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LINGUISTIC, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ACTS IN TRANSLATING LITERARY TEXTS:  
PRIZES AND PITFALLS

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ABSTRACT

While the importance of translation in the postmodern globalized world cannot be over-emphasized, the act of translation calls for a unique talent. Translation is best described as a phenomenological act in which a translator seeks to enter the mind of the original author and translates on the basis of equivalence, with as little change to the original as possible. It calls for a certain historical sense and knowledge of linguistic transformation happening over a period of time. The translator has also to be aware of the cultural nuances which are untranslatable. Great translations have always been enjoyed as in the case of *The Canterbury Tales*. With the passage of time, there are calls to translate texts across the linguistic, cultural, medium and genre-specific barriers. My research shows that of all the considerations, a translation is, broadly speaking, a three-pronged strategy, being linguistic, cultural and political act at the same time. My paper takes up case studies of translations into English of an Urdu and a Haryanvi language text and analyses them from the aforesaid angles, bringing out the benefits and underlining the pitfalls on the way.

Keywords: postmodern, phenomenological, equivalence, medium, genre.

Introduction

The importance of translation in our times is paramount. This is a globalized world and the need to read and understand the literatures of other regions in the world is self-evident. Even within a big country like India, translation into English of regional language (miscalled 'vernacular') texts highlights the merits of native narratives, besides acting as a tool to avoid hierarchy of languages. In that sense, it helps unite the subaltern with the elite and bring about unity in the country. Moreover, a work

translated into English has a reach beyond the borders.

It is a fact too that at present most of the texts written originally in English come either from the Indian diasporic writers or the public school background, middle class, metropolis based writers who are faulted for their lack of understanding of common people, particularly residing in rural India. So, there is all the more reason to translate the Bhasha literature into English. In that sense, it helps

unite the people by creating consciousness of one nation.

#### Translator's Qualifications

The translator, therefore, shoulders a great responsibility. He has to understand that translation of a literary text is different from the translation of a scientific or business or travel text in which the language used is merely referential. It is also different from the persuasive use of language required in business or legal vocations. If the translation is good, it provides pleasure and instruction to the reader but if it is bad or is done only for the sake of doing translation – to get a degree or some money, then it will serve the limited purpose of informing the readers of target language (TL) about the existence of a text in source language (SL).

It is, thus, very necessary that the translator should have the awareness of the great task that he is performing. For this, he should not only have full knowledge of both SL and TL, but also be well conversant with the art and history of translation. It is very much like what T.S. Eliot prescribed as a necessary qualification for a writer - to be knowledgeable about the entire European tradition of writing, since the days of Homer, in order to write effectively. This is the historical sense. (Eliot, 1951: 14). In order to convey exactly the message enshrined in SL, the translator should also be able to rise above subjective considerations.

A valuable guideline to writers of regional languages is provided by U.R. Anantha Murthy, when he discusses the choice of a work to be translated by a translator. To him, the book should be the one "not written to be translated" (Sadana in Anjaria, 2015: 147). That is because if a writer has at the back of his mind, the desire that he should be translated into English – and this is a tendency picking up these days – then the resultant work will not be perfect; it will work upon the writing process, somewhat like "the internal colonialism that has long plagued the Indian elite" (ibid). The writer should be thoroughly immersed in the worldview of the source language, he argued. And when such a work is translated into English "English itself should gain the qualities of the source language" (ibid).

Indeed, it's a tall order, but the ideal has to be a lofty one.

#### Variety of Translations

There are a number of translations which have taken the world by storm. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, couched in Middle English was beautifully translated into modern English and in verse form at that by Nevill Coghill which is enjoyable by any standard. One may argue that if we knew Middle English, we could probably enjoy the original text more. That should indeed be wonderful. The translation may inspire the reader to walk an extra mile, learn the SL and enjoy it. That is what so many people did in the past.<sup>1</sup>

There are many frontiers across which translation can happen. It could be linguistic in which we merely translate a text from SL to TL. There can be translation from one medium like a written text to another medium, say a movie, even though not all would agree to this being called translation and not transformation.

