

# Tread gingerly!

## Translation as a cultural act

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### Abstract

*The paper is a Keynote Address and attempts to delineate the ethics as well as the politics of translation. Drawing on a variety of resources it attempts to argue how translations are always necessarily open ended. The transgressive nature of translation is discussed in detail. While detailing the culturally interventionist nature of translation, the hegemonic as well as the esoteric nature of the act of translation is also spoken of. Translation is seen as an act that resists balkanization and promotes the agenda of civilization and inclusivity. An attempt then is made to comprehend what freedom entails for a translator.*

*Key Words : Translation, Theory, Postcolonial, Postmodern, Market, Deconstruction, Authenticity.*

Translations are at once sites of contestation because they are foremost, appropriations, whatever the intent or reason may be. Politically, they have always happened between trading interest groups, between an ambassador and the receiving court. Conquests have resulted in acquiring the library of the vanquished. Within cultural domains the transaction has been from the language of power to the many dialects and languages of the folk. In all such instances we are aware of at least one process, and that is the seepage of the validations in the source system into the target system. Ranjan Lal Gammeddage, the Sinhalese scholar points out in his 'An Introduction to Translation' that the Sinhalese word for Translation is 'pariwarthanaya' which comes from the Sanskritic root of *vrith* taking the suffix *pari* leading to the idea of a complete, perfect linguistic transposition, 'parivarthana'.

Translation replaces the original silently. It is at once the destruction and the making of an icon. To borrow the Baudrillardian phraseology, the original is the fantastic, the translation, the hyperreal, both in a procession of simulacra. Each is opposed to the other, yet each survives because of the other. The act of writing is no dictation; it is its failure. The edict stands cancelled in the exploding semantics. The *vak* when it becomes the *sutra* necessarily must yield to discourse, which is a constant assertion of approximation. Translation thus prefers newer linguistic matrix for existence. Poets have from time immemorial freely translated for their own purpose or for that of their times. There was perhaps no sense of transgression then, when esotericism led to choice. In exercising this choice the poet was embarking on a journey of alterity. However, as the contours of world politics changed even the actions of humanity entered newer phases of subjectivity. What we see today is a writer and a reader who are no more monolingual. The polyglot translator is a phenomenon of the seventies and after, in the Twentieth Century. Simple binaries in any discourse in such a circumstance grow suspect at once.

The question, 'why translate?' leads us at once into a complex world of ideologies of production mechanisms and of cultural contexts. Language as play, as 'rupture' effectively allows the translator to transgress at every possible moment the fixity of meaning as well as the sanctity of established order. Consider for instance Suzanne Jill Levine's reasons for translating specific authors:

Since it is at the level of language that the translator can be most creative, inventive, even subversive, I have preferred to translate writers like Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig and Severo Sarduy, who play with language, exposing its infidelity to itself, writers who create a new literature by parodying the old<sup>1</sup>.

One of the strong cultural identity markers in the life of a nation is its literature. It is an empowering agent and at most times also allow people to arrogate to themselves a relative

superiority. B.M. Srikantaiah, in his note on the History of Kannada Literature as quoted by Ramachandra Sharma, pays rich tribute to Pampa, the Patriarch of that literature, 'Pampa is the source poet for all Kannada poets, the emperor, the one name pervasive in Kannada'<sup>2</sup>. (translation mine) The poet who was thrown out of the republic is not only very much a citizen here but also the 'prima don'. Of course he had the patronage of Arikesari of the Chalukya Dynasty (C.940 AD) in the 10th Century. B.M. Srikantaiah was one of the first translators from English into Kannada. His English Geethegalu provided certain formal innovations for the *Navodaya* School of poets. However, he strove towards authenticity, 'However, I have striven keeping in view the duty of reflecting the original, as far as my intelligence would permit'<sup>3</sup>. But such a notion of authenticity is no more unproblematic. The Empire through fabulation attempted to process all contestations into acquiescence. The idea of the Master could not be either established or perpetuated outside the gambit of language. One certain way of erasing identities was to marginalise the linguistic heritage of the subject race. The discourse then becomes a closed argument. The translator at that juncture faces an unforeseen obstacle. It is in that context that one pays heed to what Samia Mehrez says of the inherent problems in translation today:

Hence, in using the language of the ex-colonizer it was important for postcolonial bilingual writers to go beyond a passive form of contestation, where the postcolonial text remained prisoner of western literary models and standards, restrained by the dominant form and language. It was crucial for the postcolonial text to challenge both (sic) its own indigenious, conventional models as well as the dominant structures and institutions of the colonizer in a newly forged language that would accomplish this double movement. Indeed, the ultimate goal of such literature was to subvert hierarchies by bringing together the 'dominant' and the 'underdeveloped', by exploding and confounding different symbolic worlds and separate systems of signification in order to create a mutual interdependence and intersignification<sup>4</sup>.

