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PROBLEMATIZING TRANSLATIONS:
A STUDY OF BENDRE'S POEMS TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

RAGHU V

Department of Arts and Humanities
Research Scholar, Dravidian University, Karnataka, India
Email:raghumaithri@gmail.com
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RAGHU V

ABSTRACT

Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre (1896-1981), a renowned poet of Kannada is a benchmark in the annals of Kannada literature. His poems set new standards both in form and content. He is the forerunner of the neo-romanticism in Kannada. The nation honoured him with 'Jnanpith' for his most intricate but famous anthology *Nakutanti*. He has penned more than 1500 poems and they are unique as they produce resonance of sound and meaning. Writing poetry is not only refreshing, but it is also a spiritual experience for Bendre. The kaleidoscopic nature of his poems are a feast to readers but a challenge to the critics. Many attempts have been made to translate his poems into English. Folk background, mythological tinge to the expressions, complex metaphors pose a serious challenge to the translators of Bendre. But they are all partly successful as a translator cannot bring full justice to the original. The scholar in this paper makes an effort to review the attempts made in translating Bendre's poems into English and at the end he tries to translate one. In the attempt of translation, it results more as a transcreation; this is very much true in case of Bendre. He was not just a poet, but a philosopher and a seer too. He had deep knowledge of mathematics, numerology, astrophysics and other physical sciences which he brought in his poems in a subtle manner. The scholar enlists the challenges of translation of Bendre's works with suitable examples and records the hurdles he faced in the process of his own attempt at it.

Key words: Bendre, Kannada, neo-romanticism, translations, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Bendre the Jnanapith laureate of Karnataka is also recognized as the wizard of words (*Shabda Garudiga*). He is also famous as a visionary and prophet. He wrote in Kannada, a south Indian Dravidian language and a few pieces in English. His main works are poems. Bendre belonged to an orthodox vedic brahmin family. His forefathers from Rathnagiri of Maharashtra came down to Karnataka and settled in Sirahatti taluk of Dharwad district. Born on 31-1-1896 to the couple Ramachandra and Ambika, Bendre passed his matriculation in 1913 and moved to Pune to study at the Ferguson College under the guardianship of his uncle. He completed his primary education in Kannada, he had Marathi environment at his uncle's place and learnt

the best of English literature in the college. Thus the budding poet had a strong base to bloom into a gigantic literary figure. The poetic spirit in him inspired to compose poems in Kannada, Marathi, Sanskrit and English. Reputed institutions in Dharwad invited him to work as a teacher even before the B.A. results were announced. His fame as a poet had spread. He moved to Dharwad in 1918 and started his career as a teacher at Dharwad Victoria High School. Lakshmibai joined him as his life companion in 1919. His first publication *Krishna Kumari* came out in 1922. 1925 was the year when the people of state opened their eyes in awe and admiration at this young poet when he rendered his poem 'Did you see the bird fly?' (*Hakki Hariutide Nodidira?*) At the Belgaum conference of Kannada writers (4th Kannada Sahitya Sammelena). Kannada Literary field was struck by storm of this new poet's skillful use of alliteration, assonance, rhymes, internal rhymes and rhythmic patterns. He exploited the words to the fullest possible extent. He also broke the tradition styles in meter and form, either modifying or inventing his own. His themes & images are drawn from the familiar surroundings. Moreover he intently heard the rustic singers which explains his successful experimentation on the resonance arising out of the rhyme and rhythm in his works.

Bendre had a tumultuous personal life. Out of 9 children born only three survived. In 1932 he got into the bad books of the British administration for his poem *Narabali* (Human Sacrifice) included in his collection *Gari*. Accused of instigating people, the government arrested him. But his poetic spirit remained free. Imprisoned under direct surveillance at Mugada, he penned his famous poems *Naanu Badavi...* And *Bringada Beneeri Bantu Kalpana Vialasa*. The jail episode disturbed his family. He also lost his daughter in 1934. Bendre studied M.A. in Pune, came back to Gadag as the Head Master of a school. He chaired the Kannada Sahitya Sammelan held in Shimoga in 1943. In 1944 DAV College, Solapur appointed him as a full-time lecturer. He retired in 1956 but the state appointed him as an advisor at *Akashavani* (Radio Station), Dharwad. The years 1959 – 1976 brought him lot of accolades. But he lost his wife in 1966. In 1968 he received the honour of Padmasri and in 1974 the coveted 'Jnanpith' award for his *Nakutanti*. In 1976 he was honoured by the Kashi Vidyapeeth with an honorary doctorate degree. He passed away in Mumbai on 26th October, 1981.

