

## 'Anxiety' of an English Translator!

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### Abstract

*I have been translating into English for some time now. One of the main reasons is that I know only my mother tongue, Telugu, and English. Should I then not translate into English at all, knowing fully well that English has 'power' over all other languages? How do I negotiate these 'anxieties'—not to let English have a stranglehold and the desire to take a text that I consider significant in understanding the multiple dimensions of the concept of the 'nation'? My 'anxiety' is also that of an English teacher who teaches "Indian Writing in English". How long am I to rest content with the narration of the nation that the privileged speakers of English in India (I do not exclude myself from this group) provide to the world? My paper attempts to grapple with these 'anxieties' and 'desires' from the perspective of a translator, a reader and an academic.*

I will begin as a reader. I read Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales in English. I did not know then that these were originally written in Danish. I did not ask even later, when I came to know that they were translations, if the "Ugly Duckling" or "Thumbelina" were in Danish the way they were in the books in English I so adored in my childhood. In school I read "Bishop's Candlesticks" as a short story, not caring whether it was a translation of a piece from Victor Hugo's much acclaimed French work *Les Miserables*. As I grew up and began to read translations, be they of Dostoevsky or of Kafka or of Camus, I was aware they were translations but I never paid attention to the translators. Only Dostoevsky was speaking to me, only Kafka was speaking to me, only Camus was speaking to me. When I read the *Panchatantra Tales* in English or the *Andhra Mahabharatam* in Telugu, I never questioned their 'authenticity' (a term I find very

problematic). But if any one were to ask me who the author of *Mahabharatam* was, I would have answered Vyasa. If I did not consider the Telugu text a kind of translation but an ‘original’, why should my answer have been Vyasa? The hierarchy of Sanskrit over Telugu perhaps! I am no longer such a naïve reader. I know the power politics that lies in the very act of translation. Especially of translating into English in this globalised world. Therefore, I can read a Telugu text like Kesava Reddy’s *Atadu Adavini Jayinchadu*, a text that the writer openly acknowledges as having been inspired in its theme by Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, as an ‘original’ text and its translation into English not as unnecessary but as crucial for an understanding of the specific culture of the Yerukula community in Andhra Pradesh.

This may be the right place for me to move on to my perspective as a teacher. I have used this text in an Indian Writing in English class. One may ask the question why a translated text in such a course. I will come to it in a little while. I have been asked by students—what is so great about a text that borrows so heavily on another text (a canonical text in English) that it should be brought *back* into English? Mine was not an isolated instance. My colleague and co-translator, Sridhar would corroborate this view when he tried to take this text to not just students in an M. A. class but also to faculty in a refresher course. (In fact, I borrow some of his ideas on the book) The word ‘back’ in ‘brought back’ is a vital one. If one reads the English text *He Conquered the Jungle* translated by C. L. L. Jayaprada, one can see how difficult it is to negotiate the socio-cultural intricacies of the Telugu text in English. But this desire to bring out the cultural specificities is what makes the reading of such a text all the more challenging! We do not see Hemingway brought back to us into English via Telugu but Kesava Reddy, the old man, the sow, the jungle, the Yerukula community brought to us in English. May be something of the Telugu is lost but something is gained too!

Now to Indian Writing in English. I have taught that course many times. Initially, I was not happy with the course consisting only

of the triumvirate, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, and others, predominantly male along with a couple of women writers included like Kamala Markandaya and Kamala Das. So I consciously added a number of women writers and tried to include writers, both male and female, who represented different sections of society, all of whom were writing in English. This made us conscious of the multiplicity of voices and the varied genres that were fighting for 'respectability' in the academia. But an uneasiness still lurked within me. It made me wonder how 'representative' of the 'nation' even such an inclusive list would be, considering that all these have been written 'originally' in English. And then the charge by 'respected globally known' writers like Rushdie who made statements that nothing significant is happening in Indian languages.

I began to think more about the nomenclature "Indian Writing in English" and to interrogate it. Is writing itself an act of translation? What happens when an Indian whose mother tongue is not English writes in English? Do the experiences get translated? Do we not applaud the efforts of the likes of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Salman Rushdie who tend to adapt English, to make it our own and to suit the rhythms and the pulse of 'India'? Also, how often have we stopped to ask ourselves if we should be teaching Rabindranath Tagore, Vijay Tendulkar or Girish Karnad in an Indian Writing in English classroom? Since the time I have been consciously thinking of these issues, I have looked at translated texts into English also as 'original' English texts.

