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Translation and Memory: Recovery of the Past in “Face in the Mirror”

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Abstract

Memory and translation always have something preceding them. Their existence depends on a prior happening. A past occurrence is recounted in memory and a text is rewritten in its translation. The paper draws on many similarities between translation and memories and illustrates it in the context of a story entitled “Face in the Mirror” written by an Assamese writer Arupa Patangia Kalita.

Keywords: Memory, Translation, Collective Memory, Historical Memory, Mediation.

Literature has had an inseparable relationship with memory since the time of its inception. Memory was the source and means for the creation and dissemination of oral literature. Considering the fundamental role of memory in literature Lovro Skopljanac in the essay, “Literature Through Recall: Ways of Connecting Literary Studies and Memory Studies” conjectures in this way:

The metaphorical blend of memory with literature, where memorising is the source domain and writing is the target domain, has been indirectly present in Western thought since Plato’s wax tablet (see Draaisma 2001), influencing the way memory is conceptualised and explained. The opposite blend, where writing is the source domain and memorising is the target domain, would conceptualise the writer as the encoder of meaning that is stored in a text and later recalled by a reader.

The above-quoted lines describe the associations between memory and writing and also between memory and reading. However, the terms source and target also bring to our mind the task of translation where the transmission happens between a source and a target text. Memory is stored in the human brain in the form of

individual or collective memories and again it is preserved in oral or written literature which can be decoded by the readers. In this journey of memory, literature works as a carrier of memories. Likewise, translation can be called an 'intercultural carrier of memory'. Sharon Deane-Cox, in the essay "Remembering Oradour-sur-Glane: Collective Memory in Translation" observes: "Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere, scope remains for a much more concerted and conscientious dialogue between Memory Studies and Translation Studies; the former may be served by a more detailed, critical appreciation of the processes and potential consequences of translation as an intercultural carrier of memory," (273).

Both memory studies and translation studies can complement each other. There is always room for discussion regarding the potential of translation as an intercultural carrier. When we think about it critically, we become aware that the nature of the task of the translation is such that it can never be perfect and there is always a scope of partiality. Translation mediates between two languages which are always non-equivalent and most of the time a translator's attempt at establishing an equivalence between them may result in a forceful connection leading to a limited view or a dispersed view. For a better understanding of the idea, we can refer to Maria Tymoczko as she tells:

...the receptor language and culture entail obligatory features that limit the possibilities of the translation, as well as extending the meanings of the translation in directions other than those inherent in the source text. .. As a result, translators must make choices, selecting aspects or parts of a text to transpose and emphasise. Such choices in turn serve to create representations of their source texts, representations that are also partial (24).

However, Derrida's claims expressed in his book *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation* pose a stark contrast to our discussion of the limitations of translation. He views that a translation ensures the survival of the original. He further stresses: "The work does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond the means of its author" (179). A similar view is given by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Task of the Translator" as he remarks: "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its after-life – which could

not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change" (73). In the same way, recounting of memory whether it is in the written or oral form whether it is a historical account or a literary production; undergoes a change. Yet the recounting guarantees the living on of the memory. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that in the act of translation, the translator goes through a great struggle to find the right words in the target language to express the ideas in the original text exactly. When memory is turned into narrative similar kinds of challenges are faced by the writer. Quoting Schachtel Mark Freeman articulates it beautifully:

At every step a word beckons, it seems so convenient, so suitable, one has heard or read it so often in a similar context, it sounds so well, it makes the phrase flow so smoothly. If he follows the temptation of this word, he will perhaps describe something that many people recognise at once, that they already know, that follows a familiar pattern; but he will have missed the nuance that distinguishes his experience from others, that makes it his own. If he wants to communicate that elusive nuance which in some way, however small, will be his contribution, a widening or opening of the scope of articulate human experience at some point, he has to fight constantly against the easy flow of words that offer themselves (265-266).

The familiarity of the language and its use in certain known contexts create an inextricable relation between words and meanings. To dissociate this link is the challenge in front of a translator and a narrator.

Memory needs mediation for its survival. The question becomes complicated because the idea of mediation also carries with it questions like whose memory, who will mediate etc. Edward Said talks about 'invented historical memory' which aided the 19th-century nation-building movements. It aided in creating a shared sense of the past. "Thereby providing a false, that is, invented memory of the past as a way of creating a new sense of identity for ruler and ruled" (178). Here memory is mediated in such a manner that it created a sense of oneness. The idea of invented historical memory is similar to the idea of pseudo-translation because here too the translator works with marginalised literary forms and themes. Lawrence Venuti states: "most likely to be literary forms and themes that are new to or currently marginal in the domestic culture so that the

pseudotranslator typically exploits accepted translation practices to work with cultural materials that might otherwise be excluded or censored” (33). Gideon Toury too opines that pseudo translations help in creating a new literary tradition at the time of tense historical situation (48).

In this manner, we can point out many affinities between translation and narrativisation of memory as both acts transmit cultural material from one place to another. However, when we discuss the issue in the context of texts where memory plays a key role and at the same time, they are translated into another language the issue gets intriguing. For instance, in this case memory is formulated in one language and again in translation, it is reformulated in another language. In both cases, the writer and the translator pass through the same experiences as has been discussed above.