There are period translations in which the language of yore is translated into present-day language and idiom, because the SL is extinct. There is the cultural translation in which the lifestyle and life philosophy of one region have to be explained to people of some other area. A translation is a historical as also a phenomenological process in that the translator has to understand the linguistic and related aspects of culture of the SL text, and he has also to access the consciousness of the writer of the SL text to be able to translate it faithfully. Even the worldview of historical figures is interpreted differently as time passes and new ideologies and theories emerge.

So, each one of these inter-language, inter-medium, inter-genre or inter-culture variants has its own parameters and requirements to comply with in order to give us perfect translation. Coming to literary translation, which is going to be the main concern here, we know, there are many twists and turns in it and probably very few translations, achieve the desired accuracy or equivalence of meaning. And if these achieve accuracy, then the

aesthetic part poses another insurmountable problem.

Broadly speaking, translation can be taken up in three ways -- as a linguistic act, a cultural act and a political act.

#### A Linguistic Act

In translation, we expect rigorous fidelity to the original. That is why we find sometimes the discrepancy or the gap in placing the translated text in proper perspective.

#### Translating Urdu Poetry

Look at the following example. The original text is by the famous Urdu poet Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869):

*Bāzīcha-e-atfāl hai duniyā mere aage  
hotā hai shab-o-roz tamāsha mere aage*

*Ik khel hai aurāñg-e-sulemāñ mere nazdīk  
ek baat hai aijaz-e-masīhā mere aage*

*Juz naam nahiñ surat-e-aalam mujhe  
manzūr*

*Juz waham nahiñ hasti-e-ashiyā mere aage*

And here is the English translation as done by Maaz Bin Bilal:

A child's play is the world in front of me  
Night and day, the tamasha is swirled in  
front of me

A game is the throne of Solomon to me,  
The miracle of the Messiah too is told in  
front of me.

Not more than as a name do I accept this  
globe's mien,

A legend is the being of the world in front  
of me. (Bilal 2017a: 94).

While the translator has tried to retain, to some extent, the cadence of the ghazal in this translation, the repetitive "in front of me", which could well be refrain in an English song, makes odd reading here foregrounding the limitations of translation. Also, we mark the helplessness of the translator in not being able to translate the word "tamasha" as simple "play" because it would miss

out on the comic and philosophical connotations of the word "play". The Hindi word "leela" takes it to spiritual plane. But the translation "is swirled" appears odd because in the original line, there is no stress on the agency responsible for this 'tamasha'.

When it comes to transporting a literary format into another language, the result is somewhat surprising. Here is a *ghazal* titled "The Ghazal in your hands" written in English by Bilal:

Mir and Ghalib gained many a yaar, but it  
was Faiz

Who befriended his *raaqeeb*, the enemy in  
your hands.

A form thus perfected, will you better  
Shahid, Maaz?

Let poetry come, become clay, like putty in  
your hands. (Bilal 2017b: 50)

The Urdu word *raaqeeb* ("yaar" being already a part of English lexicon) has to be explained in footnote, but the phrase "enemy in your hands" is linguistically ambivalent even though the author continues with the refrain "in your hands" in the next couplet (sher). Further, the temptation of adding his name – the Urdu poetic way – to the last couplet might have been done to show the requirement of the ghazal form, but it also requires a footnote explaining the importance of Shahid who is not so well known. Seen from another angle, the address to "you" might be confused with the reader and give the impression that there are two authors of the poem – Shahid and Maaz! This is, however, better than supplanting the name of the original writer by the translator's, the way the ancient Latin litterateurs used to do.<sup>2</sup>

#### An Act of Creativity

The above examples go to prove the point that literary translation does involve an element of creativity which is accentuated when it comes to translating verse from SL to verse in TL. In case of poetry, this holds good when it comes to explaining words which do not find equivalents in the TL as in metaphors, proverbs, etc. At the same time, the meter and devices like alliteration pose a big problem. I am, to be sure, for sense-to-sense, rather

than word-to-word translation. So, there is no harm if one resorts to an idiom in TL in order to explain a metaphor in SL. That, at least, would give the reader an idea of the change of register. Suresh Singhal has very ably pointed out the element of creativity in translation. Look at the example from English to Hindi:

SL: What the hell I've to do with the police?

