Situating Post Colonial Translations/Translator in India

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Abstract

The term Post-Colonial Translations in the Indian situation is not completely free from the tentacles of colonialism. The translator in the Indian situation needs to be extremely cautious in representing the literatures in the English language since English is both the tongue of the erstwhile coloniser and a global medium too. The translator who is engaged in a serious task is not often divorced from the work translated. The pitfalls that an Indian translator needs to avoid are many given the hungry eyes of the West who eagerly look forward to see the representations of the languages of India in their tongue. The duties of the translator, the pitfalls she needs to avoid and the task embarked in translating a complex nation like India with a hoary past of more than two thousand years are discussed in this essay.

Post-colonialism and globalisation are simultaneously homogenic and heterogenic. While different literatures are now perceived with a uniform consciousness of native cultures, language, literature and ethos, their multiplicity has acquired the necessary validity, dignity, though a certain amount of unifocal parochialism at times cannot be ruled out.

No other literary activity in India led to the quantum of literary and cultural dialectics currently as has done the translation of texts into English. The sudden spurt of translations in India in the post-colonial times has altered both the Indian literary scenario as well as the fortunes of the publishing houses. OUP, Orient Longman, Katha, Kali, Stree, Penguin, Sahitya Akademi, NBT and the list is endless. Could the boom be attributed to the growing affluence, increased literacy rates, an increasing appetite to know the

'othered' or to merely gratify consumeristic desires in a global economy? The reason could be a combination of or beyond all these factors. While the 21st century reader in/of India across the globe is often caught in a surfeit of translations, the translator is often wrapped in a complex, ambivalent, multi-cultural and diverse multi-lingual spaces. Fostered alike by native and the western traditions, the post-colonial Indian translator is often in a trishanku position.

The position of the post-colonial Indian translator remains complicated by the fact of the deep furrows created by the empire in our native soil. Robert Young has conceded the "great attention accorded to India [….] perpetuate the differing evaluations that the British accorded to the various parts of the empire." Young further elaborates on the quantum of economic, cultural and historical attention that our nation received from the coloniser and concludes that India was "the crown of colonial discourse analysis." (Young, cited in Trivedi 1996: 233)

The term 'attention' needs a closer examination, for, it would superficially appear to be a benevolence condescendingly showered on the 'natives' by the colonisers. The semantic concerns of the term **Post Colonial** also remains to be examined, since it encompasses "all the cultures affected by the imperial power from the moment of colonization to the present day." (Ashcroft 1989: p.1-2). Its concerns therefore do predate the nation as certain preoccupations continue throughout in the "historical process initiated by European imperial aggression." (ibid.)

The "scramble for post-colonialism" as Stephen Sleman would label it, is real. But Ashcroft's essay "Excess Post Colonialism and the Verandahs of Meaning" concerns itself with the unwanted abundance and Derridean excess of Post Colonial theory.[1] The Indian situation reveals both the tides and counter-tides against the post colonial movement. At this juncture, it is essential for us to distinguish between the 'post colonial' and 'post-independence'. While the latter term refers to the mere grant of independence as

denotative of freedom from the British political control, 'Post Colonial' on the other hand connotes the multi-farious process of colonisation as an octopus-like control, out of whose tentacles it is rather difficult to free ourselves even long after independence. Its repercussions are deeply embedded in the psyche of the nation, making amnesia almost impossible.

Since, the prime focus of the paper is post-colonial translation of various Indian languages into English, the linguistic legacy bequeathed on the post colonial translator needs to be examined. But before that, the post colonial translator ought to remember the fact that dissemination of knowledge about India was evident in colonial times. Translations of *Manusmriti, Vedas, Upanishad, Vishnu Purana, Harivamsam* etc. into English have facilitated the occident to know India better. Translation and transcreations among the various Indian languages were also not unfamiliar. For instance, the multiple transcreations of numerous Sanskrit texts like *Ramayanam* into *Kambaramayanam* in Tamil, and the different versions of *Mahabharata* into Telugu, found the *Bhasha* literatures engaging themselves in a spiritual revolution, making its readers grasp the ungraspable. Critics like Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi have considered the movement from Sanskrit to the other Indian languages as being akin to the west's movement from Latin to Vulgate. The growth of Indian spiritual literature in the *bhasha* traditions are perceived as an attempt to release scriptures "from the monopolist custody of Sanskrit pundits." (Bassnett & Trivedi 1999: 10)

The contemporary post colonial translator in India needs to realise the fact that the analogy between Sanskrit and Vulgate can hardly be stretched beyond a certain point, because 'fidelity' being the key word of the numerous translations of the Bible, is the least resorted principle in Indian translation. For instance, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been constantly re-worked with multiple shifts in ideological stances, and the creative transformation involved in the numerous translations.[2]

But the position of the modern post colonial translator in India is quite complicated given the linguistic legacy bequeathed by him. The post colonial translator in India often traverses in multi-lingual spaces. The (in)famous minute of Macaulay denigrated the cultural and linguistic legacy of Sanskrit and Persian, while unconsciously negating the value of the entire gamut of *Bhasha* literatures from *Sangam* times, to all existing vernacular modes of writing.[3] Therefore, the post colonial translator adopts the twin processes of appropriation and approbation of the colonisers tongue to explain his linguistic heritage and establish a cross-cultural relationship, while also adopting his translatory potential to write back at the empire. This brings us to the inevitable comparison which needs to be made between translations in the pre-colonial times and those in the contemporary scenario. The pioneering efforts of Scholars like Sir William Jones, Schiller and Schlegal was to delve deep into the perennial springs of Indian knowledge. But modern Indian translators are often fraught with tensions, politics and numerous forms of neocolonialisms.

