

Translating Cultures

Sanskriti: Anuvad-Vivad

Language, an important part of culture, grows in a socio-cultural context and is used in any kind of literary creation. With so many languages around us, the translation activity grew up as a natural phenomenon for fulfilling the social necessities and dissemination of human expressions.

However there is a clear historical division between this perception that language is culture

and the perception of others who think that language and culture are two distinct entities and therefore translation is seen by them,

as a universalist encoding-decoding linguistic activity, transferring meaning from the source language to the target language, using what Reddy called the method of ‘conduit metaphor of language transference.’¹

Here, Culture and any cultural differences can be carried by the language without significant loss.

¹ Reddy, M.J., ‘The conduit metaphor’ in A.Ortony (ed) *Metaphor and Thought*, pp164-201, 1973/1993

Others such as Nida believe that ‘the context actually provides more distinction of meaning than the term being analyzed.

‘Hence, meaning is not ‘carried’ by the language but is negotiated between readers from within their own contexts of culture.

Each readership is hence bound to receive the text according to their own expectations, and translation is necessarily a relativist form of ‘manipulation’ (Hermans 1985),² ‘meditation’ (Katan 1999/2004)³ or ‘refraction’ (Lefevere)⁴ between two different lingua-cultures (Agar 1994).⁵

In other words Language always rests on the dialectical relationship between complex linguistic and extensive cultural systems.

Nida, Newmark and many others rejected the - linguistic theories of translation which deal with word and text as a unit but do not go beyond to take into consideration the cultural aspect.

² Hermans T (ed) *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in literary translation*, 1985

³ Katan, D. *Translating Cultures: An introduction for translators, interpreters and mediators*, 1999/2004

⁴ Lefevere, A, ‘Mother Courage’s cucumbers’, in L.Venuti(ed), *The TranslationStudies Reader*, pp. 239-55,1982/2004

⁵ Agar M *Language Shock: Understandingthe culture of conversation*,1994

Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere even dismissed the efforts of the earlier translation theorists of painstaking comparisons between original and translations by saying that these exercises do not consider the text in its cultural environment.

Cultural as an inherent part of language is never ignored in any kind of translation studies but sometimes it is emphasised more or other times less but never ignored.

Bassnett and Lefevere rightly go beyond language and focus on the interaction between translation and culture, on the way in which culture impacts and constrains translation and ‘on the larger issues of context, history and convention.’⁶

According to ancient Indian theorists the inner significance of the meaning is rooted in the context of the verbal art and that determines the ‘literariness’ of the artifact and without this knowledge the translation is never successful and therefore both the verbal and cultural contexts facilitate in recoding the text by the reader-

⁶ Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, (Eds), Translation, History and Culture, P11

translator for a meaning which emancipates ‘artha’ from material reality.

Kayyat and even Tolkapiyar refer to ‘pramanaantar’ the contextual meaning which is when transferred translation becomes a reality.⁷

In the days of linguistic translation theories equivalence in the translation process was, no doubt, perceived as dialectic between the particular linguistic and cultural systems of the writer as well as the translator.

It suggested by taking into consideration the

- i) dimensions of language user- geographical origin, social class and time and also
- ii) the dimensions of language use- medium (simple/complex),
- iii) the social role (relationship between addresser and addressees) and
- iv) social attitude (the degree of social formality as evident in the style) are the means by which the author’s socio cultural context is realised.

⁷ I.N. Choudhuri ‘Towards an Indian Theory of Translation’, Indian Literature,, Vol LIV No 5 (259: Sep/Oct 2010)

- v) As a result the source text is developed having a linguistic as well as a cultural frame.

The translator also lives in

- i) his own socio-cultural context and while analysing the text he is governed by
- ii) the linguistic and cultural systems and the end product is
- iii) the semiotic transformation of autonomous and communicative aspects of sign orders.
- iv) This being the reason the translator realises that equivalence in translation should not be approached as a search for sameness. Equivalence rests on the relationship between signs, what they stand for (autonomous aspect) and those who use (communicative aspect) them.