One such attempt is by A.K. Ramanujan in *Speaking of Siva*. He shows in his introduction to the book the problems that one might face in attempting to be sincere to syntactical requirements of the two languages. “English syntax does not allow a natural and succinct translation of all these symmetries”<sup>5</sup>.

It is undeniably the most successful of any Kannada translations to have been published so far, including his own translation of U.R. Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara*. However, with all his care and attention to linguistic niceties even Ramanujan has allowed himself to be subverted by his assumptions of the needs of the dominant language, especially in his scrupulous translation of the signature lines of the *Vacanas*. That in itself is not inexcusable. Look at what happens when a translator takes a step too far in the direction of the target language to be authentic to that expectation. In P. Sreenivasa Rao’s translation of U.R. Ananthamurthy’s *Bharathipura*, the main street of a Malnad village becomes “downtown”<sup>6</sup>. In the opening paragraphs of chapter one, or two pages later, the lane turns into a “ghetto”. Such instances reveal how the translator at certain moments plays into the hands of power structures that constantly operate around him. Yet again, today translation is an activity goaded by professional needs, sponsored by professional organizations. Andre Lefevere makes explicit the sorry state of affairs:

If educational institutions increasingly function as a “reservation” where high literature, its readers, and its practitioners are allowed to roam in relative, though not necessarily relevant freedom, they also further contribute to the isolation of the professional reader. Professional readers need to publish in order to advance up the professional ladder, and the pressures of publication relentlessly lead to “the progressive trivialization of topics” that has indeed made the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association of America ‘a laughing stock in the national press.... Needless to say, this “progressive trivialization” also serves to undermine further the professional reader’s prestige outside the charmed circle drawn around him, or her, by educational

institutions<sup>7</sup>.

Translators really need to tread gingerly in such a bleak situation. God help you if you should wish to translate a play. The market is too wet a sponge – useless. So much for literature as an identity marker in the present day cultural requirement of a society! The only possibility of a discourse arises is when we go along with the Kannada Poet Ramachandra Sharma's belief: 'It is possible to sit down for a discussion about how best to translate, what the solutions to problems that naturally arise in such a business are, etc... when we accept that the task of translation is a business of the world of Arts'<sup>8</sup>. Sharma sees himself performing the task of a 'stabilizer' as a translator, '*To pour words into the ready syntax of tradition will never produce poetry*'. The primary intention of translation should be to capture the attitude of the original. All that may help him in that endeavour are the tools of the translator<sup>9</sup>. Such understanding and confidence are by themselves enough indicators of the translator having escaped the hubris of a Fitzgerald translating Omar Khayyam, whose arrogated freedom emanated from his being a representative of the Empire. Translation is also believed to be a search, at best a via media, for the perfect language. Umberto Eco has this to tell us, 'The solution for the future is more likely to be in a community of peoples with an increased ability to receive the spirit, to taste or savour the aroma of different dialects'<sup>10</sup>.

Translation has an onerous responsibility, to transcend all agendas of National constructs and grow into a grand process of civilization. To assert thus does not necessarily mean that one opts out of discussing the multifacetedness of Translation as an intellectual activity. To translate today one needs to be empanelled, be part of the establishment. That in itself may not be such a bad thing as it may sound. For concerted and standardized translations to be produced, translation has to be an organized activity. However, the danger lies in its hegemonic interests, which retard its own basic premise, that of offering to the reader works that are fascinatingly novel to his experience. If you are not

commissioned then your translation may find it difficult to reach a publisher. Lefevere once again observes with much perspicacity:

Acceptance of patronage implies integration into a certain support group and its lifestyle, whether the recipient is Tasso at the court of Ferrara, the Best poets gathering around the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, Adolf Bartels proudly proclaiming that he has been decorated by Adolf Hitler, or the medieval Latin Archipoeta, who supplied the epigraph to this chapter, which reads, rewritten in English; "I shall write unheard of poems for you, if you give me wealth<sup>11</sup>.

