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'WRITING' AS TRANSLATION: ANALYSING LINGUISTIC MATRICES IN *MISTRESS*

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ABSTRACT

Communication is in itself, an act of translation. We continually decode and translate the thoughts pre-existent in our minds into verbal expressions like speech/writing, through non-verbal gestures, visual/ performative arts and so on. All literary texts can be basically considered as 'translated' works, in which authors make deliberate choices of language(s) to creatively depict the configurations of their reflections and observations of people and impressions of the world at large. The prolific corpus of Indian Writing in English (IWE) from pre-Independence times to the present, primarily expounds the authors' passionate commitment to translate their perceptions on an amazing array of topics through myriad literary genres. English, for most IWE writers based in India or abroad, is just another *bhasha*, like their mother tongues. However it should be assumed that even though English is used and appropriated as the most convenient, popular medium of expression, IWE writers invariably indulge in a kind of simultaneous and involuntary translation for effective communication. Most IWE writers ensure that the English language they use is unique and reflects their native cultures, albeit in a very subtle manner. Ideas, images, Indian words and proverbs are profusely translated from the mother tongue to English to impart a local colour and create an 'exotic ethnographic text'. Translation therefore plays a vital role in the predominantly intercultural literary domain of IWE resulting in the creation of a hybrid language intended to approximate and assimilate the Indian context into the linguistic matrices of English. Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* is a literary tour de force which captures the zeitgeist of contemporary Kerala. In the narrative, Nair blends the iconic art form Kathakali with the lives of the characters who are on a quest to find meaning in life. My paper focuses on how the author uses linguistic resources in two ways - to portray how the characters negotiate the cultural space which they occupy; and translate the socio-cultural milieu in which the novel is located.

Key words: communication, translation, English, mother tongue, culture, linguistic resources.

We can no longer function without translation, and the world we inhabit is a multilingual, multifaceted world...Translation requires negotiation of difference that is both linguistic and cultural. (Bassnett, *Translation*)

Communication is in itself, an act of translation. We continually decode and translate the thoughts pre-existent in our minds into verbal expressions using languages through the medium of speech/writing or through non-verbal gestures, visual/performative arts and so on. Susan Bassnett begins the "Introduction" to her book *Translation* with the affirmation that the twenty-first century is the great age of translation. "Translation today is an increasingly common human condition, and the rapid rise of electronic media has also served to heighten awareness of the importance of communicating across cultures" (1). All literary texts can be basically considered as 'translated' works, in which authors make deliberate choices of language(s) to creatively depict the configurations of their reflections and observations of people and impressions of the world at large.

Human language is not solely a means of communication, it is also a subject for communication. It exists not simply as an entity used in everyday behavior but also as a concept; and given the fundamental role that language plays in life, it is a concept which becomes implicated in the beliefs and debates about wider human concerns. In other words, every conceptualization of language, be it a folk belief about correctness or a philosophical premise concerning truth conditions, is also in some way an implicit statement about human understanding of the world...In works of fiction in which language figures not merely as the medium of narration but also as a focus of that narration, a specific and historically contingent conceptualization of language will be used. (Seargeant 386)

Bassnett refers to how Roman Jakobson makes a distinction between three kinds of translations in his classic essay "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation". The first category is intralingual translation or *rewording*, which suggests that translation is not only a process that happens across languages but is also a process that can and does take place within an individual linguistic system. The second category termed interlingual translation or *translation proper* involves movements of texts across linguistic frontiers, and it is this category that has led to the majority of writings about translation. The third and final category of Jakobson is termed intersemiotic translation or *transmutation*, which includes genre shifts such as film versions of novels or poems based on paintings and even performances of plays when a written text is made physically manifest on a stage as performance (Bassnett 6-7).

