

Translation Studies and Culture: An Interpretation

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What is translation and what are the functions of translation? What particular purpose is a translation work supposed to give? There might be a great deal of misunderstanding regarding these concerns. Why should it be? The answer is that translation process is not a simple innocent activity, nor a simple linguistic transfer; it is rather a complex mechanism involving a number of issues and concerns. In his essay "Perspectives on Translation," Roger T. Bell attempts to give a precise definition of translation on the basis of Equivalence Theory. The author finds translation to be "the replacement of a representation of a text in one language by a representation of an equivalent text in a second language" (6). The author elaborates his argument and discusses different parameters of equivalence. He says:

Text in different language can be equivalent in different degrees (fully or partially equivalent), in respect of different levels of presentation (equivalent in respect of context, of semantics, of grammar, of lexis etc.) and at different ranks (word-for-word, phrase-for-phrase, sentence-for-sentence). (6)

But the modern theoreticians find this definition incomplete. Two different languages may differ in syntax design, semantic value, and lexical category. These are the linguistic parameters. Apart from these there are other factors like contextual ambiance, expressional potency, and, especially, cultural constraints. It is very natural that the people of a particular geographical boundary do not have a proper understanding of the people of another geographical origin. These two sets of people are different in their cultural values, attitude and practices. Since language is also a by-product of a cultural system, one does not have a better access into another language-system unless he/she acquires a good understanding about another culture, attitude and practices. Naturally the people of Source Language (SL) are expected to have an understanding of the ethnicity, culture and way of life of the people of Target Language (TL). Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, in their essay -- "Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars" state that:

. . . translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in the process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors and system.

So, in the process of translation the transfer of language should be associated with the transfer of culture. Besides, some other aspects should be highlighted in a translation work. These roughly are -- what is the purpose of a translation work? Who the people the work actually addresses to? Or which is the target group? How convincing would be the method of translation as addressed to the target people? We need to have these questions working while involved in such an enterprise. In all these questions, the cultural problems pose complications. If we do not have an understanding of the culture and attitude of the target group, there is an apprehension that they might not accept it heartily. A translation assignment means more than just converting information from one language into another. It also involves paying particular attention to the point of view of the translation user -- the listener-oriented aspect of a text. The translator's responsibility is enormous since he works rather as a 'catalyst'. On the other hand, if receivers' intention is misinterpreted, transmission will not be successful.

We know a culture is a composite product of a number of systems working together. Cultural studies combine sociology, literary theory, film/video studies, etc. Cultural studies examine and often concentrate on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, race, social class and gender. Cultural studies also concern itself with the meaning and practices of everyday life. In two different cultures, the factors are widely different. The comparatively improved and advanced ideological, literary, social or racial systems are imposed upon the systems that are less advanced ideologically, literarily or socially. If both the cultures are not equal in terms of their relation to each other, then a superior lingua-cultural trend might jeopardize the merit of an inferior lingua-cultural phenomenon in the process of translation. It may give rise to a master-slave relation in two language systems much in the same way as the colonial dominance is seen to work.

Translation process is an extremely intriguing mechanism. A successful translation work, therefore, does not only deal with problems of

dichotomy between two linguistic parameters but also with facts related to culture. Andre Lefevere adds other dimensions to the cultural problems. He talks about two grid lines: -- "textual grid" and "conceptual grid." He observes that these grids are derived from the "cultural and literary convention of a given time." Time is a very important factor that interprets the meaning of a text to the contemporary readers. He says, ". . . the epic, once the great form of European culture, has virtually ceased to exist, and has become strange and distant for contemporary readers." A sort of awareness regarding this contemporaneity has to deal with textual grid -- that is a framework of time set in the text. Again, the cognitive approach of the people of a particular geographical location is different from that of another. It is indeed a complicated procedure "when Western culture 'translates' non-Western cultures into Western categories" (qtd. in Bassnett & Trivedi 15). During translation the conceptual grid of the target readers must be met. Both the grids are also the result of a socio-cultural process. During the translation work, both grids need consideration. So, a translator is not only a mere interpreter, but also a creative co-author. In a work of translation there is space to demonstrate his creativity. Lefevere thinks:

Both the writers of the original and the translator are faced with two grids . . . and that both have to come to terms with those grids. Here, much more than the linguistic level, lies in favour of the creativity of the translators: like writers of originals, they too have to find ways of manipulating these grids in such a way that the communication becomes not only possible, but interesting and attractive. (qtd. in Bassnett & Trivedi 15)

Now, if these grids are the outcome of a socio-cultural impact as mentioned by Lefevere, then the questions related to cultural diversity and the cultural status-quo requires much consideration.

