
Translation as Empowerment : Translational Fiction of Latin America

Sonya S. Gupta

Abstract

This paper looks at a shared space inhabited by contemporary literatures of Latin America and India generally studied in western academia under the rubric of "Third World Literature." We will, in the first place, see how the act of translation is embedded in the literary imagination of hybrid cultures arising out of colonial encounters. The issue of translation recurs constantly in contemporary Latin American fiction as a part and parcel of the problematic of writing in America arising with the discovery and conquest of the New World and the colonial encounter. The self-reflexive use of translation is a characteristic of much of contemporary writing in Latin America as it is in much of Indian writing in English. While new concepts about translation from Latin America and India have deeply influenced the theory and practice of translation and have led to a reassessment of the history of translation and postcolonial writing itself, the cultural economics of translation remains a domain still largely regulated by metropolitan centers. The paper will examine the translation practices that lie at the core of creating and regulating this domain in the context of India and Latin America.

In recent times, translation theory has been enriched by varied perspectives. One of the ways in which the role of translation has been studied is by contextualising it, not in the largely monolingualistic and monocultural situations that exist in western societies, but instead seeing it in the context of those societies that experienced colonialism, as a result of which they became spaces where literatures and languages of diverse cultures came into contact and gave rise to what G.N. Devy, in the case of Indian multilingualism, has referred to as a

“translating consciousness” (Devy 1998). These ex-colonial societies form a part of the so-called ‘Third World.’

The present paper will attempt looking at a shared space inhabited by contemporary literatures of Latin America and India, a space which Aijaz Ahmed sees as arising primarily in the metropolitan University of the Western world under the rubric of ‘Third World Literature’ (Ahmad 1994:43). More specifically, we will look not only at translation practices that lie at the core of creating and regulating this space, but also, and perhaps more importantly, at how the act of translation is embedded in the literary imagination of hybrid cultures arising out of colonial encounters.

Translation, Conquest and Colonisation

The Spaniard Antonio de Nebrija, writing the first grammar of Spanish language in 1492 which, in fact, was the first of a modern European language, had written to the Catholic Kings as they launched their colonial project in the Americas that “la lengua es la compañera del imperio” (language is the partner of the Empire). In his study on linguistic colonialism in the new world encounter between European colonizers and native Indians, Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out the connivance of language, translation and the Empire noting that the primal crime in the New World, the first of the endless series of kidnappings of Indians, was, in fact, plotted in order to secure translators (Greenblatt 1992: 17). Vicente Rafael, in his analysis of the role of translation in articulating the relationship between Christianity and colonialism in the case of the Phillipines Tagalog society under early Spanish rule, has noted that the Spanish words, *conquista*, *conversión* and *traducción* (conquest, conversion and translation) are, in fact, semantically related.¹

Early colonizers created the view that the inhabitants of the New World had no language at all: “God willing, when I make my departure I will bring half a dozen of them back to Their Majesties, so that they can learn to speak” (Cohen 1969: 56), thus goes the entry on that fortuitous day of 12th October, 1492 in the diary of

Christopher Columbus when he 'discovered' America. However, from placing them at the outer limits of difference, that is, denying their language or considering it deficient or defective, was the opposite conviction that there was no serious language barrier between the Europeans and Indians. The Spanish conquistadors used the latter view to intentionally falsify the narratives of early colonial encounters to make their actions appear fairer than they actually were by themselves "translating such fragments as they understood or thought they understood into a coherent story." (Greenblatt 1992: 27).² Eric Cheyfitz has, therefore, argued that translation was "the central act of European colonization and imperialism in America" (Cheyfitz 1991:104). It was the European colonizers who decided what would be translated or made known about the New World in those early encounters. Thus, the image of America was inaugurated by the European gaze and the history of this image as fabricated by successive colonizers has been determined not by a greater or lesser knowledge about the New World, but rather by the changes in the dominant interest of European culture. In fact, long before the Orient, that is, the East, grew as a set of alternatives to Europe and as a place to consume, and to fantasize about, America had been Europe's other. The knowledge constructed by the Empire, through travel writings, histories and chronicles of the Americas which may also be seen as acts of translation, made available the New World to the rest through 'Imperial Eyes' (Pratt 1992). Even today, as Aijaz Ahmed has pointed out literature from other zones of the 'Third World' comes to us not directly or autonomously but through grids of accumulation, interpretation and relocation which are governed from the metropolitan countries (Ahmad 1994: 44). He further points that "by the time a Latin American novel arrives in Delhi, it has been selected, translated, published, reviewed, explicated and allotted a place in the burgeoning archive of 'Third World Literature' through a complex set of metropolitan mediations" (ibid: 45).

