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Re-Examining Some Problems of Translation of Literature

Sukriti Ghosal

Registrar
Hindi University, Howrah

Abstract

Translation discourse which has recently re-surfaced in the academia needs re-examination for various reasons. Although many problems related to inter-lingual translation, especially of literary texts, have been variously discussed by scholars and critics, many important aspects are still found unaddressed. Some of the issues that have not been clinched even today are – what is the role of interpretation in determining the precise nuance of a term; why an equivalent even when it verbally corresponds to the original cannot always be used in translation; what is the relation between usage restriction and equivalence; why for capturing the cultural association of the original sometimes even a ‘wrong’ verbal counterpart is to be accepted as the best alternative in translation; why selection of an equivalent becomes a challenge when the members of a linguistic community for whom the translation is meant have heterogeneous cultural affiliations; how the evolution of culture problematizes the task of translation, making what is appropriate unacceptable. The present article discusses some of these cruces and concludes that despite these challenges, translation of literary of texts, especially the ones de-canonised by the rulers, must continue. This is because while translation can be a means for interrogating the power structure, it can also be a means for embracing internationalism.

Keywords: Interpretation, Usage restriction, Heterogeneous Cultural affiliation, Evolution of culture, De-canonisation

Translation – literal or literary – has many forms and types. In ‘On Linguistic Aspects of Translation’ (1959) Roman Jakobson mentions three types of translation – *inter-semiotic*, *intra-lingual* and *inter-lingual* (Jakobson 233). When the Romantic visionary William Blake drew

sketches and coloured them to illustrate his poems, this transference of idea from one art form to another is inter-semiotic translation, for the vision is re-incarnated in pictorial form although the focus is on the poem, the first fleshing of the vision. When *pani* (water) is represented by synonymous words of the same language *udak, nir, ap* or when Shakespeare's dialogues are simplified and re-written in modern English, say in 'No Fear Shakespeare' series, the translation is intra-lingual. The third type – inter-lingual translation – is basically replacing signifiers of one language with those of a different language so as to make the text comprehensible to readers who may not read the text in the language in which it was originally encoded. For example, when 'water' is rendered as 'Aqua' (Latin), 'Nero' (Greek), 'Eau' (French), 'Wasser' (German), 'Mizu' (Japanese), the rendition is inter-lingual. The present article proposes to critically examine some of the basic tenets of inter-lingual literary translation in order to understand the nature of problems and how to negotiate them.

Translation discourse has re-surfaced in the academic space in the past few decades presumably due to global interest in reading the works of Nobel laureates. It is not that translation was not so much in practice in the past. Leaving apart the translation of oral literature into writing which was sort of copying, the Bible was translated into Greek even before the birth of Christ. Critical views on translation are also centuries old. For example, John Dryden, himself a translator of commendable accomplishment, in his Preface to *Ovid's Epistles* (1680) mentions three types of translation – *metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation* to distinguish three broad types of translation of literature. 'Metaphrase' is word-for-word translation, the prefix *meta-* in the context means not *beyond* but *after*. 'Paraphrase' is rendering a literary text with some degree of latitude, which is why it is often looked upon as a dilution rather than a reliable reproduction of the original. 'Imitation' is a sort of creative transposition – although the original text inspires this rendition, the details of the original can hardly be traced to the new text. According to Dryden, Jonson's translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Waller's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Cowley's translation of two Pindaric Odes respectively illustrate these three types of translation (Works, 1, 114-15).

The etymological sense of ‘translation’ is ‘carried across’ (<Latin ‘trans-’, across + ‘-latio’, the past participle form of ‘ferre’, ‘to carry’). In most cases the focus is on the transference of the semantic core – message/ idea/ thought/ experience whatever, in an undistorted form from one language to another. Lawrence Venuti has pertinently observed, ‘translation is a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation’ (Venuti, 17). Any translation requires bilingual proficiency, for minus the linguistic acumen to grasp the nuance of words of the Source Language (SL) or the power to re-express it in the Target Language (TL), no translation can be successful. So, a translator is not a mere copyist – although (s)he can never enjoy the full freedom of an independent creator, for, generally speaking, the source text can never be lost sight of.

