War, Women and Translational Empowerment in Seela Subhadra Devi's Poetry

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Abstract

Translation in recent times has come to be a means to enrich the language and literature of a culture. What are the problems of translation faced by translators in arriving at an acceptable translation? Can a translated text hope to attain a status equivalent to the Source Text remaining within its confines? If so, what is the modality to be adopted? The paper looks at some of these concerns as the translators undertook to translate Seela Subhadra Devi's full-length poem in Telugu titled Yudham Oka Gunde Kotha into English as War, a Heart's Ravage. Should treatment of the post-September-Eleven politico-religious scene necessarily call for a gendered response in the hands of a woman-writer? Can she transcend the limits of her consciousness? Can a marginalized woman as a mother hope to widen her scope for discovering her potential, facilitating a discourse of alternative power? Some of these questions are intrinsic to woman's subjectivity, but having a woman as writer and translator bears also on the issue of empowerment. What are the challenges encountered in the process of translation when the

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poem in the Source Language is rich in its allusion to native Telugu culture and literature and when the translation has for its objective symbolic stability of meaning? Besides attempting to answer the above questions, the paper seeks to trace the various stages involved in the translational process as well by analyzing at length an illustrative passage from the translated text.

Dharma and Adharma of Translation

At the beginning of the Kurukshetra war, Vyasa came to his blind son Dhritarashtra offering him sight to see the war. Dhritarashtra pleaded not to give him sight, if it were only to see his sons die. Instead, he would be satisfied to hear through someone who could relate vividly the details of the war. Vyasa, offering a boon, replied:

> "So be it. This Sanjaya will give you a true report of the entire war. I will grant him inner sight. He will be like the Rishis who can see all … Sanjaya will see everything that happens in the war. He will know even the thoughts of all … whether spoken, or whether it is just in the mind of a man, Sanjaya will know it all".
>
> (Subramanyam 2001: 479 & 480)

A translator shares with Sanjaya the anxiety to represent what she has visualized into articulate speech, and at the same time remain within the limited confines of the Source Text and not to over-read or under-read what she sees or reads and comprehends. Although outside the field of creativity (in this instance, poetic creativity), her inner sight should privilege her to see beneath surface meanings as well as discern the creative process behind the ST. She is also within its understanding and she internalizes the field within

herself. She is urged to relate exactly without debate or question the just and unjust actions of men. Any transgression would invite reproach with a shriek of *adharma* (immoral behaviour) from the blind Dhritarashtra - or the reader - who has no access to the Kurukshetra war or the ST, hence is blind. She has, therefore, to watch her tread with care. Despite this *limit* to *(her)* visual sight, and her distance from the field of action, the translated text emerges, since the ability of *Dhritarashtra* (the reader) "*to see with the mind's eye*" is boundless. The sights to which access is denied, "*those he is obliged to see through his mind*". Sanjaya, the translator, with his extended and enlarged vision is out to project the unfolding action: "*Maharaj, hearken to all that I can see*" (Bhattacharya 1992: 281-282).

War and the Empowerment of Women

Among the many issues frequently debated with regard to women's writing, one is the question of gendering of translations. In the politics of translation, an issue such as this, not surprisingly, invites an equally gendered response. If a woman writer were to create space for herself within and outside the boundaries of her SL, which amounts to giving her writing a public presence and legitimacy, finding a translator from the mainstream is as challenging as seeking recognition within the same. Hence, more often than not, women translate in order to undertake the task of carving out space for women writers outside the mainstream, which has also been *male-stream,* (SL 2) as well as gain access for them to global readership. In outreaching global attention, the long narrative poem *War, a Heart's Ravage* of Seela Subhadra Devi, written in Telugu, is a confluence of three voices - all of women. Viewing the post-September-Eleven politico-religious situation in the world contextually in the midst of Afghan war, the poet being a woman, records her response as a mother, as

Scene of man-made mammoth structures' collapse
Lingers still afresh on eye's iris.
(Jayalakshmi and Rao 2003: 31)

Secondly, the poem celebrates the centrality of woman as subject, the main narrative voice - a woman-conscious mother. In the contemporaneous context of the poem, the poet's response is highly meditative on the theme of woman as a mother, a silent sufferer in war since times immemorial. Thirdly, the translation is a collaborative effort of two women, in effect reinforcing the issue of empowerment.