These two referential systems (the particular linguistic and cultural systems of the writer and the translator) help us understand the translated version of a literary text with reference to the i)translator's strategies,

ii) degree of objectivation, the extent to which the general is modified or replaced by the specific and the type of bilingualism.

Comparison of seven significant English translations of Gita Govinda (e.g., Willium Jones 1792, Edwin Arnold 1875, George Keats, 1940, Lakshmi Narayan Shastri 1956, Duncun Greenlidge 1962, Monika Varma 1968 and Barbara Stoler Miller 1977 provides not only an insight into literature but also captures the change in sensibility that marks different epochs and the mood and temperament of the translator.

In fact, this kind of a comparative study of the source text having linguistic/literary and extra-literary conventions gives an idea of the literary idiom and cultural tenor of the source text and its translations in different ages bring forth unique cross-cultural manifestations of the original texts.

Because of the personality and period of the history of the translator and the language he uses, the impact of linguistic, generic or ideological

forces is so powerful that we may have different tastes in different works of translation.

We may notice as explained by John Fletcher⁸ that Yeats's rendering of Ronsard's 'When you are old', a fine poem in its right, alters the tone of the original fundamentally.

Ronsard is confident that his verses will immortalize the lady but chides her for her improvident coyness.

Yeats eliminates the arrogance. Here a great poet takes a theme from another great poet and recasts it in a subdued manner entirely his own.

Analysis of this kind of translation helps us in having an 'explosive contact' with the author and the translator and as such of interest in cross cultural translation studies.

In this study of translating cultures one can benefit from a systematic comparison of six significant translations in Hindi of the rubaiyats of Omar Khayyam. All these are retranslations from the

⁸ John Fletcher, *The Criticism of Comparison...*, in Malcolm Bradbury etc(eds), *Contemporary Criticism*, p127

English translation by Fitzgerald. One of the rubaiyats as translated by Fitzgerald is:

Dreaming when Dawn's left hand was in
the sky

I heard a voice within the tavern cry
Awake my little ones, and fill the cup
Before life's liquor in its cup be dry.

Now 'my little ones' is wrong translation of khayyam's 'A rind kharavati' which means 'drunkards of the tavern.'

This wrong translation continuing in the Hindi translations gives rise to different connotative meanings in the mind of various translators according to different cultural setups in which they live.

Harivansharai Bachan translates it as 'mere sishuo nadan',

Keshab Pd. Pathak as 'mere sishudal'

and Maithilisanan Gupta as 'o mere bachhe'.

Sumitranandan Pant has a pedagogic attitude to this term and translates it as 'madira ke chatra'.

Bachchan does not stop at the filling of the cup and insists others to drink it even- ‘buja lo pi pi madira bhukh’.

Maithlisaran Gupta, being a vaishnavite, slowly utters ‘patro bharo na vilamba karo’, as if he is afraid of drinking.

A comparison of these various translations can shed light not only on the changes in a given civilisation’s attitude towards literature, but also on the changes in a society’s attitude towards certain other topics.

These culture-bound attitudes so thoroughly stylise our perceptions that we experience our ‘traditionality’ as natural but without going deep into the historical causes, the roots of determinism which underlie the ‘recursive’ structure of our sensibility and expressive codes we cannot translate properly.

The cultural contexts of a given discourse could be extremely deep rooted, e.g. in ‘Asadhya Veena’ by Ajneya the terms kesha kambali, gufa-geha, hata sadhana, krricha tapa are taken from the Buddhist Hinayana yogic terminology, indicating that communion with the ultimate in a state of

selflessness may lead to spiritual accomplishment. Ajneya picks up this cultural reference to project his idea about the creative process.

In his translation of this poem with the help of Professor Leonard E. Nathan the corresponding terms ‘whose robe a rug,’ ‘whose home was a cave in the hills’, ‘irresistible vow’, ‘disciplined devotion’, could not project the culture-bound meanings which reside in our unconscious.