Translators are well aware that the task is not easy at all. It involves a number of challenges. The main challenge is certainly balancing fidelity and freedom – loyalty to the source text and deviating from the source in order to communicate to the target reader. Absence of balance is treated as a fault in Translation Studies, be it *domestication* or *foreignisation*. Incidentally, while the former is ‘an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values’, the latter is ‘an ethnodeviant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad’ (Venuti 20). Too much of fidelity to the original will result in foreignisation of the translated text and create problems of easy reading. On the other hand, if only the expectations of the target readers become a priority and the SL text is domesticated to a fault, the flavor of the original will get considerably dehydrated making the translation almost a useless exercise. An Italian phrase ‘*traduttore traditore*’ – translator a traitor – finely sums up the precarious moral dilemma of the translator who is always a victim of conflicting allegiances and cannot be true to one moral obligation without violating the other. Balancing fidelity and freedom are the toughest challenge, for while loyalty to the SL text makes a translation un-reader-friendly, reader-friendly translation makes it dull by desalinating the original flavor.

Any general statistics will reveal that translation of writings published in the field of science, technology and social science are less controversial although globally they far exceed translation of literary writings. One obvious reason is that the writing that is message-centred does not suffer much when transposed into a different tongue. Does it, therefore, follow that translation of non-literary texts is a cake walk? It is not so, for each language has certain unique features which can hardly be retained in a different language. For instance, in Bengali there are three forms of Second Person pronoun: *tui* (intimate or dis-honorific), *tumi* (formal), *apni* (formal and honorific). This subtle distinction cannot be retained in English where there is just one form, *you*. The Bengali verb *khaoya* ('to eat') generally expresses intake of everything – solid, liquid, even gaseous. So, one can eat rice, water and *bidi*, although in English one *eats* rice, *drinks water* and *smokes bidi*. There are problems with name words. *Chawal* is boiled rice in Hindi, un-boiled rice in Bengali. One advantage of name words is that, without searching for equivalent words in the TL, these may be left unchanged in translation, if required with a footnote. But this cannot be done when the expression is idiomatic: e.g., 'to rain cats & dogs' or 'to go cold turkey' 'to beat around the bush', 'to cut the Gordian knot'.

But where the import gets precedence over literal signification, where sound and sense enter into an un-divorceable bond, as in literature, one must murder to dissect; that is, translation is impossible without disintegrating this unique bond. In order to establish the first point, one may consider the first two lines of a verse from Tagore's novel *Char Adhyay* ('Four Chapters'): '*Prohor shesher aloy ranga sedin choitramas/ Tomar chokhe dekhechhilem amar sarvanash*' (Chapter II). The literal meaning of the second line is 'in your eyes I saw my ruin'. But this *sarvanash* ('ruin') is no doom or catastrophe, for it is spoken by a lover hypnotised by the eyes of the object of one's love. 'My self-composure is sealed in your eyes' something like this may come closer in signification to the original. As regards the second, the unique sonic-semantic cohesion, the argument will be clear if we just try to translate the following lines from Tagore's poetic-play *Devatar Gras* ('The Divine Gulp')

*Jal shudhu jal
Dekhe dekhe chitta tar hoyechhe bikal.*

Masrin chikkan krishna kutil nisthur
Lolup lelihajihva sarpasama krur
Khal jal chhal-vara tuli lakshafana... (Tagore 1981: 335)

Water only water,
Seeing the unvarying stretch he is out of his mind
Smooth, glossy, dark, crooked, unpitying
Greedy licking tongue, baleful like the snake
Vile, deceitful, raising many hoods... (Translation mine)

Everyone having a smattering of Bengali must admit that although the sense has been captured, the original flavor is missing because the jingle of the 'l' sound which makes us hear the wave-breaking is lost. Another example from Tagore's famous poem 'Duhsamay' ('Hard Times') may help drive the point home:

Achhe shudhu pakha, ache mahanava-angan
Usha disha hara nibid-timir-anka. (Tagore 1981: 293)