For postcolonial writers, as stated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, writing in English becomes a "literary act of mental translation" (18). This fact is reiterated by G.J.V. Prasad in his analysis of the Indian English novel titled, "Writing Translation". He says that the texts all Indian English writers create "are 'translated', the very act of their writing being one of translation" (40). Maria Tymoczko in her article "Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation" sees translation as a metaphor for post-colonial writing. According to her, translation:

...invokes the sort of activity associated with the etymological meaning of the word: translation as the activity of *carrying across*, for instance, the transportation and relocation of the bones and remains of saints. In this sense post-colonial writing may be imaged as a form of translation (attended with much ceremony and pomp, to be sure) in which venerable and holy (historical, mythic and literary) relics are moved from one sanctified spot of worship to another more central and more secure (because more powerful) location, at which the cult is intended to be preserved, to take root and find new life... As background to their literary works, they are transposing a culture – to be understood as a language, a cognitive system, a literature (comprised of a system of texts, genres, tale types, and so on), a material culture, a social system and legal framework, a history and so forth. (Tymoczko 20)

Tymoczko goes on to explain a significant difference in the two literary activities which has to do with parameters of constraint. A translator faces the dilemma of 'faithfulness' to a fixed text which includes cultural and linguistic elements. But a post-colonial writer has the freedom of choice to choose "which cultural elements to transpose to the receiving audience" A post-colonial writer thus chooses either "a fairly aggressive presentation of unfamiliar cultural elements or an assimilative presentation in which likeness or 'universality' is

stressed and cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work" (21).

The prolific corpus of Indian Writing in English (IWE) from pre-Independence times to the present, primarily expounds the Indian authors' passionate commitment to translate their perceptions on an amazing array of topics through myriad literary genres. English, for most IWE writers based in India or abroad, is just another *bhasha*, like their mother tongues. However it should be assumed that even though English is used and appropriated as the most convenient, popular medium of expression, IWE writers invariably indulge in a kind of simultaneous and involuntary translation for effective communication. "Translation in this context is both an act of love and of disruption, since it forces individuals out of their comfort zone of national space and mother tongue, compelling them to engage with otherness" (Bassnett 57). Most IWE writers ensure that the English language they use is unique and reflects their native cultures, albeit in a very subtle manner. Ideas, images, Indian words and proverbs are profusely translated from the mother tongue to English to impart a local colour and create an 'exotic ethnographic text'. "Linguistic features related to the source culture (such as dialect or unfamiliar lexical items) can be highlighted as defamiliarized elements in the text, or be domesticated in some way, or be circumvented altogether" (Tymoczko 21). Translation therefore plays a vital role in the predominantly intercultural literary domain of IWE resulting in the creation of a hybrid language intended to approximate and assimilate the Indian context into the linguistic matrices of English.

Renowned Indian English author, Anita Nair began her career as the creative director of an advertising agency based in Bangalore and turned to writing when her first book, a collection of short stories called *Satyr of the Subway*, won her a fellowship from the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. A native of Shornur in Northern Kerala, she is now a bestselling author of fiction and poetry. Her novels *The Better Man* (2000) and *Ladies Coupe* (2001) have been translated into 21 languages. Her debut collection of poems *Malabar Mind* was published in 2002, and in 2003 she edited the book *Where the Rain is Born - Writings about Kerala*. She has also written *The Puffin Book of Myths and Legends* (2004), *Adventures of Nonu, the Skating Squirrel* (2006), *Living Next Door to Alise* (2007) and *Magical Indian Myths* (2008) for children. Her literary oeuvre also includes travelogues and the play *Nine Faces of Being*, which is an adaptation of her novel, *Mistress*. My paper focuses on how the author uses linguistic resources in two ways - to portray how the characters negotiate the cultural space which they occupy; and translate the socio-cultural milieu in which the novel is located.

Nair's best seller novel *Mistress* is a literary *tour de force* which captures the zeitgeist of contemporary Kerala. The plot of *Mistress* revolves around the lives of Koman the aged protagonist who is a former Kathakali artiste and his niece, Radha. The author blends the iconic art form of Kerala, Kathakali in the narrative with the lives of the characters who are on a quest to find meaning in life.

