

TOWARDS THE AESTHETICS AND ETHICS OF TRANSLATION

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To the question of the aesthetics and ethics of translation, there are no easy answers. Even if we find answers, they may lead to newer and profounder questions and hence, they would eventually be no answers at all. From being subjected to the tags of beautiful/faithful, based on the metaphor of woman to being termed as interpretation, production, subversion, manipulation, and transformance, translation has had its own unique trajectory of evolution. Given this kind of a narrative of its evolution, if one has to arrive at the clarity as regards the aesthetics and ethics of translation, s/he will have to address many key issues. The first key question is, is there any aesthetics of translation in existence today? Or is it possible to formulate any aesthetics of translation at all? While translation was successfully employed as a tool of colonization, have we been able to conceptualize any aesthetics of translation to be used as an instrument of decolonization? Further, if feminists speak of *Écriture féminine*, do we have any aesthetics of translation which can help us translate it better, or for that matter the entire gamut of minority discourse? If translation, as Gayatri Spivak argues, is 'the most intimate act of reading' (Spivak: 1992), and if literature is to be read as resistance and/or history and numerous other ways, what kind of aesthetics do we have for the translation of this kind of writing? If 'politics of translation' is guiding the poetics of translation, what kind of aesthetics of translation shall we evolve in the end? These questions, it seems, shall continue to haunt us.

On the other hand, what kind of aesthetics of translation we should have is essentially an ethical question and hence, the other thing to be borne in mind is that the ethics of translation will determine the aesthetics of translation to a great extent. Here lies the problematic of the aesthetics and ethics of translation. But why, in the first place, the aesthetics and ethics of translation matter so much, they matter because what is at stake is not translation alone, but literature itself and with it, the entire universe of ideas it seems to contain within it.

'The Strange Institution Called Literature'

In quests intellectual or otherwise, one must, at regular intervals, revisit the fundamental premises. In order to lend better clarity to the entire exercise of translation and what it means to us, we must dwell upon the basic premise called literature. Translation as a perpetual challenge and quest hinges on our notion(s) of what literature is or ought to be. As Derrida puts it, 'literature is a strange institution which allows one to *say everything in every way*'. He goes on to elaborate in his *Acts of Literature*:

To say everything is no doubt to gather, by translating, all figures into one another, to totalize by formalizing, but to say everything is to break out of prohibitions. To *affranchise oneself* - in every field where law can lay

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down the law. The law of literature tends, in principle, to defy or lift the law. It therefore allows one to think the essence of the law in the experience of this ‘everything to say’. It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution (36)

To Derrida, literature is a space, a site where everything is said and in every manner possible. But as he says it is a ‘strange institution’, strange because it is an institution, unlike other institutions, goes beyond its limits, its own norms. It allows one to say what other institutions do not allow the space for. While it is strange for Derrida, it is a paradoxical institution for Jonathan Culler:

Literature is a paradoxical institution because to create literature is to write according to existing formulas – to produce something that looks like a sonnet or that follows the conventions of the novel – but it is also to flout those conventions, to go beyond them. Literature is an institution that lives by exposing and criticizing its own limits, by testing what will happen if one writes differently. So literature is at the same time the name for the utterly conventional – *moon* rhymes with *June* and *swoon*, maidens are fair, knights are bold – and for the utterly disruptive, where readers have to struggle to create any meaning at all, as in sentences like this from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*: ‘Eins within a space and a weary wide space it was er wohned a Mookse.’(46)

These are significant pointers to the nature and function of literature. But what is it that makes it literature? Or to put it in another way, the ancient conundrum, what is literature? It might be well worth to revisit Bhamah who says, *shabdartho sahitou kavyam* (Kavyalankara: 1.16). Literature is something that happens between word and meaning. It is a simple and yet one of the most profound definitions of literature. It is simple because it offers in one sentence what scores of publications on literature fail to do. But it is profound due to the reference to meaning because meaning is to be further understood before the definition is decoded. Literature is all about some meaning, not something one can put finger on and discuss but something that is eternally elusive, it defies all attempts to finalize it. It is a problematic category because it is a product of a problematic process called interpretation. As a construct, interpretation stands for the plurality of meanings. With plurality of meanings, meaning becomes obsolete and more and more irrelevant in the wake of the idea of discourse which allows no singularity of meaning or interpretation. If translation is the transference of meaning, it is problematized right at the outset by the very nature of what literature is. Literature is also the strange institution which is a site of the play of ideology and power, colonization and violence, humiliation and the act of privileging, the re-reading and rewriting of history or should one say, histories and herstories, and it is also a site of the act of undoing all this. With this prelude on all this, one can come close to understanding the enormity of that challenge that translation is.

