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CONTEMPORARY LITERARY DISCOURSES AND TRANSLATION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Translation studies has emerged as an independent branch of study that mostly, no doubt, relies on what has been happening in the field of literary theory for the last one century. Travelling a long way from what was once considered to be of secondary importance, translation, both as a practice and a theory in its own right, has now carved out a space that now attracts the attention of the scholars the world over. An act once taken up by the individual practitioners in order to satisfy their urge to transfer the knowledge from one language to the other, translation has now gained unimaginable dimensions. The present paper investigates the relationship between translation and the reception of Indian English literature in its days of infancy.

Key words: linguistic transference, cultural decoding, deviation, structures, Indianisms

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Every translational enterprise is more a cultural decoding than that of only a linguistic one for, if at all, it is essentially the latter it could easily be carried out by various electronic devices available to us but any translation, apart from certain technical and computational ones, always demands certain degree of human intervention for each word, each phrase and each expression for that matter, is basically the outcome of a specific cultural experience. The translation of a text may entirely be politically innocent but if it overlooks or bypasses the cultural differences between the source text/language and the target text/language, it will surely fall prey to a close scrutiny and virulent criticism as any such effort would be considered to be a negotiation with the very spirit of the source text and that in turn will question the 'authenticity' of the translated version.

The twin terms that have been identified and allocated prime place in the task of translation by almost all the major translation theorists Sukanta are 'truth' and 'fidelity' where 'truth' refers to the real or what is generally termed as the 'original' and 'fidelity' refers to the translator's indefatigable loyalty to that 'original'. These terms have always been engaging the translators and the translation scholars alike. Whereas a translator is obsessed with the limitations of his/her creative liberty and therefore is forced to get messed up with the task of searching for an even equivalent to the expression in the source text, the translation scholars after many years of heavy-handed conglomeration, have now started attesting the allowances availed at times by the translators. The very question as how a translator should begin the task in hand whether as the reader-

critic and presenter of the source text to an alien reader or only as the one who renders the text for the consumption of such a class of readers who are less 'informed' and may not be having the adequate skills to correlate the renderings to the spirit of the source text. The task of searching for a viable equivalence in the target language is not merely a linguistic affair; instead, it also demands the cultural rootedness that the translated version needs to construct with the help of the translator's activism. This is perhaps one reason why reading and re-reading of the whole text are recommended before the task of translation actually begins.

Just as a text is now not considered solely the outcome of a single mind, a finished autonomous entity in itself, similarly the interpretation of a text is also not finally reached at by the employment of a single mind. I.A. Richards might be right in obliterating many of the basic information associated with a particular piece of work in order to identify new educational/interpretive tools that would ultimately result in the 'perfect understanding' of the text but there is no doubt about the fact that Richards' views aimed more at the independent (if not indifferent!) interpretation of the given text that might be resulting in unraveling the multilayered meanings of the text. But for a translator a set of valid information regarding the times and location of the author is as indispensable as the theoretical inclination towards the 'perfect understanding' of the text. By propounding the concept of practical criticism, Richards alongwith the other Formalists challenged all the existing norms of literary criticism that relied more on the biographical details of the author and also in some cases, the time, location and reasons behind the production of that particular text. Why was this move towards a new direction necessary? The reason was quite obvious: too much reliance on other- than- text sources leading to a biased critique of the text in hand. This new methodology interrupted the whole process by making the text as something complete in itself that might grow and change but to the limits of its structure, diction and imagery etc. It was hailed as something very positive and is still given a space in curriculum at least upto Graduation level. So the literary criticism passed through this stage of complete overhauling when translation was considered only to be an amateurish activity that did not have any theoretical framing. Criticism and translation are such intertwined activities that cannot be separated at any cost because, as has earlier been pointed out, interpretation is the first step towards translating a literary text and no translator can produce a good and complete translation if (s)he does not have the ability to formally critique the text in its totality as Sujit Mukherjee while discussing the theoretical position of the act of translation, writes:

...in my perception, underlined by some practice, translating a literary work stands very close and nearly equal to the writing of it...At the risk of stating the obvious, let me insist that the basic equipment for a translator of literary work is a secure hold upon the two languages involved, supported by a good measure of familiarity with the culture represented by each language....All or nothing must be the translator's aim. (Mukherjee 37-41)