For an analytical study one story entitled “Ghrinar Ipar Sipar” (translated as “Face in the Mirror”) written by an Assamese writer Arupa Patangia Kalita has been chosen. The story “Face in the Mirror” shows intricate interconnections among memories irrespective of time and culture. The story narrates the life of a girl in a missionary school in Assam in the 1960s. As a punishment one of her teachers made her sit with a very silent, unfriendly girl called Zungmila. Despite the many attempts from the girl’s side (who is also the narrator of the story) Zungmila did not speak with her although she helped her in their sewing class. At that time the small girl was reading the novel *Yaruingam* written by an Assamese novelist Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. The novel was set in Nagaland which talks about the involvement of the common Naga people in the world war and how they were affected by it. Zungmila too was a Naga girl. The girl, Zungmila’s classmate who is also the narrator of the story started to talk about the characters in *Yaruingam* in front of Zungmila. She told about Charengla’s (one of the characters in the novel) sorrow for being abandoned by the Japanese soldiers. She also narrated an old man in the novel who wanted to establish an independent land in their hills. Zungmila listened to her quite attentively as the writer informs: “It was as if mute Zungmila had a damned – up hilly river inside her and now somebody had opened

it...She asked me again and again about the things I had already talked about...She started talking" (124).

Zungmila related to her classmate how her whole family was involved in Nagaland's fight for an independent land during the time of India's independence from British rule. It was a terrible time for the people of her land. She narrated her memory sometimes by crying and sometimes with anger. She unfolded how the clash between the Indian army and the rebels resulted in the burning of villages, the killing of people, and the rape of women. Her aunt who was actively involved in the movement was raped and killed. She described how it continued till the 1960s and she too became a sufferer and an eyewitness to all this.

Here we can refer to what Alison Landsberg has termed 'prosthetic memory'. Landsberg defines it in the following manner:

This is a particular form of memory that emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history. .. The person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics (2).

Zungmila is reminded of the tense time of her land by her friend's narration of *Yaruingam*. She remembered certain memories which were never experienced by her but she knew about them from the narratives told by her elders. This is what prosthetic memory is exactly like. On top of that it ignited memories that she experienced in the 1960s: "For three days and two nights, the people of the village were surrounded in the church field. Zungmila shed tears when she told me about the little babies who had died from cold and hunger. She had fainted towards dawn" (127).

The narrative moves to the 1990s and the small girl, Zungmila's class friend is a woman now. She narrates her own experience of terrorism in Assam during that time. She and her husband were given an extortion notice with a threat of murder. The whole incident took her back to her reading of a novel entitled *The Bluest Eye* written by the Afro-American writer Toni Morrison. The helpless situation

reminded her of Cholly, a black character from *The Bluest Eye* who became enraged with an innocent black girl; but couldn't hate the White people who humiliated him. Later on, when she had to invite a relative of hers to her house who was a leader of the Assam movement in the 1980s and spearheaded many massacres; but is a very rich person now. The hatred for this class of people was dormant in her mind. Observing the hypocrisies of the wife of this person she couldn't remain silent. From a welcoming host, she turned into a rebel which reminded her of Zungmala: "I did not know why, after a long time I remembered Zungmila" (147). In this manner, the story creates a chain of memories. The Memories are of different times and different people but get interconnected in the mind of the narrator.

The act of translation transmits at the temporal as well as at the spatial level. The temporal transmissions establish interconnectedness among generations and the spatial transmissions connect cultures. Similarly, memory too can perform the above mentioned tasks; nonetheless, cultural transmissions happen at a larger scale when texts are translated. The selected story by focusing on the historical and cultural memory of the character accomplishes intergenerational transmission. At this point, we can cite Bella Brodzki's view on the same concerning a novel entitled *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*: "This fictional text, by exemplifying the processes of history and cultural memory it thematizes, signals an imperative-the value and vitality of intergenerational transmission as a crucial form of cultural survival in a postcolonial context" (219). The English translation of the story "Ghrinar Ipar Sipar" (translated as "Face in the Mirror") actualizes cultural transmission spreading it across cultures. Once it is translated into English; it crosses the boundary of Assamese culture and reaches a large audience.

The memories depicted in the story are bitter historical memories. The word 'Ghrina' in Assamese means hatred. The story represents how hatred and hateful memories persist irrespective of place and time. The same kind of memories prevails in Africa, Nagaland, and Assam. The English translation does not retain the word 'Ghrina'; yet the title "Face in the Mirror" successfully captures the meaning of 'Ipar Sipar' which roughly means both sides. The face inside the mirror and outside the mirror connotes experiences from both sides where the narrator is actively involved and where the

narrator hears about others' experiences. Thus, with some variations, the memories get transferred across cultures.

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that if literature mediates memories; translations of literary texts remediate them. If literature ensures the passing on of memories, translations ensure intercultural connections through sharing of memories. Both acts perform the task of connecting us to our past for a better hold over our future.

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