Literary Translation in India
New Paradigms of the Translator's Invisibility

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Abstract

The translator's invisibility haunted translation scholars like Lawrence Venuti who tried to account for it by both the traditional notions of translation in the West as well as existing copyright laws. Simultaneous commissioning of translations in several languages by the same MNC publisher reduced the visibility of the translator to decimal points. The counterpoising of domesticating and foreignizing translations in discussions on the translator's visibility by translation scholars like Venuti, however, needs to be re-examined. The translator's invisibility was introduced as a phenomenon in India by colonial cultural intervention. The production and marketing of literary translations in India during the last quarter of a century have produced a complicated relationship between translators and editors, and the publishing houses that employ them. Translations produced outside the mainstream have been observed to give more visibility to the translator. Translators who operate as part of a collective with its ideology and/or poetics have shown themselves capable of shedding their cloak of invisibility. In any case, the convergence of cultures in a globalizing work has made the translator's task more demanding.

The notion of the translator's invisibility is deeply embedded in the Western literary system. This is because the translator, as Willard Trask has put it, is only a role- player in translation, acting 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 (Venuti 1998:7). Lawrence Venuti blames the predominance of the ideal of domestication for the invisibility of the translator in western cultures. In domesticating

translations, certain fluency is demanded from the translator, a fluency that makes the text read more like a primary text than a translation:

> The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator's effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing precise meaning. What is so remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's crucial intervention in the foreign text. The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer, or meaning of the foreign text.
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> (Venuti 1998:2)

Venuti recommends the use of foreignizing as a strategy for the translator to regain his identity as an active interventionist and to prevent the perpetration of ethno-centric violence when the translation is from a marginalized literature into a hegemonic literature. However, a closer analysis of Venuti's observations will show that the notion of the visibility of the author of the antecedent text at the expense of the translator's is problematic. The paradox is that there is more intervention by the translator in a domesticating translation than in a foreignizing translation, in that in the former a text is wrenched from its cultural moorings to conform to the predominant ideology and/or poetics of the target culture. Venuti proposes an active intervention by the foreignizing translator in clear terms:

> Foreignizing translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience…
>
> (Venuti 1998:21)

What Venuti describes as a 'disruption' of the cultural codes of the target language is often no more than literal translation, a strategy employed by both bad translators and translators wary of perpetrating ethno-centric violence. In popular perception, even if a domesticating translation conceals the translator's intervention, its fluency is the mark of the translator's success. Thus, while the fluency of a domesticating translation conceals the translator's intervention, a foreignizing translation often gives the translator more visibility than he deserves - and bad publicity. The distinction that should be made is that in fluent domesticating translations, the translator's intervention is in deference to what is perceived as the hegemonic ideology and/or poetics of the target audience, not in the service of his/her personal ideology and/or poetics. The translator is thus only the worker bee, not the queen. A translator's manipulation of the source text in the interests of his personal ideology and/or poetics (especially if these diverge radically from the hegemonic ideology and/or poetics of the target culture and is potentially subversive in nature) is likely to leave more visible marks on the translation. This is the kind of visibility that postcolonial translators revel in.[1]

Copyright laws which assert the hegemony of the author of the original text over the translator often make the translator the dark matter of the literary universe whose existence can only be verified by a close observation of inter-textual gravitational pulls. A fastidious bilingual author often subjects a translator's manuscript to close scrutiny before allowing it to be published. Piotr Kuhiwczak (1990) in his study of the different translations of Milan Kundera's *The Joke* observes how the author's dissatisfaction with the first English translation of the novel made him force the publishers to make alterations in the text and request a new translation thirteen years later. Globalizing trends in the publishing industry, especially the simultaneous commissioning of translations of the same text in several languages by multi-national publishing houses, have made the translator's situation more precarious.

The tradition of literary translation in India before colonial intervention never marginalized the translator. In fact there were no 'translations' in pre-colonial India—in the sense in which they were understood in the West. There were only rewritings and renderings which conferred on their authors a literary status in no way inferior to that of the author of the antecedent text. Thus Ezhuthachan in Malayalam, Kambar in Tamil or Tulsidas in Hindi were epic poets in their own rights. The history of translations in post-colonized India, however show the translator being relegated to the same inferior status as his/her Western counterpart. Although a comparative study of the translator's visibility in Indian and Western literary systems would be a rewarding exercise, in this paper I am confining myself to a few observations on the continuing invisibility of the translator in Indian literatures, especially Indian Writing in English Literature (which Sujit Mukherjee called 'a link literature for India').

