the past century by theorists and translators of varying orientations, persuasions and ideologies. As a result, various methodologies and norms are now enunciated across cultures. Today, the translation theorist is aware of the full, inclusive and complex body of axioms, postulates, hypotheses, and methods that form the theoretical foundation for the praxis of translation.

Enriched by the research input, the 1990s have seen Translation Studies achieve certain institutional authority, manifested most tangibly by the popular reception of translated texts across the world and the proliferation of translator training programmes and scholarly publishing. In keeping with the historical signposts of the time, the theories of 1990s have also stepped beyond the problematics of semiosis towards "depth" analyses. Now, the process of translation does not

merely concern itself with the question of crossing languages, "re-coding" or carrying across meanings. The scope of its engagement has enlarged to encompass social and cultural nuances.

II

The theories of translation prevalent in the West in the earlier centuries derived largely from, as Antoine Berman puts it, the "*figure of translation based on Greek thought*" or more precisely, Platonism. Diachronically, this means that "*the figure of translation*" is understood here as the form in which translation is deployed and appears to itself, before any explicit theory. Berman explains the way Western translation has been "*embellishing restitution of meaning based on the typically Platonic separation between spirit and letter, sense and word, content and form, the sensible and the non-sensible*". (Burman 2000:296). This viewpoint is responsible for valorising "restitution of meaning" over the examination of the function of the "word" in the *performance of translation*.

It would be appropriate here to re-open the discussions offered by theorists such as George Steiner, G. Mounin, and J.C. Catford. Invoking the hermeneutical tradition of the great German Romantics like Schleiermacher, Steiner has stressed that language is not instrumental in merely communicating meaning, but is constitutive in reconstructing it. He argues that the individualistic aspects of language and the privacies of particular usage resist universalising norms of translation. He says, *Great translations must carry with it the most precise sense possible of the resistant, of the barriers intact at the heart of understanding*. I shall relate these aspects of the

"resistant" and the "barriers" to my discussion of specific texts below. Here, I wish to place alongside Steiner, the positions held by linguists like Mounin and Catford who emphasize the possibility of translation equivalence through the readability of linguistic features, levels and categories as well as a potentially infinite series of cultural situations. Theories such as these have released what Herbert Marcuse calls "the power of negative thinking" against all "one dimensional" theories of reality (*Marcuse 1964:11*).

Culturally sensitive research in the 1990s suspects "universal meanings" and "transparent translations" and indicates the existence of subliminal social-historical differences that underlie all processes of interpretation, including translation. The theoretical focus has therefore moved away from the earlier mimetic philosophies and in the light of Post-Structuralism, calls attention to the exclusions and hierarchies that are masked by the accepted realism-oriented illusions of "transparent language" and fluent (seamless) translations that seem "un-translated". The functions of both the translator and the praxis of translation have changed. As the translator becomes the critical reader-analyst of the text, it is required that the process of translation becomes sensitive to the sub-textual determinations of ethnicity and race, gender and sexuality, class and nation. The translator as analyst must be alert to the rhetorical play in the use of language and thus the "re-production" of the translated text must move beyond mere transference of linguistic equivalence to encompass political inscription.

According to Gideon Toury, *However highly one may think of Linguistics, Text Linguistics, Contrastive Textology or Pragmatics, and of their explanatory power with respect to trans-national phenomena, being a translator can not be reduced to the mere generation of utterances which may be considered 'translations' within any of these disciplines. Translation activities should rather be regarded as having cultural significance. Consequently, 'translatorship' amounts first and foremost to being able to play a social role, i.e., to fulfil a function allotted by a community - to the activity, its practitioners, and/or their products - in a way which is deemed appropriate in its own terms of reference.* (Toury 1980:198) (emphasis mine).

Clifford Geertz, one of our best contemporary anthropologists declared once that *there simply is no such thing as human nature independent of culture. We are... incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture - and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it.* (Geertz 1973:49). Human language is, therefore, neither universal nor individual but each language is rooted in a specific culture as dialects or as national languages. The individual self becomes a medium for the culture and its language. The creative self mediates the linguistic and social construction of reality, the interpretation and negotiation of the meaning of the lived world. Some philosophers of language of the post-modern ethos have gone so far as to let "reality" disappear behind an "inventive language" that disassembles it [for instance, Derrida's observation in 1986 in a memorial address to Paul de Man where he described the interpretation of "essentialist" categories such as 'childhood', 'history', 'generations',

'regions', 'gender', 'woman' etc as "inventions" to illustrate the cultural "constructedness" of communications.]