(You) Have only wings and the vast space of the sky
Marked by nocturnal darkness where dawn's course gets lost
(Translation mine)

Here too the meaning is clear but the evocation due to the refrain-effect of *achhe*, the assonance of *usha* and *disha*, the consonance of *nibid* and *timir* is certainly missing, which is why the translation cannot rise to the height of the original. In non-literary translation this is no serious loss because it is message-centric. But a word in poetry, Taraknath Sen reminds us, 'has not merely a meaning-value but also a sound value' (Sen 101). Where the relation of sound and sense is like body and soul or bone and muscle, any attempt to carry either ignoring the vitality of their bond will inevitably cause aesthetic desiccation.

No less problematic is the rendition of culture specific terms. Language carries the baggage of culture which, as Raymond Williams has justly shown, 'is a whole way of life' (Williams 18). Eminent linguist and father of 'linguistic relativity' hypothesis, Edward Sapir has justly maintained that 'No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality; the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached' (Sapir 69). As language is the vehicle of culture, it is hard to retain the original

nuance in translation of culture specific words. For example, the translation of *gangajal* as 'Ganga water' retains the verbal sense without the trace of cultural overtone that the word carries in most Indian languages. *Gangajal* is not merely the water of the river Ganga, but water which is believed to have a purifying potential despite the existence of millions of coliform bacteria and other pathogens or toxic elements in a drop of such water. The translation of the Sanskrit word *dwija* as 'twice born' is somewhat confusing to Western readers, for, strictly speaking, no one can be born twice. The word signifies a Brahmin who is believed to be spiritually re-born at the time of *upanayan* or the ceremony of wearing the sacred thread. In his translation of Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 18', 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' Sudhindranath Dutta preferred *basanta* ('spring') as the linguistic analogue of 'summer'. *Prima facie* it is quite perplexing, since the Bengali equivalent of 'summer' is *grisma* not *basanta*. However, in the tropical region, the long-stretched summer with its scorching sun rays has hardly the pleasant association that the season summer has in a cold country like England. Rejection of the so called 'correct' equivalent is admittedly a gain to us because what is literally 'correct' would be culturally incorrect in the context. How to translate a word like *antesty* or *satkar*? It may be *cremation* if the dead person is a Hindu, *burial* if the person is a Christian or a Muslim, *dakhma*, 'the tower of silence' if the person is a Parsi, for Zoroastrian faith prohibits the contact of a corpse with either earth or fire. Selection of equivalent must depend on the translator's acquaintance with the religious category of the person about whom it is used. The choice may be also be dictated by the culture of the target reader, or else it may lead to gap in communication and incomprehensibility. Incidentally, in *Toward a Science of Translating* Eugene Nida distinguishes between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. The latter is ideal because in it one is 'not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language message', but 'aims at complete naturalness of expression' (Nida 1964: 159). One, therefore, may venture to revise the very notion of equivalence. An equivalent word is less a word that corresponds literally to the word in the original but more a word that grasps the cultural nuance of the original. Nida has rightly insisted: "For a truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words

only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function.” (Nida 2002: 82).

Another serious problem in this regard is that culture is not static; it evolves, albeit slowly, over the years. As language embodies culture, every translator is expected to be conscious of the change and use language accordingly. Translation is primarily meant for contemporary readers. So, words that are outmoded if not obsolete, unless required for giving special effect, need to be avoided, or else the translation would be quaint. For example, there are a number of words that can be used in addressing one’s darling in a letter: *hridayballavesu*, *pranadhikasu*, *sucharitasu*, *priyatamasu*. The diction that Bankimchandra or Vidyasagar might have picked would certainly have a comic effect if used by a translator in the 21st century. This apart, the language of translation is expected to reflect other changes on the cultural front – say avoidance of sexism in language. The civilised society tries to minimize the various levels of discrimination/inequality found in society. If the source text wants to expose gender discrimination and the language is consciously gendered, the language of translation is not to tone down the sexist flavor for the sake of fidelity. Otherwise, the language used for translating a text today needs to avoid obviously sexist diction. It is not just substituting, as Taslima Nasrin has done in her autobiographical novel, *meyebela* (‘childhood of a girl’) for *chhelebela* (literally, ‘the childhood of a boy’), used gender-neutrally for childhood in general. This is because as a Bengali equivalent for ‘childhood’ both the terms (*meyebela* and *chhelebela*) are gendered. ‘Ms’ rather than ‘Mrs’ would be culturally appropriate translation of ‘Srimati’, for like ‘Mr’ the former does not point to the marital status of the woman concerned. Certain terms create problems in translation for having other type of sensitive cultural nuances. ‘Pani’ is universally used as an equivalent of ‘water’ in Hindi, whereas among Indian Bengalees its use is restricted to those who are by and large Muslim by faith while their Hindu brethren stick to *jal*. Linguistically conscious translators feel uneasy when they try to determine what would be the most appropriate counterpart of ‘water’ in Bengali. After all, in post-translation phase the translated text would open for all Bengali readers cutting across their religious faith. It would be wiser if at the time of selection of diction, the translator refers to the source text and

