The complexity of Migration and Redefining the Contours of Translation Studies: Some Suggestions

MAYA PANDIT

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between migration and translation to discursively understand both migration and translation. Both are twilight beings, metaphors of mobility and flux and are instances of dislocation. If migration involves dislocation from their own lands, translations represent the original text in a different context. Migrant people and translators both try to be what they are not; they are considered to be the "Other" and their journeys involve toils, travails, exertions and struggles. The context of globalization and unification of the world, the ideas about development and progress of a particular kind have resulted into dislocation of people and the urge to communicate to people about the displaced worlds results into translation activity. In the process both have to constantly negotiate with hegemonic power relations and both destabilize the political and cultural hierarchies in the communities which they enter. In this process the questions of "voice', levels of translatability, fluency, communicability become important. General translation theory needs to address these issues in the context of globalization. These issues about how ideologies operate in both migration and translation have been contextualized in terms of the discussion of three cases involving migration: of the "dance-bar" girls from marginalized and nomadic communities who had been forced to migrate to Mumbai for survival, the autobiographies of Palestinian women who had to migrate to the USA and Europe seeking safety from Israel and a tribal community in Western Maharashtra forcefully re-located in a so-called "civilized" land. It is argued that translators have a political role to play in bringing these

unheard voices to the attention of the world. This will have important consequences for translation theory.

Keywords: Migration, Translation, Diaspora, Hegemony of Power Relations and Ideologies, Third Spaces, Assimilation, Tasks of Translation Theory.

Introduction

Exploring the relationship between migration and translation becomes an attempt to understand both migration and translation discursively. Salman Rushdie called migrated people as "translated beings". In fact, they have to constantly examine themselves and translate themselves for the others in the position of the "Civilizational Other". Both are metaphors of mobility and flux. Both represent complex processes of intercultural contact and communication.

Migration causes multiple dislocations. Boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar in the old and new habitats run deep under the veneer of familiarity. It is probably a continuous process of re-negotiating multiple identities for communities displaced from their original geopolitical locations, constantly pressed upon to move towards a state of becoming something that they are not. Whatever they try to do in order to negotiate their difficult paths from a position in limbo, their self-articulations are essentially testimonies to their toils, travails, exertions and struggles. There is a constant struggle going on between the global and local cultures and systems. Can we remain deeply local in an environment of more complexes, multi-layered, globalized environments that we are getting more and more exposed to? And are we forgetting, on the other hand, the tremendous transformation that is being brought about by the dominant global processes of reorganization in the distant local world? Distances are not purely in terms of miles, they are governed by power of habits and mental maps, cultural patterns and hegemonic ideologies

and practices that govern us. Habits and norms of the migrated communities may be quite different from those of the communities to which they try to migrate. How do we meet this challenge between the local interests and the global domination?

Some Examples

Examples abound both at the local and international levels of how the lives especially of the downtrodden and oppressed get shaped at diverse local locations. Let me discuss two examples of migration and narratives emerging from the local and one from the international contexts.

A) Bar Dancers in Mumbai

The first example is of bar dancers in Mumbai, who were compelled to migrate from various displaced nomadic communities in India to Mumbai, the economic capital of India to work in dance bars which geometrically increased after the 1970s. Their oral accounts, published in daily newspapers and also collected by the SNDT University, unveil horrifying tales of displacement, deprivation, exploitation and manipulation of these young girls and their communities. They are victims of a particular model of development in India.