To stress such directions in translation is to argue that, from the standpoint of the analysis of the cultural situation or the contextual placing of the text - an analysis that might be termed political, certain purposes are productively served. The literary work contains a hidden dimension, an underlying text, where certain signifiers correspond and link up, forming all sorts of networks beneath the surface of the text itself - the manifest text, presented for reading. For a postcolonial society of many languages and classes like ours, this draws attention to the self-reflexive element in the text that must be addressed by translation. It alerts us to the existence of the "deep structures" of communication that need to be explored.

Transference is the process of conveying or projecting onto someone the available knowledge or information. The concept of 'transference' as developed through Freud by Derrida and Lacan suggests the dual process of passing thoughts, feelings, motivations, and conflicts to the "therapist" or what Jacques Lacan calls the "Subject Supposed to Know", the person who is capable of illuminating the "truth" of knowledge better than "patient" alone. But only by refusing the role of the "Subject Supposed to Know" and by initiating a sort of "counter-transference" does the analyst help the patient grow beyond the analyst (so that the therapist and the patient do not become locked in an enduring false relationship). Transference, as Lacan and Derrida both point out, occurs in many contexts outside of psychotherapy. Lacan claims that

whenever a person (teacher, friend, priest, military leader) is believed to be the Subject-Supposed-to-Know, transference exists. Likewise, transference is something that can happen to texts, to "authors", as well as to people. Transference operates through the dynamics of languages, in internal as well as external communication. However, not to become locked in the prison house of language and the metaphysics of a unified consciousness in control of languages, is to be aware of the *fictions* in the structuring of language. As far as the process of translation is concerned, then, it would mean the possibility of "counter-transference" always already existing in the text or which has to be initiated by the translator/analyst.

I offer a few examples here to illustrate the problems of cultural transference in translation. Let us read an extract from a memorable poem by the legendary Jibanananda Das, one of the great poets of post-Tagore Bengal:

Transliteration:

Bonolata Sen (1942)

*Hajaar bocchor dhorey aami pawth haatitechhi prithibeer pawthey
Singhal samudro thekey nishether awndhokarey maloy sagorey
Awnek ghurechhi aami; Bimbissar Ashoker dhusar jogotey
Sekhaney chhilam aami; aaro door awndhokarey Bidharbho nagarey;
Aami klanto pran ek, chari dikey jiboner samudro sawfen
Aamarey du dawndo shanti diyechhilo Natorer Banalata Sen.*

*Chool taar kawbejkaar awndhokaar Bideeshar nishaa,
Mukh taar Srabostir karukarjo; oti door samudrer por
Haal bhengey je nabik hariyechhe dishaa
Sabuj ghaaser desh jakhon se chhokhey dekhey daruchini-dwiper
bhitor,*

*Temoni dekhechhi taarey awndhokarey; bolechhey se, 'eto din kothay
chhilen'?*

Pakhir neerrer moto chokh tuley Natorer Banalata Sen ...

Reading the poem even without any knowledge of the source language still conveys the sense of the overwhelming vowel play that governs the slow pace and rhythm of the lines. The form matches the exhaustion and the timelessness of memory that the poem presents. While the *iconic* mode of translation that aims at geometrical resemblance in terms of structure, line, length and so on, might prove helpful to come close to the spirit of the poem, only the knowledge of the SL will enable the transference of the "deep structures" from the source text to the target text so that the "construction" of the "surface structures" would be possible. It would then be possible to address the poet's references to history, his extraordinary use of tropes and the coalescence of imagery.

Translation of the second verse:

Version 1:

*...Her hair was the darkness of Vidisha's night
from a past of forgotten time,
her face was the handicraft of Sravasti.
When drifting on some far sea aboard a ship
with a broken rudder
a sailor suddenly sees a region of green grass on some
cardamom island
like that I saw her in the dark. And*

*raising eyes that were like a bird's nest,
Banalata Sen of Nator said, 'where were you
All this while?'*

(trans: Buddhadev Bose)

Version 2:

*... Her hair like dark Vidisha's night of long before
her face Sravasti artistry when on the ocean far distant
the sailor who had broken his rudder and lost direction saw
nothing but the land of green grass within the cinnamon island
so I saw her in the dark; she said, 'where were you
all these days then?' raising her bird's nest-like eyes at me
Nator's Banalata Sen*

(trans.: Ananda Lal)