There exists a recent but vast corpus of studies which has looked at the role of translations initiated in the period of British Orientalism in India (1792-1840) in the specific context of this kind

of imperial knowledge creating enterprise through which “the orient was ‘translated’ and made available for self-definition not only to the Europeans, but also to the Orientals themselves” (Kothari 2006: 9). In India, the role of translation went hand in hand with the consolidation of English language from the eighteenth century onwards as a hegemonic language which could never, however, obliterate the linguistic diversity of the subcontinent. The gradual hispanization of America, moved by the harmonizing criteria of unity, homogeneity and organicity deriving from a coherent power structure centered around what Angel Rama calls *La ciudad letrada* (1984, Republic of Letters), negated the basic heterogeneity which preceded the conquest and colonization. But, despite tremendous violence and destruction, this basic heterogeneity could not be eliminated either. Translation into (as also from) metropolitan languages remained a constant practice in what Mary Louise Pratt calls ‘contact zones’ and defines as the spaces where subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other and not separately but through co-presence and interaction often characterized by radically asymmetrical relations of power (Pratt 1992: 7). Such a perspective brings into play the colonized subject’s engagement with the colonizer and foregrounds the interactive dimensions of colonial encounters.

Thus, in the history of translation of Indian texts into English, after the eighteenth century Orientalist phase, translations into English by British scholars declined. In the nineteenth century, it is the Indian intellectuals who began to intervene and interrupt the colonizer’s version of India. Although, in most such instances, the colonized subjects undertook to represent themselves on the colonizer’s own terms, the content was from the point of view of the colonized. Translation became an important tool in the anti-colonial agenda of correcting the Westerner’s version of India’s past. This was the context of the first English translation by an Indian – the translation of Sankara’s *Vedanta* by the leading reformist Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Roy’s main aim was the rebuttal of the charge of idolatry and to establish the fundamental unity of Hinduism in the

context of constant comparisons by Utilitarians such as James Mill and Lord Macaulay between a monotheistic Christianity and a polytheistic, inchoate Hinduism, with superiority being accorded to the former (Kothari 2006: 16-21). Roy was interpreting Hinduism in the light of Christianity and his translation can be considered what Pratt calls ‘autoethnographic expression’, that is, a text constructed by a colonized subject in response to or in dialogue with metropolitan representations. Pratt explains that “autoethnographic texts are not what are usually thought of as ‘authentic’ or autochthonous forms of self-representation, rather autoethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror” (Pratt, *ibid*). She quotes an extraordinary manuscript, a 1200-page long letter dated 1613 in Cuzco, written by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala addressed to King Philip III of Spain, found by the Peruvianist Richard Pietschmann in 1908 in the Danish Royal Archives in Copenhagen. Written in a mixture of Quechua and an ungrammatical Spanish, this letter of an unknown Andean begins by rewriting the history of Christendom incorporating Inca history and customs, followed by an account of the Spanish conquest denouncing its exploitation and abuse and finally ending with a plea to the king to consider a new form of government through collaboration of Andean and Spanish elites.

Ram Mohan Roy’s translation into English of the *Vedanta* in nineteenth century India and Guaman Poma’s appropriation of the Spanish chronicle form in the 17th century and his review of Inca history in a bilingual and dialogic letter are examples of transculturated texts in which lie the seeds of literary cosmopolitanism which has characterized the Latin American ‘boom’ novel and the Indian English novel exemplified in writers like García Márquez and Salman Rushdie.

