
Translating *Suno Shefali*: A Dual Empowerment

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of translation and empowerment in the contemporary context. It basically deals with the concerns of translation in an intercultural situation. Translation from Indian Languages to English and from English to Indian Languages entails an intercultural dialogue. Drama is polyphonic and thus not rigid. While translating a play the translator needs to be aware of the aspects of performance and presentation. The source text (ST) passing through the different stages of anuvad as translation or interpretation, bhashantaram as transformation or translation and vivarta as transcreation, enforces decisions which find their way into performance as textual strategies in the form of a dialect or an idiom or audio-visual signs by way of body language, design, sound, and music. This paper is divided into three sections. The first two parts explore the theoretical assumptions of translation and the last part deals with the thematic analysis of the text Listen Shefali wherein Shefali's predicament is viewed as the predicament of the translator.

Translating *Suno Shefali*, a Hindi play by Kusum Kumar as *Listen Shefali* was indeed an empowering experience, both at the level of the translational process involved as well as the necessary thematic understanding. Translation of thought and language, which overlap, leads to an empowerment of the writer, translator, reader and also of the text. As the title of the text suggests, Shefali's act of listening to what is said and to what is left unsaid, is similar to the translator's attempt of interpreting the text and creating a faithful re-production.

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In the year 2000-02 Osmania University decided to offer specialization courses, in its constituent colleges. Following this decision Postgraduate College Secunderabad, Osmania University offered six courses in Indian Literatures in Translation as a specialization. As a result, translations in English from various Indian "vernacular" languages gained special significance, for both students and teachers. These six courses spanned a vast range of literary texts and excerpts from different genres like a chapter on *Rasa* from Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra*; Somadeva's *Kathasarithsagar* (chapters I and II: Kathapita and Kathamukha); Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*; selected poems of Kabir from *Mystic Songs of Kabir*; Gazal's of Mir Galib, Insha Allah Insha, Bahadur Shah Zafar and Quli Qutub Shah from *Urdu Gazals and Nazm*; Prasad's *Kamayani* (books I and III); Gurrum Joshua's *Gabbilam* (part I) and Tendulkar's *Silence, the Court is in Session* to mention a few.

The students' response to these texts was much better than to the other core texts from British and American literatures. Some of them went to the source text in their enthusiasm to learn more and

perhaps read only the source texts! It was a pleasant surprise when one of the students wanted to pursue further studies on Thyagaraja. Her reason for doing so, she said, was that she was learning music and also that if a foreigner, William. J. Jackson in his book *Thyagaraja: A Renewal of Tradition* could work on Thyagaraja's musical compositions, a culture-specific text, she felt she could do equal justice or even better. Why was she so confident to think that she was better equipped? This could be a simple case of reiterating confidence in oneself which a vernacular language offers by way of familiarity with the culture, no doubt embedded in the source language. Or it could be a mere desire to reach out to a wider audience by way of translation because the target language has the sanction of a language widely used.

The locution "Translation and Empowerment" raises certain questions. How and who or what does translation empower? Being translated, has the writer been empowered by gaining wider readership? Has the translator empowered himself/herself by reaching out to a wider audience? Have the translator and the enlarged readership empower the source text/culture or the target text/culture by way of giving the source text one more medium of expression?

Literature, whether classical or contemporary, identifies the need of a sympathetic and at times even an empathetic reception, people who have such an empathy being termed *sahridaya* in Sanskrit. Unlike other genres, drama and theatre show a different relationship between the text and the reader or the performance and the audience. If in literature, the relationship between *sruti* and *smriti* forms the very basis of transcreation, wherein an idea is translated into a text and the text consciously acquires a form, the text in drama further includes other forms of perception. Citing Lesley Soule in *Theatre Praxis* McCullough refers to the relationship between the performer, spectator, and character/ text, to assert,

The meaning of a performance is not fixed in the 'character' mirroring life, but the result of a plurality of readings located in the spectators' perceptions. The 'who' of a performed identity is not a state of being but 'a process of interaction, *residing not in the subjective individual but a social behaviour*'.

