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Translation: The Need for a Composite Model

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Abstract

The present paper proposes the need for a composite model vis-à-vis translation of literary recourses in praxis. The argument developed in the paper is built upon examples drawn from folklore and the epic tradition which forms the active mode of our experience of and response to the world around us and the actual experience of translating literary texts, both in textual mode as well as for stage adaptation. The composite model of translation which partakes of extra-linguistic techniques might enable the translator to overcome gaps in reception and transmission of a literary text from one linguistic medium to another and might also accord a fresh lease of life, as if it were, to the text being translated in a new linguistic and cultural context.

Key-words

Linguistic competence, translation, transcreation, transliteration, adaptation, composite mode

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Both writing and translation involve a rigorous system of selection, rejection, assimilation and organization of the linguistic medium which is used as the vehicle of expression. They partake of not only linguistic competence, but also the dynamics of emotional, ideational, aesthetic and other elements which lie embedded in the deep structure of any text making it a viable social and artistic document. The process of translation is made more complex by the demand on the translator to grasp the connotative and the cultural nuances of the idiom, vocabulary and style of a particular writer and then to make it available to the reader whose matrix of reading, analysis and response to the original text is determined by an altogether different linguistic and cultural orientation.

The problem of inter-genre translation or transcreation[1] of a narratological text into a dramatological text and vice versa may have its own specific problems which I have experienced firsthand while transcreating/translating and adapting certain texts for representation on the stage as an amateur theatre activist. This forms the premise for arguing that the process and practice of translation implies the search for new composite mode of representation. As such, in the present paper, I seek to focus on translation in praxis and the postulates being offered are based upon my understanding of the oral tradition in literature and particularly the folk tales, my engagement with amateur theatre and my attempts at translating Krishna Sobti's (notable contemporary Hindi novelist) famous novella, *Mitro Marjani*, into English.

The line of argument I wish to follow is rooted in my understanding of the oral tradition in literature, particularly the folk tales. A folk tale gives expression to our primordial thoughts, concerns, fears, hopes, values and much more. A folk tale therefore has a certain immediacy and complexity about it not to be found in other genres in spite of the surface simplicity of a folk tale. What further adds to the complexity of a folk tale is the fact that it gets narrated in a variety of ways from generation to generation and thereby gains expression and growth not only in terms of diction and meaning by creating a 'new idiom', but also redefining social and cultural purpose according to the changing temporal configuration. This is evident from the way in which the contemporary post colonial and Afro-American writers have tried to recreate the oral/folklorist tradition in their works. It is also inherent in the popular Hindi word, *anuvaad* (*anu = new and* vaad + discourse) for translation.

The extant studies of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in the oral-folklorist as well as the transliterated versions[2] (with varying emotional, ideational and 'samskaric' contexts open to a wide range of interpretations) unequivocally establish the fact that while the basic story may remain the same in its trans-representation from one context to another, the discourse may vary. A. K. Ramanujan, for instance, points out the traditional distinction between the Rama

story (*Ramakatha*) and texts composed by specific persons – Valmiki, Kampan or Krittvasa. He illustrates how retelling of the same story envisages a different kind of discourse with a fresh idiom, tone and tenor by presenting a comparative analysis of the Ahalya episode (Ahalya was the pious wife of Sage Gautama who was, willingly or unwillingly, seduced by Indra, the King of gods and was subsequntly transformed into a stone on account of her husband's curse. The spell of the curse was broken when Rama touched the stone with his feet.) by Valmiki (Sanskrit *Ramayana*) and Kampan (Tamil *Iramvataram*) respectively. Ramanujan writes: "Let me rapidly suggest a few differences between the two tellings. In Valmiki, Indra seduces a willing Ahalya. In Kampan's version, Ahalya realizes she is doing wrong but cannot let go of the forbidden joy; the poem has also suggested earlier that her sage-husband is all spirit, details which together add a certain psychological subtlety to the seduction. Indra tries to steal away in the shape of a cat, clearly a folklore motif (also found, for example, in the *Kathasaritsagara* , an eleventh-century Sanskrit compendium of folktales). He is cursed with a thousand vaginas which are later changed into eyes, and Ahalya is changed into frigid stone. The poetic justice wreaked on both offenders is fitted to their wrongdoing. Indra bears the mark of what he lusted for, while Ahalya is rendered incapable of responding to anything" (*Many Ramayanas*: 32). According to Ramanujan, not only is Kampan's technique more dramatic than that of Valmiki, many of the motifs, as listed above, are not found in the latter. These motifs belong to the South Indian folklore and other southern Rama stories, including inscriptions and earlier Tamil poems.

