

THE COLONIAL LEGACY: TRANSLATING THE BHASHA LITERATURE IN INDIA

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Abstract

Although an ideal translation mandates that the cultural aspects of the text are transferred adequately in the target language, it is seldom the case. In postcolonial translation, the ideal translation situation cease to exist as the mind of the translator of the bhasha literatures into English are covered with the imperial/colonial mindset. This paper seeks to investigate this legacy and the dismay of translator in such a scenario in confrontation with the colonial agenda of the theories of postcolonialism.

From the cultural perspective, it is not only the text itself that is *the* object of translation, rather what is in fact translated is the culture related to that text. The textual choices made by translators shape a certain idea of India within the *connected history* of India and Europe during the period of intensified encounters. This perspective invites us to document the colonial and post-colonial period with vernacular sources. This inevitably produces a more accurate picture of the relationship between India and the West, translated to and for each other.

India is a multicultural space accommodating many races, castes, languages, religions and cultures. Yet, for all their multiple pluralism, Indians shared a cultural universe which ensured that they would not need to *translate* India for themselves. Italicizing the word ‘translate’ here serves to bring forth the basic argument that while in pre-colonial India, by and large, the activity of translation occurred within a shared cultural universe, the colonial masters began schooling Indians in such a way that the latter would, increasingly, need to make sense of their own traditions, texts, and knowledge(s) through translation in a new language. Thus, the multilingual Indian literary scenario came to be marked by the existence of and domination of Indian literary scenario by Indian writing in English and Bhasha literatures translated into English.

The advent of English and its growing ascendancy changed the translation scene as never before. At least three areas of translation grew and prospered. One, translation of Indian literary texts into English; two, translation of English language texts into Indian languages; three, translation from one Indian language into another. The trajectory of each kind was different, but the total outcome was a tremendous enrichment of our literary culture.

The first area, the translation of Indian texts into English by the West, made highly select items of Indian literature, such as *Shakuntala*, available to England and other parts of the English

speaking world. The second area mentioned above is particularly significant. As soon as Indians managed to learn enough English, they not only began translating into their own languages literary texts available in English, but also translated texts of Bhasha literatures into English. About the third area – namely, translation of literary texts from one Indian language into another – it had already begun in pre-colonial times, but it revived and expanded during the later years of colonial subjugation. What was earlier more of a literary exercise now became an aspect of the new nationalism, and the tradition has continued with AK Ramanujan translating from Tamil and medieval Kannada, P Lal's long-term engagement with *Mahabharata* and other Sanskrit texts, and Velchuri Narayan Rao's rendering of old Telugu poetry into English.

In the course of translating from an Indian language into English, we land ourselves in an unusual position. We have, for about one hundred years or more, reversed the seemingly eternal and ancient aura of the assumption that translators can master only their mother tongue and must therefore translate only in that direction. During this period of time, some of us acquired the knowledge well enough to communicate with native speakers of English, while yet others mastered the language even better and earned recognition in English-speaking countries as writers of English.

The traditional stand that translators should translate only into one's mother tongue does not have a long history. On the contrary, translation into a non-mother tongue can also be found at the dawn of Western history: in the ancient world, the native language of the translator was not an issue, nor is translation out of one's mother tongue a rare occurrence in the twentieth century. It was and still is a common translation practice in minor-language communities, or to use the current euphemism, in communities, which use "a language of restricted distribution or limited diffusion" and which are forced to translate into foreign languages, if they want their works to be recognized/canonised at all in the global level.

Translation into a non-mother tongue is common in small as well as in large language communities; however, it is undoubtedly more common in cultures and communities which do not have a central status and are forced to the global periphery. The main reason is the wholesale application of Eurocentric norms while studying and translating literatures belonging to the colonial and the post-colonial world. Eurocentrism is masked in literary study by literary universality and the universal human subject. Such a Eurocentric perspective was responsible for scrutinizing, analyzing, labeling and finally canonizing literatures of the colonial world.