Thus the pleasurable intellectual act of writing is ineluctably linked to the business of promotion. Translation thus enters the force field of ideology- the ideology of production that determines not only the marketability but also the choice of translation. The translator, unlike the author, has an expectant readership whose aesthetics, ideology and cultural ambiance are all predetermined. The reader of translations is acquisitory in nature, and therefore the success of a translation is also measured against the magnitude of yield in translation.

If Ananthamurthy's **Samskara** is successful that is because it is seen to be ethnically different by the target group. An Indian reading Tolstoy does so under the "humanistic", "universal" value system while an Australian, an American or a European reader of **Samskara** approaches the work with an anthropological interest. In other words the translation is subject to the gaze. What appeals to a reader of the translation is the direction of modernity that a conservative society appears to be taking. Here Modernity is the proximate and Conservatism is the other. In both the reader identifies his own image as the model. His sense of superiority stands satisfied. However, this need not always be the case. My own early readings of novels in Kannada were translations of Bengali Writers like Sharatchandra Chatterjee. A work like **Gora** or **Anadmath** was read not because it represented a different cultural ethos but because it made for an inclusive experience.

Yet, when a translation happens between languages of unequal power structures, reading tends to be an exclusive activity. In other words, translation between cultural boundaries defeats the project of postcolonialism, which is to convince that colonization is a thing of the past. The Bible, itself, as a tool of conversion, of colonization, is proof enough. The Swami Bhagavatpada translations of the **Upanishad**, the Ramakrishna Mutt Editions of the **Bhagavadgita**, the **Puranas** and the **Upanishad** all aim at a readership beyond the cultural immediacy. In the instance of the Bible, what necessitates translations is the clerical need to address its folk, in its expanding diocese. The Krishna consciousness translations are effected towards a neo-conversion project. In both instances, the intent is the same.

Yet, the question of what gets translated remains unanswered most of the time. Edwin Gentzler throws a little light on how the 'What' can never be answered, 'there is no kernel or deep structure, nothing we may ever discern – let alone represent, translate or found a theory there on'<sup>12</sup>. This explication of Derrida's relativist understanding of transaction across linguistic spaces results in a cultural trap. If there is nothing to translate or represent why does one strive so much? The answer perhaps lies beyond all linguistic and political domains, in that of the philosophical. The belief that there is something to translate is founded on the belief that 'I can translate'. Here, the presumption is the inaccessibility to knowledge of the many to the knowledge of the private. Such hegemonic attitude is the result of a political astuteness of the operative within the force field of semiotics. This is so even when the translator is unfamiliar with the source language and uses interpreters to 'research' translate / 'deductive' translate the original. Whatever may be the question of authenticity be, translation as a cultural activity is also one that attempts to familiarise the reader with certain congruencies in the 'other' as well as the 'different'.

A translator, finally, is at least to himself aware of one thing, that is his civility and his ability both are under scrutiny when

he translates. If all acts of writing involve a certain essentialist process, that of an encoding in a specific language, the act of translation is one that problematizes writing. All translations are negotiations, and as such the borders of translation as a paradigm are amorphous. Translation at once deconstructs the given of the assumed relationship between the writer and the work. Translation deals with the other. It is anthropological at the exploitative end and aesthetic at the romantic. It is transgression of the unchanging essence of the original. Each translation, therefore, is popularly conceived as a minimal release of a word, a historicizing of the ahistoric meaning. Translation is the meant of the meaning, and therefore at the point of emergence necessitates a further othering. Lawrence Venuti sums up the status of translation today in the following words: 'The hierarchy of cultural practices that ranks translation lowest is grounded on romantic expressive theory and projects a platonic metaphysics of the text, distinguishing between the authorized copy and the simulacrum that deviates from the author'<sup>13</sup>.

