

## Interview with Tutun Mukherjee



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If we start this interview from the perspective of your specialization, areas of interest and study, they are multidimensional. But, translation has been a common thread among them. Is there something connecting them?

As you know, my specialization is Literary Criticism and Theory and the areas of my research interest are Culture Studies, Women's Writing, Theatre and Film Studies. It needs hardly to be stressed that these areas are integrally interrelated, and engagement in each domain necessitates the translation of texts of different kinds. For instance, when a friend asked me to write a paper for his book addressing gender and history and I selected Ashapurna Devi's classic text *Subornolata* to examine gender's interpellation in history, I was inevitably drawn to its translation history to understand the way the text represented socio-cultural historiography. For my discussion of that novel, theoretical insights - from feminism, cultural studies, and translation studies for instance-- provided the framework to undergird the discourse [see "Gender, Historiography and Translation," in *Re-Engendering Translation* edited by Christopher Larkosh, St Jerome's Press, 2012]. This interconnectedness has been my invariable experience while engaging with texts from different genres.

**There are many kinds of translation, especially in written or textual (linguistic) translation. How different is it when it comes to inter-semiotic spaces, to mention in your own words, "of Text and Performance."**

It is our gain that with the circulation of the theories of translation and the recognition and appreciation of the translation practice there is a growing awareness of the specifics of translation that different kinds of texts require. For example, performative texts have certain requirements that must be kept in mind during their translation, as must the processual rigor and balance while transferring a written text into a performative one. The basic facts to be kept in mind for the translation of a performative text derive from its generic nature comprising dialogue and gesture or speech and performance. In other words, dramatic discourse is based on utterance -as speech or dialogue - of character/s on the stage. The utterance must be 'speakable' that is, be governed by speech rhythms, intonation, breath pauses. This verbal text must be capable of generating non-verbal action or, as a critic has observed, 'a system of theatrical signs'. This is not the same as translating a narrative.

Inter-semiotic translation, from a written to a performative text, requires a nuanced understanding of the use or the play of the theatrical sign as icon, index, symbol -which can become complicated as these can have cultural and semantic variations. Moreover, translating a story or a poem, for example, into a performative text makes it imperative for the translator to have idea of certain elements related to performance like the paralinguistic elements [e.g. rhythm, tempo, intonation etc], the kinesic elements [e.g. gesture and movement etc], and the proxemic elements [ i.e. the actor's position on the stage and vis-a-vis other actors]. The translation must provide enough scope for various textualities to develop for an interpretive performance of the text. Ideally, one conversant with the requirements of theatre/performance would be the most suited for intra- and inter-semiotic transference.

One must also remember that inter-semiotic translation of another kind, for the screen for example, would differ.

**Would you like to comment on the role of translation in the globalized world and implications for the so called developed and**

## developing countries?

Scholarship has always depended on translation. We have accessed classic texts whether of the West or the East, through translation. Hence, 'translation' as aid to knowledge acquisition isn't a new phenomenon. However, now it is generally agreed that with growing self-awareness and identity-consciousness of societies, communities and cultures through the twentieth century in particular, translation activities registered exponential advancement as cultures began to talk with each other and exchange ideas in a level playing field - and not in a milieu of unequal power relationships whether political, cultural or linguistic. Edward Said's discourse on 'Orientalism' stressed the way the West constructed or translated the orient to suit its categories and ideologies. In the so-called 'post-colonial' situation, translation has often served as the instrument for the non-Western societies and cultures to re-write themselves. Then in the 1990s, globalization with its mixed bag of profit and loss impacted translation activities in significant ways as ethnic and religious groups became self-conscious and articulated their views and experiences which led to a the development of 'insider-outsider' dialogues. According to Michael Cronin [*Translation and Globalization*, 2003], "Translation exists not because language exists but because different languages exist." Cronin emphasizes that translation contributes to diversity because it expands the range of texts and cultural experiences of an individual of a given language. In this connection I recall Vandana Shiva's exhortation to fight the "monocultures of the mind". Shiva's argues in support of ecological diversity. In the same spirit the ecological map of linguistic diversity must be sustained and translation is the instrument for that and to overcome "monocultures of the mind". Translation transcends borders to make connections. It must be acknowledged that globalization energized and propelled the spread of pluralities and diversities in a manner no historical motor had done before. Another noteworthy development in the age of the Internet is translation's association with technology and the Web.

***Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* has been considered as the first major anthology of its kind (as it makes a significant observation about the role of gender in the discourse of Indian theatre). Could you please share your experience as an Editor, Introducer and Translator of the book?**

*Staging Resistance* is very dear to me. I'm happy to say that OUP is bringing out the paperback edition soon. The idea began as a desire to fill a gap. I teach drama and women's writing as different courses. That was the time when I wondered why there weren't plays written by women that I could teach in my class? Other related questions were: if women write plays, would they be different from those written by male dramatists? Why and how can they be distinguished? I am talking about women playwrights in India. Even in the West, until the later part of the twentieth century there weren't many plays written by women. I was particularly interested to delve into the treasuries of our languages. Searching for and locating texts was a rewarding experience. I looked for plays that had been staged. I learnt so much about women's experiences, their thoughts and feelings. Getting translators for the play-texts did pose some challenge initially because these are texts for performance. Eventually everything fell into place. The project was deeply engrossing and during the process I discovered the usefulness of collaborative translation. The editor-translator's work was indeed an exacting one. The final phase of the project was getting feedback on the translations. I recorded all that I gained from the endeavour as the 'Prolegomenon' to the anthology which comprises 18 plays from 11 languages.

**Very often in literature, particularly in drama and fiction, there is deliberate use of variability in language for a different representation of gender/caste/class. What could be the challenges faced by a translator while translating such texts?**

Definitely. The use of variability in language to differentiate the representation of gender/caste/class poses a great challenge

for translators. Translations from Indian languages into English encounter this problem regularly. Girish Karnad has spoken about this difficulty especially in the case of his play *Tale Danda* where the nuanced language is an essential dramatic component. Effacement of specificities in the language registers diminishes the translation. I experienced this variability of language use while translating Nabaneeta Dev Sen's brilliant novella *Sheet-sahosik Hemantolok*, translated as *Defying Winter* [Five Novellas by Women Writers OUP 2008]. The story is about the inmates of an old age home who vary in age and come from different class, background, and religion. The speech pattern of each character is different. The most fascinating and challenging is the language and vocabulary of a lady who comes from a not-so-respectable class and locality. Added to this is Nabaneeta di's own ironical style of writing. This project was a truly wonderful experience.

**You have been visiting many Asian, European and American countries for a long time. How different is the discourse of translation/translation studies in those countries compared to India?**

Fascinating and different kinds of work is being done in the area of translation. The theoretical discussions are also very enriching. India presents a rich terrain because of our languages and diversities. This is missing in countries with single language cultures.

**One significant factor in your translation career is, translating from the language which is neither your mother tongue, nor your medium of instruction. How was that experience?**

Right. I have done some collaborative translation. I realized that there exists a kind of one-way traffic in the translation of texts among Indian languages. Certain languages are privileged because most texts from it get translated into other languages. Hence, a sort of hegemony of languages becomes apparent. I strongly feel that collaborativetranslation can make this give-and-take of texts more

equitable.

**NTM has been training translators conducting orientation programmes in different languages across the country and is also planning to start short-term training courses soon. We have quite a good number of literary translation training programmes in many universities and institutions, but since we are concerned with Knowledge Text translation, what will be your suggestions to design such a course? In what way translating a literary text different from translating a Knowledge Text (KT)?**

Translation of “Knowledge Texts” initiated by NTM is a much-needed and laudable project. I would define this project as ‘translation for special purposes’. It is governed more by functionality and technicality. This kind of translation would employ scientific procedures and be more demanding in terms of expertise and specialist knowledge required, both for the subject of the texts to be translated and for the translator. The translation would have to be exacting in terms of information conveyed, that is, a ‘faithful’ rendering of the SLT. An obvious problem could be getting good translators because an expert in the subject of the Knowledge Text may not be a proficient translator. I’m not sure how effective machine translation would be for this kind of work? But collaborative translation may be a viable option to meet such demands.