The theme of women's empowerment, however unsettling to the mainstream writing and readership, obviates itself in literature, to begin with, as a gender-genre-stereotypic divide in women's writing. Except for prose writing, novels and lyric poetry, genres like epic, humour, travelogue, drama, criticism, satire etc. seem to be traditionally outside the gender-genre space of women's writing. By choosing to write a long narrative poem (*War, a Heart's Ravage* is fifty-page long in the original), Seela Subhadra Devi transgresses into a hitherto male-specific genre of long poems. It is relevant, in this regard, to recall the words of Nabaneeta Dev Sen who avers with confidence that such gender-genre-stereotypic "*distinction doesn't hold any longer*" *(Subhadra Devi 2003: 67)*. True to these words, Seela Subhadra Devi happens to be the first woman writer at least in Telugu literature, if not in Indian literature, to write a long poem. The poem although not characterized by epic features, has in it a metaphorical, symbolic, metaphysical and cosmic epic struggle going on between innocent and evil forces, besides shading off into folklore and fable as a search for meaning at the human level. These are concerns that are epical in nature. Such a transgression into a new genre, indeed, is empowerment in itself.

The translation of a literary text has in recent times come to be a means of enriching a culture's language and literature - an

intercultural and intra-cultural activity, besides being a *lingua-cultural activity*. In the additional context of Indian regional literatures, it is a mode of empowerment to gain global recognition even as it retains its singular regional ethos, its ethnic character. Though the corpus of translation from English to Telugu has been encouraging, the same is not true of translations into English. That translation into English is a mode of joining the general pool of national literatures is also true of Seela Subhadra Devi's *War, a Heart's Ravage*. Its multi-dimensional, international and universal treatment of the subject of war and the related suffering of women as well as children warrants its translation into English. The multi-dimensionality of its thematic concerns - plural, heterogeneous and diverse - is as varied as the concerns of woman as individual in the society, with socio-political and economic role-playing denied to her. This multi-dimensionality of theme is inclusive of a denial of political and civic rights leading to crisis of identity. As such, in times as cataclysmic as war, her suffering is no less heroic than that of soldiers fighting on the battlefront. Following close on its heels is the issue of the ravages of war and its impact on children irrespective of the gender divide. By a conscious choice of the subject of war, with the collapse of WTO towers lurking constantly as shadows in the background, the poem breaks free of the limitations of the rationality of its theme. Then there is the subject of the religio-political struggle for domination fought out on the canvas of human life. In treating such an all encompassing subject as this, the poem maps its own space at the national and international levels, facilitating a culture study and bonding nations together in an inter-exchange of human values. Into this web of interdependencies is woven an elemental simplicity of theme, which in this vitiated modern world may appear transparently innocent. In a world "*devoured by fire of hatred* ", the poem successfully legitimizes the essential necessity of the discourse of family and motherhood as crucial for the sustenance of a viable social order. The poem seems to lend credence to the words of Nabaneetha Dev Sen:

> "Now we see that the kind of history we write is what historians won't write about. That, which is not seen … by men is written by us. It fills that gap".
> (Nabaneetha Dev Sen cited in Subhadra Devi 2003: 68)

If historical sensibility alone is a measure of a poem's significance, it is nowhere better evidenced than here in *War, a Heart's Ravage*, since the poem grows out of the writer's subjectivity, her own being.

That the poem is inextricably interwoven in its native Telugu culture does not allow it in any way to compromise the international political issues of the contemporary world, which demand everybody's attention at this very moment when the "*world's theatre of war has shifted to living rooms*" *(Jayalakshmi and Rao 2003: 23)*. Treating the theme of death and violence as common in the present day world, Seela Subhadra Devi cautions that the world is inexorably moving to the brink of disaster, an Apocalypse. Catastrophic to war are terrorism, nuclear stockpiles, nuclear testing in oceanic depths, manufacture of weapons of mass destruction and other related destructive attitudes with accompanying mass migration, poverty, hunger, homelessness and the like.