In the same way ‘mein kanfata hun; heta hun’- a line of a poem ‘mein tum logo se dur hun’ is translated as ‘I am the split eared, the underground wretch’ by Vishnu khare which cannot express the philosophical meaning of ‘kanfata’ and ‘heta’ of our cultural milieu. and as a result the cross-cultural communication does not take place properly.

Further example can be given from the translation of kalidasa’s Abhijnana Shakuntalam by Sir William Jones. Jones’ Victorian morality was responsible according to Romila Thaper in deleting or toning down many passages, which

was according to him erotic and hence immoral and linked to the primitive.⁹

In fact this kind of an attitude towards a text like *Sakuntala*, announced the birth of Orientalism, which tried to colonize the oriental texts and define and comprehend the culture of the colonized in European terms. Thus the colonized are viewed as civilized, but their civilisation may take some unpalatable forms, and these can be corrected or deleted.

Jones colonized the text in an effort to resolve his individual aesthetic crisis – a crisis that for an Indian was totally absurd. Most important is that Jones's prejudices were liable in mistranslating several passages of *Sakuntala* to impose a value judgment and tie *Sakuntala* to a vision of etiquette which was wholly western and according to European societal norms. As a result his work presenting a tendentious vision of India, consistently fails to recognize Kalidasa's humour, puns and irony and certain cultural themes.

⁹ Romila Thaper, *Shakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, p 213

This can be termed as the ‘resistency’ method (Venuti’s term) which highlights the ideological dominance of the translator.

It will be interesting to note that Tejaswini Niranjana in her book ‘Sitting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial context’ (1992) airs the same view that translation as a practice shapes, and takes the shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism.

Even she presents an image of post-colonial as ‘still scored through by an absentee colonialism.’ And while referring to the translations of kannada vacana attacks the existing translations including the translations done by the celebrated A.K.Ramanujan as ‘attempting to assimilate Saivite poetry to the discourses of Christianity or of a post-Romantic New Criticism’ almost analogous to Nineteen century native responses to colonialism.¹⁰

¹⁰ Tejaswini Niranjana, *Sitting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context*, p.180, 1992

We all know that no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture, so the exact translation is only an hypothesis only.

Translation is always done for a unilingual readership bound by its own cultural properties. It means that any discourse in the SL and its translation in TL, should be accepted as two sets of possible worlds having a ‘dynamic equivalence’ (Nida).

The question of equivalence is related to meaning, to be precise- pragmatic meaning.¹¹

‘Equivalent’ does not mean identical: the response can never be identical because of different cultural, historical and situational settings. So it is always necessary to aim at equivalence of pragmatic meaning, if necessary at the expense of semantic equivalence.

Pragmatics relates to the correlation between linguistic units and the user(s) of these units in a given communicative situation. We may therefore

¹¹ Juliana House, A model for Translation Quality Assessment, , p 49 says that translation is to be considered primarily as a pragmatic reconstruction of its source text. Pragmatic meaning relates to the correlation between linguistic units and the user(s) of these units in a given communicative situation, i.e., “ the communicative value an expression.....over and above its purely conceptual content.” (Leach Semantics), (1974), pp27-28

consider translation to be primarily a pragmatic reconstruction of its source text.

Only then the cross-cultural communication becomes feasible. But this can raise many serious issues; the most important issue is that by accepting meaning as pragmatic meaning the focus of attention moves from the cultural patterns of the source- language message to the reaction of the receptor-translator of that message.

One can in this respect refer to two translations- one in Bengali and other in Hindi- of T.S.Eliot's famous poems 'Ash Wednesday' and 'Gerontion' The original passage of the 'Gerontion' is as follows:

In depraved May, dogwood and
Chestnut, flowering Judas
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers, by Mr Silvero
With caressing hands, at Limoges
Who walked all night in the next room;
By Hakagawa bowing among the Titians;

By Madam Tornquest, in the dark room
Shifting the candles; Fraulein Von Kulp
Who turned in the hall, one hand in the door.