(McCullough Christopher 1998:12)

Translation from Indian Languages into English and from English into Indian Languages thus involves an intercultural dialogue. Thus in the process of inter-semiotic transposition leading to meaningful inter-lingual transposition, creativity works at different levels of culture, character, plot and structure of the source/target texts. After a comprehensive understanding of the text, the translator needs to find proper words and phrases that can convey the mood and meaning of the source text in the target text too.

According to the *nyaya* school of thought, linguistic utterance or *sabda* is a way of knowledge, which includes perception and inference. Theatre as a mode of communication through word and action has an immediate influence on the receiver leading to a possible critical inquiry. Thus an active interaction of perception and inference could lead to knowledge. The power of expression at these different levels, which theatre has, is its element of beauty. Therefore a play even when it is being written, translating an idea or thought into words, or being translated, from a source text to a target text needs a multi-dimensional approach because of the polyphony involved. It is not merely the context, mood and tone of the character but also the action that calls for attention. The settings and surroundings too tend to influence expression and action. A play merely written or read is half done, it gains complete form only when performed or seen. Therefore while writing or translating a play, one needs to visualize not merely the performance on the stage but also the possible composition and the reception of the audience.

The composition of and reception of the audience are often a function of the sociocultural milieu. When a performance moves from a specific milieu to another, changes could occur in expression or presentation. The audience could be anyone: anyone who walks into the theatre and watches the play constitutes the audience, which makes it difficult for the writer or the translator to have a specific group in mind. Thus, a drama text, which has to be staged and performed has no rigid text. Every translation or performance envisages creativity.

'Performability' of a text is often equated with the 'speakability' of a text, that is, the ability to produce fluid texts, which performers may utter without much difficulty and which the audience could grasp without much effort. From a theatrical viewpoint, during the process of translation the need or will to appeal to audiences usually involves a tension between foreignization and domestication. The source text (ST) passing through the different stages of *anuvad* as translation or interpretation, *bhashantaram* as transformation or translation and *vivarta* as trans-creation thus enforces decisions which find their way into performance as textual strategies in the form of a dialect or an idiom or audio-visual signs by way of body language, design, sound, and music. The use of Sanskrit terms here shows that a culture that creates a need or demand for translation has an indigenous framework of reference which helps in the interpretation and translation of the text in that culture. Performability, a way of *arthakriya*, from one medium to another, from verbal or written to performance, is also determined by the ideology of the theatre that the performing unit espouses, and is related to questions of a social standing of both the performers and the audience.

The translation process is therefore adaptation, interpretation, paraphrasing, and contemporization and most importantly, understanding the combine to create meaning in the theatre. The nature of contemporary theatre has changed from being

necessarily a mere interpretation of experience to being a manifestation of it. The experimental and experiential quality of theatre today has led to a definite interaction between the audience and the performers, often setting aside the role of the author. Thus translation at these different levels, which gains a multi-dimensional character, is indeed dual empowerment. James MacDonald, an Honorary Fellow in Drama at the University of Exeter, who has written plays and assisted performances in *Adaptation and the Drama Student*, has this to say

Indian Play translation is a relatively humble form of playwriting. Little is ever made of it, in publication or in production. In production, indeed, it is more commonly thought of as a literal rendering of the foreign original or as a transcription of the director's concept of the play.

(MacDonald 1998:137-38)

II

Both the translator and the playwright need to constantly visualize performance. If a linguistic utterance itself is a translation of an idea or thought, it is this translation of an idea into words and then into action that is indeed empowering. Translation of a dramatic text therefore works at two levels. Language in theatre is most often the spoken language unlike that of prose and of poetry. This language of performance is the language that communicates instantly, in more ways than one, with the spectators, and hence the need to use a code that could be received and perhaps even responded to immediately. Preparedness of the spectators or audience acquires a significant meaning. The rhetoric of historical and mythological plays presented a heightened and flamboyant register while contemporary theatre, on the contrary, across the centuries, redefined language which is close to the spoken word to present socially relevant elements in plays. A sense of ownership or

rigidity of the written word has little meaning in theatre. Giving voice to others may literally mean letting the performers put the text into their own words or tone through devising or improvisation. Thus language on the stage gains a gesture, a body language. The language needs to become a coordinate of the action. This could be termed Brechtian or simply an element of clarity given to the actor so as to have freedom to concentrate on action. If the source text can be considered as a work of art from the universal to the particular, the target text in turn evolves as art from the particular to the universal.