**Your article titled “SLT”, *TLL and the ‘Other’: The Triangular Love story of Translation*,” was published in *Translation Today*. Vol. 1 & 2 (2008). The title is catchy. What made you to name it so? Is the relationship between the SLT, TLL and the translator so complicated?**

I think the role of the translator is problematic in terms of her relationship with the texts - the SLT and the resultant text or the TLL. In this particular essay which also discusses the role of reviewers of translations, I describe the act of translation as an attempt to connect two shores or cultural continents. In the rocking

boat that is buffeted by currents of theory and strategies of language use, sits the translator keeping a steady hand on the rudder of her/his vessel, trying to steer a balanced course. The secret pull of a text beckons the translator with the thrill of embarking upon a labour of re-familiarization with the genealogy of the chosen text. As Spivak advises, the translator must surrender oneself to the text [not the writer!], the moment of the text. This deep engagement enables the translator to weave into the TLT the many dimensions of SLT which her intimate relationship with the text has allowed her to discover, carrying across as much locality and specificity as she can find. I conclude that no matter how choppy the sea may be choppy, one can't desist travel. So the translator set forth again in search of new continents and the never-ending love story!

**You have written an article “*Writing as Activism: Mulk Raj Anand’s Commitment to his Ideology.*” National Translation Mission (NTM) is reaching out to the masses by making Knowledge Texts available to them in their own languages. In some sense it is ‘positive action’ for disadvantaged groups. To what extent do you think such activism can make a difference to the higher education scenario in India?**

As I said above, NTM’s initiative in translating Knowledge Texts is immensely relevant, certainly a ‘positive action’ that will- help the spread of literacy. Higher education often seems intimidating to students who study in regional languages. This project gives the translation practice as activist edge in its thrust to bridge the linguistic handicap and make ‘knowledge’ more accessible for the disempowered.

**You had attended an International Conference on “*Translation and the Accommodation of Diversity: Indian & non-Indian.*” How can we accommodate national diversity through translation?**

As I’ve said before translation is the instrument to sustain the diversity of languages. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of our

society and culture is our diversity. Translation among languages is the way to help promote interaction among languages. Translation into English does create an awareness of this variety, but it also contributes to the monoglossia that's sweeping the world.

**Translation, as practice and theory has become central to Comparative Literature since the 1980s. Earlier it was not so. In the same decade, a new discipline has emerged in the name of Translation Studies. Please comment.**

Comparatists in Europe and America held this position vis-a-vis Translation, which isn't a sustainable argument at all. I don't subscribe to that view at all for the simple reason that texts in Greek, Latin, Hebrew and for us Sanskrit, classical Tamil, Pali, Persian - the whole archive of ancient literature and aesthetics from around the globe that builds the foundation of Comparative Literature - are available to us in translation. How can a comparatist marginalize translation? The emergence of Translation Studies is very welcome. The disciplinary structure makes the domain more organized, theory-based and method-oriented instead of comprising random readings. Translation Studies spans disciplines, is multi-disciplinary in its composition. It accommodates theoretical discourses as well as new developments in its use of technology. Its promise and potential as a discipline is immense. Translation is integral to Comparative Literature.

**We shall be grateful to receive any other suggestions from you for NTM.**

I wish all success to NTM and its missionary zeal. Perhaps more workshops with translators -and potential translators- to share and inculcate the spirit and activism of its projects would strengthen its hands. Thank you!

*Interview by. Shashikumar J*  
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