Narrative Transculturation or the Art of Translation

In his famous and oft quoted lines, Salman Rushdie said:

I, too, am a translated man, I have been borne across. It is generally believed that something is lost in translation; ...I cling to the notion...that something can also be gained. (Rushdie 1991: 17)

A key term throughout his work, 'translation' in Rushdie, is not just an act of bearing across but of fertile coming together (Prasad 1999: 41), something that is common to all Indian English writers as the very act of writing Indian realities in the English language implies that they are writing translation (ibid). The hybridity which Rushdie conceptualizes as 'translation' is also a key element in the Latin American discussions on literary cosmopolitanism, as for example, in the works of the critic Angel Rama, whose term 'narrative transculturation' refers to that feature of the Latin American boom writing which oscillates unceasingly between the adoption of the European model and the valorization of national difference (Rama 1982: 29). Rama takes the term from the Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz who, writing in the 1940s, coined the term 'transculturation' while theorizing Cuban identity. As opposed to the hegemonic term 'acculturation' which referred to the dominated culture's effacement by the dominant culture when different cultures come into contact, Ortiz stressed the translational displacements, the cultural mutations that take place with the collision of cultures. Transculturation is not synthesis of diverse cultural elements, it is the mutability, the fluidity and uprootedness produced by cultural contact (See Ortiz 1999). In the essay titled *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar), Ortiz sets up the book's argument taking up an allegorical episode from the Spanish classic *Libro de Buen Amor*, that of the dispute between Carnival and Lent, to analyze the impact of tobacco and sugar, two leading actors in the history of Cuba. In Ortiz's allegorical scheme, sugar represents the invasion of Cuba by a 'white', exogenous culture which has, however, legitimate claims to naturalized Cubanness. Tobacco is dark and native, and represents the indigenous substratum. The counterpoint of tobacco and sugar embeds the dialectic of foreignness and autochthony that produces vernacular culture (ibid). The search for literary expression in Latin

America was the creation of a vernacular literary language. From Spain, the Latin American writer inherited a set of artistic and literary resources, a grammar of literary and linguistic usage, and the search was now for a literary vernacular from within the matrix of the mother tongue (see Pérez Firmat 1989). This was a project in translation and it is no wonder that it is not in the foundational fictions of the nineteenth century but in its literary cosmopolitanism, which was not foundational but translational, that Latin America found its most potent expression.

The issue of translation recurs constantly in contemporary Latin American fiction as a part and parcel of the problematic of writing in America, a problematic that, as we have tried to show, arose with the discovery and conquest of the New World and the colonial encounter. The self-reflexive use of translation can be seen, for example, in Borges ('Pierre Menard, author of *Quixote*', 'Averroes' Search'), in Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) and *Explosion in the Cathedral* (1962), in Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers* (1962), in Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1964). In García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), the act of translation is foregrounded as a vital constitutive element of the novel. The plot of the novel deals explicitly with the Buendías translating Melquíades' manuscript. The text of *One Hundred Years...* abounds with 'scenes of translation' and references to plurality of languages (González 1987: 65-79), besides the well known scene at its end when Aureliano Babilonia discovers that the language in which Melquíades has written his text is Sanskrit and finally decodes the text. In the more recent testimonial narratives, which have been seen by many as a contestatory genre to the 'boom' canon, the verbal transcribed into written is also a writing involving translation at its core. On the other hand, the Chicana feminist writers have sought in their recent writings to assert their poliglossia and reclaim La Malinche, translator and mistress to Cortés, who betrayed her people to the Spaniards by giving her tongue and her body to Cortés and, like Eve, was to blame for being the mother of the 'fallen' people (Behar 1993:19).