In the Hindi translation by Vishnu Khare the
'formal correspondence' method is used which
seeks to produce a counterpart in the receptor
language whose form corresponds to the original
as nearly as possible:

Kalushit mai, dagwood tatha akhrot ke per,
Phulte huey judas briksha ke samay,
Phusphusaton me khaye, bante, piye jane ke liye,
Limoges men dularte,
Hatowale Mister Silvaro dwara/
Jo dusre kamre men sari raat tahalte rahe;
Titian ke kritiyon ke bich jukte huey hakagawa
dwara/ andhiare kamren me
Mombattiyan sarkti hui/ Madam de Tornquist
Dwara/ Fraulein Von Kulp dwara,
Jo dwar pur ek hath rakh bhavan me aae

This formal correspondence method in translation does not insist that the reader understands the cultural patterns of the source-language context to comprehend the message and seeks to produce a counterpart in a receptor language whose form corresponds to the original. As a result the effect of this method on the reader can be sometimes unnatural or otherwise tiring.

Vishnu Dey in his Bengali translation transforms all these terms of a different culture into Indian/Bengali terms, particularly which are familiar with the unilingual Bengali readership.

As a result the depraved May turns into pacha bhaddro, Dogwood, Chestnut, flowering Judas into kochushak, kalojam, mohini dhatura.

The title of the poem 'Gerontion' in Hindi is same written only in Devnagri script whereas in Bengali Vishnu Dey translates it as 'Jarayan' which immediately communicates the meaning to a Bengali reader.

Besides, some of the names of persons and places which occur in the poem like Brussels, London, Mr Silvero, Madame de Taranquist, Fraulin Von Kulp are exactly reproduced in Hindi version

whereas in the Bengali version Brussels and in London are changed to Kanpur, Kolkatai (in Calcutta); Mr Silvero, Madam de Taranquist, Fraulin Von Kulp become Hatilal Mehta, Lady Mukherjee, and Mister Tarafdar.

The title of the poem ‘Ash Wednesday’ in Hindi is same in Devnagri script. The question is how can a reader in Hindi without special knowledge understand ‘Ash Wednesday’, that it is the first day of Lent in the Roman Catholic, Anglican and some other churches? It is so named from the ceremonial use of ashes as a symbol of penitence in the service for the day.

To cover the cultural gap, Bishnu Dey in Bengali transforms the title into ‘charaker gaan’, a similar kind of religious ceremony of Bengal of ushering the new by discarding the old.

In Hindi translation the ‘juniper tree’, ‘she honours the Virgin in meditation’, ‘blue of Mary’s colour,’ ‘hawthorn blossoms’ and ‘the May time’ of ‘Ash Wednesday’ are turned into ‘juniper briksha’, ‘dhyan me virgin ka adar karti hain’, ‘neel Mery ka vastra pahane’, ‘bakain ke phool’ and ‘Mai ke samay’

whereas in Bengali translation Vishnu Dey instead of formal correspondence method uses the method of dynamic equivalence and does not attempt to fill the cultural gap, rather makes the difference between the cultures as clear as possible and turns juniper tree into jayatri briksha, Virgin Mery into Devaki mata, the month of May into phalguni, hawthorn blossoms into atasi puspa and Christ the tiger into Krishna narasimha.

Here by matching the communicative value of the source text with the communicative value of the target text the pragmatic meaning of both the texts are complemented and in Popovic’s term¹² the invariant core is not lost and the “proper” result is achieved and that makes us prone to believe that

¹² A. Popovic, A dictionary for the analysis of Literary Translation (1976)

only in this way the process of communication becomes meaningful.

Here a major question is raised and that is, can a cross-cultural reference be reduced to such a level where the very idea for going for translation for enjoying foreign literature with its cultural contexts becomes redundant?

