Translation Reviews

Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyaya's *Aranyak*, translated by Rimli Bhattacharya *Aranyak of the Forest*, Seagull Books Calcutta, 2002.

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In trying to analyze Rimli Bhattacharya's translation of Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyaya's novel *Aranyak*, we first need to understand the basic tenets of translation particularly in the Indian context.

a) Chronologically, a translation comes after the original. That is to say, the original and the translation seldom appear simultaneously. Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyaya's *Aranyak,* for example, appeared as a book in 1939, after being first serialized in *Prabashi* between 1937 and 1939. Rimli Bhattacharya's translation appeared in the year 2002. In some ways, a translation is an extended version of the original. The word '*anuvad*' ('speaking after' or 'following after') may best be used in this case. That is, chronologically, a translation can be produced only after the original has been written. It follows the original and is thus a speaking after the original. In that sense, a translation is a looking back, a reconsideration of the original. Therefore it also becomes a commentary on the original.

b) To be a commentary, a translation needs to be more explicative. By nature, translations are more explanatory than the original had been. What the author of the original may have taken for granted from his readers, needs to be explained (often with notes), in a translation. The notes, along with a select glossary and a translator's note, in Bhattacharya's translation, may be taken as a case in point.

c) A translation is not merely the meeting place for two different languages. It in fact provides the platform for two different cultures. Two different groups of readers come together in the act of enjoying a literary artifact. As Benjamin notes, in the seminal essay 'The Task of a Translator':

> …Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.

Thus, several cultural concepts, which the readers of the source language could relate to, need explication for the readers of a translation.

d) Towards the beginning of his article, Benjamin posits a fundamental question for any translator: "Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?" Benjamin does not explicate his answer in the essay. However, he is of the opinion that this question and an answer to it would give some insight into translation.

> "This would seem to explain adequately the divergence of their standings in the realm of art."
> It is almost clear, that the lack of knowledge mentioned in the above question can be of two types – the lack of knowledge of the language of an original and the lack of

knowledge of an original while knowing the language. Is a translation then meant for bilingual readers? If we say that a translation is meant for people who do not know the language of the original; how then can we evaluate a translation or its 'fidelity' to the original?

e)   The other word that is used as a synonym for translation in India is *'rupantar'*. The word means 'changed in form' or 'in changed form'. Inherent in the very word equivalent for translation in India, is a claim of deviating from the original. Fidelity to the original is not an Indian concept. As Sujit Mukherjee notes in *Translation As Discovery*:

> The notion that even literary translation is a faithful rendering of the original came to us from the West, perhaps in the wake of the Bible and the need felt by Christian missionaries to have it translated into different Indian languages. We have hesitated until recent times to translate our own scriptures – who but another god would presume to translate the word of god? – and thus managed to confine their knowledge to the chosen few, who were obliged to learn the original language. No such choosiness affected the western (i.e., the Christian) world for long, and translating the Bible must be the largest language industry the world has known… A much greater contribution by Bible translations to India's literary culture was that it brought the printing press to this land, made the printed word possible, and turned Indian literature into a matter of books at last.

However, as Sukanta Chaudhuri notes in his *Translation and Understanding*, the notion of fidelity has troubled translators down the ages:

The act of translation has traditionally been seen in a moral light. Opinion has differed down the ages as to whether the writing of poetry, or any other kind of 'original' text, involves exercising or imparting some species of moral virtue. But the translation of existing texts has commonly been viewed in ethically loaded terms: whatever the moral standing of the original, the translator is expected to adhere to it in a spirit whose definition is essentially moral… The classic expression of this syndrome is in the recurrent appeals to 'truth' and 'fidelity'…

Rimli Bhattacharya's translation of Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyaya's *Aranyak* has clearly passed this test of fidelity. So far as content and structure is concerned, Bhattacharya strictly adheres to the Bengali text. In Sujit Mukherjee's words, the work belongs to the category of 'translation as testimony'. In such categories, there is the least tampering with the original. Rimli Bhattacharya's translation, I feel may be placed under this category.

Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyaya's novel is based on the writer's experience in Bhagalpur. Though the novel chooses Satyacharan as the narrator, one can hardly miss the autobiographical element in *Aranyak*. The plot or rather the structure of Aranyak is devoid of any complexity. In fact, the simplicity and naivete of the people of the forest is also captured in the simple story line. Initially, the narrator, perhaps the central protagonist, Satyacharan, finds it difficult to adjust to the life of the forest. However, as Gostho-babu explains the mystery of the forest and its mesmerizing power soon takes the better of Satyacharan.   The following conversation between Gostho-babu and Satyacharan illustrates the process at work:

> `Gostho-babu looked at me and gave a little
> smile. 'That is just it, Manager-babu, you will soon find
> out… You are newly come from Calcutta, your heart

longs to fly back to the city, and you're yet young.
Spend some more time here. And then, you will see…'
'What will I see?'
'The jungle will get inside of you. By and by, you
won't be able to bear any kind of disturbance or put up
with crowds. That's what has happened to me. Just this
last month I had to go to Mungher for a court case, and
all I could worry about was when I'd be able to get
away.' (Bhattacharya: p 11).

Satyacharan is primarily an intruder. Coming from the more
civilized locale of Calcutta, he is a misfit in the life of the forest.
However, the transformation that Satyacharan's character undergoes
deserves special mention and occupies a major part of the novel.
This transformation is not a sudden miracle, and Bibhutibhushan's
subtlety of description is perhaps one of the areas where the
translation lacks. In the original, the only character (if I may so call
it) that looms large is that of the Forest. The Forest is a presence,
which cannot be denied. It is not one of the characters in the novel,
rather it is 'the' character before whom all have to bow. This all-
encompassing presence of the forest appears to be absent in
Bhattacharya's translation. Satyacharan takes on the central stage,
and all incidents appear to revolve around him. On the contrary, in
the original, though apparently Satyacharan may be said to occupy
central stage, he is nothing but a mere spectator. In fact, he plays no
role in the progress of the plot, the Forest is at the helm of affairs.

Like Charles Dickens' novels where all the characters are
portrayed in such vivid colours that the very utterance of a name
brings along with it a portrait of the character in all its
whimsicalities, Bibhutibhusan was a master of character sketches.
All the characters in the novel have their individual traits and never
is the reader allowed to mistake one character for the other – such is
the power of depiction. Thus, we tend to remember Raju Parey,
Dhaturia, Motuknath Pandit, Manchi, Nakchhedi, Bhanmati and

others as individuals in their own rights. Rimli Bhattacharya's attempt in creating the same flavour as that of the original is commendable. However, for one who has read Bibhutibhusan, there is something missing in Bhattacharya's character sketches. 'In fact, no reader of a translation who can read the original work should expect to be wholly satisfied with the translation. But in examining the relationship between the translation and the original, he may not only be able to test how 'true' the translation is but also explore areas of literary understanding which the process of translation often enters, sometimes unwittingly.'(Mukherjee: 1981. p 86). The above comment may perhaps be taken as true for all translations and it is equally true in Rimli Bhattacharya's case. Nevertheless, Bhattacharya's translation provides the reader (particularly one who has not read the original), with all details necessary for understanding and appreciating Bibhutibhusan's work. Divided into seven distinct sections, the translation introduces the Bengali author to the readers, followed by an introduction that traces the genesis of the text, the note of the translation clarifies Bhattacharya's strategy in the work. This is followed by the actual translation, which is structured strictly on the original novel – there is no attempt at *transcreation*. The 'glossary of select terms' elaborates on words and concepts that only the reader of the original could probably know. This is followed by an appendix, which gives the chronological list of Bibhutibhusan's works.

Certain replications were perhaps not possible in the English translation. For example, the variation in the dialect spoken by the dwellers of the forest is markedly different from the way in which Satyacharan speaks. This is the primary difference marker between the intruder and the local people. However, Bhattacharya did not have the scope of replicating the same in English. Moreover, the way in which Satyacharan addresses the local people, is both an indication of the difference in status and also the gradual proximity that the outsider feels with the residents of the forest. However, in

English 'you' becomes the 'great leveller', and in a way mars the appeal of the original. Leaving aside such cultural constraints, Rimli Bhattacharya's *Aranyak: of the forest* (the title itself is explicative) is a faithful rendering of the original. For those who cannot read the original, *Aranyak: of the forest*, is a novel in its own right. And also for those who have read Bibhutibhusan, there is not much cause for complaint as Rimli Bhattacharya carefully adheres to every minute detail of the original and arrests the true spirit of the forest. Those who complain of missing the style of Bibhutibhusan, let us be reminded, that was never the task of a translator.