Would it help to choose between the two versions? I would say, no; either of them may be taken as adequate and neither of them is entirely satisfactory. That this should be so is extremely important because this acknowledges the residue always left in the text after every translation, which encourages a new translation. In this case, though the lyrical voice of the poet does not pose many difficulties in transference, the poem alerts the reader to the poem's dialectic of selfhood. History shapes selves and the poetic self in the poem partakes of many historical epochs. However, it is a mistake to imagine the poetic self as a simple, random, constantly changing historical phenomenon or an infinitely changing collection of voices through history. Though the poetic self seems amorphous and fluid, clearly it is not a passive vehicle animated by ceaselessly changing social discourse. Something within its organization

of memory prompts the self to identify with certain forms and experiences and not others. Its ceaseless mobility finds (there is the iteration of the act of "seeing") momentary rest - the moment of timelessness in the troubled flux of time - in the empathic presence of the beloved: her eyes like "a bird's nest" and her presence a catalyst for the remembrance of things past in the time present. Let me attempt yet another version with these points in mind:

Version 3:

*...Her hair the ancient darkness of a Vidisha night
her face a Sravasti artwork. As when in the far distant ocean
the rudderless sailor who had lost his way
sees before his eyes a green expanse within a cinnamon isle,
I saw her in the darkness; she said, 'So long ... where have you
been?'*
Raising her eyes like a bird's nest, Nator's Bonolata Sen.

(trans: mine)

The iconic mode, however, would certainly not be appropriate for a poem written by, say a Dalit poet. Inspired by the spirit of Unnava's revolutionary novel, *Mala Palli* in early twentieth century and especially by the work of the Dalit poet Gurrām Joshua, as for example his *Gabbilam*, the Dalits began "forging" a language to articulate their personal sagas of pain, discrimination, deprivation and indignity. Their language does not wholly derive from conventional usage, but is "crafted" with distinct words, images, rhythms to express the specificity of their experience of alterity / "untouchability" that might truly be illustrative of the "vernacular" language, or linguistic usage

that emerges out of the grid of "verna". A poem like the following, by a powerful young poet Sikhamani, for instance, would need attention to the *indexical* connotation of the text. The indexical text is embedded in a locale, in a context, refers to it, even signifies it and would not make much sense without it. Sikhamani is the pen name of Dr. K. Sanjeeva Rao whose slim volume of poems is titled *Black Rainbow* as a reminder of the history of the Dalit movement and draws attention to the motivations of the Dalit people.

Transliteration: (an extract)

Kirru Chappula Bhasha

*Inni varnanatmaka bhashallo
na avarnanni
barninchakal bhasha ledu.
Inni soundaryamatka varnanllo
na asaundayanni wodisi
pattukuney aksharam ledu.*

*Innarllu nenuka dhyani
Anukaruna sabdalni matramey
Aravu techchukurna apsawarula Madhya
Na asalu swaranni pagottokunna nu ...*

*Ippuda aksharalu puttedi
Shivunicheti dharmaruka sabdamunuchchi kadu
Veerabahuni kirrucheppula cheppula nundi
Ippudu varnamala savarnala chetula
Rudrakshamala kadu
Goodem gudisey mundu*

*pachchi orugula dandem,
Ippudu manvu wontimeedi dandem.
Na nallajati cheppuka
Tellani lesu allika ...*

Translation:

The Language of Creaking Footwear

*Among all these descriptive
languages
there isn't one that can describe my
castelessness / colourlessness.*

*Among these chapters of purple prose
there isn't a word
that can captivate
my lack of beauty ...*

*I have made the word a coal
and lit my dark kiln.*

*I have made the word a transparent crystal
to carry in my barber's bag.*

*I have seasoned it like
a cashew nut to sign on
the nation -cloth as a washer man.*

*I have now made the word
a boat lamp to guard the fishnet
before pressing it into the dark river.*

*The word has become a spark
to fan my potter's flame.
I am plying the loom
making the word its lever ...*

*Now words are not born
out of the drum beat of Shiva
but from the creaking
language of Veerabahu's footwear.
The string of alphabet*

*Is not the chain of beads
of the upper caste
but of dry fish
in front of a hut in a hamlet.
The sacred thread of Manu
is now the beautiful thread work of my community ...*
(trans: Kiranmayi)

In spite of a commendable attempt by the translator, the "barriers" at the heart of the SL text remain intact, having successfully resisted translation. The "deep structures" do not govern the surface structures and the subliminal emotions of the original poem are not manifest in translation. The blame is not entirely the translator's; the inadequacy of English as a target language to convey the nuances of the "vernacular" is a factor in cultural loss. As far as the initiative of the translator is concerned, perhaps a more radical usage could have been

attempted or some of the potent culture-specific words could have been allowed to permeate the receptor text. Indexical glossing would have proved a helpful tool too, to generate the kind of "counter-transference" that Derrida and Lacan have recommended. Such techniques would have stressed the "positionality" (a place from which values are interpreted and constructed rather than a locus of an already determined set of values) of both the poet and the poem.