Kathakali lends the book its structure and grounds its even-handed, intense drama in a rich setting of myth and ritual; whether sketching Kerala's changing conditions, charting Radha's loveless marriage or describing the closed world of an Islamic village, Nair's third novel is consistently compelling. (www.theguardian.com)

The plot is deceptively simple in appearance but the narrative is highly textured and complex. The novel is structured as three books, each divided into three sub-sections. All the nine sub-sections have been named after the *Navarasas* which are *Sringaraam, Haasyam, Karunam, Raudram, Veeram, Bhayaanakam, Beebhalsam, Adbhutam, Shaantam* and begin with a brief introduction relating the contents of the section with the corresponding *rasa*. Koman for whom "Art can be a very demanding mistress" (*Mistress* 35) is visited by Christopher Stewart a writer based in the USA who intends to include Koman's story in his travel book on Kerala. He accepts Shyam's invitation and stays at the resort aptly named Near-the-Nila run by Radha's husband Shyam. Later on it is revealed that Chris also has another ulterior motive in coming to meet the "old man from across the seas" (*Mistress* 3). At first Chris is slightly confused at Koman's reticence to talk about his life and wonders why Koman insists on beginning the story of his life chronologically with graphic and detailed descriptions of the tumultuous circumstances in which his father Sethu, a Hindu met his mother Saadiya, a Muslim and how he was

born. Koman calls this “My purappaad to the story, the beginnings of the story of my life... (261). Radha explains the strange narrative strategy of Koman to the baffled Chris, as follows:

If you read the libretto of a kathakali play, it always begins with the shloka that puts the story in context...Just pure kathakali technique...

He would interpret not just his life, but the lives of all the others involved. It's part of the kathakali technique. The scene has to be set and explained before the character makes his appearance and the actual story unfolds. Only then will the audience understand why a character behaves in a particular way...

To understand my uncle as a dancer and a man, you need to know about his parents. (*Mistress* 56-58)

Chris responds to this explanation with the candid remark that no human is free from this cultural identity ‘baggage’ and yet “if we were, we wouldn't be who we are” (*Mistress* 58).

Being a post-colonial writer, Nair while delineating her cross cultural characters and portraying the milieu, has to choose between “either a fairly aggressive presentation of unfamiliar cultural elements or an assimilative presentation in which likeness or ‘universality’ is stressed and cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work” (Tymoczko 21). For IWE writers,

The act of writing in English is not ‘merely’ one of translation of an Indian text into the English language, but a quest for a space which is created by translation and assimilation and hence transformation of all three – the Indian text, context and the English language. Thus the English that each Indian writer uses is partly the message as well as the medium, and is important in itself. (Prasad 42)

Anita Nair uses English as an Indian language, as an effective tool to translate her thoughts and depict her fictional characters in all their uniqueness and eccentricities. According to Prasad, “legitimate English would not reinforce the otherness of the culture depicted” (34).

The culture or tradition of a post-colonial writer acts as a meta text which is rewritten explicitly and implicitly, as both background and foreground – in the act of literary creation. The task of the interlingual translator has much in common with the task of the post-colonial writer; where one has a text, however, the other has the meta text of culture itself. (Tymoczko 21)

The narrative and the dialogues of *Mistress* are sprinkled with cultural markers, culture-specific idioms, lexis-bound translations from Malayalam and so on. “The linguistic skills of the writer are used to locate the novel: location is carried out in the language itself” (Prasad 48). To cite instances from Book 1, the first section *Sringaaram* opens with a description of the beautiful landscape of Kerala with scenes of “delicate ari-poo in the hedges... wood-walled manjas” (7), the song of the “vaanampaadi” (8) and the emotion *sringaaram* compared to the fruit of the month, paddy's kernels filled with the sweet fullness of plenty (7). The second section *Haasyam* introduces mirth as the mischievous “thiravadhira kaatu” that makes palm and coconut fronds snap (52). The brief introduction ends with the description of the olanjaali, the Indian tree pie with “scant regard for custom” with its ki-ki-ki sound and dangling nonchalantly from the tip of the palm frond showing that “haasyam can be that as well. Contempt for convention”(53). *Karunam* is heard in the song of the karinkuyil and sensed: “When you shake a tender coconut and hold it to your ear. It is there in the lapping of coconut water... the fluid ways of sorrow” (104).