The phrase 'critique the text' does not really mean that a translator needs to go through everything written on the text but (s)he should have a proper understanding of how the source language functions at diverse levels and also as how can it be expressed in the target language. By referring back to Mukherjee again, the point may be made clearer than what could be by what has been stated uptill now, as he has written a series of two books on translation namely, *Translation as Discovery* and *Translation as Recovery* where the second one could only be published posthumously. As the very titles of the books suggest, the act of translation involves all those procedures that lead to both the 'discovery' as well as the 'recovery' of the text which means the translator should always have the intention of bringing out all those hidden meanings contained in the text that would otherwise be either ignored by a less 'informed' reader or might have been lost due to the change in the syntactical usage that that particular language had gone through over the years. So it is also a task expected to be taken care of by the translator to discover the missing links and recover the text as far as possible.

The limitations of what was once considered to be the proper and complete understanding of the text could be easily discovered by the theorists who further tried to evolve a theoretical basis for translation. As has already been pointed in the preceding paragraph, the translator was soon supposed to be a much more

tactful, trained and alert craftsman who could not only decipher all the possible meanings contained in the text but was also supposed to be aware of repercussions of re-presenting the same in the target language. It also shows the kind of prestige that the act of translation started gaining with the passage of time. Although Richards himself had demolished many of his propositions established earlier as ardent advocate of Practical Criticism, in the later phase of his career, the first substantial rage against the basics of Richards were pronounced in the series of translation workshops organized especially in the institutions of higher learning in the US in late 1960's as Edwin Gentzler puts it:

Instead of establishing a set of rules which subjugated the text to a limited and unified interpretation and "complete viewing", the actual translations tended to open up new ways of seeing and subverted fixed ways of seeing....the translated text seems to have life of its own, responding not to the interpreter's set of rules, but to laws which are unique to the mode of translation itself. (Gentzler 18)

Another movement that significantly contributed in framing a theory of translation and that inspired, in the beginning, many of the practitioners in the US was Imagism that propagated the idea of literal translation, i.e. to produce, as far as possible, a replica of what is contained in the text including the precise imagery and other individual details. Later on, however, Ezra Pound being its champion, clarified on its limitations. Two other major theorists, Eugene Nida and Noam Chomsky tried to evolve a theory of the 'science' of translation and for the first time started talking about the prominent role of the 'underlying' structures. Later on Andre Lefevere came up with a more composite view about what the act of translation basically stood for and tried to establish it to be an all inclusive affair that at times demands a scientific approach to the text in hand and at other, a purely artistic and literary. He also advocated a greater space to it so as to interdisciplinary approaches might be executed while translating a text. Deconstruction, especially its basic concepts of 'difference', 'signifier' and 'signified' that problematized the limitations of the process of reading and the unassailable boundaries of language, also devised a set of principles that attracted the attention of those who were involved in translation studies. But apart from these varied approaches to translation, postcolonial theorists have added many more dimensions to translation studies that need to be discussed in greater detail.

The basic premises on which the postcolonial theorists build their arguments are the modes of translation, purpose of translation, the target readership, loyalty to the original (this is anyway considered pivotal to all the theories on translation!) and projection of what we may generally refer to as the text between the lines as has been quite clearly stated in the Introduction to a collection of articles entitled *Post-colonial Translation*:

...translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that 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 or systems. (Bassnett & Trivedi 2)

Nothing happens in a vacuum and when it is something that involves human effort, it has to be coloured by everything that happens not only in the human world but also in the non-human worlds. The other proposition suggested through these lines quoted above reminds us of the hierarchical structures that have been determining the fate of many things including the act of translation which has for a very long time been treated as something of a secondary status. What the postcolonial theorists have tried to prove is the primacy of translation as it has been playing the most significant role in determining the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizers have felt the need to understand the cultural preferences of their subjects as it always helped them to rule. Take, for example, the case of India where the British, at least prior to the advent of Macaulay on the scene with his Minutes on the Indian education system that had been presented to further the goals of imperialism, have always encouraged the rendering of the native texts into English and vice-versa. This inaugurated a whole new branch of study called Indology that can boast of having

produced a line of scholars who introduced India and its numerous texts to the world. This move chiefly banked upon translation as the weapon that could bring two peoples and their cultures closer.