Referring to one of her Indian adaptations of the German silent theatre, *Request Concert* in her unpublished autobiographical dramatic narrative *antaryatra*, Usha Ganguli, a well known playwright-actor-director says:

...the play was being performed in a cowshed. About twenty Santhal women, strong able-bodied women used to hard work, came to watch the play that night. In the last scene, I'm not able to sleep, so I pick up the tablets. Immediately I felt the riveting stare of twenty pairs of eyes on me, as if forcing life on me. I could not swallow the tablets to commit suicide in the last scene that night. That changed the history of the play...

(Mukherjee 2005)

Contemporary performers often argue and also practice the very notion of a rigid text or a structured script as redundant since it prioritizes the word over body, text over the visual, the written over the spoken and the writer/performer over the audience. There are often cases wherein the writer or the director changed the text, context and even the form of the play. In theatre therefore the spoken word and the performance transcend a rigid script.

In our postmodernist culture, where narrative structures are fragmented, theatre substitutes for 'the marketplace' and its various contributors become subsumed in the whole. In this context, the author is not so much 'dead' (Barthes 1977) as indivisible from the totality, her/his personal strategy - text - becoming one strand, merely among many (MacDonald 1998: 128).

In modern/ postcolonial theatre/ literature, English words and phrases are often used in vernacular language texts. While translating such a text one needs to use extralinguistic methods in the form of quotes or italics. If the translator is aware of the fact that one of the characters doesn't know English the dialogue attributed to such a character could remain the source language or a different register could be used. Keeping in mind not merely the text but also the performance, the act of translating plays becomes audience - specific. In intercultural translations of the plays the translator finds himself/ herself further in a complex dilemma. As G.N.Devy puts it,

An Indian student of Literature finds himself precariously hanging between a literary metaphysics, which rules out the very possibility of translation, and a literary ethos where translation is becoming increasingly important.

(Devy 1998: 46)

A relationship between author, text and translator can be viewed in terms of the image of a bird in a cage. Flights of imagination captured within a framework, both linguistic and stylistic, form the text. The reader or the translator releases the bird, lets loose his imagination, only to capture it in another form/another cage or frame for another set of readers to release the bird again. However, playwriting being more of a social genre than a literary genre invariably locates the writer in a specific culture, and therefore in a specific audience group. Translation therefore brings about a

radical relocation and even transubstantiation. Thus translating a play imposes certain limitations, limitations of period and locale and the related speech patterns. How good or authentic the translation is, is a question often asked. As Matilal in his note on Translation: *Bhartrahari on Sabda* says,

The goodness or badness of a translation, the distortion, falsity or correctness of it, would not be determined simply by the inter-linguistic or intra-linguistic semantic rules, but by the entire situation of each translation with all its uniqueness, that is, by the kind of total reactions, effects, motivations and references it generates on that occasion.

(Matilal 2001:123)

Translation of literary texts unlike the translation of scientific texts becomes more of an aesthetic concern, a 'creative transposition' rather than a linguistic transposition wherein a literal translation may often miss out on the nuances in the source text. Translation emerges as a window onto something new and different even while maintaining the source text and culture. There emerges a possibility of understanding others, their cultural history and power relations in the contemporary world. This awareness and knowledge is an empowering experience. Michaela Wolf in one of her papers (affirms that translators and translation scholars are becoming aware of the fact that translation need not be necessarily viewed as a transfer "between cultures", but also to be seen from the standpoint where cultures merge and create new spaces. She further asserts that translation therefore does not confirm borders and inscribe the dichotomy of centre-periphery, but rather identifies pluricentres where cultural differences are negotiated, - mainly in the context of asymmetrical cultures.