These girls, who worked in dance bars, belonged to either Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes , Nomadic Tribes or socially backward Muslim communities, belonging to castes such as Bedia, Bhatu, Dhanawat, Gandharva, Chhari, Rajnat and Nat, Chilbila, Kesarvani, Bogum Vollu, Samlighar, Sansi, Kashmiri, Deredar, Jagari, Doli, and others, which are spread over many backward regions in and around major states and UTs in India such as Delhi, Agra, U.P., Bihar, Haryana, Bengal, Rajasthan, Maharashtra among others. These communities had always been on the margins of the social imaginary and devoid of

citizenship rights because of their lower status in the caste/ class hierarchies. Besides, many of them were nomadic without a permanent place of residence or address. The 'backwardness' of their regions is a result of many deeper historical processes in India's history of development and modernization. In the dynamics of social change, brought about by various developmental processes, these women and their communities straddle different worlds simultaneously in their everyday life. The pre-market, pre-modern feudal structures and values demand that their sexuality and labour be exploited as a productive resource for the upkeep of their families, and the new emergent structures of capitalist development, instead of allowing them any opportunity of either education or employment for self- development, do the same by making available new sites for cultural production, where their dance skills are exploited to cater to the growing demand of a middle class for entertainment and liquor. Since they cannot perform in their own places, they have to migrate to big cities to these new sites where their sexuality and cultural labour is exploited through the cultural services they offer by the bar owners to earn profits and the State to earn revenue. Their culture is completely different. In many communities, women have to play multiple roles. They have to be bread winners, they have alliances with men and have to produce children and look after their families which include parents, husbands, brothers-sisters, children, other men folk and old people from the community who are dependent on them. Their lives are full of conflict due to the increasing burden of poverty and policing by the State. Dancing has been the traditional occupation of many (e.g. forms like 'nautanki') but now these have become obsolete for lack of contractors, impact of television, cinema and consequent lack of public demand. When they were barred from dancing, their heart rending oral interviews (many of whom are illiterate) threw

light on how many processes/layers of exploitation operate implicitly and explicitly in their lives.

B) People Displaced through Constructions of Huge Dams

All of you must be aware of the plight of people displaced and not even settled yet in any place by the Government in case of huge dams like Koyna Nagar and Narmada. Kolhapur, the district where I come from, is known as the heartland of the green revolution, the land of many dams. Many people have been displaced from the hilly regions where rivers like the Panchganga originate. I am currently involved in the translation of a novel called *Ringaan* (Krishnat Khot 2017) which tells us the story of a tribal community, scattered all over like discarded dirt and 'settled' in places which are extremely hostile, condescending, unsympathetic and even antagonistic to them. The tribal people are hung in a huge, unfriendly, unreceptive and downright hostile limbo from where there is no escape for them. Their simple, modest and artless relationship with Nature is in complete contrast with the exploitative, manipulative and oppressive culture of the so-called civilized world marked by 'development', represented by sugar factories, cash crops, mechanized farming dominated by capital intensive investment, fertilizers, pesticides and excessive use of water. For them it spells the death of a familiar and humane world and also their alienation from Nature, society and even their own selves.

C) Migrant Writing from Palestine

My third example is of the Palestinian men and women migrating to the US or other (European) countries, trying to escape persecution by Israel. They show how the contexts have completely changed after the WW II. Jews, who had been the victims of the holocaust then, now appear to be in a completely different political role; here they are not victims but oppressors. Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima*, Salma

Salem's *The wind in my Hair,* Laila El-Haddad's *Gaza Mama*: *Polictics of Parenting in Palestine*are some of the testimonies that present the persecution of Palestinian people as seen and experienced through women's eyes. Interestingly, the history of Palestine as recounted by these migrants challenges the popular perception of Israel – Palestinian conflict created by and in the media. The anguish of exile, displacement and impossibility of return to the same old land marks these testimonies. The history of religious conflict, the confrontation of different ethnic identities, and more importantly, the changing demographic realities that these tales of migration tell us are absolutely heart rending. There are interesting parallels that one sees between the trajectories of the colonialist projects in the world and the political project of Zionism as has been pointed out by Anchalee Seanthong (2018). Generally the acts of the Paletinians are represented as acts of terrorism in the media across the world but they are actually the voice of victims, the Palestinian people, as the tormented Other. Ghada Karmi for instance is forced to migrate to the West. The alienation, uprootedness and trauma of displacement caused by being in 'exile' informs her individual gender, community and national identity. The forced departure of her family from Palestine results in a fractured, fragmented identity for her. Salem's story brings out how racism in Europe excludes and marginalizes migrant communities who have to eke out a living through the experience of a hybridized cultural entity. What constitutes 'home' for the Palestinian people? They represent a strategy of transmitting the knowledge of belonging and memory to new generations. These memoirs also create new knowledge for their future generations, which otherwise may be lost forever. (As, probably, in the case of the bar dancers and their communities because of lack of literacy and access to other means of communication!). The accounts of Palestine's