If the colonizers used their knowledge of the colonized to rule over them and to preach their own belief systems to prove their superiority over the natives, the people of the colonized territories also learnt what the imperialist powers practiced in their own lands and what principles guided them to run their own country. So this was a both way traffic that benefitted both the parties involved; even otherwise, those who were really interested in their academic endeavours also availed this as an opportunity to explore the unexplored. Now, without going into further details as how these scholars have presented India, its people and their belief systems and for what reasons have they done so as many critics have tremendously contributed in that respect, what is of a greater relevance now is to see how they implemented Macaulay's Minutes that English has become the most viable substitute for all the Indian languages. While throwing a cursory glance at the issue, two major reasons immediately strike our mind: one, due to the internal politics in India among various linguistic groups and two, knowledge and ability to use English properly had instated Indians in powerful positions at global level. Now anybody can ask a question: what has the status of English to do with translation studies? But this is precisely the point; a nation in just about hundred and fifty years has not only adopted a language but has internalized it so well that a whole body of literature has emerged out of it that has gained currency and has been heartily welcomed in all parts of the world. This should be counted as one of the classic examples of the translation or even better still, the transcreation (to use a more theoretically accurate term) of a nation, its people and its culture. When Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya relinquished English in favour of his mother tongue, the most prominent question that perturbed Indians writing in English for long was the issue of legitimacy of English as the language of creative expression. At the core of this question was the danger of being considered to be just a translator of ideas and emotions in a language that is not one's own which no creative writer was ever willing bear. It does not, however, mean that Indians suddenly stopped writing in English but this debate between what was considered 'original' and our own and something that was foreign and acquired through perseverance continued for a long till the time when ultimately Raja Rao came up with his arguments in the Preface to his first novel called *Kanthapura* in 1938. This famous Preface by Rao, apart from setting the agenda for the Indian writing in English, wonderfully projects the beauty and strength and relevance of the process of hybridization of cultures, linguistic traditions and racial memories. He clearly states:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own....Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (Rao 5)

Rao's faith in the emergence of a variety of English in India basically signals three important changes that will bring about a difference in our outlook towards English: one, English continues to evolve as a language like the other languages in India do; two, Indians are adapting it according to their own needs and three, once fully adapted, the danger of it chiefly being a language of translation will cease to exist on its own. The beauty of the whole argument lies in the fact that English that was once taken either to be a language of power and the empire or a language of translation would ultimately become a language of creative expression.

Although what Raja Rao tries to establish here by demonstrating a lot of confidence by citing examples of the status of Sanskrit and Persian as the languages of 'our intellectual make-up' does not appeal much to the critics belonging to the school of postcolonial studies on the grounds that it also was a major part of the imperialist strategy to force us to speak 'their' language, what all of them unanimously celebrate is its usefulness to counter them in their own language and their own idiom. But by proposing the emergence of Indian English Rao seems to be more confident of the birth of variety of a language that will as much Indian as any other language of India. Not only that he has shown this tendency in the same novel as he has used the original Indian expressions in abundance as Braj Kacharu also does not only attest of it but considers this 'deviation' to be as justified and necessary as any other such experiments that have taken place in the world of languages:

...the *Indianness* in Indian English (or in a wider context, the *South Asianness* in South Asian English) is the result of the acculturation of a Western language in the linguistically and culturally pluralistic context of the subcontinent....These 'linguistic flights' are indeed cultur-bound and language-bound....Indianisms in Indian English are, then, linguistic manifestations of pragmatic needs for appropriate language use in a new linguistic and cultural context. (Kachru 1-2)

This is certainly a very different variety of translation that Indians using English for their creative expression have been practicing for decades. No theory mentioned above had ever dealt with this type of linguistic transference nor had they ever felt like talking about it. These deviations aimed at filling the gaps created by the inherent linguistic and cultural differences propose, more through the creative use, a theory of translation that is exclusively of its own.

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