Certain varieties of post-colonial theories have succeeded in rationalizing such perspectives. The notion of *hybridity* for instance belongs to this realm. Of late, hybridity is used to legitimize and authenticate the ambivalent post-colonial reality saturated by Western ideas. It is one of the most widely employed terms in postcolonial theory. It refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.

The term 'hybridity' is associated with the work of Homi. J. Bhabha. His analysis of colonizer/colonized relationship stresses their inter-dependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. Bhabha contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the 'third space of enunciation'. Cultural identity always emerges in a contradictory and ambivalent space, which, for Bhabha, makes the claim to a hierarchical purity of cultures untenable. According to him, the recognition of this ambivalent space of cultural identity may help us to overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural differences may operate.

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or post-colonial provenance. For, a willingness to descend into

that alien territory...may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.

Bhabha is categorical in his rejection of old liberal humanist notions of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. According to him, it is the in-between or third space that carries the burden and meaning of culture and this is what makes the notion of hybrid important. Bhabha's notion of hybridity or celebration of in-between or third space quickly became a part of the vocabulary of modern translation theory, and there have been many attempts to look at the whole discourse of translation from this angle.

All attempts at cultural and textual translation must work on the assumption of the multi-tracked, non-synchronous nature of cultural hybridities, not of a one-way road leading from the source text to the target text. Thus, one discovers not only a sphere of new internationalism in the sense of the complex practice and poetics of world-wide migration and the cultural symbolism into which the historical processes of the transformation of the post-colonial societies themselves are translated, but also the powerhouses where global or international culture is retranslated into specific cultural or historical locality. Post-colonial translations postulate the decentralization and location of hybrid cultures across the traditional axis of translation between separate cultures and literatures.

Arjun Appadurai has developed perspectives for the study of the tendency of globalization. He has proposed a landmark theory according to which translation must reflect de-territorialization and displacement by the transfer, blending and shifting of local experience towards new multiple ethnic and social identities. He argues that the concept of the nation as the container of world literatures and the source and the target of translations has become increasingly questionable in a world that can now be regarded as post-national because of such phenomena as globalization, migration, exile and diaspora.

Therefore, a text originating in a post-colonial world like India, to be accepted or legitimized has to be in the translated state: Bhabha defines it as

Hybridity = International Culture

in opposition to cultural diversity. Appadurai on the other hand, locates it in the collective post-national psyche of modern migrant population.

Unmasking such rationalizations enables us to understand as to why most of the translations of the narratives of eminent writers like Shivarama Karanth (Kannada) and Vaikum Mohammed Bashir (Malayalam) have failed to accomplish legitimacy in terms of not being made into the part of the Western canon. Anita Mannur states with full statistical details that during these five decades after India's Independence, 1074 Indian texts from sixteen different languages have been translated into English. Of these, only a few texts have been given entry into the western canonical establishment. The reason is very clear: translations into the master language get legitimized only if such translated narratives exist in an already translated - post-national - hybrid state. For instance, *Tughluq* by Girish Karnad or *Samskara* by U.R. Ananthamurthy have been integrated into the Western canon in view of their representation of post-colonial hybrid experience. Both Tughluq and Praneshacharya, the protagonists of *Tughluq* and *Samskara* respectively, speak from dehistoricised locations saturated by Sartrean existentialism. Aren't they our post-national heroes celebrating our hybridity appealing to an international audience? If Girish Karnad's *Tughluq* is cast in the mould of Camus' Caligula, Praneshacharya, the protagonist of Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* looks like a Sartrean prototype with incessant bouts of existential turmoil. On the other hand, despite the fact that not less than

half a dozen major novels of Shivarama Karanth's have been translated into English, none of them has found a place in the critical canon in the West, precisely because he does not speak from a hybrid location. The fictional world of Karanth brilliantly portrays modern India's arrival as a nation with all her problematic and complex historical and intellectual baggage. Regrettably, such distinct nationalist preoccupations of Third World writers have attracted little critical attention in view of the alien nature of their ideological location.

