From *Bhashantar* to *Bhavantar*, *Bhavantar* to *Rupantar*: Celebrating the Art of Translation

Mogalli Ganesh's *The Cradle - A Saga of an Indian Feudal Family through Three Generations*, Translated from Kannada by P. P. Giridhar, LINCOM GmbH: Munchen. 2018

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As part of the proposal for translation submitted to the International Centre for Writing and Translation (ICWT) at the University of California, Irvine, in 2007-08 by Shri P. P. Giridhar, Mogalli Ganesh's novel *The Cradle* was rendered into English. As a reviewer of the book, who does not have access to Kannada language and literature, one has no hesitation in stating that a whole new world of colour, form and fragrance has opened up through the English translation of the novel, as the translator thankfully chooses not to erase the markers and nuances that distinguishes the source language narrative in more ways than one. In fact, he beautifully captures the linguistic and cultural diversity of the rhythms of Kannada literature, as undoubtedly translating Mogalli Ganesh's novel is a challenge that few would dare to take up. As a lover of literature, one is not only caught up with the depth and intensity of the story with rich shades of existential complexity that charts different cartographies of existence, one's interest is piqued as a practicing translator, for whom it is evident how malleable any language is and if one intends to, then nothing truly is untranslatable.

Thematically, the narrative is a telling critique of the history of this sub-continent that has been witness to different kinds of high and low intensity civil wars on the lines of caste, class, religion, language and culture, though the author chooses to centre on a simple binary between the upper class/ upper caste/ intensely patriarchal and feudal highlanders who live in the hillock house and rule over the lower caste / dispossessed /

ignorant lowlanders who might be indigenous dwellers (*Adivasis*) of the place caught in a relationship of conflict - both at the overt and covert level. The strange kind of awe that becomes the controlling factor of containing and squashing the discontent of the lowland dwellers is a kind of universal phenomena that perpetuates an exploitative and unjust social system. The state of dependency that the novel highlights reinforces the divide between highlanders and lowlanders and this dependency is not only economic but social, political as well as cultural, with deep religious overtones that arise out of a kind of fatalism that people on the thresholds of existence often subscribe to. The feudal-aristocratic order established their hegemony in different parts of the world till the late 20th century and in certain far flung, remote areas of the developing world, even today, using various socio-cultural practices that gave sanction to their tyrannical rule using the twin shades of repressive and ideological forms of power and control. A magic realist mode is used to depict such a complex network of relationships and the context being a small estate ruled by a family of *zamindars*, near Mysuru (Mysore), capital city of the kingdom of Mysore from 1399-1947, where the particular histories charting names of people, places, presentation of incidents/events are fictionalized to play around with universals, that becomes the axis of reflection on actual histories as what is played out down the ages is a unique gymnastics of power which uses all forms of control – old, new, residual, emergent - to establish hegemony in the Gramscian sense.

The next interesting aspect of the novel is the art of characterization and form of storytelling. The characters that dot the narrative are life-like and adorable, including the villainous “elder Uncle” and the other rabidly violent males of the hillock household. One can see the concerted effort that the author made in trying to infuse the lived nuances of ways of

life that exists among the ruling elites of the hillock house and the 'lowlanders' – presumably Dalits and Adivasis, comprising the village poor, in a hinterland close to Mysuru and characters like the 'radio uncle', Venkatalakshmi, Ashwini, Ha-Oh-Ayyo, the son of 'deaf-mute', Grandma, elder Uncle, the King of Mysuru, Madana and Malli, Pujarappa, Kapira, Doddayya and Bhimayya and several others from all cross-sections of primarily rural life - both of this world and the spirit-world, whose humour and quirks of nature make them lovable and one strikes an immediate bonhomie with them. There are interesting character foils as well, for instance, the narrator of the tale, the son of a "deaf [and] mute" maid servant who was raped by one of the males of the household and she was taken in for household work in the hillock house, as she was a wandering destitute whose condition inspired pity and the duo – Madana and his mother Malli, replicate thematic as well as formal elements that create the causal universe of the novel. In fact, all four characters are caught in a quadrilateral of forces and their lives unfold in directions that are totally unintended. The violent death of Madana, sacrificed as he was on a moonlit night to appease spirits, the death of "deaf mute", the idea ragi "rotti" maker (p. 250) and the peace that the narrator enjoyed in the house of Malli, though he was the only witness to the murder of Madana and who was in perpetual fear of a similar death on a moonlit night, interestingly becomes the last hope for the elders of the hillock household. Elder grandma's trip to Mysuru to look for him, the overtures of the family to get him married to Kaushalaye and settle the guilt score of one of their male members, his persistent refusal and yet the desire to wed her, his political involvement with underground outfits, his sympathies for the lowlanders makes him the voice of the twice born subaltern and in his blasted existence that now does not even have the courage to hope for another beginning, is the symbolic gesture of portraying the infinite play of histories -

both individual and collective, that indicate a bleak and desolate future in which 'beautyful ones (cannot be) born'[1].