takes into account the religious identity of the character who uses the word or the social reality that the narrator wants to highlight.

One easy solution of hundreds of such problems of translation would be trans-creation – which is sort of independent creation in a new tongue inspired by but tangentially attached to the thought of the SL text.. Translation value of trans-creation is highly contested but this is not at all an easy task. Ezra Pound has shown commendable proficiency in this job and Tagore has translated as well as trans-created with singular finesse. One instance from Tagore will make the point clear. Consider Tagore's four-liner 'Udarcharitanam', which in Bengali reads:

*Prachirer chhidre ek namgotrahin
Futiyachhe chhotoful atishay din.
Dhik Dhik kare tare kanane sabai
Surya uthi bale tare, 'Valo achho vai?' (Tagore 1981: 290)*

'On the crack of the wall
A small flower without name and pedigree has bloomed.
The whole garden pooh-poohs the poor flower--
The morning sun greets it saying, 'Hope you are well.'

(Translation mine).

Tagore's own English translation of the poem, published as No. 67 of 'Stray Birds', reads: 'God Grows weary of great kingdoms, but never of little flowers' (Das 404). This deserves to be looked upon as another creation despite the fact that it is the Bengali original that inspired the English one-liner. The English translation of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* by Edward FitzGerald is world famous although FitzGerald has translated with more than ordinary liberty of a translator replacing many original expressions at will probably to make them palatable to Victorian taste: 'Where Omar asks for a loaf, a jug of wine, a sheep's thigh and a pretty boy, FitzGerald omits the meat, substitutes a 'Thou', and introduces a pretty book (which no Persian scholar would need) and a Bough, which is not a property of Persian wilderness' (Kermode 61) He consciously did this transmogrification, for, as he himself said to E. B. Cowell in a letter dated April 27, 1859, 'Better a live Sparrow than a stuffed Eagle' (Bassnett-McGuire 71). FitzGerald's 'free' translation, however, is immensely popular even today and readers hardly bother about small changes. The English translation of the Maupassant's 'Necklace'

is world famous although the scholar knows that Maupassant has no story of that name. Nobody bothers about the fact that the correct translation of the French title '*La Parure*' would be 'adornment' or 'jewelry' not 'necklace'.

