

The *Sangati* of Translation

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Abstract

India is a multi lingual country. Indian literatures are a product of a multicultural social-historical mélange. Those who have their roots in a common linguistic stock and those who have stemmed from different linguistic stocks, share and are bound together by common socio-cultural and historical bonds. Thus translating a text from one regional language into another is a far more natural and satisfactory activity both for the translator and the reader than when the same works are translated to English. In the latter, negotiating cultural hurdles to achieve equivalence of meaning tends to be a relatively difficult task. Since even neighbouring languages do not inhabit identical universes, intersecting penumbras of meaning between two regional languages are more likely to generate a richer resonance of recognition and discovery than translated into English. Moreover the target audience is also different in each case.

*The paper intends to study how culture gets translated when a text gets translated into English and when the same text gets translated into a regional language. For this purpose, the paper focuses on the Malayalam translation of Bama's novel *Sangati* (Tamil) by Vijayakumar Kunissery and its English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom.*

The Indian subcontinent is marked by a plurality of cultures and languages providing a unique mosaic of verbal communication. Right from the Vedic ages, there are references that many languages, many religions and many people co-existed in India. Though these many languages still co-exist in India, they do not fully represent the same social reality. This diversity is because each language carries

with it an unspoken network of cultural values. These values, though they operate on a subliminal level, are a major force in the shaping of a person's self-awareness, identity and interpersonal relationships (Scollon 1981). Various Indian languages voice the many cultures and subcultures that have shaped its millennia-old civilization. These in turn get reflected in the literature of the land. Indian literatures are thus a product of multiracial and multicultural social historical *mélange*.

This opens us to certain questions: How then can the act of communication be consummated across cultural barriers? How then can a common idea of India be made possible through its various literatures? How can we establish the concept of Indian literature as one literature? The answer is: only through translation. Translation forms an integral and an indispensable part of the Indian psyche. Translation is of paramount importance for exchanging ideas and thoughts. In a multilingual nation, the translation of classics into various languages has led to emotional integration of the people. In India, during the freedom struggle *Bhagavad Gita* was translated into so many regional languages. This may be seen as the reflection of the integrated national psyche that prevailed in the society. Translation is thus an important field of academic pursuit that helps not only in the dissemination of knowledge but also in the diffusion of culture. In other words, translation is not just linguistic transference but the transference of a whole socio-cultural matrix.

Translation, as we said, is a collaborative creative enterprise, whose purpose is to communicate the meaning of the original text in a different language and to a different audience. But the process of translation is however not bereft of problems. The problem of translating a text can be broadly divided into two—linguistic and cultural. The problematic, according to Catford, is that:

Translation fails—or untranslatability occurs—when it is impossible to build functionally relevant features of the situation into contextual meanings of the target language text. Broadly speaking, the cases where this happens fall

into two categories. Those where the difficulty is linguistic and those where it is cultural.

(Catford 1965)

All creative literature is expressed in a language having its own phonological, grammatical and semantic structures. It is also rooted in a particular culture and carries significant information about its socio-cultural milieu. Thus the meaning of a language/text/sentence depends not only on its concept in the text but also on factors outside the text, that is, meaning is culturally conditioned and is intricately woven into the texture of the language. Thus the manner in which people choose their vocabulary, construct their sentences, speak, reveals much about their culture.

In the opinion of Newmark, translation is a craft in which an attempt is made to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement into another language (Newmark 1981:7). As cultural meanings are intricately woven into the texture of language, translation becomes all the more difficult. For a writer, a word is essentially a cultural memory. The words that the writer uses are always strongly linked to the specific cultural context from where the text originates. The translator must be able to capture and project a similar situation and culture of primary importance and that should be reflected in the translated work.

A translator has to recreate the participatory experience of the readers of the original text. This enables the readers of the translated text to participate in the alien cultural experience. Announcing the cultural turn in Translation Studies, Andre Lefevre and Susan Bassnett remark that, it is neither the word nor the text but the culture that becomes the operational unit of translation.