The conflicting attitude between cultures is a historically proven fact. It is observed that the wealth, economic stability and political domination are actually the determinants of superior or inferior culture. Euro-centric and imperialistic attitude dominates in determining this cultural stratification. Europe is considered as the "Great Original" and the colonies are mere translation of it. This mindset has impacted greatly on the socioliterary milieu. Edward Said, in his essay "Culture and Imperialism" has clearly acknowledged that

"Domination and iniquities of power and wealth are the perennial facts of human society" (78). In his lecture on "Culture and Imperialism" given at York University, Toronto, Said notes that "the vocabulary of classic nineteenth century imperial culture in places like England and France is plentiful with words and concepts like "inferior" or 'subject races," notions of "subordinate people," of "dependency," of "expansion" and of "authority" (1). The hypothesis of inequality, thereby, sneaked in the lingua-cultural domain giving birth to the views like Orientalism, or the observations of the West as made on the East. Translation work, being the product of this lingua-cultural system, suffers from this condescending attitude sometimes.

English is accepted as a language of a superior brand. Therefore, millions of English-speaking people all over the world are living in a better intellectual hemisphere. Hence, the languages of Asia, Africa or Latin America are denigrated to the "language of periphery." In translation work, hazard lies in the tension of the "in-between space" of "language of center" and the "language of periphery." If we look at some of the imperialistic views, we would surely understand what role a relatively powerful language plays. Should a language pounce upon the other to the extent that the socio-cultural factors are disregarded or bypassed in the process of translating others? Bassnett and Trivedi nicely express Edward Lane's and Edward Fitzgerald's attitudes in their essay:

Edward Lane informs readers in notes to his popular translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* were far more gullible . . . In a similar vein Edward Fitzgerald, author of the most successful translation of the nineteenth century, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, could accuse the Persians of artistic incompetence and suggest that their poetry became an art only when translated into English. Both these translators were spectacularly successful, but when we start to examine the premises upon which their translation practice was based, what emerges is that they clearly saw themselves as belonging to a superior cultural system. (7)

Now, the question is -- should the commanding culture seize upon the subordinate one at the cost of its cultural inequality? While presenting a definition of this attitude, Edward Said in his *Orientalism* stated that the western "attitude of domination, restructuring and having authority over the East" (21) has been a commonly perceived phenomenon. This

observable fact has also come authoritatively in academic discourse. Translation Studies, as a literary discipline, has surely experienced this attitude.

In this connection, I would like to show an example -- how the imposition and dislodgement of semantic category of a particular word is systematized. While adopting the word "dervish" (a word that explains a concept of Sufism in which a person strives to establish more of an individual affiliation with God and the spiritual attainment), the Oxford dictionary explains the view of a group or members of Muslim religious sect who perform a lively spiritual dance and wants to remain poor ("Dervish"). But anyone having more understanding about the theological acumen would recognize the fact that the meaning of the word has been muted. The act actually sprang from the compilers not having semiological and cultural understanding of the word, while adopting it. William Radice has done a commendable job by presenting translation work of Tagore's short stories. The fluidity and ease of his language would surely move the minds of Bengali readers too. His long stay in India, his tenacious research and genuine interest in Tagore made it easier for him to come to terms with such felicitation of expression. But he himself had a problem in gender discrimination of the word "Bonomali." The author took him for a female in his initial work.

Israeli scholar Even-Zohar had developed Polysystem theory, which is a post-modern translation theory that explains the problems of such conflict. Evan-Zohar explains that "Literature is a part of social, cultural, literary and historical framework" (Ernst-August). If these frameworks are not properly interpreted, or at least understood, the receivers' end might unknowingly be affected. In translation work this comprehensive framework of all these key-concepts or systems should be properly addressed. Once the Target Language (TL) selects works for translation, the behaviours and attitudes, at the same time, are influenced by other co-systems. In translation work -- as far as I think -- there should be no system of "Westernizing," "Anglicizing" or "Americanizing." For further emphasis, I will take into consideration two outstanding female post-colonial critics who view translation as a complex mechanism when culture intercedes. One is Sherry Simon and the other is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Simon tried to define translation from a feminist's perspective and

underlines the need of considering multiple factors intervening. Simon criticizes translation studies for often using the term culture. She thinks, translation assumes a complicated appearance. Here comes the necessity of understanding postmodern literary theories of poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, which she denominates as "multiple posts" of reality. She says:

Cultural study brings to the translation an understanding of the complexities of the gender and culture. It allows us to situate linguistic transfer within the 'multiple posts' of realities of today: poststructuralism, postcolonialism and postmodernism. (qtd. in Munday 133)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her outstanding essay, "The politics of Translation" discusses the ideological consequence of the translation of the "third world" (133). Western feminists held the view that the writing outside of Europe must be translated into the language of power -- that is English. "Such translation," in Spivak's view, "is often expressed in 'Translationese', which eliminates the identity of politically less powerful individuals and cultures." She also resents that "in the act of wholesale translation into English, there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest." Establishing the "law of the strongest," cannot be an ultimate objective of a literary work. A translator needs to underline the "environment of literary system" (133).