politics, elections, massacre, border controls and Israel's bombardment and blockade of Gaza gets projected in two ways. The representation of the global war on terror in media and their 'rhetoric of salvation', where the images of the Arab world and Palestinians are circulated, create false impressions and a false consciousness the world over. The memoirs tell us about the deprivation, contradictions, obstacles, negative sentiments and challenges that the Palestinian migrants encounter with the 'civilized world' at home and abroad.

I will not even enter into the discussion of the situation of migrants coming to India from the neighbouring countries, both Muslim and non-Muslim religious identities, who are beleaguered and fragmented and are now systematically being targeted by the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens bill in India even before they have overcome the trauma of their displacement! But one can see how their narratives will be changed, fragmented and distorted by the official, administrative and powerful voice of the State machinery including the people who occupy the State power.

Migration and Translation

These are several similarities between migration and translation. Accounts of migrant writing give rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation, which is exactly like what happens in translation. The migrants are a "hybrid" people who occupy a liminal space, the 'third space' (as Homi Bhaba would name it), inhabiting the dark and neglected spaces, nooks and corners, the in-between spaces located between two or more colliding cultures. They have raised many challenges before the scholars of translation studies. Migration represents multiple journeys, temporary, voluntary or involuntary displacement, exile, a set of concepts with which translators are very familiar as they also work in

'twilight zones' of non-recognition. Places of origin, arrival, and destination are similarly ambiguous terms both in migration and translation. Both are marked by a strange nomadism. The concept of 'mobility' is central to both. As Polezzi argues (2006:171), there are many issues which can be raised with reference to voice, agency, politics and/of representation: "How do the images produced by travellers influence the ideological constructions of identity and difference? How did travel writing influence historical phenomena such as colonialism and empire building? Can these accounts play subversive or resistant roles, offering testimonies of and bestowing visibility on people and events that would otherwise be forgotten? Why do migrating people write the narratives? What kinds of textual traces do they leave, for whom and in which language?"

It is the notions of mobility that links translation and migration organically. Movement, transportation of goods, people and ideas, is what is central to both. Both the migrants and translators need to present the new through the 'known', the 'unfamiliar' through the 'familiar'. The distance between the migrant community's habits and the norms for social behaviour in the places they migrate to can be devastating. Both are supposed to act as reasonable and reliable conductors, mediators and witnesses but both can have the potential to cheat, deceive, confuse and betray. Another important question is: Which languages does the translator translate in? English has been the choice for post-colonial communities for many reasons. And most of the translators have 'hyphenated identities'. What does the translator do in such a scenario? What kind of a vision does s/he needs to possess?

This is exactly what Salman Rushdie argues in case of translators and writers. He assigns migrant writers with connotations of potential renewal and betrayal, which

translators also have to carry. Take for instance the Indian writers in English who have migrated to the West or the US and who belong to the diaspora!

Susan Bassnett has captured the similarities and ambiguities between translation and travel, "… The discourse of faithfulness that has so long dogged Translation Studies … is also a dominant discourse in travel writing… they are not transparent activities. They are definitely located activities with points of origin, points of departure and destinations" (1993:103, 114).

Mobility and transfer thus characterize both translation and migration. Both characterize a process of de-sacralisation which has the ability to debunk the myths of cultural superiority. The Palestinian migrant writers are a case in point.