Why does a translator choose a particular text for translation? Is it just because he/she likes it? Or are there other

reasons? Translation is not merely a linguistic activity, but it is also an economic, artistic, intercultural or intracultural communication, a power-political activity. When one translates for pleasure initially it is he or she who is a translator, the reader, the audience. But when one translates for reasons academic these parameters change. The choice of the text depends on structural, thematic, and even social concerns. The composition of the audience plays a significant role. If the audience is familiar with the SL culture, translation into TL is different from the case wherein the audience is unfamiliar with the SL culture. Therefore there could be various translations of a text depending not merely on the translator but based on the target audience / reader.

III

The text under discussion is Suno Shefali, a modern Hindi play by Kusum Kumar published in 1992, and being a modern play at least one hurdle could be partially overcome viz. that of language and the social idiom. However, in the process of translating the text there were moments of difficulty, especially when the writer used poetry and music to highlight specific aspects of the play. Theatre across cultures has roots in the divine and the religious. Natyasastra, accorded the place of a fifth Veda, is deemed to have taken tradition (*itihasa*) and combined it with instruction. Various characteristics were taken from the four Vedas; "from the Rigveda the element of recitation, from the Samaveda song, from the Yajurveda the mimetic art, and from Atharvaveda sentiment" (The Sas Dra. P.14). Although they are traced to the Vedas these elements have in fact made their presence discernible only in the epics and the literature that followed. If music is used for mere ornamentation for instance soft music or the beat of the soldiers or even music evoking seasons there is no problem of transferring the mood and tone from the SL to the TL as translation here is nonverbal. The problem arises when the music is accompanied by poetic verses. It is the intercultural idiom

that makes it difficult to maintain a proper balance between the performance-oriented text and the reader/audience-oriented text.

Listen Shefali is the story of a young dalit woman of self-respect and dignity. Even as a child she was always different. She would refuse to accept 'alms', as she would call it, 'free books and free food'. She considered them as a way of distancing from the regular and accepted norms of society. She refuses to be exploited and desired to 'be like every one else', to be a part of the mainstream. Her mother works for Miss Sahib. It is Miss Sahib who encourages Shefali to educate herself. She recommends Shefali to a prospective politician, Satamev Dikshit to teach her English. English and the presence of Miss Sahib bring in the subtle presence of the colonial powers that open the windows to the outer world. It is here that Shefali falls in love with Dikshit's son, Bakul. However she realizes that Bakul's interest in her is not for her as a person or as an individual but his interest is because she is a dalit. Both Satyamev Dikshit and Bakul want to cash in on the fact that she is a dalit. They want to say that they show no discrimination against dalits, they want to use this as an exploit for winning the elections. But Shefali refuses to be used as a commodity or material for propaganda. Seeing through their game, she declines to marry Bakul, thus shattering their dreams:

Bakul: 'Oh! I am sitting properly' ...(silence for sometime) last night I dreamt ... near the ghat ... at the very spot we were getting married ... after marriage.....

Shefali: (with mocking anger) from there we get on to a Jeep ... moving all over the city we announce through loud speakers - 'Ladies and gentlemen, vote for us' ... (*disturbed, her voice becomes louder*) you are standing above me saying 'vote for Dikshit, vote for ...' People on either side of the road are moving towards their destinations. You want to draw their

attention so you stop at one of the crossroads and say, 'ladies and gentlemen for a bright future vote for us ... today it is this Harijan girl that is telling you. I just married her. (*Louder*) upliftment of the Harijans is as important as eliminating poverty. (*Bakul is agitated*) whatever efforts we made so far are not enough ... (*Bakul covers his ears and hangs his head*) when I realized that all efforts towards the upliftment of the untouchables were in vain in a moment of desperation I first fell in love with this woman, then I married her, so ladies and gentlemen now all of you will cast your valuable votes in our favour'. This was your dream, wasn't it?

