
Translating the Translated: Interrogating the Post-Colonial Condition

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Abstract

The paper deals with the issues related to the landscape of translation particularly in the post-colonial world. The paper argues that translation does not take place in an ideologically neutral ground. On the contrary, it is mediated through the dominant ideologies of the time. Translation during the post-colonial period has been subject to Euro centric norms. Concepts like 'hybridity' and 'post-nationalism' tend to legitimize only those translations/writers that adhere to Eurocentric norms. Finally, the paper argues for the historical necessity of coming back to nationalist discourse to redefine the discourse of translation as well as literature.

"I too am a translated man".

Salman Rushdie

"The vernacular literature of India will be gradually enriched by the translation of European books whose minds have been imbued with the spirit of European advancement, so that European knowledge may gradually be placed in the manner within the reach of all classes of the people".

From the dispatch on educational matters by
the East India Company in 1894

Translation has never remained a noble or innocent literary engagement in the colonial or post-colonial context. "*Translation during the colonial period*", as Sherry Simon observes, "*was an expression of the cultural power of the colonizer. Missionaries, anthropologists and learned Orientalists chose to translate the texts which corresponded to the image of the subjugated world that they wished to construct*" (Simon 2000: 10). Translation referred not only to the transfer of specific texts into European languages, but to all the practices whose aim was to compact and reduce an alien reality to the terms imposed by a triumphant western culture.

Tejaswini Niranjana (*Niranjana 1992*) argues that the meaning of *historicity* in translation involves examining *effective history*, questions such as *who did the translation, how, and why* and more importantly, the *translation's impact* needs to be addressed. By examining the history of translation of classical Indian works into English from this point of view, it became apparent to Niranjana that the translators were always European missionaries or colonial administrators since Indians themselves were not considered worthy. Niranjana goes on to observe, rightly, that the translators' prefaces reflected a desire to present Indian culture in a *purified* state so as to make it seem more *English* (*Tervonen 2002: 1*).

Perhaps, this desire to experience the familiar has emerged as the dominant equation behind translation in the post-colonial world, particularly from the Third World languages to the master language, which in today's globalized world happens to be English.

Of course, the unfamiliar or the exotic in the Orient has always been the object of curiosity and wonder in the western imagination. Such a perspective generated a lot of stereotypes about the East in the West. India being projected as a land of elephants and snake-charmers is a case in point. The popularity of *Panchatantra* stories is indeed reflective of the imaginative tour de force of the West because it kindled their imagination. Nevertheless, despite its

popularity *Panchatantra* has not become a part of the Western canonical establishment. The reasons are not far to seek. The main reason is the wholesale application of Eurocentric norms while studying and translating literatures belonging to the colonial and the post-colonial world. The term Eurocentrism stands for the conscious or the unconscious process by which Europe and European cultural assumptions are constructed as or assumed to be normal - the natural or the universal (*Ashcroft 2004: 90-91*). Eurocentrism is masked in literary study by literary universality and the universal human subject. Such a Eurocentric perspective was responsible for scrutinizing, analyzing, labeling and finally canonizing literatures of the colonial world. It was Chinua Achebe, a prominent writer from Africa, who for the first time pointed out way back in 1974 that the universal qualities expected of literature from Western criticism were not so much universal as European in universal disguise. Even today there is little change in the ground reality. Narratives or translations originating in the Third World become a part of the canonical establishment only if their authors pick up and deal with typical western/modernist motifs in their narratives. Perhaps for this reason, a writer like Salman Rushdie has become part of the canon in the West. The same norms are applicable to translations too.

Certain varieties of post-colonial theories have succeeded in rationalizing such perspectives. The notion of *hybridity* for instance belongs to this realm. Of late, hybridity is used to legitimize and authenticate the ambivalent post-colonial reality saturated by Western ideas. It is one of the most widely employed terms in post-colonial theory. It refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.

The term 'hybridity' is associated with the work of Homi. J. Bhabha (*Bhabha 1994*). His analysis of colonizer/colonized relationship stresses their inter-dependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. Bhabha contends that all cultural

statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the 'third space of enunciation'. Cultural identity always emerges in a contradictory and ambivalent space, which, for Bhabha, makes the claim to a hierarchical purity of cultures untenable. According to him, the recognition of this ambivalent space of cultural identity may help us to overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural differences may operate. Let me quote Bhabha in full:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or post-colonial provenance. For, a willingness to descend into that alien territory... may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.

(Bhabha 1994: 98)

Bhabha is categorical in his rejection of old liberal humanist notions of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. According to him, it is the in-between or third space that carries the burden and meaning of culture and this is what makes the notion of hybrid important (*Ashcroft 2004: 119*).

