

Book Review

What is Cultural Translation?

SARAH MAITLAND

Maitland, Sarah. 2017. *What is Cultural Translation?*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Reviewed by *ARBINA PHONGLO*

Cultural translation is a post-colonial evolving concept with its academic debut in 1985. Therefore, it is no wonder that Sara Maitland's *What is Cultural Translation* echoes post-colonial theory and challenges the supremacy of a particular culture, which eventually results in rejecting the primacy of a text.

The writer intends to convey two things through this text – 1. In-depth definition of the concept of cultural translation and 2. Relevance of translation in a global society infused with diversity. Many critics have talked extensively about the second one as we live in an increasingly globalized world where the cultural borders are not a strict enclosure. However, regarding ‘the in depth definition’ of the concept of cultural translation, Maitland’s work does not justify her intention or claim. It is only in the chapter five, which is the last chapter, the term ‘Cultural Translation’ figures with adequate assurance for the reader.

The whole text is based on Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy which calls for the interpretive method. Ricoeur figures constantly in this text and cultural translation is seen as representing the “practical outworking” of his theorization. Though Maitland quotes Ricoeur and bases his arguments on his theory, she aims at a different target. His theory was aimed

at personal and social transformation whereas her approach is towards cultural translation. It is critical and seeks to identify the limits of human understanding and to disclose and combat oppression.

Maitland further borrows from a few other theorists, for example, Benjamin, who is known for his rejection of the primacy of original text and placing importance on the storyteller's understanding. This highlights the increasing significance of a translator.

As the text deals with cultural translation, it has also drawn from the field of Anthropology by bringing in Talal Asad, who talked about "the critical distance between the anthropologists and the people written about." Homi K. Bhabha's idea on migration which results in colonial encounter, cultural difference and contestation, is further mentioned in support of the need for cultural translation.

All these shift our attention to the concept of 'orientalism' created by the West. The writer deliberately brings in theorists to make a ground for the relevance of cultural translation in this post-colonial and post-modern world and in the process, succeeds to an extent. She wants the reader to understand the powerful academic game and how the West writes about the Non-Western countries. She tries to create awareness or say, a shift in paradigm for which cultural translation suits the purpose.

This text also focusses on the role of the translator as a vital agent and discusses the complexity associated with the work of a translator. The primacy of the text is unacceptable and therefore, the pressure for extracting or anticipating the 'meaning' is placed on the writer's cognition. Maitland brings

to the notice of the reader the primary dialectics which exist between translator-quo-reader and text-for-translator.

The concentration of this text is on the first category of translation given by Roman Jakobson, that is, inter-lingual translation. The other two categories, intra-lingual and inter-semiotic are therefore, neither the concern nor mentioned in the text.

Basically, the argument of the text is that cultural translation starts from a quest of understanding and it also criticizes the metaphorical extension of translation. The writer tries to resolve the ambiguity surrounding the concept and theory of cultural translation by offering certain practical parameters to be followed. However, she has not neglected the problems of cultural translation in her work and has dedicatedly highlighted them.

Maitland through this book has aimed at establishing the urgency of cultural translation in the 21st century academic world. Due to the prevalence of division in ideologies, division on the basis of immigration, etc. the political situation and the co-existing cultures in different countries around the world strongly action the relevance of cultural translation. According to the author, living in a world of different prevailing ideologies, translation “serves as the means both to advance and to contest meaning.” She furthers the argument for the crucial role of cultural translation in the critique of ideology.

Cultural translation is simply not a translation, it is a creation. As an act of creation, the key areas which surfaces in this text are interpretation, rejection of primacy, distanciation appropriation and contestation. These key areas successfully

debunk the concept of ethnocentrism and ushers the reader into a world of cultural relativism.

One of the concerns raised by the writer is the validation of cultural translation when it comes to appropriation. But this concern gives rise to a contradiction to the whole idea of cultural translation which does not profess the dominance or validation of any one culture or meaning or idea.

The effort of the writer can be profoundly seen in developing and contributing to the concept of cultural translation by drawing examples from various fields – online media, TV Literature, current affairs and so on. The presence of long quotations in this text, which appear frequently cripples and overshadows the writer's substance. There is, however, no doubt that these quotations contribute to the enhancement of the writer's argument.

Many other theorists have contributed to the idea of cultural translation, to name a few: Pym, Conway and Sturge. Sara Maitland's work is exemplary not in a pioneering sense but in giving a concrete understanding to the concept of cultural translation and substantiating it. She has put forward the pressing need of cultural translation and calls it "the transformation of the very fabric of culture itself".

In this era of globalization, contrary it may sound, localization is given much importance in translation. There is an emerging need to appeal to the target audience's world view and connect with them. Cultural translation aims at transforming the knowledge from one culture to another and has its own struggles in the process. It struggles as all the cultures in the world are not homogeneous, yet there is a requirement to locate and situate in a particular culture.

This task, therefore, can neither succumb to imitation nor rid itself of subjectivity. Maitland highlights this unavoidable element in this book and says, "...every understanding in the world is interpretive. We cannot stand outside the subjectivity of our embodiment."

In dealing and understanding these problematic underpinnings in Cultural Translation, Sara Maitland's text may offer a translator/reader an overview and deep investigation into the realm of Cultural Translation. She presents cultural translation as a medium not only for transference of knowledge but also a tool heavily equipped to re-write constructed identities in one's own distinct understanding or worldview.
