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## Living in Translation: The Polemics of Diasporic Experience in *The Namesake*

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### Abstract

Some texts have an inherent quality that makes them susceptible to translational activities, according to Benjamin. Translation involves complex meta-textual politics that perhaps becomes palpable in text conceived in diasporic continuum such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*; wherein the source and the target language often overlap. In this paper, I would attempt to make an in-depth reading of both the original and the translated text with the objective of unravelling the politics of translation at play therein. I would endeavour to qualify Lahiri's novel as a 'translatable' text as I delve deeper into the novel, in the light of Benjamin's argument. Through my reading, I would try and link the palpable act of translation and the extra-textuality that it proposes aspiring for corporeality. I would also look at the cyclical nature of the act of translation and the idea it entails that is pertinent to this particular text.

Keywords: translatability, source, target, diaspora, alienation

## Living in Translation: The Polemics of Diasporic Experience in *The Namesake*

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Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its **translatability**. It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by the virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection. **Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected to the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original- not so much from its life as from its afterlife.** (Benjamin, 1992) (Emphasis: mine)

Walter Benjamin's seminal work titled "The Task of the Translator" is substantial for translation literature and studies owing to more than one reason. All the more so, it would be of utmost significance to

the argument that I am about to unravel in this paper. Firstly, the mention of the idea of 'translatability' which he finds a quality that is imbibed in the fabric of certain texts. Secondly, he draws an intriguing parallel between the act of translation and that of living. *The Namesake* can be presumably designated in Benjamin's echelon of texts that organically possess the inherent virtue of 'translatability'.

1. *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri, alias, Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, a diasporic author of Indian and Bengali origin from the U. S. A. was published in 2003. The author claims that both 'Nilanjana' and 'Sudeshna' are her 'good names' but chooses to publish under her pet name Jhumpa'. The anecdote is pertinent to the plot of the novel which I would venture into. The work was translated into Bengali by Poulomi Sengupta, erstwhile sub-editor of the Ananda publishers in 2005, under the title of *Shomonaami*. (সমনামী) It is a literal as well as an appropriate translation of the original title, word to word sans the article. The 'shomash' (সমাস) or unravelling the compounding of the word through Bengali semantics results into 'shomaan naam jar' (সমান নাম যার), or 'one who has the same name.' (Transliteration: mine)

The novel can be presumably considered to be organically translatable owing to the nexus of the plot, themes and the characters the author delineates. The text narrates the quotidian tale of a Bengali middle-class couple, Ashok and Ashima Ganguli, who emigrate to U.S. after marriage and settle in various cities within the foreign spectrum, starting with Boston, where Ashok pursues a doctoral degree. But enfolded in the quotidian plot, the author manages to weave her magic between the lines with her lucid cadence. The plot spans over a period of thirty two years, from 1968 to 2000 wherein we see the couple and their two children, Gogol alias Nikhil and Sonia striving to adjust to the alienation that life hands them down. The cradle and nature of estrangement for the two generations are different, sometimes pitted against each other. The narrative starts in media res, while the story originates in the late 1960s Bengali cultural continuum, the remnants of which percolate down to the circadian lives of the Gangulis, imported by them into the alien space. The narration, owing to the diasporic origin of the author and her simultaneous familiarity with Bengali culture, is done in English. In other words, while the plot is conceived in a Bengali consciousness, the delivery is in English, catering to the global target audience. The narrative migration of one cultural context into another language, one might say brings to life the inherent translatability of the text, where organic assimilation of translational equivalents and transliterative counterparts occur. This runs in parallel with the corporeal migration that the couple embark on at the beginning of the novel. The cultural space that the couple hereto has been occupying, hereafter comes into contact, rather collides brutally into an unfamiliar cultural circumstance. Henceforth in their lives, the two orbits engage into a combat of lived experiences. While the Gangulis try to adjust with the novelty of the uninitiated on one hand, they endeavour to preserve their ethnic identity on the other. But over time, the two gradually commence to coexist. The cultural markers that are manifested in diurnal lives, such as names of eatables, rituals, norms of addressing one another, behavioural gestures, customs inculcated through nurture, rites of passage et al are translated by the author in the original text itself, for which the target is a chiefly urban and worldwide Anglophone audience. The reason behind this is perhaps the penchant for authentic representation of the familiar. Thus in the original text itself, at various instances, there occurs confusion between the Source Language (SL) and the Target Language (TL) where Bengali turns into the SL and English, the TL, wherein the reverse is true for *The Namesake* and *সমনামী*. I present certain examples from the text before I proceed with the idea.