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Englishing the Vedic Age:
Awadheshwari, by Shankar Mokashi Punekar,
translated from Kannada by P.P. Giridhar
New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006

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Awadheshwari is a novel whose action is set in the Vedic period. The novel is divided into two parts: the first part is largely the story of Purukutsani, the queen of Awadh/Ayodhya; the second part mainly delineates the clash between Trasadasyu, Purukutsani's son and Vrisha Bhatta, a brahmin. The events are set in motion by the incestuous marriage between Purukutsa, the king of Ayodhya and his sister Purukutsani. The unfulfilled consummation of their marriage and Purukutsa's kidnap by a rival king has left Ayodhya heirless, though in the novel's present, Ayodhya is being ably administered by Purukutsani. On the advice of Sage Devadema, the spiritual advisor of the Queen, the *niyoga* ceremony is performed by Purukutsani with Simhabhatta, a prominent Rigvedin brahmin of her kingdom, and Trasadasyu, the heir to the throne of Ayodhya is born. Once Trasadasyu comes of age, his Hamlet-like dilemmas paralyze him as he wants his mother to unravel the secret surrounding his birth. As Vrisha and his father, covetous Rigvedin brahmins in his kingdom, prey upon his mind and belittle him, Trasadasyu is forced to redeem himself in the eyes of his subjects. How he does that and

how the demons of his mind are laid to rest form the rest of the novel's story.

If any translation gives rise to a general anxiety of how a text from a different linguistic-cultural background will be received by the target readers, and the translation into English from Indian languages gives rise to the specific anxiety of how the 'vernacularism' of the source-text will appear to the English reader, one can say that the translation under review will appeal to many contemporary readers of fiction in English for a number of different reasons. For one, *Awadheshwari* gives a new rationale to Vedic texts, approaching them through epigraphic and hermeneutic frames. The Vedic hymns are juxtaposed with the Harappa-Mohenjodaro seals and re-interpreted to tell the story of the bitter conflict between Trasadasyu and Vrishajana, the king and the brahmin. The hymns are taken out of their ritualistic contexts and are seen in the modern form of the personal lyric, as expressions of the anguish and anxieties of their composers – real historical men, rather than anonymous entities. The novel marshals modern literary, archeological and historical modes to take the contemporary reader 'back to the Vedas', as the mythical past gets re-constructed on a modern scientific scaffolding.

The novel also opens with the 'outrageous' event of the incestuous marriage between king Purukutsa and his sister Purukutsani. The two are said to have a part-Egyptian lineage and we are told that incestuous marriage was a common Egyptian practice to maintain purity of blood and patrimony. When we read Punekar's introduction to the novel where he discusses the Drift-of-continents' theory that different peoples and races came along with their land-masses and attached themselves to India, one wonders if geological and geographical-evolutionary theories are being invoked here to exteriorize the sexual practice of incest, as the plot-line develops the unfortunate fall-out for Ayodhya of this 'alien' kind of sexual union.

Secondly, *Awadheshwari* has a powerful female protagonist in Purukutsani, the queen of Awadh. For contemporary readers looking for indigenous female models in the Indian past, Purukutsani's able and efficient management of her kingdom's affairs, and that she is loved by her subjects and respected by her enemies, make her a worthy ancestor for the present-day 'Indian-woman-achiever'.   As a wise and compassionate queen who sets aside her personal troubles and responds to the greater duty towards her subjects, she is quite like the representation of the modern successful woman whose public persona hides private scars. She is also strongly committed to perpetuating her natal family's name and line: refusing to marry the neighboring king, she instead prefers *niyoga* to keep Ayodhya a distinct political entity in the control of her natal family. From being tomboyish in childhood, then taking up the reins of the state, to taking upon herself the task of perpetuating the natal patriliny, Purukutsani offers a model of femininity shaped not for 'gifting away' in marriage (given that her marriage is within the family), but is deployed by the natal family-kingdom to stabilize itself as an autonomous unit.   Is this any less a patriarchally-shaped femininity? What would a system where the woman perpetuates the line of the natal family do to the institutions of family, private property and society itself? – these are provocative questions that arise in the context of the novel under review.