Then, the discourse of such a translation becomes ambiguous since the psycho-linguistic terrain of the translator adopts a certain amount of mimicry. The transformation of language makes the translator situate the text in a different linguistic mileau. The process is both inevitable and problematic, since the signifying text attains a protean and fluid quality and the process of signification enters into a continuous interactive zone, wherein a cross-cultural dialogism is established between two linguistic and cultural zones.

Since fidelity alone has hardly been a quintessential feature of translation from and into various Indian languages, and the process of linguistic appropriation is endured with expanding horizons leading to discoveries. The discovery may at times exist in the original or lie embedded in the verbal resonances of the translated tongue. For instance, Hank Heifetz in his 'Poet's Preface' to *Purananuru* (3rd and 4th centuries before Christ) suggests that the exaggerated praise lavished on kings can at times be "over

powering", "but if you browse, you are likely to encounter a sudden image, a moment when the door of vision opens into a deeper, more inner world – and that the poem may be followed by others, elaborating, exploring, defining." (Hart and Heifetz: XIV) What has been merely hinted at in the original could be elaborated in the translation.

The 'discovery' made by the translator is also consequent of his creative ability to forge a new language. The creative writers of India who wrote during the immediate post-independence times like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand forged a new brand of English which acted as counter-discourse to the Queen's and Edwardian English while also widening the ambit of the English linguistic medium. Sukanta Chaudury rightly comments that translations "constitute nothing less than a parallel creative process. Involving extension, critiques and deconstructions, an "ambivalence of purpose" cannot be ruled out, since the translator occupies a realm distinct from the 'original' writer and the 'passive reader' and therefore, provides an 'equipollent version'. The dividing line between a translator and a creative writer has to be maintained since the translator needs to possess "a basic humility, a submission of his creative being to another's" (Chaudri 1999: 47). The creative mind of the translator may suffer from what Bloom would label as "anxiety of influence," but he would still need to guard himself against his reading.

This is a difficult task indeed, since a post colonial translation into English in India often continues to remain a vertex of overt and covert forms of the vestiges of the colonial rule. Citing Trevelyan, Tejaswini Niranjana adds that "… the representation of the colonized…. [is]… produced in such a manner as to justify colonial domination and to beg for the English book by themselves" (Niranjana 1992: 2). Therefore, translations produced by non-nation at times employ modes of representing the 'other', helping them acquire the status of what said labels as "representations or objects without history" (ibid.: 3). This justifies Macaulay's denigration of

all Sanskrit and Persian literatures. But, could such notions be accepted blindly, since translation of seminal Indian texts like *Ramayana, Mahabharata, Thrikkural, Agananooru, Purahanooru* etc. aim at countering such distorted notions of India and dispelling the myth of the supposed cultural impoverishment of our cultural heritage. 'Post colonial', then, in the Indian sense needs to be perceived through numerous intersecting perceptions like hegemony, distortion and subject formation. An "affirmative deconstruction" (ibid.: 6) is often needed to counter Saidian notions of 'otherness.'

Does the post colonial translator possess the freedom to produce a pure, true and issue–free translation? Considering 'history' and 'knowledge' (Istoria and episteme), Derrida contends that a transcendental signified is formed only "within the notion of an absolutely pure, transparent and unequivocal translatability" (Derrida 20). But the politics of power play, neo-colonialism and modes of differentiations basically make the translator adopt an essentialist outlook. Avoiding pitfalls like 'politics of blame' wherein the colonisers are often derailed, the nativist translator moves away from the larger concerns of post colonial translation, end up perceiving a unifocal vision of his culture. Disruptive such practices are, these translators could often forget the clashes involved in the annals of colonial encounter.

A major task that often confronts a postcolonial translator in India is the reconstruction of history. Should she also 'hand cuff' herself into the history of the nation (as Uma Parameswara would label Rushdie's pickling of history in his *Midnight's Children*)? In contesting the past, the translators are often engaged in the act of revising and expanding the historico-spatial domain as much as the creative writer. O. Chandumenon's *Indulekha* is an instance to prove this point wherein Anitha Devasia's translati on into English fully renders the dialogues in chapter XVIII wherein the Tamil translation of Appadurai has placed numerous cuts thereby reducing the lengthy chapter concerning colonialism, education, intellectual freedom etc. to a single page. Translations like these are concerned with what Tiffin labels as "subjectificatory legacies" (Tiffin viii).