Bendre's works are both quantitatively and qualitatively diverse. It includes 37 anthologies, 6 Dramas, 10 Critical Scholarship & criticism, 5 edited works and one story. Also he translated a few works from English, Marathi and Hindi to Kannada and wrote a piece 'A Theory of Immortality' in English. He penned four Marathi works.

His poems have a very wide canvas of thought and expression. From a simple poem *Karadia Kunittha* (Dance of the bear) to a complex poem '881 + 441' (a numerological concept) his poems occupy different levels of comprehension. Bendre was a literary giant. Gopalakrishna Adiga: a fellow Kannada poet and Bendre's contemporary says: 'Bendre is not only the most outstanding of this century, but also one of the most outstanding personalities of this age too. He had till the very end infinite curiosity and wide awake sensibility.... He goes deep down to the roots of the words which get related and rich by association with each other, each discovering for us a new horizon of meaning and dream and sentiment.' (Gopalakrishna Adiga 1982). This opinion sums up the feeling of the Kannadigas. This new millennium calls for special endeavours to introduce this poet to other languages, particularly to the world through English.

METHOD/APPROACH

The scholar has made an attempt to apply tools of comparison and analysis in the study. It is not necessary to apply any classical or modern theory, however the translation modalities and structure are analyzed. Textual analysis of the original or the source text and the translated text, i.e., target text are compared for the purpose of study. Both are read in detail and compared textually. It is found that the target text has failed to satisfy cent percent but the aim of presenting the poet in other language is satisfactorily achieved.

Translations of Bendre in English

It is a matter of regret that only four serious efforts are made till date to translate and publish Bendre's works in English. During the first world Kannada conference, the Govt. of Karnataka brought out a

series of publication through the Directorate of Kannada and culture. Among these a small introductory note with few translation of Bendre's poems and drama were printed as a part of 'The Jnanapith Laureates of Karnataka.' (Rao, Seshagiri and Sumantheendra Nadig 1983) The other three are, *Bendre: poet and seer* (Gokak, V.K., 1970), *Four Strings* (Rao, Raghavendra, V.D. Bendre and K.S. Sharma 1970) selection from *Nakutanti* and *Spring Fire* (Rao, Raghavendra, V.D. Bendre and K.S. Sharma 1986).

A few translations from these works are considered in this paper to record to what extent these translations live up to the original and what their limitations are. We know that translation is a complex process, it has to match the words, structures theme, tone, subject and contexts. I need to record that these translations, are neither literal translations nor free translations, but try to strike a balance between the two. I would like to take up Bendre's most famous poem 'Belagu' first. The translation is in 'The Jnanapith Laureates of Karnataka' as 'The Dawn' (127).

The Dawn

In the house of sky,
The pearly water was distilled,
And sprinkled all over,
The doors were thrown wide open
And the world was drowned in a flood
of light.
The fountain of liquefied topaz
Rose high,
Rising for its own pleasure
A sweet-scented bud opened up
Opened for its own pleasure.
On the face of leaves,
Inside the hearts of flowers,
Drops of nectar appeared-
Drops of nectar, who brought them
From the height of the sky?
Who put them?
Put them here below?

A swarm of bees,
Smearred with the sweet scents of
Flowers

Asked the fresh, cool breeze,
The first cool breeze of the morning,
To carry the light burden of scents.
He spread it with joy,
Spread it in every place.

From the throats of the trees,
The song of many birds went forth.
The next moment,
The old woods awoke,
A woke into a strange land,
A land of angles.

The eye drinks and the tongue tastes;
 This, my body, touches the magic.
 The ear hears and the nose smells;
 This body, the temple of god,
 Forgets itself in ecstasy,
 In ecstasy at his magic touch

The understanding does not understand
 And the mind does not know;
 The eye does not see the colour.
 It was the divine *rasa* of peace
 Incarnating as dawn
 And not mere light.