Thirdly, for English readers whose tastes are molded by political thrillers, *Awadheshwari* has the complexity and suspense to keep readers interested in the political intrigues of the Vedic period. The twists and turns in the plot of the novel and its panoramic scope should interest any television serial producer looking for alternatives to the family drama genre.

That *Awadheshwari* won for Prof. Punekar the Sahitya Akademi award in 1988 and that contemporary critics find in Punekar's writing a criticism of the European and Anglo-American modernity and appreciation of the "inner resilience and naiveté of

regional cultures",[1] make *Awadheshwari* a prospective text in the English syllabi of universities in India that want to 'decolonize' themselves and those abroad that are looking for such instances of 'Postcolonial Literature'.

While *Awadheshwari* in English will find an interested readership, it may not be a very well-informed readership in the sense that, at the end of reading the novel, they may know little about the Kannada context that gave rise to and received the novel. While the task of translating the novel is undoubtedly a challenging one, the English reader also has to be informed about the source-text's place in its linguistic-cultural context. What is interesting about a translated text is its life in two cultural contexts and readers in one cultural context must be allowed glimpses of how it inhabits another context. An Introduction that contextualized the source-text and introduced the author's oeuvre to the English readers would have made the translation more comprehensive.

While overall the translation reads well, some wordiness could have been avoided such as "with an humble prostration of her body" (p.12) and "one should step out to strike out along the lines of possibilities or impossibilities that the future holds" (p.60). In some places, pronoun references are ambiguous, and going by the story-line, in one place 'Vatsaraja' has become 'Kalia' (p. 73) and 'Tuesday' has become 'Thursday' (p.62). A misplaced footnote on p. 399 instead of on p. 397 is among the errors that need to be taken care of in the forthcoming editions.

Overall *Awadheshwari* compels the attention of present-day scholars and readers of fiction in English.

Note:
This is what Rajendra Chenni wrote about S.M. Punekar in his article titled "Enfant terrible of Kannada Literature" that appeared in Deccan Herald when S.M. Punekar died.

Translating Models: A review of Awadheshwari by Shankar Mokashi Punekar. Trans. P P Giridhar. 2006. Bangalore: Sahitya Akademi. 408pages.

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In times when tradition and modernity persist as crucial issues in all of our scholarship in literature as well as the social sciences, the translation of Shankar Mokashi Punekar's *Awadheshwari*, by P P Giridhar is an apt venture. The novel is a creative take on the political life in Vedic times. Written in 1987, the novel won itself a Sahitya Akademi Award. For all of us now, such a novel and its translation into English rake up a series of questions. How can one reconstruct the Vedic times? What are resources available to do so to creative writers? How does a reconstruction of the Vedic times in the 1980s look like, would it look any different or similar now? How would a translation of Vedic times, so to say, into English look like?

Does the translation of Vedic times involve a translation of concepts of the life-world of a certain time-space or does it demand a reconfiguring of language or even meet with dead-ends and involves in struggles against prevalent idioms of the present? In what sense exactly were the Vedic times different from ours? Is it only the case that sometimes translations into English end up merely *sounding* anachronistic or western-Christian or do they even distort meanings. Is it possible that to a native audience even these anachronistic-sounding renderings make meaning only in a context-

specific sense? Further then, can practices/rituals be understood as concepts? Surely, these are interesting questions spanning various fields of inquiry; I will speculatively answer some of them summarily in this review article, by taking up the novel first and issues of translation next.

A novel?:

  Awadheshwari is a peculiar novel, (to retain the term), not just for its brave attempt to creatively reconstruct the vedic times, it is so for other reasons as well. For instance, in the foreword, the author goes into researches current in his time and into scriptures and seals and tells us about a unified theory of oriental paleography. Our current understanding however, (of seeking out scriptures or judging practices like incest, both inventions of 19th century anthropology), is that it is a result of British colonization and that prior to colonization we related differently to 'scriptures' and that our life-worlds were composed differently. Although Punekar in his other writings was sensitive to issues of colonization and writing, it is often less known as to what exactly we mean by colonization or even modernity, all we can say is that he felt the unease that many of us still struggle with. Then again the author also puts forward the thesis that "they are like us". He also exemplifies literature over ritual, "…To give it a sacrificial-spiritual interpretative, because it is a Rigvedic hymn is to do disservice to his poetic prowess". A sort of paradox emerges between the author's claims and what the novel actually accomplishes. While for the author then, our pasts can be rewritten or opted out of and life can be led on ideological or belief-based stances, the novel presents us with more complex instances. This raises a set of unanswered questions about colonization, modernity, passage of time etc or even anachronisms and other debates in historiography. In the limited space of this article I will show that these anachronisms reveal more about our issues and terms of contention and that the issues may themselves demand different treatment.