My understanding of the woman question, the patriarchal stranglehold of religion and language is furthered by my reading of the English poem "Genderole" by Rukmini Bhaya Nair (Nair 1992). I also see how she subverts the form and breaks down boundaries to challenge the existing hegemonic traditions. Let me quote a few lines from the poem (the full effect of it can be felt only when we view the poem visually):

Consider the female body your most  
Basic text and don't forget its lokas |

Whatpalmleafscandoforusitdoes  
Therealgapsremainforwomentoclose |

Spacesbetweenwordspreservesenses  
IntactbutweneedtomeetinEVERYSense |

Comingtogetherisnoverbalmatter  
Howeveroursagespraisepativrata |

*Katavkantakasteputrasamsaroyam*  
*Ativavichitrawaswrittenformenbyaman | (ll. 1-10)*

This is no intellectual game she is playing. She has demonstrated how language, culture and religion have left no space for women. We are reminded here of Toni Morrison who in her very first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) uses the primer to good effect (beginning with ‘proper’ grammatical rules, punctuation and space between words and ending in the erasure of all rules of grammar and punctuation, and of the spaces) to show how a dominant culture can completely annihilate the psyche of an individual. To come back to “Genderole”, such a text helps us re-look at our notions of concepts like culture and nation, of terms like readability, and (for us in the academia) of the very concept of literature.

Now, let us turn to “Ayonni”, a Telugu short story by Volga (2001) translated into English. The very first sentence of the translation reads:

My beginning to write this story today is itself the  
reason for this story. (183)

The sentence has been criticised as awkward, as ‘un-English’. Perhaps that is so. But this sentence too is awkward and ‘un-Telugu’ in the Telugu source. It is therefore necessary to go into the why of such a sentence rather than to cast it aside as bad English (for we are here concerned with the translated text). The story is of a young girl who has not yet attained puberty being kidnapped, about child

prostitution-all this from the victim's perspective. As the narrator herself claims, she wanted to write a beautiful, pleasant story that would be published in *Chandamama*, primarily read by children, but she knows now that the only story she can write is this kind of a story that such a grotesque society produces. How then can we expect a proper, 'aesthetic' sentence as an opener, an eye-opener to the horrible trauma of a child? As readers of 'original' English we have rarely encountered such a gruesome tale. We have read of the importance of the body in both literary and theoretical texts. But such an invasion of the body that she cries out:

Yoni, Yonija, ayonija...something was happening to me.  
A sudden pain shot through my head.

Sita's an ayonija. I don't know anything about being born like that. But I can now write about what I have been wanting to all these days. How wonderful it would have been if I were born an Ayoni! How I love the word Ayoni! Are you angry? Are you disgusted? Do you find it distasteful? But you don't know anything about my anger and disgust. If you did, you would wish that my desire was fulfilled. You are all good mothers, aren't you? (185-186)

This denial of the very organ that is used for s/exploitation, the very outspokenness cannot be missed. The above quote also raises questions of readability, of what constitutes aesthetics, to name just a few. Would we not be missing out on all these if we were not to include the translated texts in our Indian Writing in English course?

As we have broached the topic of aesthetics, let me move on to another course I offer in the English department-"Reading Dalit, Reading Black". How was I able to teach such a course? Most of the Dalit writers write in their own languages (we have exceptions in people like Ambedkar, Chandrabhan Prasad and Meena Kandaswamy). But there are a growing number of books available in English now. I

am therefore able to read the Dalit texts and am able to connect two cultures, so far yet so near, only because the texts are available to me in English. But one may ask why is it so important that an English academic like me get to teach Dalit texts. That was not the reason for their being written in the first place. Granted that's true. But why should such a vast body of knowledge be denied to me? Let us consider the likes of Aristotle and Plato or the likes of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. They surely did not write for scholars of English, but perceptions of those very scholars have been enriched by their exposure to such a variety of writers. Of course, we in the English Departments cannot even think of contemporary theory without the aid of translation into English. Should we not feel that our understanding of theory will get an added dimension if we get to know Sharankumar Limbale's notion of Dalit Aesthetics through a translation by Alok Mukherjee (even as we are aware that the translation is by an upper caste person who has settled down in an academic institution in Canada) or Sivakami's views on writing, women's writing, Dalit women's writing through the 'Author's Notes' from her book *The Grip of Change* (a book translated by herself with, should I say, editorial intervention)? Take for instance the following statement by Limbale:

They [Dalit writers] believe that traditional Marathi aesthetics which is primarily based on Sanskrit or English literary theories cannot do justice to Dalit literature.

