

PAPER 15: MODULE 10: E-TEXT

UGC MHRD e Pathshala

Subject: ENGLISH

Principal Investigator: Prof. Tutun Mukherjee, University of Hyderabad

Paper Title: Literary Translation in India

Paper Coordinator: Prof. T.S. Satyanath, University of Delhi

Module 10: Postcolonial Translation

Author: Ms. Saswati Saha, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sikkim
University

Content Reviewer: Prof. T.S. Satyanath, University of Delhi

Language Editor: Dr. Mrinmoy Pramanick, University of Calcutta

Postcolonial Translation

Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. What is “postcolonialism”?
- III. What is postcolonial translation?
- IV. Postcolonial Translation and the Indian Context
- V. Role of the Translator in Postcolonial Translation
- VI. Major Criticism
- VII. Conclusion
- VIII. Summary of the Module
- IX. Reference

What is this module about?

In this module we are going to learn about postcolonial translation and its ideological and political implications. This module consists of an introduction that will introduce how the practice of translation functions in a colonial and postcolonial scenario. Further, we will discuss what post colonialism and postcolonial translation is. We will discuss how the process of translation has been discussed as a replica of colonization and how postcolonial

translation challenges the concentration of knowledge in the west and takes plurality into account. The module also includes a discussion on the postcolonial translation in the Indian context. It talks about how significant the role of the translator in the postcolonial context is. This module also includes the opinions and thoughts of various translation theorists on postcolonial translation.

I. Introduction

Translation is not just about exchanges between two different languages but it is also about the cultures in which the languages are embedded, the politics and the history. According to Bassnett and Trivedi, “translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer...Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems.” (Bassnett and Trivedi 3)

Translation practices in the colonial context have always been studied as a part of the asymmetrical power structure that exists between two languages and cultures. As such translation studies do not merely consist of interactions between two authors but entails a deep political implication. The asymmetry of power was a result of European imperialism which in turn also inculcates the faith that the colonizers are racially, aesthetically and intellectually superior to the colonized. This situates the language of the coloniser over and above the languages of the colonies. This often leads to the suffering of the texts originated in the language culture of the colonial world. They get modified, parts of the text get deleted

and the translator takes as much liberty as s/he wishes to aesthetically subjugate the text. The main aim of the translator is mould the text in a way so as to suit the taste of readers carefully nurtured and cultivated according to the sense of Western aesthetics. Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyyat* is one such instance where the translator from the "superior" culture of the West could hardly consider the poet from the East as "poet enough" and took it upon himself the responsibility to make him one. In a letter written to E.B. Cowell, Edward Fitzgerald writes, "It is an amusement for me to take what liberties I like with these Persians, who (as I think) are not poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them." (Lefevere 80)

II. What is "postcolonialism"?

In an interview taken by Thomas J. Corbett in 2011 for *Translational: Journal of the Northern California Translators Association*, Robert J.C. Young explains what he means by postcolonialism in a very simple manner. He says that postcolonialism has different connotations in different countries depending on their experience with colonialism. It simply means "after the colonial". Moreover he says:

For countries that were colonized, it means dealing with the aftermath and the debris of colonial rule, institutional, economic, material, cultural and psychic.

For countries that were formerly (or indeed remain) colonial powers—all Western European countries with the exception of Norway (though even there the Norwegian Lutherans were involved in forms of colonialism), as well as Russia, China and Japan, together with countries that arguably continue colonialism in different modalities, above all the United States (the United

States is both an imperial and formerly colonized power), it means deconstructing and revising their own cultures and historical narratives with respect to their own values, assumptions and hierarchies that were developed in the colonial period, and adjusting their own cultures to accommodate the migrants who have now brought the empire home, so to speak, and come to live in the formerly imperial centre.ⁱ

Post colonialism re-reads colonization as a part of the transcultural global process and decentres the nation-centred imperial grand narratives. It traces the movement of power and tries to expose the continuing tension of power relations. It is through postcolonialism that all the exchanges taking places within the global context can be understood. The movement of knowledge, ideas, books and cultural traffic is determined and directed by colonialism and its impact. Sherry Simon writes, “Postcolonialism is about rethinking the ways in which cultures relate to one another, recognizing their internal differences and also questioning the poles from which and to which cultural products travel”. (Simon and St-Pierre 17)