The group of scholars favouring the adaptations of alien cultural terms raises a vivad, controversy by saying that in the interlingual communication, the link is the translator who is both the receptor of the original message and the source of the secondary message.

Both these messages are embedded in their particular cultural frame and as a result in the cross cultural communication there are interferences which signify difficulties that concern both the translator and the translation process and as such this vivadi group thinks that once the translator is freed from his role as an objective mediator and keeps his receptor in mind and foresees their possible reactions, conditioned by the presuppositions and behaviour patterns of their

culture, only then the literary translation becomes possible. It is therefore stressed by the vivadi group that to understand a discourse bound by an alien culture the translation need not be linguistically clear reproduction only but also a minimum information about the thought patterns and the values of the source culture is to be dished out.

This is the reason that adaptations, as done by Vishnu Dey is essential in cross-cultural communication but that must be minimal with an eye at equivalence of pragmatic meaning.

It is also said that the cultural differences and the gaps could be filled up with footnotes though the use of footnotes would have unreasonably divided the source text into two parts- target text and footnotes and that would have disturbed the autonomy of the source text and spoiled the overall source of the source text.

The prativadi or the opposite group in the vivad says that while conveying the core meaning

through the target text the translator should not forget that the source text in its totality manifests the core meaning and Vishnu Dey transforms this invariant core by Indianising the cultural references. It is very difficult to touch the core. We learn from touching it. Only by touching we can know how profound it is- and then only we are able to reach nearest to that point of the distance between two cultures. Vishnu Dey does not allow us to do that.

The job of a translator is to turn strangeness into likeness and in the process the strangeness of the original becomes more vivid but the vividness itself liberates us from the cultural prison and gives the taste of another culture. It is almost like providing a vantage point from where the reader looks at another culture and feels encouraged to understand it.

To sum up the main concern of the translator in translating cultures is the text itself and the translation of culture-bound terms, which are

mentioned by Nord as ‘culturemes’¹³ are ‘cultural categories’ cover a wide array of semantic fields: from geography and traditions to institutions and technologies.

Scholars since Vinay and Darvelnet¹⁴ have offered a plethora of strategies to compensate for the lack of cultureme equivalence. All these strategies are only testimonies of what has been said already in the presentation of the debate between Vibadi and prativadi groups. Kwiecinski has summarised these into four groups:¹⁵

- i) **Exoticising procedures:** This procedure offers local colour and atmosphere or foreign terms into the target languages like burka used by Muslim ladies.
- ii) **Rich explicatory procedures:** The aim is to slide in an extra term or two which will cue readers to enough of the context, often through a local analogy, to guide them towards a more equivalent cognition. When,

¹³ Culturemes are formalized, socially and juridically embedded phenomena that exist in a particular form of function in one of the two cultures being compared, Nord,C., Translating as a purposeful activity: Functionalists approaches explained,1997

¹⁴ Vinay, J.P. and J Darbelnet, ‘A methodology for translation’ in L.Venuti (ed), The Translation Studies Reader, 1958/2004

¹⁵ Kwiecinski. P. Disturbing Strangeness, 2001[

where and how to explicate depends in the translator's acute sensitivity to reader uptake.

- iii) **Recognised exoticism:** Some well-known geographical and personal names and titles have 'accepted translations' according to language e.g. Ge`neve in Swiss is now well known as Geneva in translator but one will always need to check how recognised the exoticism is.
- iv) **Assimilative procedures:** These procedures transform text from the original into close functionally equivalent target terms, or it is even deleted if not considered central.

In other words the vivad between Domestication and Foreignization or what Venuti says the ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target language cultural values and the ethnodeviant pressure on target language cultural values to register the linguistic and the cultural differences of the foreign text can be solved by using the middle path as mentioned in the sum total of four strategies of translation mentioned just now. This

helps in the cultivation of a varied and
'heterogeneous discourse' where foreignization
remains embedded in the domesticity of the target
text