(Limbale 2004:106)

They raise fundamental questions of the concept of universality, of the very definition of literature, of the yardsticks for judgement. Among other questions Sivakami grapples with in the "Author's Notes", she discusses the issue of language: "What language is the language of one's own experience, what then is Dalit language, or the language of the oppressed?" (Sivakami 2006:188). This is a very significant question not only in the 'original' text of the Dalit writer but in the English translation too.

Some of the questions I constantly encounter are—Now that they are in English, haven't the Dalit texts lost their 'original' flavour and power? Have they not been negotiated? Have they not been appropriated by the English speaking/knowing elite? Yes, they are not the same as they were in the language they were first written in. But does that mean they have no 'flavour' or 'power' in the English version? Yes, they are negotiated, but which text is not negotiated—by the author, the publisher, the reader etc? How does one respond to the question of appropriation? While there is certain truth in the charge, can one say that every translator does so with the idea of appropriating a text or co-opting it? When Suneetha Rani translates a text like Vinodini's "The Single Pole Hut", she is trying to capture the Dalit Christian girl's experience of being wooed and rejected by a Brahmin boy. She does not look for readability but asks the reader to put her/his elitist self away and make a conscious effort to participate in the text. She may have given footnotes for culture-specific terms but she does not dither from her purpose of taking the text to the English readers with all its complexities. Consider the following lines:

I packed my boundless hopes as folds of trust in my suitcase  
 like the wise men walking with the stars as guides  
 I stepped into that *agrahara*  
 searching for the footprints  
*suprabhatam* heard on entering the street, asafoetida smell  
 and *madi* sarees  
 looked at me as if I was a bat settled on the worshipping  
 paraphernalia

(ll. 35-40)

Of course, she gives footnotes for *agrahara* (Brahmin residential area), *suprabhatam* (devotional songs to wake up gods) and *madi* ('ritual purity'; cloth worn while cooking and performing other rituals). But these explanations are only the tip of the iceberg. The reader must go into the resonances and the wider implications of those terms to fully participate in the text. Suneetha Rani's translation is for the most part not 'readable' in the sense most people understand the term, but it is 'readable' in the sense that it draws the reader into

the very intricacies of Dalit experience. This is what she does remarkably in her translation of Dalit women's oral narratives, where she finds she has to translate at very many different levels including from the oral to the written. But once we as readers negotiate such texts, we gain a fuller understanding of the cultural complexities of Dalit life, of the many, varied and complex Indias.

Sridhar and I are working on the last drafts of a very powerful Telugu text produced in 2000, *Antarani Vasantam* (Untouchable Spring) by G. Kalyana Rao, another Dalit writer with strong Marxist leanings. It defies generic classification. Apart from all the cultural, social, political aspects of the novel, he has been able to catch the oral tradition in his text. So how does one capture this orality? We were conscious of our subject positions. We were conscious that we could never have experienced the humiliation and trauma the characters in the text experience. And yet we tried. We tried to get at the root of the text. I give just an instance of one of the many problems we encountered while translating this text. This is about the Urumula Nrityam (Urumula dance) and the song associated with it. I wonder how many of us are aware of such an art form. How does one capture the visual in the oral that is written down? Consider the following:

The song began.

The musicians of the Urumula dance began their song. In that song, Ganga was overflowing. [...] The cracked earth must drink greedily. Ganga must fill up. Ganga must swell. Ganga must touch all the worlds. Till then thunder will not stop. Dance will not stop. Song will not stop.

The era was not born. The world was not born. Ganga was born. That was the cunning Ganga. That was the jealous and mean Ganga. That was the devil that ate corpses. Abuses. Curses. Getting upset with Ganga. For a mouthful of water. [...] The song was continuing. On Ganga, on Ganga's word, on Ganga's life.



[..]

The vermillion dance began.

[..]

A ferocious land. Bloodied. Dance. As if a war was taking place. As if it was the world's battlefield and nothing else. Swords hitting the chest, for Ganga, for a mouthful of water, postures, many furious Sivas seeming to dance the *tandavam* of deluge...illusion, reality, dance, war, the grotesque, life-like dance, like song...Urumula dance.

There will always be a lingering doubt as to whether we have been able to capture the nuances and the tone of the language. But something tells us that the struggle must continue. For if it does not, we will not be able to get to know even a small percentage of the powerful literature that is being produced in our country.

## References

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