If the "law of the strongest" becomes the determinant factor in a translation work, any work will undergo an arbitrary, condescending attitude. I would like to call it "transgression" in place of "translation." In this case, I think, the readers of the translated version of the text would show a real remonstrance against core text or vice versa. In the essay "Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars," Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi attempt to define this tendency as cultural "cannibalism." In colonial context, "translation has been at the heart of colonial encounter and has been used in all kinds of ways to establish and perpetuate the superiority of some culture over others" (Bassnett & Trivedi, 17). In reaction to the Western hegemony, Edward Said thinks that the colonized are "shot through with doctrines of European supremacy, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and the like, dogmatic views of 'orient' as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction" (25). So, it is quite likely that so long as the "hegemonic ascendancy" of the

attitude and approach is not brought to a "shifting terrain," the work of translation might suffer the cultural cannibalism.

Homi K. Bhabha, however, does not take a radical stand. He thinks the supremacy that is reflected in Western attitude is not the result of economic and political primacy only, but also of the non-existence of a superior lingua-cultural and intellectual domain among the dominated race. If a healthy literary archive is non-existent, it is perhaps natural that supremacy of a particular culture will overlap the other one. But he thinks, in the postcolonial situation, the "translation hybridity" lives in a "third space." Bassnett and Trivedi uphold that "now, with the increasing awareness of unequal power relations involved in the transfer of text across culture, we are in a position to rethink both the translation and its contemporary practice"(17).

Two important Translation mechanics have come into being: one is "descriptive use" and the other is "interpretive use." Culture might pose some challenges; so it is very important to determine, for whom the translation work is directed -- meaning the target group (TG). We cannot expect that the translation work will address the taste and expectations of the TG completely. This type of "domestication of text" is perhaps not desirable and unjustified because of the fact that it might betray the purpose of the source text. Again, a translated work cannot circumvent or circumscribe the socio-cultural phenomenon and context. So, the "foreignization" of the text is unfair as well. The ideal solution, as I think, is the "interpretive use of translation," because here only two parallel "gridlines" -- conceptual and textual grid -- are properly addressed. In an Internet publication of late, Ernst-August thinks that through interpretive use an author can resemble the statement of original work. He says:

In terms of relevance theory, in the presentation of the idea of the book, the author is an example of interpretive use: the statements that summarize those ideas are presented because they interpretively resemble the statements of the original author, that is, because they share the explicature and/ or implicature of the original work.

Mary Louise Pratt has talked about how the cultural diversities are met at a point that may resolve some problems of translation work. She

talks about "contact zone," where two cultures come together. She also reflects that the zone might have created out of colonial domination and characterized by "multiplicity, exchange, renegotiation and discontinuities" (qtd. in Bassnett & Trivedi 14). Now, the question might be asked, whether the zone is well defined. If the colonial domination forces or tends to subdue the other because of the radical inequality, would the translation work meet the fundamental anticipations? Especially in the post-colonial context this type of inequality may obscure the beauty of translation. So, what are especially the contextual and conceptual gridlines for contact zone? Is it well defined by intercultural transfer? Or is it always a matter of "reducing native language and culture to accessible objects for the subjects of the divine and imperial invention?" (Bassnett & Trivedi 3).

If translation has been a matter of authorship, culture and system, it is also then a matter of race, ethnicity, class and society. Now the problem is whether the diverse factors -- to what extent -- are accurately synthesized in making a good translation work. Anne McClintock argues that in order to understand translation, one must recognize that "race, society and culture are not the distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively . . . they come into existence through relation to each other -- if in contradictory and conflicting ways" (qtd. in Bassnett & Trivedi 1). This space where all the facts come together can possibly be a "contact zone."

In my consideration, the liberty bestowed on the translators of postcolonial time gives them a space to use their innate creative energy. This is the space created under circumstances when "the empire writes back." We have certainly capacitated ourselves to write back in their language. By doing so, we, the colonized have made us "translated people" who, with the power of "imperial legacy," can write back to the center. Aijaz Ahmed, in his work, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality" reflects some of Spivak's thoughts as follows:

"Those of us from the formerly colonized countries are able to communicate with each other and with the metropolis, to exchange and to establish transnationally, . . . because we have had the culture of imperialism. . . . Further, the political claims that are most urgent in de-colonized space are tacitly recognized

as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, socialism, even culturalism. . . . They are thus being reclaimed. (277)

Readers of the decolonized zone surely inherit the legacy of empire and capacitate themselves to come to terms with different factors in post imperial society. They have achieved individual strength to place their intellectual frame of mind. The mind in the postcolonial domain, thereby, has become a translated mind. The translators have empowered themselves to have an innate potency to make space for themselves.

Hence, in this space, translation work can enjoy the advantage of co-authorship. I mean to say that the translator himself/herself can be called a creative co-author, rather than a sub-author. He must not be given a subordinate position. The vocal school of thinkers in the intellectual circles, who are actually the product of imperial legacy, are now reconstructing and restructuring the meaning and significance of postmodernists' attitude on translation through deconstructing the oriental and euro-centric standpoint. In the wider parameter of translation studies, certain postmodern concepts like newness, diasporas and exoticism have also occupied space. Translation studies have, therefore, achieved, in Bassnett and Trivedi's words, "homogenic ascendancy" today.

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