In all its forms, translation is actually re-incarnation of an idea in a different language by use of an opposite equivalent. By lexicographical definition an equivalent is what is equal in value, purpose, worth, meaning, function etc. Finding such a word in another tongue, even when the two languages are cognate, is difficult indeed. Even when the equivalent word is available in the translated language, one cannot use it violating usage-restriction. The Hindi word for 'hair' (*bal*) also exists in Bengali, but it is a taboo word, for it denotes the pubic hair and hence treated as vulgar. In his Introduction to *Selected Translations* W. S. Merwin has rightly argued that a 'single primary denotations' is sharable but it is impossible to find equivalent when one takes into account 'the constellation secondary meanings' (say, pejorative nuance of *bitch*), the 'rings of associations' (e.g., *sati*) or the 'the etymological echoes'. 'Daughter', for example does not carry the root meaning echoes of terms like *duhita* (a female who sucks); *atmaja* (female issuing from oneself); *kanya* (female taken away: < Sanskrit *kan*, to take away); *tanaya* (female who continues the line: < Sanskrit *tan*, to propagate). The metaphorical sense of 'Mirjafar' in Bengali is 'a traitor'. Its English equivalent may be 'Judas' although the betrayal of Mirjafar is historical and it has no religious association. In a poem of Tarapada Roy entitled '*Bhut o Manus*' ('Ghost and Man'), two ghosts debate over the existence of man as we debate over the existence of the ghost. The one who has no doubt in this regard refers to the crowd in public places as proof in support of his belief. The other who is rather skeptical refutes the argument saying that the heart of each individual has not been anatomised to check whether it contains humanity. He then adds, '*Erpar kakhano bolte jabe na / Manus ache, manus dekhechhi*' (Roy). The word *manus* occurs twice in the last line. It would be wrong if one uses 'man' as equivalent in both the places, for, in the first, *manus* signifies the creature man; in the second, it is humanity which distinguishes man from other creatures. So, any acceptable Bengali translation of the lines needs to reflect the distinction. It could be: 'Now on never claim/ 'Man exists, I have seen

a human'. Or take for example Bibhas Roychoudhury's recent poem '*Shahid Stan Swamike Ek Bhandar Chithi*' ('A Hypocrite's Letter to Martyr Stan Swami'). Two lines of the poem run thus: '*Deshi Becharamer khela/ Foreign Kenaram to achhe*'. ('The native Sale-master/ In league with the foreign Buy-all' – Translation mine). Here '*Becharam*' and '*Kenaram*' are not just two names. These common Bengali names (literally 'Master Seller' & 'Master Buyer' respectively) have been purposefully chosen by the poet to target the crony capitalism of contemporary India, the collusion of politicians with the industrial tycoons. The profit-hungry capitalists want to grab all public property and their friends, the politicians, talk of patriotism but betray their country by enacting laws so that public property can be gifted to their friends in the business circle without any hassle. Successful translation, therefore, demands determination of word-class – understanding that '*Becharam*' and '*Kenaram*' are not just two proper names which require no change in translation. They are really Common Nouns used as Proper Nouns.

It is, therefore, clear that selection of counterpart in TL depends on how the translator interprets the original which again depends on correct comprehension of the nuances which is impossible without sound linguistic proficiency. All translation is in this sense a commentary. The task of the translator is somewhat close to that of the actor impersonating a role. When an actress/ actor impersonates a role (s)he has a script written by the dramatist but the dialogue is spoken in accordance with how it is interpreted by the stage-performer. Each interpretation brings out different meanings of the speech. In *Macbeth* when Macbeth is hesitant to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth tries to stimulate his flagging self-confidence. Macbeth is half-convinced but still lacks courage to venture it and says, 'If we fail'. Lady Macbeth retorts, 'We fail!' (I. vii, 65) Famous stage-personalities of different generations have spoken it to express surprise (how could Macbeth still be hesitant), hopelessness (that Macbeth still clings to his hesitancy), disgust (that Macbeth could be so stolid), ridicule (pooh-poohing Macbeth's inertia) or rebuke (that Macbeth wastes time over something not serious at all). Analogously, a translator is also required to interpret the idea expressed and use of equivalent word in the language of translation depends on this interpretation. At the end of Tagore's short story *Shasti* ('Punishment')

Chandara's husband, who is responsible for her false conviction in a case of murder, wants to meet her in the prison. Chandara refuses to meet him saying '*maran*', which is the last word of the story (Tagore 1989: 383). The translation of *maran* which literally means 'death' in Bengali is a real challenge to every translator, for in this context it cannot be 'death' at all. 'To hell with him!', 'Fie on it!', 'How stupid to say so!', 'Damn the thought!', 'Am I mad?' or any such expression one must think of to translate Chandara's exclamation which is inspired by a hurt sentiment of one who has been betrayed by one she trusted. The translation must squeeze out the protest of Chandara who, at this stage shows firmness of personality by not yielding to the remorseful appeal of her husband who is responsible for the false conviction of his young wife.