The position of the post-colonial Indian translator remains complicated by the fact of the deep furrows created by the empire in our native soil. Robert Young has conceded the “great attention accorded to India [...] perpetuate the differing evaluations that the British accorded to the various parts of the empire.” Young further elaborates on the quantum of economic, cultural and historical attention that our nation received from the coloniser and concludes that India was “the crown of colonial discourse analysis.” The post colonial translator in India often traverses in multilingual spaces. The (in)famous minute of Macaulay denigrated the cultural and linguistic legacy of Sanskrit and Persian, while unconsciously negating the value of the entire gamut of *Bhasha* literatures from *Sangam* times, to all existing vernacular modes of writing. Therefore, the post colonial translator adopts the twin processes of appropriation and approbation of the colonisers tongue to explain his linguistic heritage and establish a cross-cultural relationship, while also adopting his translatory potential to write back at the empire.

The postcolonial theory has, indeed, provided a powerful analytical framework for translation studies. Bassnett and Trivedi believe that the hierarchic opposition between the original work and translation reflects the hierarchic opposition between the European colonizer culture and the colonized culture. This hierarchy, they observe, is Eurocentric, and its spread is associated with the history of colonialization, imperialism, and proselytization. Because of these historical reasons, many radical theories of translation have come up in the former colonies.

The study of translation practice and theory in the context of globalization is crucial significance for a multilingual, post-colonial nation like India. Paul St.-Pierre and Lawrence Venuti have made some insightful reflections on the relationship between translation practices and the processes of globalization. St.-Pierre points out the problems of making generalized observations regarding the relationship between globalization and translation. As against Venuti's generalized observation that globalization results in more capital being spent on translation into the regional languages, Paul St.-Pierre calls attention to the fact of increasing emphasis on translations from Indian languages like Oriya *into* English. This is says is due to the place of English in a multilingual, post-colonial society like India. He notes the important contradiction in the situation like this where the processes of globalization are threatening the local languages and cultures on the one hand and at the same time it also valorizes the regional and the local by considering it worthy of translation and publication by important publishers.

As an identity of literature depends essentially on nationality and not on language, it is said that only regional literatures- called *Bhasha* literatures are the national literatures of India. In spite of the apparent heterogeneity of the literary scene in India, the multilingual Indian literary scenario is marked by the existence of Indian writing in English and regional language literatures translated in English. India is a cultural memory in which the history of its society is embedded. Society remembers and participates in this history when it is put in a context. Hence, it paves a pivotal role for the translators to recreate this participatory experience of the source language culture by relocating it in the target language so that the reader can participate in an alien cultural experience. Translators have the power to act as connectors between cultures and languages. Since English is the language of interaction and the most natural language for emotional and

creative expression, in order to globalize and localize any literary work, it is mandatory to translate it into English. As stated by Paul St. Pierre in “A Handbook of Translation Studies” by Bijay Kumar Das:

The importance of translation can be located in the fact that translation brings the readers, writers, and critics of one nation into contact with those of others, not only in the field of literature, but in all areas of human development: Science and Philosophy, Medicine, Political Science, Law and Religion, to name but a few.

Thus translation helps in the course of nation building. There is a strong interconnection between translation and the constitution of national identity. Through translations nations define themselves and in doing so they define others. Furthermore, when the medium of translation is English, it brings to surface a different cultural context of any social evil existing in the Indian society. English shares the common ground of Indian realities. As stated by Chandran in “English Bhasha: A Commentary through Three Indian Narratives by Paranjape:

When English narrates an episode, its commitment as a medium gets resolutely directed towards a Bhasha and its ethos in question.

Indian literature is an expression of the vital plurality and productive diversity of our nation. Community-states in India have no well-defined boundaries; they cross each other's frontiers. In many cases, languages are not confined to the geographical boundaries of particular states; languages contain many variations and dialects and share a number of features. States have a mixed population speaking different languages. When members of these communities communicate with each other, they often have to speak different mixed varieties of languages, so people inside their state as well as outside are constantly engaged in translation. India, thus, is a land of “translating consciousness”. Translation is an egalitarian process that engineers the plane space. It frees the knowledge system from the possession of a few individuals, transfers the text into different domains, and gives it new linguistic and cultural incarnations. It is not concerned with the transfer of meaning; it transforms a text, and, in the process, may transform the meaning, which the target language culture often influences and determines. Derrida calls translation “a regulated transformation”.