As an empowering construct *War, a Heart's Ravage* is a recognition of, a drawing out and an expression of power at once both intrinsic and a given from without. It awakens the deeply hidden powers of a woman, "*which comes from being at home to, and connected with, the life force*" as Bryan Law, affirms in his *From Power to Empowerment*. Her potential to indulge in a discourse of alternativity on power, away from her marginalized identity by re-contextualizing it in social discourse, needs to be recognized. As such, through translation, the poem empowers itself,

raising a voice of caution to the world of the impending collapse of cultures, when

> World's countries mindless
> continue to cross bounds
> as boundaries unbound,
> trench earth
> sow seeds to root war shoots.
> (Jayalakshmi and Rao 2003: 13)

Today doubt, suspicion and uncertainty are endemic to life, militancy and militarization mistaken for empowerment, and nations are caught between the contentious issues of religion and politics. For which reason, the poem calls for demilitarization and disarmament, implicit in which is the necessity of disempowering unhealthy competitors in war, who strike at man's *personal power*, a power which, according to Julia Kraft and Andreas Speck, has a *spiritual quality*. The war games represent an '*instrument of power*' comparable to the sport of war:

> Power, strength, arrogance -
> Twisted together, ride the world.
> Men persist, flock of sheep-like
> Till all pawns arranged are played out.
> (Jayalakshmi and Rao 2003: 29)

War in all forms denies the discovery of, according to Bryan Law, "*power within*" as well as "*co-operative power*" among all groups and communities, which help in working toward a common goal, a shared vision of peace. When operative in its true spirit, existing only in times of peace, this power can become a consciousness-raising mode, with power sharing as its end. The poem *War, a Heart's Ravage*, in this context, is a voice-raise, an awareness awakening against a "*world maddened and possessed*" of war. The chief casualty of this madness is spiritual knowledge

"*culled*" since centuries "*being pounded to powdery dust*" (WHR 47). The poem refers to a mythic struggle between religion and politics, and demands for a change over to a more egalitarian society, where a non-violent power would prevail. It is a "*power to be and to do*" *(Kraft & Speck 2003),* but the real war as always is waged on the "*canvas of women's hearts … where tearful thoughts are penned!*" *(Jayalakshmi and Rao 2003: 20)* The poet reminiscences

> Wherever war is fought,
> Don't women-victims alone,
> with their cohort-consort train
> leap to watery well's death,
> resort to selves' immolations on funeral pyres,
> torch inner courts, bear fourth degree tortures
> behind closed closet doors?
> From pages of history leap out
> such tales of owe
> as slag from ore!
>
> (Jayalakshmi and Rao 2003: 20-21)

If at the human level women represent a petrified, regressive force, at the level of aesthesis they regain their regenerative empowering force. In this, the demonic "*Satans, Hiranyakhasipas/ Black magicians, Bhasmasuras threaten, upheaving from earth's deep sepulchres*" (WHR 49) not really belonging to the dead past but living, throbbing and pulsating, fattening and spreading flames of hatred among nations. Recovery of life is attempted wherein women exercise control, "*Ahalya's stone-cursed*" as quasi-mystical creators, are sought to be revived. They regenerate ethical and spiritual values of purity and chastity, since the petrified woman and emasculated humanity both are found incapable of power to offer release and relief from oppression of *arrogance blown heads or from those mad of religion*. She is the "*carrier of human values, a therapist who raise(s) voice as a fresh leaf bud / to show us the way*

through the dark crematory. This apart, she helps to *re-consecrate this planet with humane touch and people with human beings*" (WHR 50), capable of burning down the destructive forces by harnessing constructive forces.