Caught between the need to capture the local culture and the need to be understood by an audience outside the original cultural and linguistic situation, a translation must be aware of both cultures. Thus, according to Homi K. Bhaba what is theoretically innovative and

politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of ordinary and initial subjectivities. One should focus on the moments of processes in the articulation of cultural differences (Bhaba 2004). One of the main goals of literary translation then is to initiate the target language (TL) reader into the sensibilities of the source language culture.

The enterprise of translation is thus an interpretation/conversion of a text encoded in one semiotic system into another. The difficulties in translation are not only linguistic but also cultural and political. Transmitting cultural elements through literary translation is a complicated and vital task. Culture is a complex collection of experiences which condition daily life. It includes history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. This is difficult to comprehend. As the word in the source text (ST) may be strongly rooted in the source culture (SC), it may be too difficult for the addressed readers. In addition, translation may have to deal not only with lexical expressions, but also with problems of register, syntactic order, regional varieties (dialects) etc which are culture specific. The interpretation/translation should be based not just on the words of the text, but on the intent of the author, the relationship of the author with the intended audience, the culture and worldview of the author and original audience, and the receptor audience. The similarity of the cultural structures of the source and target language thus determines the degree of translatability. Therefore translating a text from one regional language to another is a far more natural and satisfactory activity both for the translator and the reader. This is because they share more or less common socio-cultural and historical bonds. But when the same text is rendered into English, it will be different. In the latter, negotiating semantic and cultural hurdles to achieve equivalence of meaning tends to be a relatively uphill task. According to Sapir, “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” (Sapir 1956:69). Even neighbouring languages do not inhabit identical universes. Intersecting penumbras of meaning between two languages in the subcontinent is likely to generate a richer resonance of recognition and discovery than when translated into English. The target audience is also different in each

case. The potential readers for an English translation would be an indeterminate mass. As a result, the anxiety of communication gets reflected in an explicatory or dilutionary tendency. But in the translation from one regional language to another, the nervous uncertainty of decoding culture would be less evident.

This paper intends to study how culture gets translated when a text is translated into English and the same text translated into a regional language. For this purpose I chose Bama's *Sangati* (Tamil), its Malayalam translation by Vijayakumar Kunisserry and its English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom.

Pastino Mary alias Bama was born in 1958 at Puthupetty near Madurai. Though her family were converted Christians, she was a constant witness to the hardships the Dalits, especially the Paraiyas, had to face. After her post graduation she decided to become a nun so as to be of service to the downtrodden. While working as a teacher in a Christian convent school she realized that Dalits, even after conversion, were being discriminated. Disenchanted she parted ways with the church and decided to concentrate on the upliftment of the marginalized. Through her literary works she reveals how caste informs and runs through all aspects of life. Bama is one of the first Dalit women writers to be widely recognized and translated.

Bama's *Karukku* was published in 1992, *Sangati* in 1994 and *Vanmam* in 2000. If in *Karukku* the tension is between the self and the community, *Sangati* voices the community's identity. The word *sangati* means 'events' and thus the novel, through individual stories, anecdotes and memories, portrays the events that take place in the life of women in the Paraiya community. The novel also reveals how the Paraiya women are doubly oppressed. Women are presented as wage earners and it is upon them that the burden of running the family falls. Men on the other hand can spend the money they earn as they please. In addition, the women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment. They are thus economically, physically and psychologically tortured. A Dalit woman is never considered a 'subject.' The novel

then creates a Dalit feminist perspective. At the same time, the novel takes one to the inner premises of Dalit culture asserting its richness and tradition. According to Francis Gros:

Dalit communities do indeed have a very rich and deep cultural heritage, a folk tradition of tales, songs... and a wonderful world of Gods, Goddesses and devils, all elements contributing to the creation of an original, imaginary world, which is in no way less important nor less fascinating than ... orthodox manners and customs.

(Gros 2004:14)

For this purpose, Bama makes use of the local Dalit register. By eliding words and joining them differently, by overthrowing the rules of grammar, she demands a novel pattern of reading, thus creating a unique style of her own. Bama narrates the story by making use of a colloquial style with its regional and caste inflections thereby overturning the aesthetics of the dominant group. By resorting to this method she reveals before the readers the cultural identity of the Dalits who resist the other caste norms. Thus the privileged-caste readers can enter this language only with a degree of effort and with a sense of unfamiliarity. Bama is able to convey the experience faced by the Dalits as the language she uses is the language of affect. It is the language that captures the intense, everyday violence of caste. Here the language of pain works as an act of persuasion and appeal.