The cultural encounter of translation calls for a transformative assimilation of the translated culture. The process is two-fold, since the cultural and linguistic osmosis involved, felicitates an expansion of the scope of the work of art. The native discourse, when fused into an alien semantic system, leads to the formation of a hybrid and unified discourse. Rightly does Sukanta Chauduri mentions:

> In translation, two ages and cultures – mere strictly, two groups or conglomerates of culture – are held in tensed, each re-worked in the light of the other and further refracted by a range of other for us (Chaudri 1999: 10).

Apart from the loss of certain native cultural forms, the cultural encounter also results in a state of reverse flow, since the target language (often English in India) remains enriched with ideas, metaphors etc. of the source language.

The multi-lingual situation of India acts as a source of enrichment and also lends an immense complexity to the situation. Despite the multiple translations that take place within the 'bhasha' traditions, the premier position occupied by translations into the Engish language is indisputable and has also been a source of genuine concern for the Indian academic elite.[4] In a multi-lingual country like India, the regional essentialist (if not chauvinistic) outlooks often create mental barriers which may at times hinder the process of translation. Even among the different languages of India, the translations may not be read on account of a lack of cultural dynamism. Chaudri makes a distinction between 'mono lingualism' described as "the literal state of burning or using only one language" and 'unilingualism' which has "a mindset or ethos that operates only in terms of one language" (ibid.: 72-73), which may hinder the appreciation of anything beyond the single language.

If the translator is genuinely interested in translating her native tongue into English, the problems of translating the quintessential cultural experience is difficult, given the basic alien

nature of the language. The Indian postcolonial translator, with her twin-linguistic legacy of her native tongue and English, often resorts to a subtle form of abrogation called the 'metonymic gap' (Ashoroft 1989). The translator inserts unglossed words. Mostly cultural items like names of food, dress, exclamatory remarks, familial retention and hips etc. which are actually synecdochic of the native culture. For instance, Ambai's short story in Tamil *Amma Oru Kolai Seidhaal*, (1971) has been translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom as *My Mother Her Crime*. The adolescent child's perception of the mother is significant:

> Suddenly she seems to me like the daughter of *Agni* [….] could this be my mother? …. Why does the *sloka* come to mind all at once? My mother turns her head what are you doing here *di* [……..] Is it [….] the sharp *Kumkumam* mark on her forehead that makes her seem the very image of those blazing fames? With long drawn out *Agniye Swaahaa* they pour ghee on to the flames.

The untranslated language represents the colonized culture in a metonymic way wherein the translator presents her ethos to the colonizer in her language [what may basically appear to her] while concurrently signalling a difference from it.

To once again probe deeper into the politics of translations, the undeniable fact remains that the realm in which the postcolonial translator traverses is not entirely free from the strings of colonialism. Nkrumah refers to 'neo-colonialism' which is a covert form of control, wherein numerous policy decisions, economic control and political sanctions enter into the foray with the leading publishing houses owned by the British and American nations. The imperatives like power play is visible and the conscious and unconscious hierarchies come to the fore especially when binarisms like colonizer/colonized, and those of economic strength, operate. The site of translation therefore is one in which two unequal worlds stand at difference, involving collision, collation, tension and yet

continuing to simultaneously de-construct and re-construct new semiotic signals and signifiers.

Such trends can also usher numerous forms of homogeneity, especially the linguistic one. Meenakshi Mukerjee is therefore right in stating that "global monolinguism is the aspiration of the younger generation today" (Mukerjee 192), especially at a time when books written or translated into the English language receives a greater quantum of hype, publicity and brings more dollars/pounds to the publishing houses. How different then, is the work of art from any other consumer product which is marketed world wide?

Even then, a novel by an Indian writer in English is often received with greater accolades than the translated one. Still, the translator in India needs to continue her mission to avoid the pitfalls of essentialising India as also its homogenisation, critics may even derail it as drawing us away from the original source. But it is indeed a stern fact that without the translation, the world would have probably remained oblivious of the original text.

NOTES

1. "Too much, too long, too many, too subversive, too voluble, too insistent, too, strident, [….] too complex, too hybrid […] too […] excessive" (Ashcroft 33)

2. India has a plethora of regional versions of the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. For instance. *Kamba Ramayana*, the Tamil version of Ramayana by Kambar, is a modified transcreation of Valmiki Ramayana. The Telugu language has for its share various versions of Mahabharata as those of Tikkanna, Nannayya and Molla's version called *Molla Ramayana*.

3. Macaulay's tirade against India, its language literature, religion and culture is evident in his [in] famous minute on Indian education.

"I believe…. that all the historical information, which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language, is less valuable than what may be found in the paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England."

"…. A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."

4. Meenakshi Mukherjee's *The Perishable Empire* is an earnest plea for translations. In an essay "The Anxiety of Indianness", she mentions how numerous writers aspire to be "part of a global league." Although these writers show little familiarity with "Bhasha Literatures," they achieve fame paradoxically with their relationship to India. (Mukherjee 175) Shashi Deshpande has also somewhere, regretted over her lack of ability to write in the *Bhasha* tradition.

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