(Seetha 2005: 224-225.LS)

It is at this point of refusal to be a victim of exploitation for self gain that the two voices are heard: one that of Shefali's mother and the other that of an astrologer. The mother as one who is weak and is willing to accept anything that is offered to her; if only to improve her family's social position; and the astrologer who went through the process of purgation when he was able to constrain himself from committing suicide on the banks of Yamuna, thus emerging a strong man. The astrologer is now able to give strength and conviction not only to him but also to others who come to him for help. It is when Shefali is struggling with the powers of love and of her own convictions that the people are speaking to her. She has to now choose whether she would be "consumed by life or would consume life". Her mother tries to convince her to compromise and accept the situation. Her only concern is a comfortable life devoid of 'self'. She is projected as one who has no courage to fight for recognition or acceptance. Her only concern is to get her three daughters married. She is unable to understand Shefali's rigid attitude towards society. Shefali's mother has no identity of her own. She is merely a mother figure, socially committed, only recognizes her duty towards the outward world. She is unable to perceive the

struggle within Shefali, a struggle to assert an identity of her own, an identity that belongs to the mainstream. Shefali refuses to be marginalized.

Shefali has been meeting Bakul on the banks of the river Yamuna. On the ghat next to where they used to meet, is the astrologer. The play in fact opens, showing first the astrologer, Acharya Manan Dev in a typical atmosphere. He has all his paraphernalia displayed around him, a mat spread out, a bird in a cage, people consulting him and a little boy running errands for him. Why does he choose the banks of the river? Why is he not on the streets where there could be more people? He has reasons. He has a purpose. He feels that people in the streets merely want to know how better their life could be but people here on the ghat come to a point of desperation, a moment of crisis, when life's problems demand (re)solutions, they are forced to choose between life and death; so he could guide them to life and a better one too. He plays the role of an opposing force as against the weak assertion of Shefali's mother. He becomes a symbol of power, a mysterious power. However he reveals his true self only to Shefali, like Lord Krishna revealing his self to Arjuna on the battlefield. Like Arjuna, Shefali finds herself fighting her own people, her love and the rigid, divisive and exploitative forces in society. She refuses to become a pawn in the gamble played by politicians. The astrologer constantly uses poetry and song to infuse strength in Shefali.

Kick it off, hurt not thyself!
 Impediments in your path we shall not be!
 Whatever you wish to be..
 You can be, but never a coward be!
(Manan forgets. Geru continues alone)
 Suppress how long can be the laughter of peace!
 What is this life to give and take!
 Shall we not do? Or shall we strive?
 Peans of one's own joy!

Whatever you wish to be...
 You can be, but never a coward be!
(Manan recollects the poem and joins Geru)
 Either win with the power of love
 Or let the smuggler kiss your feet
 Revenge is also a weakness
 But cowardice is more vicious
(loudly) Whatever you wish to be..
 You can be, but never a coward be!
 (Seetha 2005:198-199. LS)

He sees poetry as the ultimate truth and astrology as falsehood or rather maya. The rhythm and pattern of words in poetry extend the power of expression. So we find in this play another dimension added in the structural pattern. A shift in the mode of translation is evident in that it moves from a realistic dialogue form to a symbolic poetic expression. Poetry is considered as the only reality. If poetry is seen as creativity at the levels of imagination, how could it be reality? Bhartrhari states that language gains its meaning only when it transcends language. Reality begins only when language ends. Translation of the dialogue is close to the speech patterns, "the uttered or fully sequenced speech" which can be placed at the level of *Vaikari Vak*.

Translations of poetry and song need a different approach wherein the rhythmic, metaphorical and idiomatic uses of language take the translator into the realms of imagination. The most difficult task is the translation of a song with its melody and music. To capture the cadence of music in translation is like the photographer in *Listen Shefali* who is taking the pictures of a group of singers. He wants them to sing and sing aloud. When asked why he expects them to sing aloud as he would not be able to capture the music, he replies that he would be able to capture different postures of their head and mouth.