The languages of Dalit writers are 'in-between' languages which occupy a space 'in between' and challenge the conventional notions of translation. Through their language they seek to decolonize themselves from two oppressors: the western ex-colonizer and the traditional 'national' culture that deny them their importance. Bama, in describing the violence and deprivation of Dalit women, often takes recourse to a language of abuse that is replete with sexual references. This, according to Limbale, is because the reality of Dalit literature being distinct expresses itself in a distinct language. This language does not conform to the (refined?) language of the elite. It rejects the

aesthetic writing coming from the privileged castes. This rejection gets expressed in a language full of sexual references. Bama seems to find a reason for the kind of language they use:

No matter what the quarrel is about, once they open their mouths, the same four-letter words spill out. ...they have neither pleasure, nor fulfillment in their own sexual lives, they derive a sort of bitter comfort by using these terms of abuse which are actually names of body parts.

(Bama 2005)

The language of Dalit women is rich and resourceful consisting of proverbs, folklore and folksongs. Bama also makes use of a language full of vigour. Proverbs and folk songs are constantly made use of to explicate their situation. She also makes use of jokes and lampoons, thereby daring to make fun of the dominant classes that oppressed them.

Sangati was translated into Malayalam by Vijayakumar Kunnessery. Born in a remote village in Palghat, Vijayakumar was brought up in Coimbatore which made him have close association with Tamil language, customs and manners.

In India, society is stratified into different castes. These castes are clearly named groups and are rigidly separated from each other. There is very little possibility of movement from one caste to another. Each caste has its own dialect. Vijayakumar in his translation makes use of the slang of Palghat Paraiya community. This has close affinities with the slang used by Kuppuvachan in *Khazakkinte Ithihasam*. By retaining the slang of the Dalits, Vijayakumar brings the translated text closer to the original. It also reveals the close association between Tamil and Malayalam.

In the historical past proto-Dravidian was spoken possibly throughout India. When the Turanians and the Aryans came to India and mingled with the local population of the north, the north Indian languages changed to a great extent. Thus it lost its ground there and

confined itself to the south. Even in south India it did not remain as one single language for a long time. Dialectal differences arose partly due to the political division of the Tamil country into three distinct Tamil kingdoms and partly due to the natural barriers created by rivers and mountains. The absence of proper land communication among the three Tamil kingdoms also accentuated this process of dialectal differences. As a result, the Dravidian language spoken by the people who lived in the regions north and south of the Tirupati mountains varied to such an extent that it became two independent languages: Tamil and Telugu. The language spoken in the region of Mysore came to be known as Kannada. Malayalam emerged as yet another distinct language in Kerala. All these far-reaching changes occurred at different periods of time in the history of the Dravidian languages. However, these languages came to be known as Dravidian languages. Many common linguistic features are still discernible among these Dravidian languages. Some five thousand words are common to these languages. Many grammatical forms are common. The overwhelming influence of Sanskrit scholars and the indiscriminate borrowing of Sanskrit words resulted in the emergence of Kannada and Telugu as distinct languages from Tamil. The influence of Sanskrit on Malayalam language came to be felt only about eight centuries ago and therefore, the areas of difference between Tamil and Malayalam are not many. Tamil was the language of bureaucracy, of literati and of culture for several centuries in Kerala. In fact, fifteen centuries ago the rulers of Kerala were all Tamils. Up to the tenth century the Pandya kings ruled Kerala with royal titles such as 'Perumaankal' and 'Perumaankanar'. From the third century BC to the first century AD many poets from Kerala composed poems in Tamil and their compositions are included in Tamil anthologies such as *Akananaru* and *Purananaru*. All the one hundred poems in the anthology *Patitruppathu* extol the greatness of the kings of Kerala region. Many scholars and pundits from Kerala contributed much to the Tamil language and literature and historical evidence shows that the region now known as the State of Kerala was once an integral part of Tamil Nadu. Because of these reasons there is greater affinity between Tamil and Malayalam than between Tamil and Kannada or Telugu.