First, I wish to draw the attention to the textual mismatch or the mismatching of the words. In the first stanza the very first word in Kannada '*Mudala*' (East) is missing in English. A new word 'Distilled' creeps into the first line in the English version which has no justification. No reference to such idea is found in the original. A major loss of meaning is observed in the first stanza. The word '*eraka*' has a meaning of 'love'. Both the word and its sense are missing in the translation. This observation of mismatch of meaning between the source text and the translated text appears to be true when we read the last lines of the poem where the poet declares that it is the essence of love that is manifesting as dawn and hence it not just a 'dawn'. Again the last line of the first stanza in English has a word 'below'. The poet in his original work does not suggest the place (below) but gives an open ending with 'here'. The same error follows in the next stanza where the last two lines are extra which appears to be an explanation by the translator, also introducing a third person 'he', whereas the source poem has a hidden narrative. In the last but one stanza the original records the sensory perception of world. Translation is faithful to the original but for the first line again which says 'eye drinks', should have been 'eye sees'. Keeping aside the variations in structure of the poem in English, which is very well defended by the editors. The editors admit that when Masti Venkatesh Iyengar, great grand man of letters was approached to write a foreword for an anthology of Bendre's poems in translation '*Spring Fire*', he refused. And when the editors presented the volume for a read, he was unhappy with translations expecting 'that a translation must approximate to literal version' (IX). The editors agree that, 'translation is a very limited process which, in principle, can never reproduce any structure identical to the original' (X). They also claim their effort as 'transcreation' (X). However it is understood that in the process of translation too much of addition or deletion of the original is uncalled for.

Bendre is not just a poet but a philosopher and a seer too. The mystic element in him, the vocabulary he gained by vast reading and wide exposure makes his work a hard ground for a scholar and a tough challenge for translators. However it also facilitates easy communication to the reader. The complexity is at two levels; at word level & concept level. To illustrate this two level complexity we can think of Blake's poem *songs of innocence* and Robert Frost's poem *stopping by the woods*; where the words seems to be simple, the poem has profound meanings. For the second type, where the concept itself is a challenge, the example is Eliot's *waste land*. Bendre's works represent a combination of both. Bendre's works carry a suspended tension between the words and its meanings. The moment one starts reading the poem the tension builds up. We can see such tension in his poems: *No, Do, Pi, Baa Hattara* etc. His poems create multiple reflexive images and resonant sounds which overlap to create a new experience.

These complexities of the poet make the translation of his poems a gigantic, challenging task. Due to the urge to retain the essence, a translator of Bendre will easily fall prey to the fault of embellishment. The words, rhythms used by Bendre is not linear in nature and the meaning of the words grow in a centrifugal manner but, at the same time acts as a centripetal force to hold the poem. This seemingly opposite forces acting at the same time confuses the translator to no end and the original effect can never be brought into any of his translations. Only a derivative satisfaction can be arrived at. However a comprehensive effort by the

scholars is required to overcome the above challenges to effectively introduce and establish Bendre in the English arena. He is truly the poet of the millennium and a world laureate.

We may wonder why this poet did not write in English. Of course he wrote, with the same pungent and punch. However, probably, he understood the limitations of the language and switched over to his native language. A few of his English poems can be found in *Spring Fire*, of the nine poems in this collection (37-40) I choose to quote 'Linguistic Jargon'; it contains all elements of representative characteristic of Bendre.

Linguistic Jargon

I know men are mess
 And man is Class
 I know 'men' is plural of Man.
 It seems the word 'human' is an adjective
 A hold – all term to cover
 God and Evil
 Man and the Devil
 All the human goods
 Saleable in the Black-market of Science
 The society where diplomats meet
 For the profession which is Politics.
 The Alphabet is Simple
 A = to dominate over the whole
 In the name of civilization
 Humanism
 West
 White Man's Burden
 The language is Basic English
 Give it what name you please
 American, African, what else you can.
 They say Cancer has no remedy
 Strategic Humanism is the Cancer
 On the Breast of Man
 I think Christ died of Cancer
 Not on Jewish Cross
 Sanctioned by Greek Authority
 Science is in a mood of Repentance
 It shall be Christianized soon.
 Cross is the remedy for Cancer
 Only the Divine wears the Crown
 I remember I was a clown in the court of
 Lear
 Oh dear, oh dear
 The drama will not end
 Unless Cordelia is dead.
 And dominant group is over-fed
 Food becomes poison
 Leisure sounds like pleasure
 But felt like a pang
 Linguists say Person comes from Persona
 not Parson.
 Brain may be the cure-all

But skeleton is the Fetish of Science
 New man will not be visible
 Until Barbarism retires into the
 Jungle of Linguistic Jargon.