Photographer: (To the singers) start, start singing....
I'm coming.

Dikshit: (Startled) why are you making them sing
aloud? ... That won't come in the photograph.

Photographer: *Maza aata hai!* I enjoy keertan
sounds. If they don't sing so loud, how will I get the
uneven expression of the faces on my film? Some
with closed lips and some with open mouths. I like
that.

(Seetha 2005: LS. 202)

Thus translating music and poetry is at the level of *madhyama vak* wherein thought and intuition are captured. There are four levels of expression, according to the philosophy of Nyaya Sastra wherein the surface value of speech, the speech act itself is called Vaikhari; a subtler level of speech, the level of thought, is called *Madhyama*; the subtlest value of speech is called Pasyanthi and the transcendental level of speech on the level of pure consciousness is called Para which is the level of bliss.

Suno Shefali, therefore, is an appeal not merely to the sense of hearing but to something beyond. It is a call to the inner self, a call of awakening. Shefali's mother with her mere practical approach to life uses intensive dialogue form a level of *vaikhari vak*. Manan dev Acharya, the astrologer as the name suggests dwells at the level of thought or chintan and therefore could be related to the *madhyama vak*. At the end of the play when he says listen Shefali, Shefali is standing with her eyes closed. Manan says nothing; yet a statement is heard from behind the curtains. This statement is at the level of *pasyanthi vak* "an apparently imitative intuition" wherein "sequencing is present only as a pregnant force". It could be Shefali's ability now to hear beyond the word or Manan's attempt to communicate his thoughts without really saying them to someone on

the same wavelength, or it could be a statement of reaction on the part of the reader/audience. Just as a writer has an identity by way of his/her culture, language and style, so does the speaker in a play. A statement heard without the mention of the speaker leaves the statement open to a wide interpretation and multiple reading. This is a statement that is merely heard without any mention of the speaker. We hear 'thus written are the chronicles of the brave.' However this last line could evoke other similar conclusions like, 'thus made are the statements of the power-hungry' 'thus exploited are the ignorant' and so forth. As the open ending of the play suggests various possibilities, so does a work of art in the process of transference from an idea to a text to an interpretation and an idea thus formulated again could suggest a cyclic process which though not reaching the same point but forming a spring pattern, sends forth ripples of consciousness with the text as focus.

Names of the characters gain special significance in understanding the play which could be missed in translation. As already suggested, Manan signifies thought processes, the little boy Geru, meaning red-coloured mud found in quarries, running errands adds colour to the staid, serious and thoughtful attitude of Manan. The child in him and the innocence he represents becomes the link between Manan's sub-conscious and the conscious world around. Manan and Geru can be identified as a *sutradhar/sthapaka* and *vidushaka*. If Manan introduces and holds the strings of action together, Geru adds a note of lighthearted element to the action. Shefali is a tree, bearing blue-coloured fragrant flowers. Blue coloured flowers are considered a special offering to Lord Shiva, the lord of destruction. Thus the Shiva temple in the play gains added significance. Kiran is married to Bakul in this very temple. Bakul is a small brown-coloured flower dear to Lord Krishna. Bakul walks away with Kiran, literally 'the sunray', thus causing darkness in Shefali's life. However, the silent presence of Manan is a ray of hope. The *ghat* on the riverside is symbolic of life and death, joy and sorrow, construction and destruction of flow and stasis. *Listen*

Shefali is therefore not an idealization of life (*of itihasa*) like in Ramayana wherein the characters are presented as embodiments of perfection, but a down-to-earth practical approach to life with its struggle and strife like in the *Mahabharata*. It is on the battlefield of Kurukshetra that thought (Lord Krishna's *Geetopadesha*) is translated into action (Arjuna's).

Translating *Suno Shefali* is therefore a reaching forth of not merely the author/translator but also the characters in the play that become symbolic of the modern predicament of class, caste and gender struggle. Empowerment lies in recapturing by way of imagination the thematic and linguistic reconstruction of *kutch bhi ban par kaayar math ban!* "Become anything but not a coward"

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