Historical evidences show that languages of the Dalits are in fact the primordial Dravidian language. The Paraiyars, the Pulayars were actually a learned sect of people. They were referred to as 'Pulayimar vazhnavar' meaning, 'those who are learned.' It was with the Aryan invasion that they were marginalized. There was a conscious effort to separate them from the king and his followers. Thus the Paraiyars and the Pulayars were driven out from the mainstream and later on they were treated as untouchables. It is this Dravidian language that is discernible in Malayalam even today. Thus the words used by the Dalits in Tamil Nadu can be found in the Malayalam spoken today. For example 'Gouli' (lizard), a common word in Malayalam, is a term used by the Dalits of Tamil Nadu. While retaining the background and geographical features of the novel, Vijayakumar narrates the story from the perspective of a Palghat Paraiya community. By retaining the dialect of the Dalits, Vijayakumar is thus successful in being faithful to the original text.

The Malayalam translation was first serialized in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* before being published in book form. Hence while both Bama and Lakshmi do not title their chapters, Vijayakumar makes use of titles for every chapter. These titles according to Vijayakumar were added with the consent of the writer. The titles however help in bringing the readers closer to the native culture of the land and accounts for readability.

According to Vijayakumar, a good translation must be able to convey the essence of the text to be translated. To prove his point he narrates the meeting between Gandhiji and Sree Narayana Guru. In the course of their meeting Gandhiji told Sree Narayana Guru that a world devoid of caste differences was impossible. Even the leaves of the same tree are different from each other. Sree Narayana Guru told Gandhiji to bring all the leaves of a tree and crush it so as to extract its juice. The juice extracted from all the leaves will be the same. Similarly, a translator has to find the essence of the text to be translated and then convey it in another language without losing the essence. The Malayalam translation of *Sangati* has been able to convey the essence of Bama's text.

Bama's *Sangati* has been translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Her translation of *Karukku*, Bama's first novel, won her the Crossword Book Award for the year 2000. It is this book that was instrumental in bringing Bama's works to the limelight. It is the translator who transforms a vernacular text for readers to bask in its literary light. But for these translations many of the literary works in India would be out of reach to a wide community of readers.

Lakshmi Holmstrom in her translations carefully positions her approach within a historical debate in Tamil and in a post-independence consciousness of being multilingual. She points to the contemporary vogue in India for reading Indian literature in English translation. But English not being an Indian language, it is extremely difficult to map a non-western meaning system on to English. Tamil and English are languages with completely different grammatical structures, cultural settings and assumptions and literary traditions. Thus while translating from the very different grammatical structures of Tamil, the translator strives to retain the writer's individuality. The very structure of the language poses problems to the translator. There is a great difference in the syntactical and lexical organization between Tamil and English. Tamil follows a left branching pattern whereas English follows a right branching pattern. Tamil also makes use of double words like adjectives, adverbs and even verbs either to intensify their meaning or to indicate the boring or annoying repetitive part of the action. Thus Bama writes 'Taali geeli' which is lamely translated the same way into English by Holmstrom.

If the problems relating to linguistic translations are vexing, cultural translations pose a greater dilemma to the translator. Mythological allusions and characters, fashion, dress code, food items, rituals and religious practices are distinctively identifiable with a specific culture. Therefore it becomes untranslatable. This is then retained in transliteration and is acclimatized in the target culture by way of glossary. Thus while both Tamil and Malayalam can convey with one word the differences in gender and status, English has either to use the

Indian word as such, provided with a glossary or give suitable explanations. Thus in *Sangati*, Holmstrom has to depend on glossary to explain relationships such as ‘patti’, ‘perimma’ etc. Kitchen utensils have been explained within the text itself. Thus Holmstrom writes: “The girl’s mother’s brother’s family had to donate a sari and ravikkai, and big cooking vessels, andas and gundas”. On the other hand the Malayalam translation goes as follows: “Chadangin thaiman chela, jumper, andavgundav banduma kodukkanam”.