Translation as a Mode of Empowerment

As has been stated earlier, the thematic concern of the poem and the translation's intent is empowerment. This point, when taken further as a language having internationally recognized excellence and merit, translation from a less known SL like Telugu into a wider and widely accepted literary tradition of English is also empowerment and enrichment of vernacular creative literature. Besides the problematics of the hierarchization of languages, the politics of translation recognizes translation into English as a necessity for the survival of Indian vernacular literatures in a world fast moving towards globalization, be it mainstream literature or gendered writing like that of women. Adding to the difficulty is urban youth moving away from regional mother tongues to acquire skills in English. So to speak, the translation of *War, a Heart's Ravage* not only stretches the linguistic boundaries of the SL Telugu gaining a revitalizing force in English, but also takes the TT to readers estranged from their mother tongue. Besides pitching the poem against political and economic power structures in today's world, the poet also invests it firmly in its regional Telugu culture. In doing this the writer appears to be adept at co-mingling the two on a wide canvas. If a poet's work, in addition, has to cut across a plethora of class, gender, race, and linguistic groups, then, a translator subscribing to this view gives the poem out to the world, by traversing through all groups trans-nationally. The readers can by no means be dismissive of this poem terming it as regional, vernacular and local, hence, "*less likely to be seriously reviewed and receive widespread publicity; thus less likely to be translated and published in other languages …*" *(Subhadra Devi 2003: 24).* Since

the readers of the TT are not necessarily limited to one regional language group, they have an access to participate and have a share in that consciousness-raising attempt. Translation, in this regard, opens lines of communication between languages and cultures.

Besides being a mode of empowerment as enunciated earlier the translational mode adopted in *War, a Heart's Ravage* may be likened to a tri-level approach postulated by Serghei G. Nikolayev in his article "Poor Results in Foreign-Native Translation: Reasons and Ways of Avoidance". His approach to empowerment works in a three-phased manner - the initial '*superficial awareness*' of the original to a stage of deep awareness of the original to finally a creation of the new utterance - as a parallel semantic and connotative construct in the TT. In analyzing the mode employed in translating the poem, the passage, as instanced below, traces these different stages of the process, which also finds a parallel in Julia Kristeva's linguistic-psychoanalytical approach. Looking at her *Two Modalities of Signification: the Semiotic and the Symbolic*, the mode of translation may be said to have passed through the initial stage of translational transfer of unstable meanings at the Semiotic stage to that of Symbolic stability of meaning. Translation of *War, a Heart's Ravage* involved an initial reading aloud, followed by a reading to oneself absorbing the sounds and rhythms of the poem in the ST analogous to Kristevian idea of the babbling incoherence of a child. The stage may also find a likeness in the *semiotic,* and language of poetry - a pre-entry stage into the receptor language domain. The initial readings of the text were, therefore, always a random toss *(of)* "*words back and forth / between mouth and ear*" *(Jayalakshmi and Rao 2003: 17)* between the translators and from time to time in the interactive sessions with the poet. Issues were called into question, debated and ruled. To cite Julia Kristeva, "issues were over-ruled" and opinions were "brought to trial", and unstable ambivalent meanings were identified, until the process reached the "possibility of creation, of sublimation" *(Kristeva 1996: 129-131).* The disruptions hallmarking this stage passed through silences, elisions,

and not through any semantic arrangements amounting to a "refusal to submit to communication" (Kristeva 1996:131). It was a refusal to submit to translational poetic articulation. It is a realm for experimentation at the level of thought and idea, not precisely meaningless, but reserving for itself that which is traditionally accepted as emotive, intuitive and trans-rational. More generally, the stage is an acquaintance with alliterative, metaphoric, symbolic and the musical rhythms native to the words in the SL.

Following is an attempt at tracing the contours of the translational mode, and the three stages or versions through which a passage, for instance, reached its final symbolic articulation,

Variant A: When will there be peace
for this fire which once before
quenched itself only in Khandav fire?
How many lives with holy water held in
hand
will help to quench this fire?

Variant B: Whence peace?
Once before this fire gratified itself
only with the Khandav fire.
How many lives held in hand
sacrificed to holy fire
help to satisfy this wild fire?