Bhabha's notion of hybridity or celebration of in-between or third space quickly became a part of the vocabulary of modern translation theory, and there have been many attempts to look at the whole discourse of translation from this angle. Samia Mehrer (*Mehrer: 2000*), for example, argues that post-colonial texts understood as 'hybrids' have created their own language. Michaela Wolf's essay entitled *The Third Space in Postcolonial Representation* (*Wolf 2000: 127-145*) is a plea for the application of the notion of *hybridity* in the field of translation.

What does this mean for the conception of translation? All attempts at cultural and textual translation must work on the assumption of the multi-tracked, non-synchronous nature of cultural hybridities, not of a one-way road leading from the source text to the target text. Thus, one discovers not only a sphere of new internationalism in the sense of the complex practice and poetics of world-wide migration and the cultural symbolism into which the historical processes of the transformation of the post-colonial societies themselves are translated, but also the powerhouses where global or international culture is retranslated into specific cultural or historical locality. Post-colonial translations postulate the decentralization and location of hybrid cultures across the traditional axis of translation between separate cultures and literatures (*Medick 1996: 11*).

Arjun Appadurai has developed perspectives for the study of the tendency of globalization (*Appadurai 1991: 191-210*). He has proposed a landmark theory according to which translation must reflect deterritorialization and displacement by the transfer, blending and shifting of local experience towards new multiple ethnic and social identities. He argues that the concept of the nation as the container of world literatures and the source and the target of translations has become increasingly questionable in a world that can now be regarded as post-national because of such phenomena as globalization, migration, exile and diaspora.

Therefore, a text originating in a post-colonial world like India, to be accepted or legitimized has to be in the translated state: Bhabha defines it as

Hybridity = International Culture

in opposition to cultural diversity. Appadurai on the other hand, locates it in the collective post-national psyche of modern migrant population.

Unmasking such rationalizations enables us to understand as to why most of the translations of the narratives of eminent writers like Shivarama Karanth (Kannada) and Vaikum Mohammed Bashir (Malayalam) have failed to accomplish legitimacy in terms of not being made into the part of the Western canon. Anita Mannur (2000) states with full statistical details that during these five decades after India's Independence, 1074 Indian texts from sixteen different languages have been translated into English (*Mannur 2000: 229*). Of these, only a few texts have been given entry into the western canonical establishment. The reason is very clear: translations into the master language get legitimized only if such translated narratives exist in an already translated - post-national - hybrid state. For instance, *Tughluq* by Girish Karnad or *Samskara* by U.R. Ananthamurthy have been integrated into the Western canon in view of their representation of post-colonial hybrid experience. Both *Tughluq* and *Praneshacharya*, the protagonists of *Tughluq* and *Samskara* respectively, speak from dehistoricised locations saturated by Sartrean existentialism. Aren't they our post-national heroes celebrating our hybridity appealing to an international audience? If Girish Karnad's *Tughluq* is cast in the mould of Camus' Caligula, *Praneshacharya*, the protagonist of Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* looks like a Sartrean prototype with incessant bouts of existential turmoil. On the other hand, despite the fact that not less than half a dozen major novels of Shivarama Karanth's have been translated into English, none of them has found a place in the critical canon in the West, precisely because he does not speak from a hybrid location. The fictional world of Karanth brilliantly portrays modern India's arrival as a nation with all her problematic and complex historical and intellectual baggage. Regrettably, such distinct nationalist preoccupations of Third World writers have attracted little critical attention in view of the alien nature of their ideological location.

On the contrary, the works of Ananthamurthy and Karnad are not only legitimized by the Western academic establishment as representing modern Indian experience, but also routinely prescribed as texts in Euro-American universities. Since the location of their intellect and sensibility signifies a translated state, translations of their works appeal immediately to the western psyche, which always operates from within the familiar experiential reality. In other words, these works have been legitimized since they operate within Eurocentric norms.

I have drawn upon Kannada literature mainly because that is my home ground. Even translations from other languages have been subject to the same criteria. For instance, we are told that 61 works of art were translated from Marathi into English after Independence (*Mannur 2000: 229*). How many of these translations or writers have been accepted or legitimized? Only a few writers like Vijay Tendulkar have been given entry into this elite circle. I believe one needs to look at the intellectual location of such writers to come to understand their acceptability in the West.

How should we negotiate this awkward post-colonial predicament? We are accepted only if we are articulated as translated, hybrid and post-national selves. Perhaps, the solution lies in consciously challenging the hegemonic Western critical discourse by constructing an alternative nationalist discourse, which, through translation between and among different Indian languages, facilitates and strengthens the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic ambience of our nation. One could argue that Sahitya Akademi, the National Body of Letters, has been endeavoring to promote nationalistic discourse through translation all these years. But it has concentrated only on translating the dominant and mainstream writers from one language to the other. The counter-nationalist discourse on the other hand, must accommodate the subaltern and the marginalized voices by introducing and familiarizing them to the readers of literatures in

other Indian languages. Making a marginalized voice of Assam to be prominently heard in a remote village of Maharashtra through translation into Marathi for instance is the most desirable way of challenging and resisting the hegemonic post-colonial discourse.

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