It is not surprising that translation is such a fundamental issue for writers in Latin America. Will we always be “but a distorted echo of what occurs elsewhere?” The state of being ‘translated men’ understood as mere copies or shadows of the metropolis informs *Caliban*, the seminal text of Roberto Fernández Retamar on the cultural identity of Latin America (Retamar 1979:10). In assuming Caliban as the symbol of the colonized, Fernández Retamar acknowledges that it is also an alien elaboration but a formulation that cannot be avoided. “To assume our condition as Calibán implies rethinking our history from the *other* side” (ibid: 37), ie., from the viewpoint of Caliban. It is this kind of rethinking from *el otro lado*, the other side, which has resulted in radical concepts of translation emerging from the former colonies, India and Latin America, particularly. The calibanesque/cannibalistic metaphor of devouring of western legacy to produce a synthesis of European and autochthonous elements informs the Brazilian translator Haroldo de Campos’ vanguard poetics of translation as textual revitalization. Translation, says de Campos, is like a blood transfusion: the translator devours the text for his/her own nourishment and vitality. Translation, in such terms, is not servitude but a dialogue and the translator a powerful and free agent (see Vieira 1999: 97).

Translation as Empowerment

The marginalisation of translation, Bassnet and Trivedi note, begins with the advent of print capitalism in Europe and stems from notions of ‘copyright’ and ‘ownership.’ In this scheme of things Europe becomes the great Original and the colonies were therefore copies, ‘translations’ of Europe which they were supposed to duplicate (Bassnet and Trivedi 1999:4). While new concepts about translation from Latin America and India have deeply influenced the theory and practice of translation and have lead to a reassessment of the history of translation and postcolonial writing itself, the cultural economics of translation remains a domain still largely regulated by metropolitan centres. Who decides what will be translated, published and disseminated? As Aijaz Ahmad has noted, the archive of the so

called 'Third World' literature is largely built by the machinery of accumulation, translation and gloss for texts from Asia and Africa cranked up in the metropolitan countries (1994: 81), the case of Latin America and the Caribbean being slightly different as Spanish, Portuguese and French and English, of course, being metropolitan languages facilitates to a certain extent the circulation of these texts in metropolitan circles when compared to say, the vast body of texts written in vernacular languages in India. The translation projects sponsored by Foundations, university presses, private publishing houses and other agencies generate all kinds of classificatory practices (79).³

In the case of Latin America and India, translations from and into Indian languages and Spanish show a revealing trend. In Spain, Indian Writing in English is fairly available in translation into Spanish, thanks to the enormous industry of translation in the West. The other translations that are published in Spain are largely of texts the 18th and 19th century British and mainly German Orientalists had made known and thus merely redeploy the orientalist disregard for India's present and satiate the West's thirst for an exotic spiritual India. In her introduction to Felix Ilárraz's translation into Spanish of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, the then Ambassador of Mexico to India, Doña Graciela de la Lama mentions that while preparing the *Bibliografía Afroasiática* (Afroasiatic bibliography) for El Colegio de México, she had noted that there were very few translations into Spanish of modern Indian literature (Introduction 1981: ix). She further noted that the Mexican philosopher and writer José Vasconcelos had translated the works of Rabindranath Tagore but that Tagore's fame did not create a reach for Indian literature in general, or other writers of Bengali nor those of other regional languages of India. It was to correct this situation and let Latin Americans have a better knowledge of contemporary Indian literature that after *Tughlaq*, the Centre for AfroAsian Studies of El Colegio de México did undertake some translations, notable among which is the anthology of stories of Saadat Hasan Manto published in 1996. The list of Latin American works translated into Indian

languages is woefully short and if one takes into consideration that Latin American fiction has invited world wide attention, it is surprising that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* of García Marquez has been the only Latin American novel translated into Hindi till date.⁴ Given this situation, one may have to conclude that the story of ‘orientalist’ translations is being repeated in a neo-colonial world.