Translation in India is perhaps the result of a constant need to familiarize oneself with the canonical literature. It is doubtful how many could commonly access either Pali or Sanskritic texts. Yet again, translations from Sanskrit into other languages have existed on palmyra for a long time. Such translations were necessarily outside the religious and the ritualistic needs of a society. One may therefore very well arrive at a conjecture that in India at least, translation was an activity, which secularised the text, and helped establish distinct linguistic traditions in a regional context. Non-formal events like *Kathakalakshepa* have traditionally resorted to translation as orature. What is being stressed at this point is the remarkable tentativeness of the act of translation. It is an intellectual process where discourses are set in flow. It is therefore, almost always, meaningless to ask the question what is being translated. For, the question assumes that there is not only a unitary text of frozen contour but that there is a tenacious physical relationship between the author and the text that is being translated. Such assumptions can hardly be tenable

in the face of Derrida's categorical assertion:

" And the sign must be the unity of a heterogeneity, since the signified (sense or thing, noeme or reality) is not in itself a signifier, a trace..... The formal essence of the signified is presence, and the privilege of its proximity to the logos as phone is the privilege of essence"<sup>14</sup>.

It is therefore that translators abrogate a demanded responsibility to be true to the original. After all translating the original is a notion that is fraught with problems. For Andrew Benjamin, in his article "*Translating origins: Psychoanalysis and Philosophy*"; the act of translation is to question the origin itself. Look at what he says:

The origin as that which is put into question brings psychoanalysis and translation into contact since both are marked by the inevitability and necessity within their origins – including their own conception of the origin – of the process named within psychoanalysis as "*Nachtra glichkeit*"; a term which at this stage can be translated as "*deferred action*", or "*action at a distance*"<sup>15</sup>.

Such notions of the 'essence' and of the 'origin' lead to either conceiving of writing as an act of representations not dissimilar to Derrida's notion of presence as a "*Supplement of a supplement*"<sup>16</sup>, or as what interpolates. However, in both instances what is at stake is the notion of translation as a search for precise match. It is possible to concur with such a departure from a conservative notion of precision in translation. One is at this juncture reminded of Octavio Paz's own belief that poetry is an act of divorcing a word from its historicity (cf. Octavio Paz, "*Introduction*" [Selected Poems](#).) If the act of writing then is an act of freeing a word from its texted associations, translating that word should then necessarily involve not merely to identify the word in a climate of synonymous resonance. There are in fact always, in most cases, synonymity. However, synonyms betray. So then, is translation a search for uniqueness? One answer rests perhaps in the question

why does one translate? The answers could be many. However, it is also conceivable that a translator is born when (s)he essays on a sanguinary search for that which allows complementarity in life. It would perhaps be wise to involve Umberto Eco at this juncture:

“ The solution for the future is more likely to be in a community of peoples with an increased ability to receive the spirit, to taste or savour the aroma of different dialects. Polyglot Europe will not be a continent where individuals converse fluently in all the other languages; in the best of cases, it could be a continent where differences of language are no longer barrier to communication, where people can meet each other and speak together, each in his or her own tongue, understanding, as best they can, the speech of others”<sup>17</sup>.

Translation strives towards such an end, of the commonweal. The business of a translator then could perhaps be to bring the genius of one language into the climate of the other. That would constitute a practice in which the translator would work to the full the resources of the target language. It does not merely involve a couple of dictionaries, a thesaurus and a book of grammar. Look at what a significant translator of our classical texts says in a recent book of his:

You need to savour the sound and semantic values of words and to be in love with them. Surrendering to the text in this way means most of the time being literal- for the “ spirit killeth and the letter giveth life”. That is how you retextualize the original in the receiving language. To maximize the problematic of translation, you need that the language you translate from and the one you translate into are alien, and not cognate languages<sup>18</sup>.

Sharma is here talking about the aesthetics involved in the act of translating literary texts. Even as he summons Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra to disinvest the faith in the notion of the ‘ real’<sup>19</sup>, he clearly prioritizes the translator's right to freedom from the linguistic categories of the source language. Such freedom is

not absolute. No translator really takes it to be so. It is a limited freedom, which a musician or a dancer enjoys in the performance of a composition. Apart from the achieved movement in its musicality, the significance of the verbal dynamics may yield very little.

No word exists in any language without its cultural resonances. Therefore, in the task of transferring those cultural inscriptions of a word into the target language lies the genius of a translator. It is precisely here that the exercise of freedom prefigures. Finally, the translator and the translated work are both deeply embedded. Only when we realize this political inscription of Translation as always already in existence will we realize the onerous task that a translator performs.

**NOTE:**

Quotations from B.C.Ramachandra are all translated by the author.

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