Variant C: Whence peace?
Once before this digestive fire
gratified itself with Khandav fire alone.
How calm this wild fire?
How many, lives held in hand
sacrificed to holy fire?
(Jayalakshmi and Rao 2003:45)

It may be noticed that the problematics of translation of the above passage revolved around words such as “fire” employed twice in Variant-A above, consisting two very different connotative referents, and “gratified” mistakenly finds identity in the word quenching. However, “quenching” semantically goes with thirst, meaning also “to put out the flame as well as slake” while in actuality the passage refers to Agni the god of fire asking to satisfy his hunger. In variant-B hunger, then, gains referentiality of meaning to one form of fire - a digestive “fire” - hungering for gratification. At this stage as Kristeva maintains in her “Interview, patterns appear but which do not have any stable identity: they are blurred and fluctuating” *(Kristeva 1996:129)*. Besides, the *whatness* of the problem of finding an appropriate word for the ritual of symbolic offering of food as oblation to *Agni*, i.e. taking water in hand as *avaposana* - in this instance fire - is a minor irritant. This in turn relates to warlords setting afire cities of life to satisfy their hunger for power. Extending the complexity of the problem further, there is a mytho-culture-specific reference to the forest at *Khandavprastha* that needs to be set afire if Agni's voracious “digestive fire” is to be gratified.

The translational resolution of the tangle in the above passage, in fact, lies elsewhere. The word ‘wild’ offers the final link in resolving all the allusive complexities of meaning. The hunger of *Agni* and the hunger of war-lords both being 'wild', ironically require sacrifice - the former calls for *Khandav fire* alone and the latter life itself as a ritual offering. Accentuating the irony further is the fact that ritual sacrifice is normally offered to ‘holy fire’, and the “wild of the digestive fire” and wildness of the competitors in war find a synonymy in gratification, a better word to use than quench. Besides, in the case of the warlords it amounts to being violent. Moreover, *Khandav fire* when gratified calms itself, but the hunger of the power-hungry defies gratification. The war hunger in today's world defies reason. Hence is the exasperating question “How calm this wild fire? ” Similarly, the drawn out interrogative in Variant-A

sounds prosaic, in contrast to the short and pointed "Whence peace?" that carries in its tonal quality a sense of urgency and immediacy.

Requisite to arriving at a final shaping of the translation it required, hence, beside a nodding "superficial awareness of the original", also a corresponding acquaintance with cultural referents that went into the composition of the ST. The sacrificial ritual and the mythic allusion to *Khandav* fire from The Mahabharata are a case in point. This knowledge of the cultural referents takes us into the second stage of the three-phased approach to empowerment as enunciated by Serghei G. Nikolayev – "a deep awareness" of the original. Imperative to it is knowledge of the semantic and syntactical peculiarities of the Telugu language. At the first two stages the meanings float freely, jostle with each other, freely transgressing beyond their denoted meanings. They are rule-transcending signifiers, not yet ready to have a finality or fixed identity of meaning. These two stages are the initial making available to oneself a range of possible meanings and their corresponding words, until the translators strike at the right word associative of right sound. Limiting themselves to overcoming the linguistic hurdle and cultural referents at this point, the translators desisted from indulging in unhealthy imitation of words and their meanings, word constructions and structures in the SL. Care is also being taken, to compress and decompress language, to match ST's tone and mood swings. So much so, in the end *creation of a new utterance*, an aesthesis, a 'dynamic equivalence' is reached. Venessa Leonardi, in this context, quoting Eugene A. Nida and C.R. Taber's "The Theory and Practice of Translation", (Leonardi 2003) maintains, "in such a way that the TL wording", to quote words of Nikoloyev, "trigger the same impact on the TC audiences as the original wording did upon ST audience". Thus, in variant C the implicit and the explicit coalesce to present a unified coherent completeness of meaning to the passage. This translational process

finds a more precise echo in Kristeva's quotation of Vladimir Mayakovsky from his, *How are Verses Made? (Mayakovsky 1970)*

> '… rhythm is the basis of any poetic work ... When the fundamentals are already there, one has a sudden sensation that the rhythm is strained: there's some little syllable or sound missing. You begin to shape all the words anew … It's like having a tooth crowned. A hundred times (or so it seems) the dentist tries a crown on the tooth, and it's the wrong size; but at last, after a hundred attempts, he presses one down, and it fits … Where this basic dull roar of a rhythm comes from is a mystery'
>
> (EL 234)

The translator's task like that of a dentist is to try words in TL like crowns over words in the ST till the right sized crown feigning the original is discovered. Once pressed down, the little syllable and sound found wanting till then is fixed to its sticking place. Thus, the translation gives in to creation of a new utterance, a near approximation to the rhythm of the poetic work in the SL. What we have here is an evolving process of a translational transfer of words unstable in meaning at the Semiotic stage, to begin with, to stability of meaning at the Symbolic. This is not to say, however, that the Semiotic is unstable in principle, but innate to it is a roaring energy, a creative force that needs/awaits discharge. The translator is merely a witness to a display of transfer of this energy from the Semiotic to the Symbolic, from one text to another, when she can exclaim: “it fits”!