The first section of Book 2, introduces *Raudram* as a version of thulaavarsham that rages and roars. Another version depicted to evoke raudram is the burning sensation caused by consuming cheenamolagu. And finally the tuk-tuk sound of the maramkothi symbolises the fury of passion (151-152). The courage of the aanaranchi is synonymous with *veeram*, as it drives away all the crows and even kites from its nest by pecking them mercilessly till they flee. The cashew apple shows *veeram* by not letting go of the nut even when it drops to the ground, showing the courage to go on (198-199). The thin, quivery call of the kaalan kozhi at twilight induces the sixth emotion *bhayaanakam*. The stillness of the month of Meenam is yet another version of *bhayaanakam* (240-241). There is a reference to a hundred-year old bungalow with a giant manjadi tree, with hundreds of manjadi seeds glistening like ruby drops in the emerald of the grass (243). The concluding book

begins with *beebhalsam* imaged as the “detached revulsion you feel when you see a thoti kazhukan” and the smell of the elephant yam’s flowers that “send out a scent of putrid flesh” (287). Nair gives an empathetic report of the beebhalsam that is experienced when elephant yam is cooked and eaten.

After the first morsel, you will know the worst agony of all. Hundreds of small needles will begin to pierce your mouth, tongue and throat...that is what the elephant yam can do to you.

This is another dimension of disgust. An abhorrence you feel for yourself and for an action of yours. Revulsion and agony. (288)

Adbhutam is the wonder felt while seeing a rainbow or the luminous stars emerging on a cold December night sky in Malabar. *Adbhutam* is also experienced when the enormous and prickly jackfruits yield golden yellow pods which taste like nectar. The sight of the beautiful *nakumohan* is a hallmark of wonder advocating the transient nature of *adbhutam* which can never be experienced again in exactly the same degree (336-337). The translucent ice fruit of *palmyra* enclosed within the purplish black cannonball shell is the epitome of *shaantam* the last section with which the book ends (396).

Malayalam words are used untranslated in the modes of reference, kinship terms, names of places and festivals, clothing and culinary items, songs etc. To cite a few, Koman who was originally named Omar Masood by his mother Saadiya but later changed to Koman by his father Sethu after she commits suicide, is *veshakaaran*, *aashaan* and *maash* to others. Saadiya calls Sethu, “My Malik” (185) and Seth who is *Modalali* (221) to his workers aspires to be a *Janmi* in order to acquire a lineage he didn’t have, and respectability (233-234). Shyam is a mere *chekkan* to his uncle cum father-in-law obviously signifying the class-gap till his marriage to Radha. Foreigners are called *Sahiv* and *Madaama* and Rani Oppol is Shyam’s sister. There is a toddy shop named *Chakkara pandal* and a restaurant named *Mulla pandal*. Terms related to Kathakali like *padam*, *aattakalasham*, *chutti*, *katthivesham*, *mannola*, *chuvanna thadi*, *pettikaaran tirasheela* and so on permeate the narrative and are explained in a Kathakali lexicon at the end. Other terms include the festival *Thrissur pooram*; names of Gods like *Guruvayoorappan* and chants like *Om Nama Shivaya*; places *Arabipattanam*, *Pavitramanicka patnam*, *Kaikurissi*, a movie theatre *Murugan Talkies*, a bus service *Mayilvahanam*; traditional attire like *lungi*, *mundu-veshti*, *jubbah*, *burkha*, *khadi kurta*; art forms like *Krishnattam*, *kalaripayattu*; ethnic local food like *pappadam*, *murukku*, *golden pazham pori*, *soft fluffy appam*, *karimeen*, *matthi-poola*, *meen pappas* and *erachi olarthiyathe*. Shyam who offers “some tea money” (11) to the railway porter Mohammed, feels that his uncle considers him as “a fly in his paal kanji” (16). He sarcastically refers to Chris’ cello as a “violin’s grandfather” (9) and later as “his silly buffalo of an instrument” (13). Even Radha when she gives vent to her ire, because her sister-in-law refuses to try the food items she had prepared, yells: “What was I expected to provide? An elephant’s egg, hardboiled?” (61).