As a reader however, one relates to the character 'radio uncle', whose passion for the gadget is something shared in the Bengali / Indian / Indian sub-continental milieu, as a common phenomenon in the generation of the 1930s and after. The history of how the All India Radio[2] came into existence and what regional language terms were introduced as an anti-colonial critique of blind borrowing of English words into Indian languages as an act of enrichment, rather than translating/ transcreating ideas and concepts in one's own language is an interesting one. Words/phrases like *Akaashvaani*, *Prasar Bharati*, *Doordarshan*, *Doorabhaash*, *Betaarvaarta* etc. were new coinages based on what one would like to foreground as 'ideational translation' as its objective was to render foreign words into one's own language rather than simple borrowing of terms to enrich the stock of words in Indian languages. It may not be out of place however to suggest here that translations of this kind are still meaningful forays and *The Cradle* paves the way forward in a direction of

[1] Borrowing the title of Ayikwei Armah's 1968 novel *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

[2] Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) came into existence on July 23, 1927 and faced liquidation in less than three years. If one goes by the history of radio and broadcasting services in India, one realizes that there were three radio clubs established in Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Madras (Chennai) between 1923 and 1924 and initially radio broadcasting began as a private venture, and the first radio program was broadcast by the Radio Club in India in June 1923 (See, www.ddedjust.ac.in/studymaterial/ mmc-1/mmc-104). All India Radio came into existence on 8 June 1936 and its coming into being has a historic significance for the Indian sub-continent as one should remember that none of these ventures that led to mass communication networks or mass viewing/ mass reading networks was the result of passionate investment and not introduced by the British as an act of colonial benevolence to improve conditions of life in the Indian sub-continent.

scholarship where we have become confident of rendering the so-called "Indian English" genre with a corpus of late 20th century and postmillennial translations from different regional languages into English, taking care that markers - linguistic, cultural and otherwise of the text in the source language is retained to acculturate "Indian English" in a regional flavor. Like Mogalli Ganesh's novel, Mahasweta Devi's fictional pieces portraying subaltern and marginalized existences from the Dalit/Adivasi world, Satinath Bhaduri's novel *Dhoraicharitmanas* and some of his short stories to be rendered into a foreign language including English is still a translator's challenge owing to the use of what Premchand in his writings on "*Rashtrabhasha*" and "*Qaumizabaan*" tries to posit as "*upabhashas*" (translated best as "sub-languages" rather than dialects[3], as the Hindi word is used in both senses). Considering this aspect of the novel in Kannada, which would be necessarily using several linguistic registers to indicate the socio-cultural location of its characters, what the English translation of the novel has achieved is remarkable, barring a few stumbling blocks which one encounters as a lay reader. For instance, one's encounter with a few phrases like - "caste DNA", "ontological hunger" and "ontological poverty" - are interesting usages which reads fine in English, but one wonders what the words are in Kannada or other regional languages of this sub-continent. One would be truly happy if terms of references in the hard sciences, life sciences, social and human sciences have found their way in our regional

[3]Translation mine, in a collection of Premchand's writings *On National Language*, which is part of an on-going translation project of translation of Premchand's non-fictional writings from Hindi and Urdu into English under the aegis of UGC SAP-DRS III, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, 2015-2020. The edited volume containing Premchand's entire corpus of writings on the question of "rashtrabhasha" is due to be published in 2018.

languages as till the late 90s, books on cinema and literature in Bangla retained the English/French terms like "semiotics", "signifier", "sign", "narrateme", etc. in their source language script and simply added a phonetic transliteration of it with a description of the same in the target language. Again for a general reader of English literature, stumbling over "ontological hunger" and "caste DNA" might be a good mental exercise but not a fair one, as one picks up a book to read and mull over life perhaps, in a proactive way. Mauling readers to confront their own ontologies might lead to scaring them away from a book that is otherwise a delight to read.

Structurally, fifteen odd chapters comprise the narrative movement that tells the story using multiple perspectives and points of view with a notion of time that is both linear and cyclical, in a unique fusion of corollaries where lived and imagined histories, experiences and realizations are welded together to create a complex matrix, almost like the vision that the insect (Phylum *Arthropoda*, Class *Insecta*) has with a compound eye (*Ommatidium*). The narrative perspective is an interlinking of several prismatic facets that being with a compound eye vision is blessed with. Individual chapters of the novel are complete narratives and are more like stand-alone pieces, though it is together that they tell the story. The language of narration stylistically follows a kind of visualization that aesthetically co-relates with none other, but the last Muse, the art of cinema or the moving image - which Tagore describes in a letter to Murari Bhaduri as *ruperchalatprabaha* i.e., a continuum of beauteous forms - (Translation mine, qtd. in an article "Some Aspects of Intersemiotic Translations…" by Anuradha Ghosh in *Filming Fiction,* Eds. M. Asaduddin and Anuradha Ghosh, OUP: New Delhi. 2012).