TL: mujhe police se kya lena dena? (Singhal 2006: 90)

But considering the widespread use of English in ordinary parlance in India, it would be ludicrous to have the following translation:

SL: Milk shake is available at the counter.

TL: doodh ki lassi vikray patal par uplabdha hai. (ibid)

Why not have it like "Milk shake counter par uplabdha hai." The over-use of Hindi words is one thing that has set off the non-Hindi speaking populace in our country. Even the Hindi speakers do not feel comfortable with it.

There can be problems in translating metaphorical language, whether used in prose or poetry. For example, in Hindi, phrases like 'Hirni si chaal' or 'ghataaon si zulf' translated into English as 'gait like deer' or 'locks like clouds' provide only amusement. It takes away the delicateness of the simile.

#### Translating Haryanvi text

Let us now take up a case of translation of Haryanvi dialect into English. The Haryanvi novel *Yudhveer* is written by Jagbeer Rathi. A Haryanvi novel is a rare thing and rarer still is its English translation, done in this case by Suresh Singhal. But howsoever sincerely one might attempt this kind of translation, it is normal to find laxity which maybe explained variously as liberalism or innovation by the translator, yet it can require *suspension of disbelief* on the part of the reader. Let's look at the following:

The first sentence of the novel on page 15 of ST (source text) states: "Adde pa tempo rukya to main uttar to liya par payan ka ji likarya ja tha." Translation is done as: "As the tempo stopped at the

halting point of the village, I did get down there, but the extreme fatigue had been giving me an acute sense of pain in my feet." The literal translation of the phrase "payan ka ji likarya ja tha" could be "heart went out of feet" but it would still not show the subtle humour of the Haryanvi dialect.

Similarly, "Le mera pyara pota! Dikhe Iya teri naak kheech dyun kade midda na rehja." (Rathi, 2008:110) is translated as: "Come here dear grandson, let me stretch your nose lest it should grow inadequately" (Singhal, 2016: 74). Now, "grow inadequately" does not have the flavour that is there in "kade midda na rehja" which should be nearer to "lest it stays flat." Page 51 of the SL text has a song:

Jai jai Hind ke veer javaan  
khoob gajab ki teri shaan  
teri soorat pe jaun kurban  
jai jai Hind ke veer javaan  
.....  
suthra tagra chhail chhabeela  
mard muchhail sai tu robila  
singh jaise tere nain chamkeele  
farfar farke baaju josheelee  
Jan jan ka tu sai bhagwaan  
Jai jai Hind ke veer javaan  
Bahana ka bhai tu man ka pyara  
Boodhe bap ki aakhya ka taara  
Jis gail byaha va surat piari  
Gajban gori kesar kyaari" (Rathi, 2008: 51)

The English translation is done as:

We hail you, O man of bravery  
Unfathomable is your great glory;  
Let me sacrifice for you my life story,  
We hail you, O man of bravery  
...  
You are beautiful, brain and bold,  
The man with moustaches manifold;  
Having twinkling eyes like a tiger,  
Energetic arms fluttering like a fighter;  
God of people, you are far from slavery,  
We hail you, O man of bravery;  
You are sisters' and mother's attraction  
On you, old father showers affection;  
Your wife happens to be sizzling glare,

And more than saffron-like dazzling fair.  
(Singhal, 2016: 28)

The translator has used his own acumen to act as an auteur, so to say, rather than a translator. Quite a few coinages are the result of the translator's creativity. Thus, "veer javaan" is simply translated as "brave youth" but having translated it as "man of bravery", the translator is tempted to rhyme it with "life story" rather than "life" in the third line. Also there is the word "slavery" at one spot, which is translator's insertion. Nowhere does the word "slavery" have any equivalent word in the Haryanvi text.