There is no need of explanation or a glossary as ‘chela’, ‘jumper’, ‘andav’ are part of the Malayalam vocabulary and culture. Again, a community address, that is a noun derived from a particular caste, will sound bizarre to the western readers who are not aware of the stratification in the Hindu society in India. These community addressee forms, food items, terms related to cultural practices, dress etc are retained in their native form and explained with the help of glossary. This is because of the inability of the target text—English—to come up with suitable equivalents for customs or lifestyles specific to the culture described in the source text. For example, Bama gives in detail the ceremony conducted in connection with a girl attaining puberty. It tells how the girl is confined to a little hut away from the household—‘kuchulu’. As this custom is not in practice in the west, the translator has to depend on transliteration which is later explained in the glossary. But this is not required in a Malayalam translation as this was a practice followed in Kerala also.

Folk songs are also used in *Sangati*. Folklore/folksongs have an important place in the culture of every tribal society. They are used as a medium to transmit its tradition and traditional knowledge systems from one generation to another. They are a form of cultural expression of the group whose identity it expresses. The beauty of the song lies in the word music elicited by means of assonance, alliteration, internal and end rhymes, refrains. This rhythmical relation and the meanings and association of meanings which depend upon rhymes and sounds are difficult to translate into English. Thus Holmstrom focuses on

rendering as accurately as possible images, similes and metaphors. She attempts to reproduce the lyrical quality by reproducing approximate refrains, consonances, alliterations wherever possible. Bama also makes use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions. These idiomatic expressions are repositories of the cumulative inherited wisdom of the speech community. Hence they are culturally significant. This cannot be mapped onto another cultural space without giving a pragmatic paraphrase. This becomes all the more difficult while translating Dalit literature. Through their works, the Dalit writers raise matters of class and caste, question power and privilege and thereby challenge translation, especially when rewriting texts into English—the language of globalised imperialism. Thus what one captures/feels while reading a text in Tamil with its regional caste and class variation gets lost while translated into English.

Sangati makes use of the Dalit Tamil language throughout the book. This language rejects the theoretical and aesthetic writing coming from the high caste segment of society which tends to be a generalized universal language. It refuses an easy accessibility to those outside the culture. Never does Bama try to sanitise the language. The linguistic nuance she makes use of is culturally loaded and is of paramount importance making it an uphill task for the translator. Thus in the translation, Holmstrom has to overcome the challenges of rewriting a Dalit language of abuse into Indian English which is middle class in nature. It results in a massive reduction as the emotive quality of Bama's description is lost. Dalit dialect cannot be expressed in a faulty language as every dialect is a "self-contained variety of language, not a deviation from a standard language" (Newmark 1981:195). Thus making use of the standard Indian English damages the effectiveness of the original. What Holmstrom did was to,

preserve the state in which... language happens to be
instead of allowing... language to be powerfully affected
by a foreign tongue.

(Benjamin 1973:80-81)

This is the basic error of a translator. It is the duty of the translator to expand/ deepen his/her language by means of a foreign tongue. This will enable the language to accommodate the emotions/ ideas of source language. This is expressed by Bama herself in her interview with T.D. Ramakrishnan where she says that the language that she had used in *Sangati* was hard to translate. However Lakshmi Holmstrom has very deftly overcome these difficulties. She has,

translated it without losing the beauty and texture of the language. But it has not come to the level of the Malayalam translation... It will be difficult to find apt words in a European language. Their very culture is different.
(*translation mine*)

(*Sangati* 2005:135)

Thus though the novel has been translated with meticulous care, it has not been able to capture the spirit of the language. This might be one of the reasons for a bleak response to O.V.Vijayan's own translation of his historic Malayalam novel *Khasakkinte Itihasam*. In his own words,

But I have chosen to write in Malayalam and not in English, although it would have been more profitable to...Indo-Anglian writing... is culturally untenable.

(*Outlook* October 1997:126)

Thus literatures written in Indian languages enjoy a social and cultural rootedness. But at the same time, Indian writing in English and translations of regional literatures into English give these literatures a 'national' character and the status of a national literature. Translations promote national understanding of the different regional 'selves' in the country. It opens out new vistas to readers. Similarly it brings new readers to writers. It is through these translations that both Indians and non-Indians can become aware of the undercurrent of unity that runs through all regional literatures. Thus through literatures in translation, the idea of a certain social vision is possible.

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