1 The Bengali gastronomical delight 'paanthar mangsho' (পাঁঠার মাংস) is translated as 'goat and potato stew' in the second chapter of the novel, which unfortunately, fails to capture the richness of the dish.

2 Terms such as 'rosogolla' (রসগোল্লা) are transliterated by the author as she perhaps fails to find a suitable equivalent.

3 Even if the translated version is incorrect following the rules of English grammar, the author sticks to it for the sake of authenticity, as it is the mistake on the part of the character she tries to convey. While Ashima is in labour before Gogol's birth, the attending nurse asks for her preference regarding the child's gender. She replies, 'as long as there are ten finger and ten toe', meaning a healthy baby, she is fine with either. The nurse smiles suggestively and Ashima 'mortified' to realise her mistake, as her subject in college was English. The author explains, 'In Bengali, a finger can also mean fingers, a toe toes.' The Bengali word for both is 'aangul' (আঙুল) which works as both singular and plural.

4 Ashima, conforming to her conservative upbringing, addresses for her husband without uttering his name. She says, 'are you listening to me?' This is a rough translation of the Bengali word, 'shunchho?' (শুনছ?)

Most of these textual instances are related to Ashima than Ashok. A plausible reason for this might be the role of the homemaker she confined herself to in the early years of living in America. As a result, her interaction with her surrounding cultural plane was lesser than her husband, who had a professional career of his own which helped him adjust comparatively faster. Also, Ashok went to America even before his marriage to Ashima for his degree.

We observe that the translated expressions tend to use more words than the original counterparts; a fact that holds true irrespective of what the Source Language. Not only *The Namesake*, but *সমনামী* encounters similar issues. I would approach the latter text in roughly the second half of this paper. Antoine Berman states, 'every translation tends to be longer than the original', (Berman, 2002) a phenomenon termed as the 'inflationist principle' by George Steiner. The original novel, published by Harper Collins consists of 291 pages while the translation by Ananda Publishers is of 295 pages, comfortably kept below the 300 pages limit; the usually set by norms of 'translation commission', adhering to professional rules of translational jobs. (Vermeer, 2002) Lahiri, in the novel, tries to be the faithful appropriator of the essence of the 'Bengali' halves of Ashok and Ashima, a long stretching past in continuous. But in doing so, the output often suffers from what is called 'qualitative impoverishment', which 'refers to the replacement of terms, expressions and figures in the original with terms, expressions and figures that lack their sonorous richness or, correspondingly, their signifying or 'iconic' richness.' (Berman, 2002) Eugene Nida in his *Principles of Correspondence*, seconds the argument by stating that some translators 'fall into the error of making a relatively straightforward message in the source language sound like a completely legal document by trying too hard to be completely unambiguous; as a result such a translator spins out his definitions in long, technical phrases. In such a translation little is left of the grace and naturalness of the opinion.' (Nida, 2002) We perhaps should not be that harsh on Lahiri though, as she roughly manages to balance between her role of the author and the inherent translator. Perceived holistically, both the translated and the original portions pertaining to the American/foreign culture add up to produce a good, lucid narrative. But the problematic fissures cannot be elided over where the English equivalents stifle the perspicuity of the text. A reader unfamiliar to the Bengali culture would probably read those portions more than once to grasp the meaning and then run an internet search; while a familiar reader would knowingly smile at the uneasiness reflected in the trials, perhaps with a little condescension. In these edges, such as wherein rituals and customs like the 'rice ceremony' or 'Onnoprashon' (অন্নপ্রাশন) in Bengali are described, the Bengali translated text seems more at home, natural and faithful to its cultural tongue and taste. By 'natural', it is meant that, though it would be unavailable to the Anglophone audience, at least the familiar reader would be spared of the queasy uneasiness. But there can be a possible avenue to the idea, one which I would shortly discuss.