Again, there is the line "You are beautiful, brain and bold," in which the word "brain" – is a grammatically odd interpolation by the translator. The next line omits reference to "robila" ("robust" in simple English) and instead adds "manifold" to moustaches! Even "twinkling eyes" for "nain chamkeele" is misplaced, for the word "twinkling" cannot be a substitute for "shining brightly" or "lustrous". The arms also do not flutter "like a fighter"; rather like "a fighter's". "Josheeel" is "zealous" or "enthusiastic", not "energetic." Calling wife "a sizzling glare" is not only ungrammatical but also suggestive as opposed to "surat piari" which is "lovely face".

The innovation from the side of the translator would have been excusable if it had added to the beauty of the poem without compromising with the bare demands of English grammar, but the translator chose rhyme over other considerations.

#### A Cultural Act

The translator acts as a go-between for the SL writer and the TL reader. His is the supreme duty of transmitting the message accurately but at the same time in a way that is comprehensible to the reader placed in the cultural context of another language. For that matter, he has to interpret, explain or even illustrate, preferably in footnotes so as to show they are translator's words. In case of even referential texts like the tourism brochure of China, compare the following translations:

A: The Imperial City is a section of the city of Beijing in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and was surrounded by a wall and accessed through six gates, with the Forbidden City at its center, whose construction took 14 years, and was finished in 1420.

B. The Imperial City is a section of the city of Beijing in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and was surrounded by a wall and accessed through six gates, with the Forbidden City at its center, whose construction took 14 years, and was finished in 1420, *72 years before Christopher Columbus discovered the New World.* (Zhang, 2013: 80)

The B version has been preferred by the critic as being amenable to the reader because it has the necessary additional contextual information even though it is a kind of gloss on the original piece. The only thing desired in this case is a square bracket placed around the interpolation.

While translating the ghazal into English, the translator has to make the reader in TL aware of the structure of ghazal and try to re-create the music and bring in the delicacy of ghazal. Only then the translation would be perfect. Similarly, with regard to the Haryanvi text *Yudhveer*, the translator has to make the reader in TL aware about the underlying humour in the rustic usage of language which is hardly translatable. This imparting of knowledge of what is partly left out in translation should inspire the reader to learn the source language. If it happens, the translation would have achieved more than its usual goal.

In this context, one does encounter choice between giving glossaries of native words with their meanings in original texts as novelist Shashi Tharoor did in case of his *The Great Indian Novel* or so many others have done. On the opposite side, others including Rohinton Mistry have not done it showing postcolonial pride in equality of cultures. Not all readers are equally talented to figure out the approximate meaning of foreign words and phrases. A Glossary at the end will very much domesticate the terms for the reader well-versed in TL only. This

is very necessary because language not only mirrors world but makes it also for us. An interesting report would prove my point. A 9<sup>th</sup> grade class in Singapore, given a story writing assignment, showed every student created characters with blonde hair and blue eyes. Such was the impact of the prescribed English texts that they did not think their own yellow skin and black hair were worthy of any story! (Krishnan, 2018: 4) Herein comes the importance of judicious explanations with translated texts.

Translation may be compared partially to the transformation of a literary text into a movie. The author of the text becomes auteur of films, so that he has the freedom to mould the material to suit the requirements of the movie. We must reconcile ourselves to the fact that 100% allegiance to the original text may not be possible considering the cultural setting of the target language. Therefore, domestication of language rather than its foreignization is preferable.<sup>3</sup>

#### A Political Act

In this politically charged age, many a time, a translation is considered to be a political act, as for example, translation of a Pakistani writer's book on democracy in Pakistan by an Indian translator, or let us say, as it happened in the case of translation of Om Prakash Valmiki's novel *Joothan* from Hindi into English by Professor Arun Mukherjee. When Valmiki, himself a member of the Dalit community, wrote the autobiography, few could raise finger on its authenticity, but Mukherjee, a Brahmin woman intellectual, based in Toronto may be under the cloud of suspicion because of caste difference, even though she declares that her fascination for Ambedkar's ideology inspired her to contact Valmiki and translate his work into English. (Sadana in Anjaria, 2015: 158).