Literary Theory, Translation and Translator Competence

As Luise von Flotow observes, “The modest, self-effacing translator who produces a smooth, readable target language version of the original has become a thing of the past” (76).

Something seems to have happened to the construct of translation, and the self-effacing translator, as Barbara Goddard puts, ‘as an invisible hand mechanically turning the words of one

language into another'. Today, the translator is no longer invisible hand, s/he is right there in the text, in the production of meaning. As Goddard says, the feminist translator seeks to flaunt her signature in italics, in footnotes and, in prefaces, deliberately woman handling the text and actively participating in the creation of meaning.' There are a number of factors behind the disruption of this notion of translation as an innocent act of transference of meaning from one language into another. A fundamental change has occurred in the motivation for translation. The idea of serving a language and the works written in it by carrying them across into another language and culture is not the only factors of motivating translation practices today. Translation has its own politics now, its own hidden or manifest agenda. But how has it all changed for the self-effacing translator?

Translation finds itself today in the midst of an overabundance of approaches and theories. For every school of literary theory, translation has its own relevance and significance and vice versa, according to them. For post-colonial theorists, translation is, as Tejaswini Niranjana puts it, 'a practice that shapes and takes shapes within the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism' (Niranjana: 1992) For Feminists, translation is an opportunity to subvert the patriarchal modes of using language. As Susanne de Lotbiniere Harwood says:

My translation practice is a political activity aimed at making language speak for women. So my signature on a translation means: this translation has used every possible translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language. Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world. Which is what feminism is all about. (De Lotbiniere-Harwood, p. 9)

Translation, as scholarly theorists put it, is no longer a reproduction of the so-called 'original'; it is an act of writing in its own right. The translation theorists in the West have done fairly well in approaching translation from the point of view of their respective schools of thought and theory. The question, however, is, would it suffice for the Indian scenario of translation? Or would it suit the diametrically different scenario of translation in India? How much of the translation theory of the West suit the aesthetics and ethics of translation in a country like India? Even if it does, what is the Indian intervention in terms of translation theory in the ever changing dynamics of translation? Have we been able to make use of the long and attested tradition of discourse on literature and literary criticism for defining and re-defining our translation priorities as well as translation strategies? These are questions which are at the heart of the aesthetics and ethics of translation because we cannot pursue translation guided by the noblest of intentions, with aesthetics and ethics borrowed from the West or for that matter from anywhere else. One wonders if there is a better prescription of translation competence than what Bhamah says about the competence of a poet, "For composing Kāvya, the poet should contemplate over the following-Grammar, Meter, the nature of words, meanings of words, the stories in Itihasas, the ways of the world, Nyaya, and the arts."(Kavyalamakara, 1.9)

Is our translator today equipped with the knowledge of all of these?

Lead Out:

The strange institution called literature has led to an even stranger institution called literary theory because it enjoys the privilege of saying everything about the process of 'saying

everything in every way. Translation guided and defined by interpretations proffered by literary theory of the West has its own challenges. If the strange institution is termed as literature in the West and Kāvya in the Indian tradition, and they have fundamentally different definitions of their nature and function, when we translate it, the aesthetics and ethics cannot be the same as that of the West. If that be true, the translation theorist cannot afford to bury his own tradition and carry out the task of contemplating over the fundamental issues of literature and its translation. While today anyone and everyone translates, if one has to revisit Indian tradition, Bhamah would be found saying, “Even the dull-witted can learn Sāstra with the help of a teacher. Poetry, however, would come to the one with natural ability, and that too not invariably.” (1.5)

Whether to make translation a vehicle of one’s agenda and theory of one’s choice or to make it a means of pursuing the realization of *purushartha chatushtaya* is a choice which will determine the aesthetics and ethics of not only translation but also of literature itself. But to come to anywhere close to the clarity regarding these issues, we shall have to, as Derrida says, ‘...question, analyze, transform this strange contradiction, this strange institutionless institution.’ (*Acts of Literature*, 42). Perhaps, the same seems to hold true even for translation.

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