Postcolonialism is the reading and writing practice which questions the production of knowledge and discourse concerning the other. Translation in this context is understood not just carrying over message from one language to other, bridging the gap between two cultures, it becomes “a strategy of intervention through which newness comes into the world.”ⁱⁱ

III. What is postcolonial translation?

There exists a qualitative difference between the translations of the pre- and the post- colonial period. The periodization of translations, therefore, as colonial or post-colonial is although a

diachronic marker, it also encapsulates, at same time, ideological and political implications. Postcolonial translation studies challenges the notion that knowledge is concentrated in the west and tries to move towards a broader scheme that is skeptical towards received knowledge and takes plurality into account. The major questions that the study of postcolonial translation theory deals with include enquiring the kind of changes that has taken place in the world of translation in terms of the choice of texts, whether the choice of texts for translation in the colonial times matches the choice of texts in the postcolonial era and how they now serve a completely different political project. It also tries to probe deep into the changes that have crept into asymmetrical power structure that existed between the former colonies and the centres of power and how the change affected the choices made in translations. In other words, this theory of translation studies has helped to identify the socio-political dimensions of literary and linguistic activity and has thereby contributed largely in broadening the horizons of translation studies. ⁱⁱⁱ

The process of translation has often been viewed as replica of the process of colonialisation. The concept that the original is superior and that the translation is nothing but a copy of the original coincides with the period of early colonization “when Europe began to reach outside its own boundaries for territory to appropriate”. (Bassnett and Trivedi 2) The author was considered the owner of the original text. The translator, therefore, suffered from the anxiety of approximating the original text as much as possible so that the authenticity of his rendition is not challenged.

Comparing process of colonialism and translation Bassnett and Trivedi remarks that in case of colonialism “Europe was regarded as the great Original, the starting point, and the colonies were therefore copies, or ‘translations’ of Europe, which they were supposed to duplicate.” (Bassnett and Trivedi 4) Thus the colonies were by definition inferior to Europe.

This also hints at the language of 'loss' which came to be known as a strong feature of translation. Since the colonies are translations, something was lost in the process and thus they were rendered inferior. The postcolonial theorists have concentrated on this close relationship between colonialism and translation and has pointed out that translation was for centuries a one-way process which facilitated colonialism. In fact it was the European norms that dominated practice of translation and literary production that dominated the colonies. These translations defined the colonies from the perspective of the coloniser and thus ensured a superior position for Europe. Said, in his famous work *Orientalism*, points out that "Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself [sic]vis-à-vis the Orient, translated into his text; this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kind of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text – all of which adds up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient and finally representing it or speaking in its behalf." (Said 20) What Said argues is that these colonized countries were described in ways which denigrated them, which produced them as an inferior copy, an Other, in order to produce a positive, civilized image of British society. Anuradha Dingawaney and Carol Maier in their work *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-cultural texts* pointed out that such translation practices are a form of linguistic and literary violence. All these theorists have recognized the "metaphor of the colony as a translation, a copy of an original located elsewhere on the map". (Bassnett and Trivedi 5)

Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre in their work *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era* deals extensively with the role that translation play in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. They question whether translation in such a scenario is nothing but an "alien and oppressive presence of foreign culture" or "they are a part of a process of exchange" involving response and interaction. Simon writes, "In the context of translation

studies, the term “postcolonialism” remains useful in suggesting two essential ideas. The first is the *global dimension* of research in translation studies; the second is the necessary attention to the framework through which we understand *power relations* and *relations of alterity*.” (Simon and St-Pierre 13)

IV. Postcolonial Translation and the Indian Context

The concept of translation as is prevalent in India today is the result of the Indians coming in contact with the European epistemological concept of translation. The advent of the British in India marks the coming in of a translation practice which brought with it concepts of the “original” and the anxiety of authenticity. The word *anuvad* that was by and large used to denote translation in classical India etymologically means “repetition of something that has already been said”. Thus the practice was mainly oral and had no relation with that of writing. Since the practice only meant repetition, there was neither the anxiety of the original, nor the anxiety of betrayal or the concept of loss in translation. That is the reason why the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* worked as source books which were freely worked and re-worked upon several times by countless writers in both Sanskrit and modern Indian languages who even included local tales in their renditions to fill in the gaps. All such texts that emanated out of these sourcebooks were considered original texts in their own rights. Therefore translation in the Indian context is considered as “new writing” as Sujit Mukherjee points out or “transcreation” as P.Lal calls it.