Translating Bendre's Poem; A personal experience

As already mentioned Bendre's poem poses multiple challenges. To experience it, the scholar attempted to translate one. I chose his '*Naa Kavitha Baribardittu*' (Ed. Vamana Bendre 67). It is a lamentation of a poet regretting that he should not have written the poem. The translation:

I shouldn't have penned the poem

1

I, shouldn't have penned the poem
 You shouldn't have invited
 I shouldn't have read
 Flies don't die under false attacks

2

Who many killed?
 Nadirsha, chengiz Khan, Timurlane
 This lane, that lane, this way, that way
 Ways and ways
 Khyber pass, burning stacks
 Kaphir, Mlecha, yavana, Irani
 Everybody's dead are buried there.

3

....

4

Allah! Bismillah!
 Islamists killed their own
 Hindus killed their own
 Let the elections come
 Is it democracy or Dyamavva's fair?
 Don't kill he-buffalo, Don't kill sheep,
 It's Western Humanitarian
 Camouflage of cold war
 Only third worldwar can
 Cool their stomachs

5

....

6

Are we less?
 We killed Gandhi
 Drank Nehru's Blood, Sacrificed
 Labahadur,
 Burned Indira's head
 Bhutto is maternal uncle, Abdulla is

Maternal uncle
 Even Kamsa was Krishna's Maternal uncler
 Should we forget history? Which year was
 Without war?
 Panipat again again
 'Krishnarpana' for Bangladesh
 May lose Kashmir, beware
 Until Asia is cut into pieces
 How can Europe's naughty villains vine survive!
 If Bengali is spoken in place of urdu
 Who doesn't get mad?

7, 8, 9, 10....

11

Poetry is written in black ink
 War is carved in red blood
 One is History! The other Mythology!
 What can quaran do when there is no
 Compassion?

12

I shouldn't have...

One has to note that the poem has inner resonant meanings, craving for humanitarian values crying against institutionalized values like religion, politics etc. First stanza starts with a lamentation and regret for having written a poem. Second stanza presents the conflicting interests of different races. We have to note 'yayakhan' translated as 'different khans' does not completely reflect the original. Please note that 'yayakhan' closely sounds as 'Yahya Khan'. The third stanza, I did not dare to translate because until one has a sound knowledge of Indian mythology it is difficult for him to comprehend the total sense of the stanza. It starts with Magadha's excavation, relates with Sagara's Yaga, death of his sons by Kapila's curse and the birth of Ganges. Fifth stanza is also not translated as it has more colloquial terms. This is the strength of Bendre. His words have a colloquial touch which brings him close to the readers but poses a challenge to the scholars and translators. Again in stanza 10 there is an expression 'Byare Alla' this has different denotative and connotative meanings. This cannot be translated. In spite of all these challenges I still feel he needs to be presented in English because he represents not just a language but a phenomenon.

Here is a poet, a poet leaving an indelible mark in the history of literature. Let's hope the new millennium explores Bendre with a new look to enjoy the perennial spring of his poetry.

CONCLUSION

Translation is a very challenging path to tread. It is a difficult task trying to match the original or the source language with the target language. As the Italian proverb says, " *traduttore, traditore* " ('translator, traitor'), the translators have failed in satisfying the readers but it cannot be denied that there is no other way than an attempt being made to introduce a writer of one language to the reader of the other. The disagreement is of fundamentals of operation and execution than the deliverance of quality. The process itself is very limited and can never reproduce the original either in structure or content. However the attempt must not be shelved. Care must be taken that in an attempt to match the morphological perfection one must not sacrifice the essence or the spirit of the source text. The scholar after presenting a famous poem of Bendre in translation found many mismatches. He also attempted translating one and scaled new challenges of translation. He admitted that few parts could not be even attempted to translate due to cultural barriers.

However it is to be noted that a satisfactory mean between the impossible and what is possible has to be achieved through a transcreation of the work without sacrificing the essentials of the original.

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