In form:

Surely then, if I were to read the novel and not the author's promises, then we are confronted with peculiar things. A series of unrelated plots, lengthy sub-plots: the sheer number of it almost blinding us to the need or aesthetics of it. On the whole, the large number of plots cannot be missed by any reader at all. This leads us to ask, if then *Awadheshwari* is a novel at all. The numerous unrelated plots should perhaps be understood in terms of the story-telling traditions in our contexts. Typically, *Awadheshwari* is like a *record* of a set of instances. It does not seek to provide experience; fewer stream of consciousness techniques, abrupt shifts from reflections of characters to the development of plot (which can participate in theoretical endevours) and such like mark the novel from time to time. One can see *Awadheshwari* as working through models (of set of instances) that are set in the *form* that then relates to us a different life-world. One can read the content of *Awadheshwari* as a particular understanding of the Vedic time-space, that strangely or perhaps not so strangely after all, offers us story-structures or models that take off from the main plot, never to return or contribute otherwise. Stories than, one could say have more ambiguous roles to play than novels or other forms, particularly in our contexts. A story could aim to merely relate or keep alive curiosity or retain a world, unlike a novel. And throughout *Awadheshwari* the reader meets with such stories. One could see the effort of the author to capture difference, showing in the form of *Awadheshwari* more than in say, it's content, although the content offers to us equally different stuff. This poses to us a unique task, that of translating models, which I will take up in a moment. To see *Awadheshwari* as a record is even interesting in times where the *dharmashastras* are understood less as laws or codes and more as records. The lack of the form of the novel in our contexts can be drawn upon here to form interesting hypotheses.

In Content:

The content of this novel is fraught with characters, but these are no characters from a typical 19th century novel! They are characters because they are reflective actors and because action can be typified at least in some general ways. The characters' attitude to action on the whole, the attitude of engagement and negotiation with existing practices and the unabashed pragmatism that is placed within a discourse of right action, contemplative/reflective life cannot be missed at all. With content fashioned in such a way, it is noteworthy that one cannot be proposing that the Vedic times were a degenerate or barbaric time. Thus the novel provides by default and this perhaps has to do with the form, a glimpse into a way of life that we can perhaps with due respect understand as our traditions or inheritances. Read like this the novel does not make us see colonialism as just another cultural encounter that occurred naturally in course of time, but the novel stands for something that can record tradition and show to us the ruptures that colonization set forth.

Translating Models?:

The issues regarding the translation of such a novel then involve awareness of the story form and the models presented therein. However, very interesting questions arise here. Is translation only a task of translating the concepts? Can practices be translated or recreated as concepts? Are there practices that do not lend themselves to conceptualization and translation? And do they remain as practices only because they manage to remain outside of conceptualization? The awareness of the translator in such a case I think is shifted from providing an experience that is nearer or faithful to the original but in preserving the model that the original presents. Thus one has to translate models more than attempting to provide experiences or specific meanings. Here then, with the novel Awadheshwari, we are confronted with a case where language cannot be seen as representing culture in any direct manner. So then, the translator must be cautious not to be ideologically inclined and

must translate the meaning of the path or model if at all (because specific meanings are only part of a given path or model). So that, a model preserved and passed on, and numerous experiences within it can become possible. In times when endless ideological translations prevail upon us, even heaped upon us constantly, Giridhar's translation is more relevant. For instance, his "asked himself wordlessly" and similar phrases point to a particular from of reflection, specific perhaps to our times and contexts alone, the composition of which we can reflect upon. That Giridhar believes that one can be indifferent to ideological positions in the act of translation perhaps best suites the translation of stories in the Indian tradition.