I would have concluded this paper with such a positioning but for a recent happy discovery. During the course of my readings of women writing in India, I was looking at Dalit women autobiographies. Since Dalit writing is particularly well documented in Marathi, I was trying to locate English translations of autobiographies by Dalit women in Marathi. I found that Baby Kamble’s Marathi work, *Jena amach* is still not available in English. My colleague, who is undertaking the English translation to be published shortly, gave me a Spanish translation of this work done in Uruguay titled *Nuestra Existencia*.⁵ I read the work in the Spanish version as it is inaccessible to me in the Indian language it is written in, i.e, Marathi. A Marathi work of a Dalit woman, not available in English translation, read by an Indian in its Spanish translation has affirmed once again my conviction as a translator that translations can create spaces where foundations for sustainable solidarities can be built.

NOTES

1. *Conversion*, Rafael states, refers to the act of changing a thing into something else, and is commonly used to denote the act of bringing someone over to a religion or practice, but it also has the connotation of translation.
2. The most glaring example of the latter view was the *Requerimiento*, a legal document which was read out aloud to the newly encountered peoples in the New World. The document demanded obedience to the Catholic Kings as rulers of the Indies by virtue of donation of the pope, and permission

for the religious fathers to preach the true faith. If these demands were promptly met, many benefits were promised, but if there should be refusal or malicious delay, the consequences were made perfectly clear (Greenblatt: 29). The Requerimiento glossed over the biblical account of the variety of languages and assimilated the Indians into utter likeness doing away with the need for translation.

3. It is to be noted that translation from one Indian language to another and from Indian languages into English is a different case, but as soon as we talk of translation from and into Indian languages and foreign languages, the situation is quite different.
4. The translation into Hindi has been done by the author of this paper. This translation was undertaken directly from Spanish. The genre of poetry has been more fortunate and poets like Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Cesar Vallejo as well as several contemporary poets have been translated and published in magazines, anthologies as well as individual volumes.
5. I thank Prof. Maya Pandit, EFL University, Hyderabad, whose translation of Baby Kamble's autobiography is now due for publication soon, for providing me with a copy of the Spanish version, *La vida de una mujer intocable: Nuestra existencia*

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, Aijaz (1994) *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bassnett, Susan and H. Trivedi (eds) (1999) *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Behar, Ruth. (1993) *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*, Boston: Beacon Press.

- Cheyfitz, E. (1991) *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, J.M. (ed. & trans.) (1969) *The Four Voyages of Columbus* London: Penguin Books.
- Devy, G.N. (1998) *Of Many Heroes: An Indian Essay in Historiography*, Mumbai: Orient Longman.
- González, Aníbal (1987) 'Translation and Geneology in One Hundred Years of Solitude' in McGuirk, B. and Cardwell, R. (eds) *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greenblatt, Stephen (1992) *Learning to Curse*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Kamble, Baby (1996) *Nuestra existencia*, Montevideo: Ediciones Trilce/Indigo/ Ediciones UNESCO.
- Karnad, G. (1981) *Tughlaq: El Gran Sultan de Delhi*, Félix Ilárraz (trans.) New Delhi: Embassy of Mexico.
- Kothari, Rita (2006) *Translating India*, Delhi: Foundation Books.
- Márquez, Gabriel García (2003) *Ekant ke sau varsh* (trans. by Sonya Surabhi Gupta from Spanish to Hindi) *One hundred years of Solitude*, New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.
- Ortiz, Fernando (1999) *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, Madrid: Edito CubaEspaña (1st edition: La Habana, J. Montero, 1940).
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo (1989) *The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Prasad G.J.V. (1999) 'Writing translation: the strange case of Indian English novel' in Bassnett, Susan and H. Trivedi (eds), *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Pratt, Mary Louis (1992) *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Rama, Angel (1982) *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, Mexico: Fundación Angel Rama.
- Rama, Angel (1984) *La ciudad letrada*, Hanover: Ed. Del Norte.
- Retamar, Roberto Fernandez (1979) *Caliban y otros ensayos*, La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura.
- Rushdie, Salman (1991) *Imaginary Homelands*, New Delhi: Penguin and Granta.
- Vieira, Else Ribeiro Pires (1999) "Liberating Calibans: readings of Antropofagia and Haroldo de Campos' poetics of transcreation" in Bassnett, Susan and H. Trivedi (eds) *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge.

