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TRANSLATION, POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY: KALIDASA'S "ABHIJNANASAKUNTALAM"  
DURING COLONIAL AND NATIONALIST PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

Translation appears to be a simple act of linguistic substitution where words from one language are translated into another language, having a purpose of making the text comprehensible to those readers who cannot read it in original language. But turning from the Sanskrit version of the play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* by Kalidasa to its English renditions, one comes across multiple translations of the play that have occurred at different times, which makes us to think it as an inter-cultural act. In this paper, I analyze the multiple translations of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* in English during colonial and nationalist periods with special emphasis on exploring the cultural politics, ideology and role of context behind the translations.

**Keywords:** colonialism, ideology, nationalism, orientalism, politics, power, translation studies

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INTRODUCTION

Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* was one among the first major literary works to be translated into English. It was first translated in 1789 by Sir William Jones partly to satisfy his own intellectual curiosity, and partly to carry forward the latent agenda of Orientalism. The play has thereafter enjoyed unprecedented after-life in the form of its multiple translations. In the absence of any robust tradition of translation, the phenomenon of multiple translations of one text calls for serious cultural analysis. The present paper would be an attempt to understand the compelling reasons that necessitate repeated translations of one chosen text. As cultures undergo process of revision, expansion and self-reflexivity, the practices of translations undergo corresponding changes. The texts that acquire canonical status and often paraded as master pieces need to be re-translated so that they can be accessed by contemporary generations. Engaging with these issues and by tracing the history of these various translations during colonial and nationalist period, one can infer that translation is not just an act of word transference from one language to another but is surcharged with politics, power and ideology. With shifting linguistic and cultural trends the existing translation becomes dated. Therefore the translator re-translates it within new cultural idiom thus making it more appealing to his contemporary readers. In this way each translation comes as a critique of the previous translation and becomes intrinsically an exercise of hyper- textuality.

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**Translation Studies**

Translation is not a marginal activity, but a primary and serious cultural act. In a multicultural situation, it is a process of inter-cultural and intra-cultural dialogue. It is given secondary position because of the restricted notion that it merely involves observing closely the surface structure only. With the advent of Cultural Turn in Translation Studies and Post-colonial view of translation, it is now viewed with a broader perspective. Theorists like Susan Bassnett, J.C Catford and Lefevere describes translation as an inter-cultural act.

Translations are attempted with social purpose and are performed with suitable additions, deletions, explanations, summaries and innovations in style and technique. There are specific intentions, agendas, and strategies involved when translation is undertaken. The variations in translations are the outcome of historical, social and cultural contexts in which the translation is situated. Translator's subjectivity, competence, gender, caste and nationality impact the process of translation. Translation can be seen as negotiation between texts and between cultures in which translator acts as a mediator. Some choices which translators make may be random and ungrounded. Others, however, may be based on a socially shared system or systems of ideas, values, or beliefs. These can be termed as 'ideologies of translation'. They may convey translators' attitudes towards the source text and writer, towards the source and target culture and towards their own role as mediators.

**Translations during colonial period**

The East India Company has consolidated its power over India by 18<sup>th</sup> century. After political domination, the British turned to Indian literature to understand the culture of the colony they were ruling and this led to the process of translating texts into English. Orientalists perceived Indian culture as monolithic; ignoring the fact that unlike West there are other religions also and presented homogenised image of India based on Hinduism and the play came to be seen as an icon of Hindu culture. Sir William Jones was one of the many officers who were studying and translating texts from Sanskrit, Persian and other Indian languages into English. He read the Bengali version and first translated it into Latin and then re-translated it as *Sacotala* or *The Fatal Ring*. It was later translated by Monier Williams' *Sakootala*; or; *The Lost Ring: An Indian Drama by Kalidasa* in 1855, who translated the play into verse while William Jones' translation was in prose. The play was also translated by Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar with the title *Shakuntala* in 1854 and later on by M.R Kale, an Indian Sanskritist in 1898.

Translations during late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were target-oriented translations that took into consideration the fact that the target readers were not familiar with linguistic and cultural milieu. Sir William Jones domesticated the play to suit the morality of his target readership despite his praise for Kalidasa, Jones felt apologetic about the explicitness of the text. Monier Williams has a more condescending attitude to the play. His translation reflected colonizer's orientalist attitude and Victorian disapproval of sexuality. The reference to 'heavy hips' of Sakuntala in Act1 by Dushyanta was toned down to 'elegant limbs' by Jones and Monier Williams referred to the 'graceful undulation of her gait' and some omitted it altogether in an effort to make the translation more appropriate for the target culture. Translators, Indian as well as Western have not only accepted and adopted colonialist readings and interpretations of the text but have endorsed and reproduced the same projections. The impact on Indian translators can be easily seen in Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's translation of the play for college students which was toned and the erotic passages were removed in order to make it proper to be studied by students.