It is also pertinent to review some of the folk versions of the *Ramayana* to perceive the seeds of resistance and inversion of the dominant discourse as symbolic form of protest against the patriarchal and hierarchical social system. We do not hear about Ravana's daughters in the *Ramayana*. However, its folk version prevalent in the Himalayan area, presents Sita as Ravana's daughter. She is put into a box and set afloat in the waters by Mandodri, Ravana's wife, so that she does not get killed by her father, who is made to believe that Sita portends ill fate for him. Sita's abduction by Ravana is the instrumental cause of his destruction. It may be interpreted as the annihilation of the patriarchal world order thwarted by its own mechanistic impulses. In fact, in several parts of India, particularly in Andhra and Karnataka regions, women have 'Ramanayas' of their own. In fact, as Velchuru Narayana Rao (*Many Ramayanas*: 115-134) tells us, these Rama stories offer a host of perspectives based on their class-specific versions including the peculiar attitudes, points of view, intent and social position. However, in Brahmin and non-Brahmin versions alike, there "are polite but strongly made statements that question Rama's wisdom, propriety, honesty, and integrity….Under the pretext of family members teasing each other, every character is lampooned. No one's character is untainted; no person loves another unconditionally. Even Sita's chastity is open to doubt: the picture episode suggests that Sita harbors a secret desire to sleep with Ravana, her drawing of Ravana's big toe making veiled reference to his sex organ[in fact, Ravana is believed to be Sita's husband in yet another version]. The final picture that emerges is not that of the '*bhakti 'Ramayanas*, with an ideal husband, an ideal wife, and ideal brothers, but of a complex joint family where life is filled with tension and fear, frustration and suspicion, as well as with love affection and tenderness….A similar strategy of subverting authority while outwardly respecting it is found in the *Ramayana* songs sung by non-Brahmin women" (*Many Ramayanas*: 130).

The different retellings of the *Ramayana* as it gets translated from one linguistic and socio-cultural context into another acquire new idioms and parameters of narration and representation which accord a new life to the epic tradition with respect to a new or altered frame

of reference. This makes **the** *Ramayana*, in spite of the definite article, not a single book or epic, but a story and a tradition of storytelling characterized by a fluidity of expression – *puratan* and *nutan* at the same time. Such telling and renderings as translations constitute an interesting aspect of cultural transactions.

The oral-folklorist versions of the *Mahabharata* likewise represent cultural patterns of different regions. I would like to focus on just two episodes of the epic as recounted in Himachal Pradesh, my home state, to illustrate how the adaptation and translation of the Mahabharata story into the popular lore of a particular area infuses it with new paradigms and metaphors. According to a prevalent folk version in the Kinnaur region of the state, the *Lakshagriha* episode of the *Mahabharata* in which Duryodhana conspires to lynch the Pandvas by setting the house made of *laksha* (sealing wax) in which they were to spend the night on fire, is suitably modified by substituting the *lakshagrira* with a house made of cow dung, one of the local materials used for constructing *kachha* or temporary houses. It may be mentioned here that the people of Kinnaur feel intimately connected with the Mahabharata tradition through the local deity, Usha Devi, who is the wife of Prince Pradyumana, Krishna's grandson. The second episode pertains to the marriage of the Pandavas to Draupadi as described in the ballad of the 'Pandain' or the 'Pandvayan' which has special significance in Shimla, Solan and Sirmur regions. According to this ballad, Draupadi is 'bad luck' personified as a woman who is sent to the Pandavas to punish them for their pride. Thus, folk literature (as well as literature in general) finds its own answers to questions regarding social organization and the dynamics of group and individual interaction which characterize the epic tradition, by reworking the basic story in the local or regional context. This also transforms myth(s) associated with the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, into a language of argument, to adopt a phrase from Edmund Leach[3], and not merely a chorus to harmony as might be supposed by perceiving the basic or the skeletal story, which is their general informing principle. [In this context, I might also refer to the temporal, cultural and language specific translations of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which, in addition to promulgating interesting and pragmatic versions of the *Guru Parampara*, have also led to the growth and development of new syncretic forms of worship[4].