Implicit to this problematic of translation of War a Heart's Ravage is the translators' individual style and her cultural perspective, which is Telugu at one level and Indian at another, and English at the level of translation, calling for focused attention. At the same time, collaborative exchange demanded that a balanced

perspective was necessary for the TT in order to attain a viable final meaningful shape, that is, adopt the style and choice of words in the TL while yet accommodating the writer's perspective.

The awareness at this stage is of untranslatable syntactic constructions and idiomatic expressions in the ST, which no dictionary would help explain. It is an awareness that linguistic equivalence cannot exist between two languages since the fact that languages are structured the way they are does not allow linguistic fidelity. This is all the more so when they belong to diametrically opposing cultures and linguistic genealogies, like Telugu and English. There is no linguistic and cultural commonality, sameness or parity. Such expressions were translated and reproduced literally and explained in the glossary, as for instance, "*quaffing cities and cities by handfuls*" *(43)*, a culture-specific expression, or " *piercing fingers may be anyone's; but eye belongs to us all* " *(6)*. Meanings in such idiomatic expressions can neither be detachable nor translatable. Tonal equivalence alone is something that a translation can hope to achieve, however. Restructuring constructions in the TL English is constitutive of this stage, since overcoming this hurdle would offer a smooth passage to the third and final stage of "creation of new utterance". In compliance with the translational transfer of rhythmic meanings that are unstable at the Semiotic to the Symbolic stability of meaning at the final stage, the temptation of employing grammatically correct constructions or indulgence in a mechanical imitation of English word structures or unjustified use of excessive Latinisms, as is the wont with teachers of English, is avoided. Perhaps, no translation has a finality of determinable fixed identity of meaning resembling or really capturing the source text. The translational process moving through the three variants is at best a series of readings, merely illusory steps leading to near approximate meanings in the ST. Each variant merely accentuates meaning to a seemingly fuller understanding of the semiotic creative process underlying the creation of the ST.

Nevertheless, the question of excessive dependence on the linguistic peculiarities of SL viz. Telugu remains. Any such indulgence viewed skeptically is a violation that could lower the quality of the translation itself. For instance, the semantic distortion that occurs at the stage of variant A due to misunderstanding the meaning of the source utterance appears in English as faulty and wrong syntax. Hence moving through the three levels from one variant to another, the translators felt how essential an acquaintance with the syntactical and semantic specificities in both SL as well as TL is, besides being woefully conscious of the limitations of their own position. In consequence, it is felt that no translation can offer a satisfying reading unless the TT like the ST lays claim to being a literary aesthetic creation, a work of creative force on display. A translated poem in the receptor language has to exist in its own right as an aesthetic work, and read as a poem in TL as a 'creative utterance'. In translating the long poem, meanings got significantly reinvested and reconstituted, revealing new and meaningful relationships since meanings as essences are present in the subjectivity both of the writer and the translators, and essentially not identical.

The last idea takes one to the question of the involvement of the translator's own subjectivity in the process of translation. An objective distancing may merely succeed in generating an objective response from the translator. Such a translation would be scientific and rational but would suffer by failing to carry the creative force of the ST to the TT. The translation of a poem, in fact any translation, necessarily and inescapably presupposes an involvement of the subjectivity of the translator. The success of a translation, hence, lies in the translator's subjective mediation between the ST and the TT, as well as in the objective distancing from both the ST and the TL in giving a conscious expression using stable sign system. The subjective self as always has a way of making its presence felt in the conscious mode in an unambiguous manner. The subjective mediation would evoke a better emotional, aesthetic and appreciative

response to TT through which a translator hopes to achieve "a creative utterance" , bringing to mind A.K. Ramanujan's words in his *Poems of Love and War* that *"only poems can translate poems"* (A.K. Ramanujan 1985: 296).

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