If the discussion above focussed on certain aspects of Shri Mogalli's art, one must not forget that the English translation carries across the source text without foreignizing or domesticating English, but one can simply describe the translator's role as a highly proficient linguist, philosopher and translator who effortlessly trapezes across contexts, making the reader join in with him in the unique constructions of images, in a language that waltzes around, matching the tempo and rhythm of the *rasas* and *bhavas* that circulate in different strains in the novel. There are several remarkable features of Giridhar's translation that therefore warrants a close engagement, as the translator then becomes a *Bhavaantari* (one who is able to carry across the *bhavas* - emotions and feelings, i.e. the spirit/sense of the source text) or *Rupantari* (one who is able to render the *Rup* - form/beauty both thematically and stylistically) rather than just a *Bhashantari* (*Bhasha* - language, i.e. interlingual translator). Girdhar's use of English is peppered with coinages of words and phrases that are unique and there seems to be no attempt at any Kannadization of English, though one can savour the flavour of the source culture as one progresses with the narrative. The linguistic eye of the translator is unmistakable as in no other way can one come to terms with phrases like "walk over and park himself" (p. 43), "liquid grief" (p. 107), "timeless black cobras" (p. 107), "horse of imagination" (p. 139), "ladle out their tale" (p. 159), "bustling harvest" (p. 160), "embroidering according to the situation" (p. 162), "youngling snakes" (p. 182), "lullaby of life" (p. 258) , "cradle of the bird of life" (p. 276) which illustrates how cinematic literature can truly be. Though readability in the target language context is an important feature in any work of translation, the question of being faithful to the source language con/text is equally important, no matter how dinosaurian the notion might sound today, considering the body of academic discourses on the subject.

When language is used visually, a literary narrative becomes akin to a painting; when used aurally, it is akin to music and when it is used like a moving image, it is cinematic. There are several passages in the narrative that would bear out the suggestion made above. For instance, when the King of Mysuru appreciates the dance and music of the lowlanders, his rejection of "(t)he scholarship and poetry of (his) stuffy stodgy flabby paunchy palace scholars are like dog milk before your art" (p. 168) is not a simple piling up of epithets without any break in the sentence with a usual comma as punctuation mark and nor is it an error in proof reading as the rush and speed with which the words come together convey the intensity of boredom that a king might be experiencing, surrounded by sycophants that he is, who perpetually try to thwart his attempt to deliver justice to his people. The use of alliterative phrases makes the lines onomatopoeic and the rush in the utterance of the sentence makes the three arts of painting, music and cinema converge in a literary frame that is unique.

In fact, the chapter titled 'the high throne-seat that bowed to the lowly tambour musical" (p. 158) marks the climax of the narrative both thematically as well as stylistically. The fate of the "highlanders", who inhabit the hillock house, can no longer continue with their erratic ways, extort the lowlanders and subject them to a life of perpetual slavery - economic, political, social, cultural, psychological and sexual. Though the king grants acres of fertile lands to the lowlanders, pleased as he was by their music and dance, his ministers join forces with the hillock dwelling highlanders to initially grant them the land but do not carry out the royal decree in writing. Taking advantage of this lacuna, "elder Uncle" deceitfully usurps them of their right to land and taking advantage of the king's demise, the political turmoil in the country on the eve of independence and after, puts them through a chain of unwarranted physical and mental torture using state

administration, bureaucracy and police. When the lowlanders gather together to take their revenge in the concluding section of the novel, the son of the "deaf mute", who threads the diverse ends of the narrative together by virtue of being an ill-begotten child, whose lowborn mother is raped and violated by one of the hillock dwellers and whose education has been supported by his father's family though he remained a bastard all his life, is the ideal peg that hangs the different narratemes together that radiate centrifugally. Yet, the formal balance is maintained through a collateral centripetal convergence of elements reminding one of the history of the times - before and after 1947, that gave birth to an India that still had a long way to go to attain independence in the true sense of the term.