Translation, even when successful in the sense of having wide range of readership, falls short of perfection in one respect or other. In '*The Art of Translation*' (1941), Vladimir Nabokov has mentions three types of errors in translation: 1) errors due to ignorance or 'misguided knowledge', 2) errors due to laziness to explore subjecting 'scholarship to primness', 3) errors, least excusable according to Nabokov, that occur when the translator stoops to conquer and consciously distorts the original in order to 'conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public' (Nabokov). 'Free' translations are marked by other departures – Replacement, Insertion and Omission – which, although not errors, Nabokov would hardly be pleased with. Consider for example the English translation of 'Viday Avishap' ('Farewell-Curse'), published in English as 'Kacha and Devayani' with the original title *replaced*. In the last part of her last speech Devayani curses Kacha for ignoring her love in order to be true to his mission of gathering for the gods the knowledge of reviving the dead. In the manuscript the translation runs thus, 'Let me utter this curse that the great knowledge you have earned may become your burden, and though others may learn it from you, yet for the very lack of love it may ever remain apart from your life, like stars floating on the night, leaving its virgin darkness unespoused' (Chattopadhyay 45). This is indeed a poor translation of the original, for, idiomatically, the initial expression is recognizably un-English. In the published book, however, Tagore revised the wording of the manuscript and made it smarter: 'Accursed be that great knowledge

you have earned! – a burden that, though others share equally with you, will never be lightened. For lack of love may it ever remain as foreign to your life as the cold stars are to the unespoused darkness of virgin Night' (Das 258). In the original there is no reference to 'cold stars' or 'virgin Night' which Tagore has *inserted* in the translation, what for is anybody's guess. As regards *omission*, which is not infrequent in translation, Tagore has omitted the last speech of Kacha with which the poetic drama ends: 'Ami bar dinu tumi sukhi habe/ Vule yabe sarvaglani bipul gourabe' ('I bless you, you will be happy/ And forget the chapter in the glory of your life' (Tagore 1981: 213). It is not clear why Tagore must omit it, for it brings out the greatness of the character of Kacha whose love for Devayani is too profound to be profaned by a counter-curse.

Most translators, despite utmost devotion to their task, get lesser recognition than even ordinary authors. Of course, there are exceptions like Kritibas Ojha or Kashiram Das, the Bengali translator of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* respectively. But the thumb rule is that, the better the translation, the more invisible the translator. In *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995) Venuti traces it to domestication tendency and over-emphasis on 'fluency' in translation. Whatever the reason, for the translator self-expression, paradoxically, is a mode of self-effacement, for every translator endeavours to make the source text voice perfectly audible by muting his own. Finally, in one's interest in the aesthetic value or the communicative value of translation what one often tends overlook is that there is a relation between translation and power. In several essays, especially in 'The Politics of Translation' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has shown how the colonial power has used translation to gag the 'other' voice, especially of women. She has justly argued that as translation has been used by colonial rulers strategically to advance their own colonial interest, postcolonial resistance demands re-translating the books or translating those books that colonial rulers wanted to suppress. In 'Writing between the Lines: Politics and Poetics of Translation', R. Parthasarathy has justly observed that 'The translator unearths long-forgotten classics and puts them into orbit, thus redrawing the literary map' (Parthasarathy 170). It is a fact that visible or invisible control of translation by state power continues even today. It is visible when a classic postcolonial text like

Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' is expunged from the English (Hons) syllabus of a Delhi University (in 2021) presumably on political grounds. It is invisible when a translator cannot risk translating a text in fear of becoming a target, or even if translates it, cannot find a publisher. But translation will continue negotiating all these challenges, for it is the only way thoughts and ideas can cross linguistic and spatial barriers. R. Parthasarathy thinks that in a multi-lingual, multicultural country like India, 'the very survival (of the nation-state) depends on it' (Parthasarathy 184). Besides, translation helps us to transcend national barriers and reach out to the world. One concludes quoting the words of Jose Saramago, the Portuguese Nobel laureate, 'Writers make national literature with their language, but world literature is created by translators' (Glasberg).

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