Domestication has not been taken as the ideal in Indian writing in English translation. On the contrary, in its professed aim to serve as a link literature for India, the attempt is almost always to present the text as culturally representative. Occasionally, as in the case of canonized writers like Basheer, M. T. Vasudevan Nair or U. R. Ananthamurthy, the translations are intended to present them as 'universally' relevant writers. In all cases the translator is virtually invisible. Most of the translations published by commercial publishers are commissioned translations in which the translator, willingly or otherwise, follow the in-house editor's instructions. In-house editors too, like the translators, remain invisible while executing the official publishing policy. There are a few editors like Mini Krishnan of Macmillan India Ltd. who keep a high profile, writing fairly long introductions for the translation. In many cases such editors are systematically groomed and projected as part of the marketing strategy of the publishing house.

Occasionally translators also write introductions. But when they do, they speak not in their own voices, but in the voice of the editor. Such introductions often discuss the author and the source

literature at length. V. Abdulla's introduction to *Poovan Banana and Other Stories*, a selection of short fiction by Basheer in English translation, for instance, is a fairly long essay of Basheer's life and works. But this introduction is typical of translators' introductions in that it maintains a deafening silence about the process of translation, carefully avoiding even casual statements about the problems of translation.

Where the translator dwells at some length on the translation, his/her visibility is often derived from other sources. R. E. Asher's translation of three Basheer novels published as a single volume was not a commissioned work. First published by Edinburgh University Press in 1976, it was an amateur translation of a professional linguist. This status of Asher's seems to have facilitated his long discussion on cultural relativity in translation, the particular translation problems he faced and the strategies he employed to circumvent them. It is also possible for a translator working outside the mainstream to indulge himself in this manner, as this writer did in the introduction to one of his volumes of translations:

> *Reverberations of Spring Thunder* is not, to use the American translation scholar Lawrence Venuti's phrase, a 'domestic translation', a translation that is so completely assimilated that it does not read like a translation. That would be hardly desirable, even if it were possible. The translation is addressed to a target audience whose first language is not English, and as link literature it is *intended* to be read as translation. Much of the 'remainder' (a term used by Venuti to indicate those elements in a translated text which mark it as a translation)—not only the transliterations, but also the occasional deviation from standard English idiomatic usage—is there by design, not by accident.
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> (Sherrif 2000)

When the translator is part of a collective with a larger agenda, it is possible to go even further. The introduction then virtually becomes a translator's extra-textual rewriting of the antecedent text. The following extract is from J. Devika's introduction to her English translation of Nalini Jameela's autobiographical narrative in Malayalam *Oru Laingika Thozhilaliyude Athmakatha* as *Autobiography of a Sex Worker*:

> As a translator I struggled to retain the complexities of the argument—in which a neo-liberal political language often jostled for space with contrary positions—as well as Jameela's personal writing style, Jameela's meandering, casually conversational manner, her method of suddenly bringing the ironic laughter of resistance right into the middle of descriptions of shocking oppression had to be transferred carefully. Her trick of discussing past events in the present tense was difficult to retain. Also, while Jameela follows a broadly linear narrative, she often digresses into the past and moves into the future. Most of these shifts have been retained in the text, with a few exceptions in which the jump appeared too awkward and disruptive to retain. As she herself mentions in the interview appended, the last chapter is not really a last chapter at all.
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> (Devika 2005)

The appropriation of the text by the translator in the service of her ideology and poetics has been facilitated by the nature of the text which often eludes the notice of the readers: it is an edited transcript by a journalist of the oral account of the subject. That the translation was the result of an initiative by a feminist collective is a pointer to the ways in which translators can shed their cloak of invisibility.

Although it is easy to see that all translations are meant for readers who do not know the source language, given the process of globalization and the increasing awareness about other cultures in all

cultures, no form of rewriting including translation is taken for granted by a community of readers. Translators have to speak to the target audience not only about the target text, the target literary system or the target culture. Like professional scholars they too have to discuss how texts, authors and cultures are rewritten in translation—just as they are in other forms of rewriting.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on the issue see: Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira (1998) "Liberating Calibans: Readings of Antropofagia and Haroldo de Campos; Poetics of Transcreation" in Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (eds), *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge.

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