Translation in praxis is wound up with the challenge of grasping the cultural and connotative nuances of the idiom, vocabulary and style of the source text. I have been attempting to translate, as noted at the outset, Krishna Sobti's (notable contemporary Hindi novelist) famous novella, *Mitro Marjani*, into English. The text has already been translated into English by Gita Rajan and Raji Narsimhan for Katha India. My first impression on reading their translation of *Mitro* was that it makes immaculate use of the English language. However, my problems as a translator begin beyond this point of perception. Although written in Hindi, the context of the novella is infused with Punjabi culture which is genetic to its tone, texture and overall atmosphere. Sobti, who breathes this cultural context, has beautifully interwoven the Punjabi idiom into the Hindi diction used by her as the vehicle of expression. Punjabi as a language is very rich in culturally loaded proverbs and sayings which tend to get lost in translation. A close analysis of the linguistic strategy adopted by the Katha translators reveals a tendency to round-off such idiomatic and culturally loaded expressions with a linear construction in English which deflects rather than translate[5] the meaning and purpose of the original. This situation, which may be used to exemplify the problematics of inter-linguistic translation, raises questions which defy easy answers – questions such as: How much liberty can a translator take with the source text, including the degree of intervention that s/he may make and the extent to which the translator

might remain invisible to let the source text 'speak' about itself? How can the otherness or foreignness of Hindi/Punjabi are retained in English for the readers in English so that the work of translation is genuinely viewed as cross-cultural communication.

Of course, such questions have remained unanswered despite a plethora of theories which seek to deal with them. The search for a plausible situation, at least in the context that I have been trying to proffer, brings me to my experience with amateur theatre. Staging literary and folk sources involves a process of translation into the active, representational mode and the problems central to translation apply to theatrical productions as well -- and the problems of trans-adaptation entail fresh dynamics. In reworking a textual source into a script for the stage production, the translator-adapter takes recourse, consciously or unconsciously, to the entire repertoire of one's experience of texts and intra/intertexts of the same or diverse genres, socio-cultural interactions including the oral-folklorist tradition(s), cognitive and archetypal patterns of perception and behavior, which impinge upon the psyche in the collective mode. At times, metaphors drawn from such repertoire simply happen and one has to work out a mode for representing them. In the process of adapting K.V. Putuppa's *Shudra Tapasavi*, which is based on an episode from Valmiki's *Ramayana* regarding the violation of the brahmanical prerogative to undertake *tapasya* or meditation by 'Shambook', a low-caste, and is already a Hindi rendering of the Kannada text by V.R. Narayan, I was required to personify 'Death' as a core character on the stage. The metaphor for representing 'Death' in the context of the play dawned upon me from a childhood tale in which a demon moves around sniffing for human beings as its prey, and it became the opening metaphor of my stage adaptation of *Shudra Tapasavi*. I had to represent the theme of death while translating and adapting J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, re-titled *Sagar Ke Sawar*, for the stage. The 'Sea' is the informing symbol of this play which orchestrates symphonies of both life and death for the Aran Islanders off the coast of Ireland. Born and brought up among the hills, the sea has remained a distant image for me and never a firsthand perception. Moreover, I had to integrate the consciousness of death with the psyche of my young student-actors, who were so full of life. I was once again compelled to search for images and patterns from their active experience including popular film songs and I used this particular recourse to make them comprehend and enact the interplay of life and death on the stage. At the same time, I myself had to comprehend the intricate lore of life and death by drawing upon my limited but vivid experience of these in my immediate surroundings. And C.G. Jung's concept of overcoming the frustration associated with the finitude of life through creative potential helped me to characterize and represent Maurya, Nora, Cathleen and Bartley on the stage.