The author's adherence to details of the Bengali culture snugly fits with the Gangulis preference to preserve their ethnic identity in a foreign land, where they keep translating their words to communicate their intentions, from a grocery store to the hospital. Their existence in the U.S is a partial, mutilated, substituted

existence with a translated identity. Here comes in visibly the parallel that Benjamin draws between translation and life. They live as if they have stepped into someone else's shoes, an image recurrent in the film adaptation of the novel that was directed by Mira Nair in 2006. For them, preserving the titbits of culture that they inherited keep them closer to their roots. The Gangulis religiously visit their other Bengali friends, 'share rice' with them, take their children to 'Durga Puja' ('দুর্গাপূজা') performs 'Anjali' ('অঞ্জলি') (translated as chanting words and throwing petals of marigold at the feet of the cardboard image), thinks of India as 'desh' ('দেশ') even after spending three decades in the U.S. In this context, according to Itamar Even-Zohar, 'translation, by which new ideas, items, characteristics can be introduced into literature, becomes a means to traditional taste.' (Even-Zohar, 2002) Hence, the aforesaid avenue could be that a familiar reader, especially one living in diaspora her/himself would probably not smile condescendingly, but encouragingly as s/he would be able to read about her own culture, branched out to an alien continuum and penned down in a foreign tongue. But the dilemma regarding the uninitiated reader, unfortunately, remains unsolved. For them, 'translation is a trial of the foreign' (Berman, 2002) which for Ashok and Ashima is rendered an entirely novel significance. Ashima thinks, 'being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy, a perpetual wait, a continuous feeling out of sorts.' Through their lived experiences, the seamed apertures of the 'cultural filter' (House, 2002) in the translational fabric is made palpable.

But we cannot eventually forget that it is the English text which is the original and Bengali the translated version. Therefore the trials of the second generation Gangulis, especially Gogol, who are born and brought up in the U.S. are inherently untranslated, spun out comfortably in English, as it is the hitherto 'foreign' that is native for them. His lived experience of translation works from the other end of the spectrum. He finds the Bengali-ness that his parents fastidiously latch onto as tedious and meaningless. The psychological condition of the 'ABCD', the acronym for 'America Born Confused Desi' haunts Gogol, starting with his estranged bifurcated identity engendered by the two names, the 'good name' and the 'pet name'. The former he shares with the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. Names acquire corporality in the text. They are an umbilical attachment to one's identity in the context of the novel. Ashok and Ashima, who are called 'Mithu' and 'Monu' respectively by their families, seamlessly enter those alternate familiar identities that the pet names have created throughout their lifespan, whenever they visit India. In these roles, they are comfortable in their own skin, 'louder' and 'more confident' than they ever are in the U.S. But Gogol, being brought up in the American culture, fails to understand the necessity of the two names that his Bengali parents insist upon. The concept of the 'good name' ('ভালো নাম') and 'pet name' ('ডাক নাম'), the latter being different from 'nick name' is rendered meaningless in the American context. Ashok and Ashima realize this when Gogol starts his formal education. The school authority does not understand the concept of the difference between the two names and registers him under the name of 'Gogol', much to his parents' dismay. A 'nickname' is usually a shortening of the good name ('Nick' from Nikhil) while pet name can be a different name altogether (Gogol as opposed to Nikhil). But problematically, the Bengali corresponding word for both pet name and nick name is 'daaknaam' ('ডাক নাম'). Gogol is perturbed by the rift in his identity and he feels that he is living dual lives under 'twin names', one in the domestic periphery and the other outside. To complicate the polemics of the translational grey zone, a parallel strand of a third culture is introduced through instances like Gogol's name that he shares with the celebrated Russian author Nikolai Gogol, the universality in the name 'Sonia' who is Gogol's younger sibling, Mousumi's (Gogol's ex-wife) love for French literature and her obsession with Paris and the entire body of acquired values that it channelizes into the existing dialectic between the source and the target.

One of the prominent problems that the Bengali translation faces is once again in the context of naming. We read the Bengali translation and see that the American pre-school teacher uses the word 'daaknaam'

(‘ডাক নাম’) while she means nickname. It can confuse the non- Anglophone reader who would think of pet name by the association. Thus a misunderstanding might occur between the translator and the reader. Given are some other interstices that a reader would come across in the translation, some owing to the liberties taken by the translator.