Harish Trivedi in his essay “The Politics of Postcolonial Translation” discusses postcolonial translation in the Indian context. He points out that postcolonial translation usually considers translation of world literature into Indian languages and translation of

literatures of Indian languages into languages of the world. The major change in the kind of translations and the attitude towards it in the postcolonial scenario is that it is now more target language culture oriented. The translators translate Western authors not for the love of their work or language but for the love of their indigenous language, to contribute more to their native language, to enrich it, to make it more accomplished. As is the case of Hindi translator Rangey Rajan who being the most prolific translator of Shakespeare states that “his fifteen translations published in the mid-1950s were motivated rather more by his love of Hindi than by his love of Shakespeare”. (Ray 80)

Even during the colonial period, the indigenous intellectuals of India took up the practice of translation, adaptation and rewriting of the Western texts on a large scale not only for aesthetic pleasure but also as a politically and ideologically charged activity that thrived in a relative autonomy from the colonial state and aimed at producing results that undercut the colonial motives. Indian translators also tried to go beyond the colonizer’s language and showed interest in literary works of Ireland, Scotland, France and Spain. These literary encounters not only provided inspiration for the freedom movement but also can be seen as an attempt of liberating the literature produced in India from “the tutelage of the imperially-induced master literature, English. The translators considered the selection of texts from languages other than English is particularly significant as these would serve as an eye-opener to another world for Indian colonial readers, their fellow writers and translators, or re-writers. (Simon and St-Pierre 89-90) Some of the examples in this context include Rangalal Bandopadhyay’s translation of Thomas Moore, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi’s translation of Victor Hugo’s *Quatre-vingt-treize* as *Badla*, Premchand’s translation of Anatole France’s *Thais*. These translators paved way for many later translations of European works as those by Moliere, Dumas, Maupassant and Rolland.

The other side of postcolonial translation in India consists of translations from Indian literature into the languages of the world. This has been classified by Harish Trivedi into four broad categories : a) Indic and indological works from classical Indian languages like that of *Shakuntala*, *Manusmriti*, *Arthshastra* b) late ancient and medieval works, largely to do with *bhakti*, like translation of Tamil *Sangam* Poetry, Kannada *Vachanas* c) fictional works depicting life and culture of modern India, for example works of Tagore, Premchand, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Gopinath Mohanty and d) works by modernist or high-modernist writers like Lokenath Bhattacharya, Agyeya, Jibanananda Das, Amrita Pritam, Sitakanta Mahapatra, Mahasweta Devi, Indira Goswami, Nirmal Verma, Thakazhi S. Pillai. This enormous translation project has given rise to a new category of literature called the Indian Writings in English Translation which is now an important part of the curriculum of English literature studied in India. (Ray 83)

V. Role of the Translator in Postcolonial Translation

In the introduction to *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era*, Sherry Simon remarks:

Translators, as cultural and economic intermediaries, are often members of marginalized groups. Historically, they occupy socially fragile positions, on the fringes of power. When they are, in addition, members of colonial or neo-colonial societies, their work is saturated with the knowledge which comes from daily exposure to conflictual aspects of language exchange. They are attentive to the fact that cultural traffic does not circulate freely about the globe, that its flow is regulated by the existence and condition of trade routes,

the availability of willing vehicles and the needs and pleasures which cultural commerce caters to. In other words, they know that the circulation of translations is not to be equated with the logic of the gift but with the rules of commodity exchange. Postcolonial contexts heighten awareness that translations are solicited and exchanged according to rules of trade and ownership, which are both commercial and ideological. (Simon and St Pierre 13)