Likewise, the opening chapter of the novel warrants a special mention. The chapter titled 'radio uncle' is a micro narrative which ensembles that works on multiple levels. As an introduction to the novel, whose theme is recapitulating the history of a "huge household" (p. 9) that through three generations "splintered into smithereens, (where) everyone went his/her own way migrating to towns and cities" (*Ibid*.) leaving behind "(t)he village, its lanes and by-lanes, its streets and sub-streets, its hills and hillocks, its soil, the gardens, the brook, the wooded terrains, the paddy fields and all, which were like redemptively vital rivers of milk and honey flooding our childhoods, returned repeatedly to memory screens like mirages before fading away and back into limbo. No one wanted the village now. Following as we did the path taken by our elders, even we, fledglings or unfledged ones then, went astray" (*Ibid.)* - one needs to take note of the leisurely pace at which one traverses all the spaces mentioned much like a child or an adolescent does, in a casual sojourn into the nooks and crannies of natural habitat. The schism that comes in with the short, sharp sentence - "No one wanted the village now" - is almost like a cut or a wound inflicted on the dreamy sequence

that is captured in memory where time can be stalled or willed to move at a pace one desires. With it, comes the notion of violence that going "astray" indicates and there are many incidents and events in the novel that are either the result of violation of one's person - physically, mentally as well as emotionally - leading to outright violence, including killing in cold blood without an iota of guilt regarding the crime committed. Venkatalakshmi's "deep disappointment" (p. 11) with "radio uncle" or Uncle Keshavananda as husband for whom the "radio set was everything… the be-all and end-all of his existence" (p. 10) comes a full circle as such an incorrigible, die-hard romantic does not perhaps have the right to exist. His whole being was engaged in repairing radio sets that came to the Brahmananda Radio Repair Centre that he owned and if he was not repairing radios, he was trying to catch the right wave-length tuning things in almost 24/7 giving the impression of being "*a madman…*" who "*had no peers through the length and breadth of the land in the art and science of radio repairing*" (p. 18) and was it Venkatalakshmi's fault that she couldn't tolerate such a *saut* (co-wife) even after the birth of their daughter Ashwini, as nothing could change for "radio uncle" as he had a passionate zest for this *betaryantra* -wireless instrument that could catch all kinds of sound waves. When the "fire of communal trouble" (p. 21) was "ignited by some trivial reason" and when the whole city was engulfed in flames, "radio uncle" was there in his repair shop where he had been working for "three consecutive days" (p. 20) - without food or water. When his repair shop too caught fire, his wife Venkatalakshmi "went over and called" (p. 21) him but as he did not budge from the place, she seized the opportunity of murdering him. The spine chilling manner in which the murder is narrated - "*Let him be safe within the four walls amidst radio sets,* she thought before locking him in and coming away" (*Ibid.*) and the manner in

which the closing paragraph of the opening chapter ends - "She chewed the cud day and night of capturing all by herself the joyous and balanced rhythm, the *laya* of the wings of time and got ready" (p. 22) indicates that assertion/liberation from the chains of life ironically need a violent deliverance.

The manner in which Keshavananda dies is almost like embracing *jwalantsamadhi* - a form of death by ascetics within the Hindu and Jain fold, where they willingly immerse themselves into the fire to be one with the cosmic spirit. This double tension as to whether one takes the incident to be an act of willful murder by a disgruntled wife or is it an act of choice on the part of Keshavananda to die in such a way without allowing any one to describe it as a suicide will remain couched in ambivalence.

If the hallmarks of great literature are narratives that are steeped in ambivalence or have paradoxical constructions where nothing *is*, what it appears *to be*, then *The Cradle* is surely a must read. The book is invaluable to scholars as well, as it demonstrates the dual brilliance of translative and creative art, it offers an erotic view of history that is unconventional and has the potential to re-orient the "hunger/fire of the loins" to "the hunger of the mind" forcing one to think of *what it is*, rather than *what it could be*. What one enjoys most as a lay reader is the manner in which characters are presented, incidents and events – whether real or imaginary - are constructed, descriptions of places, sights and sounds and the quirks of man and nature are narrated and as a scholar, the indomitable sense of humour of both the author and the translator, who refuse to take life lying down, no matter what the events of times past, times present and even the bleak future might have to offer. Again, the latent feminization of the narrative art is subtle and thought provoking as it problematizes the gendered hierarchies and phallocentricity of

discourses. The lurking undercurrent of violence that laces the narrative texture seems indicative in its gesture as it is the condition of life for Dalits, Adivasis and other minorities, marginalized and downtrodden sections of people who are part of this sub-continent. Time, likened to a python, "lying coiled and still… had gobbled up everything around" (p. 130) and as incidents and events unfold, whether in fictional time or times re-counted in memory, the "deaf-mute" condition of not just a character but history itself rises up like a spectre, as it is the macabre nature of things that mars and maligns on the one hand and on the other, allows us to dream and construct rhythms of futures yet to be born and borne, whether in fragments or in wholes.

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