1. The expression of terms pertaining to the American culture, such as ‘hamburger’, ‘ricotta cheese’, ‘prom’, ‘garrison’, ‘saltbox’ (the last two are architectural terms) are transliterated.

2. But sometimes, the expressions for which Bengali functional equivalents exist are transliterated too. Such as, Gogol’s school report card states, ‘Gogol is an outstanding student, curious and cooperative’ could have been easily translated into Bengali as, ‘Gogol ekjon medhabi chhatro, onushondhani o sohojogitapurno.’ (গে গে একজন মধোবী ছাত্রঅনুসন্ধানীএবং সহ য়ে গীতাপূর্ণ transliteration/Translation: mine) Or John Lennon’s ‘obituary’ could have been translated into ‘mrityughoshona’. (মৃত্যুঘোষণা transliteration/translation: mine)

3. Norms of the address ‘you’ is accordingly adjusted in translation as ‘tui’ (তুই), ‘tumi’ (তুমি) and ‘aapni’ (আপনি). (Transliteration: mine). But this works out perfectly at most of the times.

4. Tenses are changed. The opening sentence of the novel is written in simple present- ‘... Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen...’ whereas in Bengali simple past is used. (‘Daariyen chhilo’ [‘দাঁড়িয়ে ছিলি’] in place of ‘Daariyen ache’ [‘দাঁড়িয়ে আছ’]) Sometimes it works without sounding odd as Bengali grammar works differently. But sometimes it ends up feeling awkward.

5. Sentences are mistranslated due to lack of understanding of the context. For example, Ashima’s neighbour Judy prepares a dish of ‘quiche’ and tells her, ‘twenty minutes at three fifty for the quiche.’ It means that the quiche should be cooked for twenty minutes at 350 degree temperature in the oven. But the Bengali is mistranslated as, ‘quiche tar jonnyo 350 minute jotheshito’ (‘কশি-টার জন্য ৩৫০ মিনিটি যথেষ্ট’) which means that the quiche needs to be cooked for 350 minutes. Needless to say, the meaning completely crashes.

6. Sometimes phrases and clauses are left out completely. For example, ‘Mousumi is horrified, in the banquet room to see, the tables wreathed with tulle, the ivy and baby’s breath twisted around the columns.’ It is simply translated as, ‘banquet hall ta ke khub sajano hoyeche’ (‘banquet hall- টাকে খুব সাজানো হয়েছে’) or ‘the banquet hall is decorated beautifully.’ Mousumi’s reactions are obliterated entirely from the sentence along with the names of the decorative flowers.

The Bengali translation, one might claim lies somewhere between an ‘overt’ and a ‘covert’ translation, or, ‘a covert translation that operates quite overtly.’ (House, 2002) There are gaps in the process, but in the cyclicity of translation the SL and TL play interchanging roles depending upon the context. Living partially in translations, we find Ashok and Ashima adapting to yard sales and Christmas celebration, while Gogol finds the Hindu mourning rites after his father’s demise oddly comforting. He realizes the ‘trial of the foreign’ that his parents faced in reverse given his own situation of cultural disagreement. The cultural gaps are partially bridged as lived experiences of one are translated to another through his/her own and also collectively. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak writes in *The Politics of Translation*, ‘Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries’, (Spivak, 2002) which is manifested in the name ‘Ashima’ (‘অসীমা’) or ‘the one without boundaries’ who lives her name in the end, dividing her time between the two cultures and reconciling with the gaps. The ‘translatability’ of the text helps achieves a precarious balance in the translated version in the hands of one particular translator. Perhaps the act might have been executed in a better fashion in the hands of another. But irrespective of the quality of translation, the organic pulse of both the act of living as well as translation permeate through the narrative experience. Through the lived diasporic experiences of the Gangulis, the act of translation perhaps manages to adopt a

semi-organic existence itself. In a manner of speaking, it forwards a step towards what Julian House desires, 'texts that are [...] produced immediately as parallel texts in different languages.' (House, 2002)

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