The characters also visualise each other in typical native expressions. Shyam thinks Chris is not “masculine handsome” but “A fair enough *Lolan*” (67). He also thought his uncle and Chris would be inseparable “like jaggery and a fly” (67). Koman imagines the boorish Shyam as the *aashari* a minor character, the comic player in *kathakali* who makes people laugh with his buffoonery. But the *aashari* is both fool and master craftsman. He also sees Shyam in the role of *Keechakan* and sometimes as *Bheeman*, the mythical characters of *The Mahabharatha*. Koman has a parrot named *Malini* who screeches “*Kallan! Kondhan!*” which upsets visitors (75). Shyam uses a typical Kerala image as he admires Radha’s tresses that “falls straight and silky as rainwater down her back” (21) and thinks of her as his “*Syamantaka gem*” (116) whereas Koman, the *kathakali* artiste sees the worried lines on Radha’s forehead as the “white bulbs a *katthivesham* wears on his forehead” (28). After Chris’ arrival Koman notices that Radha has transformed and observes that “her face wears the radiance of the *minukkuvesham*: the lovely damsels of *kathakali*...” (34). Hindu and Arabic prayers are included in the narrative which consists of Tamil words which use modifiers in conjunction with names of some characters like Doctor Aiyah with his *surukku sembu* (84), the *kondai* sisters Faith, Hope and Charity – *periya kondai*, *china kondai*, *jadai kondai* - based on the size of their hair buns (39), Mary Patti and Faith Akka, and *Anjuvanthanar* – the Muslims who pray five times a day (94).

When Radha speaks Malayalam, Chris retorts: "When you speak your language, I feel so excluded" (170). But when they become lovers, he wants to use an endearing term for her and chooses the Malayalam word, minnamingu, which he can pronounce only as min-min (172). Radha does not understand the complexities of his description when he says:

My Min-min is a piece of music that I am still learning to play. Her key signature is F sharp major with sharps and flats that would drive you nuts. Her time signature is adagio appassionato. Slow and passionate. (211)

In this context, Nair uses terms from Western classical music as Chris is a cellist. Radha is attracted to Chris mainly because "our formative years lived in two different continents were not so far apart" (212). Both of them though hailing from different national and cultural backgrounds had read the same books and listened to the similar kind of music during their teen years and shared many experiences in common. With Shyam, Radha felt she had no life at all and that he could never understand her feelings, the affair she indulged in was an act of defiance. The novel is a fine expose of modern human relationships, especially of the protagonist Koman who staunchly believed that "art imbues meaning to one's existence" (262).

To conclude Anita Nair writes not in an Indian English or even in her own English but "in an English intended to approximate the thought-structures and speech patterns of the characters and not to betray the Indian text and context by an easy assimilation into the linguistic and cultural matrices of British English" and to create an "exotic ethnographic text" (Prasad 43). Raja Rao has articulated this very clearly in foreword to his debut novel *Kanthapura* when he says that Indians cannot write like the English, and they should not do so. Instead IWE writers should "write only as Indians" (Rao 5). Anita Nair's writing as a Postcolonial author thus becomes "... an act of translation into and a transformation of (as well as by) a more powerful language" (Prasad 42).

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