A postcolonial translator addresses an intercultural audience. The translator must intimately understand the language and situation of the source text. S/he then tries to convey thoughts, ideas and cultural practices from one culture or language to another. The translator's task, therefore, is to bridge the difference that exists between the culture of the source text and that of the target text. Thus s/he often takes recourse to footnotes, glossaries and prefaces to fill the gap between the two. Since the translator has to represent a vast cultural space, s/he has to make a choice as to which elements of the source text will be retained, and which are the elements that needs to be "domesticated" for the benefit of the target readers. This process of selection is itself politically and ideologically nuanced. Maria Tymoczko, in her essay, "Postcolonial Writing and Literary Translation" states that "Another name for the choices, emphases and selectivity of both translators and postcolonial writers is *interpretation*. Judgement is inescapable in the process; 'objectivity' is impossible. And just as there can be no final translation, there can be no final interpretation of a culture through a literary mode...Such a process of selectivity and interpretation is ideological and will inevitably invite controversy." (Bassnett and Trivedi 23-24)

VI. Major Criticism

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay “The Politics of Translation” (1993) talks about the ideological consequences of translation of ‘Third World’ literature into English and the distortion it entails. Translation of texts from the former colonies into the language of power, that is, English eliminates the identity of politically less powerful individuals and cultures. She writes, “In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translates, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan. (Spivak 371-2) The major criticism of the postcolonial theory of translation is that it is nearly always neo-colonial, although at the surface level it talks about decolonization. The language of postcolonialism seems to be only English and the ‘politics of translation’ seems to give prominence to English, the hegemonic language of the ex-colonizers. Translation of texts into English often fail to translate the difference in the views of the author of source text as the translator, often, over-assimilates it to make it accessible to the western readers. Tejaswini Niranjana in her major work *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context* (1992) also presents an image of the postcolonial as ‘still scored through by an absentee colonialism’ (Munday 132) Translation of texts into English has produced a corpus of knowledge about the Third World which enable the centers of power to “construct a rewritten image of the ‘East’ that has then come to stand for truth.”

VII. Conclusion

Translation had been at the heart of colonial encounter and had helped in the establishment and perpetuation of superiority of one language and culture over the other. But the importance of studying translation practice in the postcolonial era has become even more

important since the previously powerful languages and culture of the metropolis now interact with the languages of the culture once marginalized and ignored. These cultures of the marginalized colonies now write back to the once centres of power through translation. These attempts have compelled theorists to rethink about the history of translation practice and its relevance in the present postcolonial times. Since the practice of translation entails mediation between two cultures which could be both repressive and liberating, it has the capacity to both join and separate cultures. But the exchange and circulation that takes place in the postcolonial context are largely governed by an interactiveness between cultures which challenges the conversations emanating from centers of power and conventional speaking positions.

VIII. Summary of the Module

In this module we have learnt how translation is not just an exchange between two different languages but it entails a historical, political and ideological stance. In the postcolonial world translation is studied as a part of the asymmetrical power structure that exists between the language of the colonizer and the language of the colonized. This power politics is the result of the European imperialism which denigrated the cultures of the colonized. We have also studied how postcolonial translation activities rethink the ways in which cultures relate to one another and take the plurality of voices into account. It challenges the notion that knowledge is concentrated in the West and focuses on the discourses concerning the other. The module also deals with the postcolonial translations in India and shows how in the colonial period the Indian intellectuals took up the practice of translation, adaptation and rewriting of the Western texts which thrived in relative autonomy from the colonial state and produced results that undercut the colonial motives.

These translators also interacted with the translators from other European states which not only provided them with an alternative view of the world but also gave inspiration for the freedom movement. In the post-colonial times the translations in India was both from languages of the world into the Indian languages and vice-versa. The translations were more target language oriented with the attempt of enriching the indigenous languages.

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ⁱ <http://translorial.com/2011/05/01/translation-and-postcolonialism/>

ⁱⁱ See Sherry Simon’s Introduction to *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era* for a detailed discussion on this topic.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Trivedi, Harish. “The Politics of Postcolonial Translation”. Mohit K. Ray (ed.) *Studies in Translation*. New Delhi: Atlantic Press, 2008 for detailed discussion.