The last example that I offer to illustrate the force of "counter-transference" that an analyst-translator can initiate is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of Mahasweta Devi's short stories. Spivak's work has been much discussed and debated and I have written in detail about it earlier (Mukherjee 2000:94-105). Here I will just illustrate with one example the rhetorical dimensions evident in Spivak's translations.

Discussing the role of the publisher as an intermediary in the process of translation, Ritu Menon mentions Devi's short story published by Kali for Women in the anthology *Truth Tales* as "*Wet Nurse*" and Spivak's translation and extraordinary analysis of the same story as "*Breastgiver*" (Spivak 1987:128-30). Menon says that during that presentation, Spivak offered no less than eight possible interpretations of the original: as a historian and teacher of literature, from the author's subject position, the teacher's and the reader's position, a Marxist feminist reading, a liberal feminist reading, and a gendered subaltern reading.

In her translation, Spivak reinstates the symbolical "naming" of Devi's text "Stanadayini" as "Breastgiver". (Whereas 'Wet Nurse' would have had the original Bengali word as 'Dhai Ma') ; the translator's choice of "naming" the text as "Wet Nurse" governed that particular translation which played on the mythic connotations of the name of the protagonist Jasodhara and to a large extent neutralized the subversive impact of the text). Spivak's interpellation or *catachresis* in the reading of Devi's *symbolical* text maps a structure of relations onto another plane or another symbolic system that enriches the textual discourse. Catachresis describes the process by which a writer or a reader/analyst/translator can interrupt the flow of conventional meaning and insert a contradictory or alternative system of meaning. Catachresis ruptures the propriety - the conventional meaningfulness - of the discursive moment. Without an awareness of this rupture, there is no impetus for treating a text as symbolic. Catachresis and symbolism invoke one another, even though they might occupy different textual modalities. Spivak's alternative system of meaning is the Marxist feminist analysis of the text demonstrating the use of the gendered subaltern by the capitalist society. As Kristeva explained in her discussion of the use of poetic language, catachresis offers a challenge to the hegemony of meanings dominated by patriarchal culture and organized by certain behavioural norms. By challenging the conventional meaningfulness of Devi's short story, Spivak activates the discourse of counter-transference in her translation that addresses the rhetorical richness of Devi's text.

My attempt in this paper has been to discuss the possibility of cultural transference through the processes of

translation so that the sub-textual rhythms and the tensions of the text do not remain hidden. By the instances given above, I have tried to show the degree of success extant translation practice has achieved and also the way different kinds of texts need different methods of approach. It always remains the translator's aspiration to make manifest in the translated text the "encyclopedic" (*Eco 1984:157*) relationship between language and human creativity. The successive efforts of different translators working on a single text only go to show the inexhaustiveness of the textual residue that tempts yet another cycle of translations.

References

- Burman, Antoine (2000). **Translation and Trials of the Foreign**. Trans. L. Venuti. *The Translation Studies Reader* (ed.) Lawrence Venuti. London & New York: Routledge.
- Catford, J.C. (1969). **A Linguistic Theory of Translation**. London: OUP.
- Das, Jibonananda (1993). **Jibonananda Daser Kavya Sangraha**. Calcutta: Bharobi.
- Derrida, Jacques (1974). **Of Grammatology**. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Eco, Umberto (1984). **Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973). **The Interpretation of Cultures**. New York: Basic Books.
- Kristeva, Julia (1984). **The Revolution in Poetic Language**. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lacan, Jacques (1977). **Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis**. Trans. Sheridan, Alan. New York: Norton.
- Marcuse, Herbert (1964). **One Dimensional Man**. New York: Norton.
- Menon, Ritu (2002). "Authorial Submissions, Publishing and Translation" in **Translation, Text and Theory: The Paradigm of India**. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Mounin. G. (1963). *Les Problemes Theoriques de la Traduction*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Mukherjee, Tutun (2000). "Of Other Voices: Mahasweta's *Devi's Short Stories* Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak" in **English and the Indian Short Story**. (ed) Mohan Ramanan and P. Shailaja. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Sikhamani (2000). **Black Rainbow**. Hyderabad: Milinda Publications.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1987). **In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics**. New York: Methuen.

Steiner, George (1975). **After Babel**. New York & London: OUP.

Toury, Gideon (1980). **In Search of a Theory of Translation**. Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute of Poetics and Semiotics.