

Reviewing Translations: Translator's Invisibility Revisited

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Abstract

The translator's invisibility is a spectre which still haunts the practice of translation in the West. Theoretical advances in Translation Studies in the last quarter of the twentieth Century have not succeeded in restoring to the translator the inalienable rights of the author. The adoption of the notion of translation as a form of rewriting and the rejection of the duality of 'original-translation' are small beginnings for bringing the translator back to visibility. Other issues like dismantling the copyright regime as applicable to translations have to follow.

Reviewers of translations who describe both the translation and the antecedent text have to reckon with the fact that their reviews may ultimately contribute only to translation theory. Such reviews normally interest only bilingual readers who would not need the translation in the first place. For the monolingual reader there is no way to verify the comparative analyses. The problem can perhaps be overcome by placing the review in a larger context of the interface of cultures or as a symptomatic instance of cultural dissemination/ appropriation/ domestication/ foreignisation. Another way, of course, is to make the review eminently readable even for non-professional readers.

The notion that the translator is only a role-player is deeply entrenched in most cultures. Willard Trask puts it neatly when he remarks that the translator acts out the role of the author, willingly submitting to the make-believe that the translation is the original text, while producing a 'crib' of the original (qtd. in Venuti 1995: 7). In India, however, this notion is definitely a Western import. As far as

this writer has been able to verify, there was no word to signify 'translation' as it is understood in the West in any of the Indian languages till the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, there were no 'translations' in any of India's literatures. What existed and circulated were 'renderings' or 'rewritings,' notions which were theorized and accepted in the West only in the eighties of the last century. A common tradition was for poets and dramatists to freely borrow themes and plots from the great epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and render them freely, sometimes making drastic departures and ideological appropriations. The way in which Tulsidas's *Ramcharit Manas* or Ezhuthachan's *Adhyathma Ramayanam* diverged from Valmiki's epic was inconceivable in the West. Ezhuthachan's rewriting of Rama from a mere 'maryada purushottam' in Valmiki's epic to an icon in the Hindu pantheon has no parallels in Western literary history. Unnayi Warriar's *Nalacharitham Attakkatha* radically alters Nala's character as it is represented in both *The Mahabharata* and *Naishadha Purana*.

A reviewer of a translated text normally cannot accept the invisibility of the translator once s/he concurs with two notions on authorship which are today widely accepted. The first is that the translator is an author in her/his own right, the source text being only a launching point from which s/he takes off and the translation a rewriting of it. In the West, the Rewriting-Culture School of Translation Studies theoretically reinforced this notion in the eighties and the nineties of the last century. Andre Lefevere's "Beyond Interpretation' or The Business of Rewriting" (1987) is a central text in this context. Along with Lefevere, a number of other translation scholars including Susan Bassnett, Mary Snell-Hornby, Theo Hermans, Lawrence Venuti and Mona Baker, to name only the more prominent of them, developed the Theory of Rewriting to show how translation made interventions in many cultures through rewriting texts and how it served as the site for both perpetuation of cultural hegemony as well as resistance to it.

The second is the now well-entrenched notion that 'originality' is only a construct and that there are no essentially 'original' texts.

Many texts which were traditionally considered original are today considered rewritings. The most telling examples can be the epics in many cultures: *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh* or *Sagas of Iceland*, the purported authors of which were actually compilers and editors of songs, legends and oral narratives. In translation theory it is time to give up the term 'original text' or even 'the source text' in favour of the more precise term 'antecedent text' which indicates only a chronological precedence.

The central paradox of Descriptive Translation Studies is that they, as such, address bilingual readers who do not really *need* the translations which are being discussed. The monolingual reader has to take the writer's word for the analyses of translation shifts described. Giving a thumbnail sketch of the history of translation in the West, Susan Bassnett notes that translation was mostly only an intellectual exercise for scholars in Imperial Rome who could also effortlessly read Greek (Bassnett 1991: 44-45). Only stray translations from other languages served the fundamental purpose of translation.

The review of a translated text partly becomes a translation study if any aspect of the translation is discussed. However, a review is most often not a disinterested academic exercise. Unlike the reviews in academic journals, most reviews in dailies or periodicals are commissioned, either by publishers of the books or by the publications which carry the review. Apart from the pressure on the reviewer to promote the book, there are problems of space. The reviewer is not allowed to expand on the text, beyond the stipulated number of words. Andre Lefevere lists the review (and the blurb) among the various forms of rewriting, because the review like other forms of rewriting, rewrites the text systematically on the basis of the ideology and/or poetics of the target culture or those which the translator personally embraces (Lefevere 1987: 21). The guidelines for reviewers of translations posted on the website of PEN does not go as far as to call the translator an author in his/her own right. It limits itself to calling a translation a work of 'collaboration.' But its suggestions are interesting:

1. Reviewers should state that the work is a translation and should mention the translator's name. Although this may seem obvious, the translator is in most cases not acknowledged. Reviewers might also mention the translator's previous works, along with awards or other distinctions. If the translator has written a preface indicating his or her approach to the work, this too should be considered.
2. The reviewer should avoid nitpicking. A review is not a crossword puzzle. What the reviewer perceives as errors or mistranslations may actually be carefully worked out strategies to support the structure of the work. 'Focusing on minutiae out of context deflects from the overall evaluation of the book and the translation.'
3. If the translated text is a classic or a well known work, the reviewer can ideally address such issues as the need for the present new translation, what it omits or highlights differently from previous translations, whether its idiom suits contemporary readers and whether it offers new emphases or insights.

But PEN also recognizes ground realities. Most reviewers of translations today do not know the source language. PEN's advice to them is quite conventional:

Even so, they are certainly equipped to address matters of style, coherence, and narrative tone. For instance, at the simplest level, does the language flow naturally and smoothly? Does the author present any special stylistic or other challenges that the translator has successfully—or heroically—met? In a work of fiction, is the dialogue persuasive and idiomatic? Does the tone shift to represent different characters' voices?

Discussing the globalization of translation, Venuti points out that domesticated translations have virtually become the norm for multi-national publishing houses (Venuti 1998: 160-168). They have

found that translations which cater to the ideology and aesthetics of the target audience at the expense of the ideology and aesthetics of the source culture have a steady market. The ideology of the global market is clearly at work. The origin of the product is much less important than the packaging and the demands of the target market. Billions of dollars are spent every year to make advertisements politically correct to target audiences. The translations are so thoroughly domesticated that a bilingual reviewer with liberal views on cultural relativity and political correctness is forced to turn his/her review into a charge sheet against the translator for his/her transgressions.

A review of a translated text legitimizes itself fundamentally as a culture study. It becomes a study of an instance of cultural interface. In this form it is not promotional material for the book (a review which is intended as promotional material normally effaces the identity of the translator). Such a review does not restrict itself to the 'quality' of the translation, and goes on to delve into its ideological and aesthetic implications. As a cultural study, it addresses such issues as the relations between hegemonic and marginalized cultures (a central issue in Lawrence Venuti's *Translation Studies*) reflected in translation, the role of translation in canonization, translation as the site for (mis)reading of cultures and translation as political action. As a culture study it does not really matter whether the review appears in the source language or the target language. It need not necessarily be even a scholarly, academic exercise. It may often interest the non-professional reader as a journey into un-chartered territory. Cultural interface in all its various manifestations is a fascinating phenomenon.

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