In case of translation of *Yudhveer*, the writer, a Jat by caste, is being translated by a Bania scholar. Even though the caste factor operates in Haryana most blatantly, the fact that the two belong to the same region and in all probability spoke the same dialect in their childhood would ensure that the translation does not lack on account of linguistic strangeness even though at the ideational level,

differences could, theoretically speaking, affect it. The moot point is that the translator must have sympathy for the writer of the SL text.

#### Conclusion

Despite the limitations of translation as pointed out above, translations fulfil a laudable objective. The English translation of Urdu poetry opens up a new domain and style to the English speaking people not only in India but all over the world. Similarly, the translation of *Yudhveer* goes a long way to acquaint people in other parts of the country about the kind of background which is responsible for providing fighters to the Indian army. The way the families and the immediate neighbourhood feel about the martyr finds resonance in far-off regions of India, say Tamilnadu or Assam, where too, the young people join the army and their families bravely suffer the loss of their loved ones. This brings about unity among the people. Thus, it can be concluded that translations, despite the limitations pertaining to language, culture, politics, etc. can still play a vital role in dissemination of literature and knowledge provided the translator has the required acumen and can rise above personal prejudices.

#### Endnotes

1. The first great fictional work in Hindi – *Chandrakanta Santati* written by Devaki Nandan Khatri way back in 1888, which inspired many people from non-Hindi speaking areas to learn Hindi. I am sure, Fitzgerald's English translation of the *Rubaiyyat* of Omar Khayyam must have impelled readers to go to Persian language. Going back, one can refer to the Renaissance period when scholars like John Colet, Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn went to Italy to learn Greek and came back to establish its teaching at Oxford so that others could learn this language and enjoy the wonderful ancient texts of Greece. (Baugh, 1948: 327) Similarly, a number of scholars from India and China visited each other's country and translated works. (Nehru 192-194). Similarly, European scholars like Max Mueller translated our hallowed texts from Sanskrit into German. This kind of movement of scholars for the sheer purpose of amassing knowledge or enjoying

literature has happened in many parts of the world and has been made possible through the art of translation.

- <sup>2.</sup> In 300 BC, when Greece was conquered by Rome and the Romans started considering translation as a form of conquest only, “not only deleted culturally specific markers but also added allusions to Roman culture and replaced the name of the Greek poet with their own, passing the translation off as a text originally written in Latin” (Baker,1998, p241). Something similar was done in South East Asia where Ramayana was translated and it became a part of the social psyche of societies in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, etc. so much so that each country has its own Ayodhya and its own set of Ramayana characters, though their names show some variation due to linguistic differences affecting them over centuries. One can mark another kind of difference here. The Latin translators were more after their names, whereas the South East Asian translators, working under the orders of the rulers, retained the original moral conclusion of Ramayana – something that ancient India looked upon as favourable to the spread of Dharma.
- <sup>3.</sup> Roxana Birsanu notes in this connection: “In their translations, Elizabethans such as Arthur Golding or George Chapman treated the great names of ancient Rome and Greece as if they were their own contemporaries. They ignored the cultural and historical differences separating the moment of the source text production and proceeded to a domestication of the foreign text, making it fully assimilable by the English culture. At the other extreme, there is the Victorian translation policy put into practice by names such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Charles Swinburne or Matthew Arnold. Their respect for the source text was so great, that the main purpose of the translation was to render the remoteness of the original as accurately as possible” (Birsanu 2011:179).

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