However, several questions present themselves here. How do these processes of contact, mobility and "miscegenation" get chosen for translation? Who do the translations reach out to? Why? How are the translations received by people for whom and in whose language they are made? Is their reception always positive or are they looked down upon as inferior works that tell about the "Other"? They do tell you about people, cultures, histories which are different from your own, but are they always seen that way? Do they tell us what we miss or what is unwanted?

It is necessary to note here that both migration and translation are enmeshed in relationships of power and constant negotiation. Translation can never be an innocent act. In fact, as Polezzi says (2006:175), both are acts which have "practical and moral consequences". They destabilize the political and cultural hierarchies in the receiving communities. We need to explicate their complexity and think of them in historically and geographically located terms. There can be no universal parameters of judgment in this. As Asad says, translating is not

a matter of matching written sentences in two languages, such that the second set of sentences becomes the real meaning of the first…. In other words, it is the privileged position of someone who does not, and can afford not to, engage in a genuine dialogue (Asad 1986:155). "Sometimes a translator feels that he has to compensate for the inequality between languages and forces the original testimonies to make sense in terms of the receiving culture and language." (Asad 1986:160). The question is how does one make sense of migration and the conglomerate of meanings of migration in the translation? The prism of ideology operates on the translator too.

Another important issue in both migration and translation is the question of voice. How do we know that the voice and point of view of the translator and the voice and the points of view of the native are one and the same? This also gives rise to the question of morality of speaking for the others. Does the translator have the right to represent the migrant community and vocalize their voice? But if the subaltern cannot speak in the languages that the others understand, how do we find an alternative to translation?

The question of translatability of difference between the migrant culture, translator's culture and the receiving culture (as in the case of mine) is a complex question in the context of multilingual and multicultural audiences. I have already raised the issue of who does one translate for. 'Here' and 'there' and 'home and abroad' may have different meanings and they may not be useful to explain the diverse production and reception scenarios. The authors may have to address complex audiences. Their works may receive patronage from international publishing houses, metropolitan intellectuals, or people who have made the journey from periphery to the centre. As Polezzi argues (2006:180), translations are produced with complex rationales; they may be done because the

language of translation gives them access to a larger audience. Or it probably helps them to make a political statement. They may be done to harness the prestige that the gaze of the powerful outsider bestows on the work.

In India, translation had for a long period been a unidirectional process with our texts translated into English and especially for European consumption. But as Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi say (1999:13) "In our age of (the valorization of) migrancy, exile and diaspora, the word 'translation' seems to have come full circle and reverted from its figurative literary meaning of an interlingual transaction to locational disrupture." They points out the need to anchor translation firmly to historically located practice to the traffic between languages which still speaks of asymmetrical power relations between various local vernaculars and the one master-language of the post-colonial world, English. In the process of translating migration accounts in English (or any other language that is culturally very different), various impoverishments occur in translation. The cultural, semiotic and discursive regimes in English may reveal yawning gulfs opening before the translator. In such cases, what do we do as translators with the concepts of fluency and transparency and how do we expose the ideological designs underneath? Should we domesticate and assimilate the source text or allow it to reach out to different readers through detailed introductions, glosses and notes? 'How not to be complicit in the politics of domination' is an important task before the translator. As Lawrence Venuti says (1998:4), "asymmetries, inequities, relations of dominance and dependence exist in every act of translating, of putting the translated in the service of translating culture". He goes on to argue that translation is an essentially ethnocentric activity.

The minority texts and migrant experiences bear the mark of their genetic imprint: where they come from, what traditions they have, what ways of seeing they possess culturally and politically. How do translators negotiate with that? Even the notion of mother tongue may also be questioned here. Many a time, the notion that everyone has one specific mother tongue is entrenched firmly in our mind. There may be multiple mother tongues. They may be communities which are not at home in only one language (as the bar dancers demonstrate); or there may be no mother tongues but a medley of different languages at their disposal for different social functions.