Although translations during the period are implicated in colonial orientalist politics but there are ideological shifts with every new translation. A comparative analysis of one sentence from Act1 from the translations by William Jones, Monier Williams and M.R Kale will help us to understand the shifting approaches of the translators. Here Dushyanta describes Shakuntala, holding her loosened hair with her one hand: Sir William Jones translates it as "her dishevelled locks, from which the string has dropped"; Sir Monier Williams translates it as "Loosed is the fillet of her hair". M. R. Kale translates it as "the knot of hair being loosened". It is interesting that both Jones and Monier-Williams think that Shakuntala must have used a string to tie up her hair. Jones says her locks are dishevelled because 'the string has dropped' and Monier-Williams refers to the

'fillet' of her hair which indicates that she had some sort of band around her hair. Indians would know that this was unusual for women in Shakuntala's time. Kale refers to her 'knot. During colonial period, the translated Shakuntala became a symbol of the colonizer's attitude to native culture and literature.

#### **Translations in the emerging context of Indian Nationalism**

During nationalist period of Indian history, the translations served the purpose of constructing national identity. There was a tendency to portray ancient India as a template to chronicle the contemporary struggle of a colonised nation. The Indian nationalists found a cultural and historical mascot in Shakuntala and her love story which is about love, passion, rejection and final recognition at once found parallels in the condition of colonial India where the country was conquered, dispossessed and ruled by the British.

The myths of Aryan ancestors and a Hindu past helped to formulate a unified image of *Bharata* as a nation having a history of glorious past. The translations of classical works like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* performed the important act of creating national identity by acting as a catalyst, nationalistic in nature these helped in bridging the gap between diverse linguistic and cultural boundaries. Nation building has always been linked to national integration and the idea of national identity. For a country like India, it is very challenging to deal with a national identity that derives its strength from its multiple layers of social, political, religious, economic, cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. The existence and subsequent translation of the Indian Classics acted as a catalyst in creating a pan-Indian ethos. The story of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* served the purpose of establishing a myth of strong Hindu nation having Aryan ancestors. These myths, whose nature is mainly nationalistic, were made available to the Indian population through translations without which it is unconceivable that the deeply entrenched cultural and linguistic boundaries within India could have been bridged.

Rabindranath Tagore in his interpretations of the play in his essay "Sakuntala---Its Inner Meaning" glorifies India's past and associates the curse motifs, ideals with nation and seems to preach self-conquest and self penance which reflects the contemporary nationalist zeal. He says "the poet has made the two lovers undergo a long and austere *tapasya* that they may gain each other eternally". There were references in the discourses pertaining to the controlling of passions, desires and senses. The first line of verse 1 of Act 3, for example, is translated as "I know the power of self penance..." (p.69) by C.R Devadhar(1934) , P.Lal(1957) translates it as "I know something of self-discipline" (p.30) and Mani Rao(2014) translates it as "I know the power of ascetics" (p.82). There is a lot of difference in the choice of words which alters the meaning also. C.R Devadhar's choice of the word penance seems to be an impact of Gandhian preaching during the nationalist period. The story of Shakuntala stands for the pain of separation between the lover and the beloved, or between mother India and its native people due to British rule. In their search for authentic native nationalism, Gandhi and his followers appropriated texts of that period. Thus there is shift in an attitude; the rustic Shakuntala of romantic period is now seen as an ideal for Indian womanhood. By invoking Shakuntala in the pious nationalist context, translators not only domesticate the 'rustic maiden' Shakuntala, but invent an Indian ideal of womanhood from Gandhian tradition. Shakuntala thus performs so many cultural functions. The translators during national period seek to present the narrative as a national literary text for the consumption of an incipient national audience.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Translation has been always a cultural and political project. It is inextricably linked to ideology, cultural identity of power structures that dominate the society. Translations transform a text into new and more relevant text for contemporary audience. Kalidasa's *shlokas* are not frozen events of history; they are renewed with each literary effort. Therefore, translations during colonial and nationalist periods are affected by the prevailing historical and cultural context. Thus the major concern of the translators is with reproducing 'period flavor'. There can be no ultimate translation and any assessment of translation can only be made by taking into account both the process of creating it and its function in a given context.

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