However, there still remained unwieldy gaps between my perception and representation. The language of a formal stage performance could never be free and fluid like that of folk theatre. And while articulating what is perceived in the verbal mode, it was gagged by limitations of vocabulary, syntax and grammar. The 'word', written or oral tended to be opaque and refractory rather than a transparent and reflective medium. The answer to this problem is found in the composite, hybrid mode of stage representation where facial expressions and body language, costumes, set design, light and sound and special effects produced through dance, music and even cinematography to a certain extent enables the theatre artist to moves beyond the limitations of the three walls of the stage, to transcend the purely textual/intellectual dimension into the domain of experientiality.

Hence translation as an intra-cultural, inter-cultural or cross-cultural communication might be accomplished by adopting a composite mode of representation. The narrative tradition

in India provides a viable model for such representation. We have already talked about the various traditional and oral-folklorist versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which transform them into hybrid texts. Similar traditions are also notable in vernacular Buddhist and Jain writings with the spread of these faiths across the Indian subcontinent and beyond. We have a large corpus of Buddhist writings in Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil, Sinhalese and Tibetan, and of Jain writings in Prakrit, Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, Gujarati and Hindi available for study, analysis and interpretation. A given text in any of the sectarian or religious tradition in multilingual translations provides the model for understanding the translation process that is being discussed here. The *vrata-katha*[6] (the 'vow story') in the Jain literary tradition provides, as a case in point, one such composite model of translation. A typical *vrata-katha* comprises a sacred chanting in Sanskrit accompanied by ritualistic performances including instructions and commentaries and is followed by a story narrated in vernacular prose for the benefit of listeners. The multilingual nature of the text and the renderings that take place from one language to another within the text itself [thus] provides the model for translation and interpretation as cultural transactions.

While it is not always possible to practice hybrid representation of the kind described here in the linguistic mode of translation, it should be possible to make up for the loss of meaning in lexical and syntactic lapses through pictorial and graphic representations wherever it is plausible [The *Amar Chitra Katha* series has made our understanding of culturally and historically important episodes more vivid and lively through their pictorial representation]. Of course, this demands a participatory effort between groups of people.

The arguments that I am trying to advance also have a bearing upon Walter Benjamin's conception of translation as "mode" as outlined in the "Task of the Translator". Benjamin speaks of translation in terms of "recreation" that seeks to transform and renew something living – the original or the source text – by supplementing it and according to it a kind of "afterlife". Benjamin believes that there is always something "unfathomable" in a text which evades the translator. A composite mode of translation might also enable the translator(s) to arrive at an awareness of some aspect of the "unfathomable" in a text which makes it a complex and intricate linguistic and cultural phenomenon (which resists translation) through fresh metaphors and paradigms made available by a participatory rather than an analytic approach.

Notes

1. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Fifth Edition) defines *transcreation* as "creative translation, seen as producing a new version of the original work".
2. The traditional classical and the oral-folklorist as well as the contemporary adaptations of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (that I have been consulting) are discussed in Paula Richman eds. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (University of California Press 1991) and *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (OUP 2003); K.S. Singh ed. *The Mahabharata in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India* (IIAAS 1993); Ajay Mitra Shashtri ed. *Mahabharata: The End of an Era* (IIAS 2004) and C.R. Deshpande, *Transmission of the Mahabharata Tradition* (IIAS 1974).

3. Edmund Leach is a British Social anthropologist cited in *The Mahabharata in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India* (13).
4. See Aditya Behl, "Premodern Negotiations: Translating between Persian and Hindavi" and K. Ayyappa Paniker, "Contemporary Textual Politics: Translating a Sacred Text" in Rukumini Bhaya Nair ed. *Translation, Text and Theory: The Paradigm of India* (Sage Publications 2003).
5. Cf. F.R. Leavis: "Thought about language should entail the full and firm recognition that words *mean* because individual human beings have meant the meaning, and there is no meaning unless individual beings can meet in it…" (cited by TRS Sharma: 20).
6. The example is taken from T.S. Satyanath, "Religions 'Crossing Borders': On the Emergence of Translation Traditions in India" in the Web Journal of Comparative Literature Association of India @ *clai.in/journal.html* (no citation and pagination details available). T.S. Satyanath is a retired professor of Kannada and Comparative Indian Literature of the Dept. of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi.

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