In India, the creation of a *babu* class (Philistines, in an Arnoldian sense) had its own problems, and the British administration faced a dilemma of its own making by providing education to the natives, thus fueling their aspirations. By then denying them access to higher services, the British turned education into an arena for social conflict. However, it was this conflict that also created space for native resistance to British rule, as Viswanathan notes: "The colonial subject's resistance to British rule occurs in the ideological space created by this contradiction, transforming education in its dual aspects of social control and social advancement into the supreme paradox of British power".

This paradox did create enabling conditions for political decolonization, but it was by no means the sole factor, since decolonization is a much more complex process and an engagement with its politics and practices requires interrogation of its textual figuration. That is a major argument of Viswanathan's book. Now that a loose affiliation of texts, revisionary reading practices, and literary histories are being institutionalized under the disciplinary rubric of colonial and postcolonial studies, the analytical rigor of her searching critique should prove to be very useful. It will also break down the fixity of the dividing lines imposed by the simple binary of colonizer/colonized, which, though as an enabling fiction has served an instrumental and historical purpose, should not detract from the awareness that the oppositional politics of the

colonized was mobilized also from pressures other than colonial authority via multiple social mediations. The difficulty with any warring dichotomy is that it sets up its own orthodoxy that could bedevil any project of postcolonial studies. English studies, which had its beginnings as a strategy of containment, stirred up a host of questions about the interrelations of class, culture, state, and modes of assertion. Viswanathan does not offer a facile critique of colonialism. While analyzing the legitimating structures invoked by the dominant narrative, she advances the thesis that appropriation, definition, and subordination were all caught up together in a system of representation. Hence any national or regional tradition cannot be analyzed independently of its historical implication in the British colonial enterprise. Resistance is not a simple modality, and decolonization as a process involves an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist forces and perpetual subversions of them.

Translators not only act as agents in all act of translating, but they learn in their own cultures an understanding, or we might say their cultures teach them what the audience would take, what it is that would make sense to anyone reading a translated text. In other words, matters of taste are culturally constructed and they grow out of the particular context in which the work is produced. Making sense occupies the most important aspect of any translation effort, and all acts of translation are conditioned by this understanding of the translator, her comprehension of what makes sense in a society that could be very different from the one from which the original text comes. It is therefore obvious that the translated text has to be a subject that is under the constraints of networks of power operating at different levels in the context of the translation.

An excellent example of this East/West dialogue is W. B. Yeats' enthusiasm and praise of Tagore's self-translation of *Geetanjali* (*Song Offerings*) into English. It is well-known that his rendering from Bengali was quite disastrous, yet he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1911. The response to this action was mixed. Edmund Gosse in a letter to Yeats described it as "a wise piece of imperialism." Obviously the award, though well deserved, was on the basis of a badly translated text and consequently is now considered an extension of "recognition to a subaltern culture". The encounter between two cultures under the hegemonic power of the colonizer is fraught with danger. Unless the status between the Source Language and the Target Language is recognized as being equal, a degree of misrepresentation is bound to occur.

Interesting developments have come from the systematic linguistic interface between English and the different Indian languages. During the colonial period English was the medium of instruction together with the various regional languages. It evolved as the major link language between the different regional languages. The constant interaction over a fairly long period resulted in the birth of Indian writings in English. In its initial stage it began as Indianised English in the works of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan and gradually evolved towards the sophisticated and elegant English of Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy—all winners of international awards. These writers have internalized the entire process of translation and are no longer concerned with transference from one language to another but have adopted the language of translation as their own. There is, thus, a blending of the culture of the Source Language with the conventions and culture of the Target Language that result in a translation which, though not an exact transference of the original text, provides a faithful cultural understanding of the original in the minds of the Target Language readers.

We transfer content because we must, knowing it cannot be done, in translation as in all communication, yet differently. We transpose level and texture of language, because we must, knowing that idiom does not go over. It is this double bind that the best and most scrupulous translation hints at, by chance, perhaps.

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