But the general translation theory does not seem to address these issues. As Polezzi (2006:181) points out, "A de-centring and destabilizing move is needed with regard to our models of translation process. The binary image of translation which couples source and target texts, source and target language, source and target culture, with its 'one-size-fits-all' aspirations and rigidities is increasingly unable to offer a sound basis for the analysis of contemporary writing and publishing networks. Such models need to be re-read and revised in view of new modes of mobility and community formation….. Ultimately this is a route which should lead us to a continuing reliance of translation studies on models that assume as normative the movement of a stable, monolingual original from the source to the target language – these later to be understood as two equally fixed poles, identified with national languages. The result may be a more flexible and pervasive image of translation which encompasses a wide range of practices, from self-translation to multiple writing, from community interpreting to inter-media adaptation, without losing sight of the geographically and historically located nature of practices and of their ethical as well as social dimension."

Many of these issues, however, rarely appear to be visible in the multiple histories of translation studies in diverse cultural contexts. In fact, the general tendency has been to either ignore or push these and similar issues under the carpet. Without going into the detailed discussion of these theories, I would like to suggest that several traditional assumptions about conceptualization of translation, ST-TT pair work, translation culture/s, processes and strategies of translation, roles of translators etc., probably need to undergo some major changes. The linguistic, economic, social, cultural, political, and ideological dimensions of the phenomena of displacement and their links with translation culture, both practical and theoretical, cannot be overemphasized in the new contexts of displacement and marginalization. The oral or written texts produced by these "Others" represent the grounds where new cultural identities and experiences are formed, re-formed, and performed and contested. The channels and modes of communications also are changing. Translators have to don the role of cultural historians for international creation of knowledge and cultural histories in these changing realities. Translators may now have to work in tandem with the newly emerging concepts of multiple translated and translating subjects, carry out different functions, including being 'cultural traitors', and ask questions about the nature and function of representations and issues of politics, voice and agency.

It is interesting to note that today various disciplinary boundaries seem to be breaking down. Branches of study like sociology, politics, geography, population studies, ecology etc. in social sciences and in humanities are converging together. The various notions from these disciplines have provided us with the 'ciphers' of the contemporary world. Both migrant writing and translation studies have emerged as major areas of inquiry. Though mobility and transfer are common features of both, it is quite necessary to anchor translation to historically

located practices. It is in the light of these observations that I would like to enumerate at least some of these challenges before the field of translation studies for our young friends and scholars. As a writer, translator and poet actively engaged in the task of translating some of these texts, I submit that the discipline of translation studies take up some of the following tasks:

- identify strategies of explicit or implicit confrontation and negotiation with the new cultures that appear through the narratives
- record through various means the oral expressions of migrant communities and highlight the phenomena of cultural amnesia and preservation of cultural memory through the trauma of displacement
- define the contours of the "third spaces" that can be seen emerging from these accounts
- group together and circulate commonalities and distinctiveness of experience of migrating and displaced communities across cultures
- compile histories of disappearing cultures, their myths, traditions as alternative structures
- record the processes of reception of such literatures across diverse cultures

We can contribute to the creation of a huge data base and inaugurate new directions for the development of translation theory in the process. Let the world come closer through us, let us be the bridges of understanding and compassion. Let us give the world opportunities to understand new vistas of experience which have remained unexplored so far. Let us be political in the true sense of the term!

Thank you very much for lending me such a patient ear. I am sure that over the past few days, many of these issues have been discussed extensively. I do not claim to have given you

any great knowledge. But I treated this occasion as a point of contact to share with you some of my own preoccupations and if you have already discussed some of these issues, I am happy to have met like-minded people. If you did not agree with some of the ideas presented then I may have given you something to weigh and consider. In any case I sincerely thank the organizers for having given me this opportunity to share some of my own preoccupations with you.

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