

## Utterance and the World: The Role of Translation Today

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“In Principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and finally, by third parties in pursuit of gain”

- The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin.

**Illuminations.** (Pimlico: London) 1999. P 212

Translation of the oral into the written, I presume, is an attempt at enunciating the verbal into the linguistic, the transformation of sensory perception into the written. In other words, it is an act of making the world “hear” operating with the motif or belief that it would be an all-embracing activity.

In principle, all languages are commensurable as opposed to American pragmatism observes Ajaz Ahamed. <sup>1</sup> In any act of translation, I feel that capturing sense is an easier task than that of making someone spot, see or experience sensibilities. For instance, translating Bhagavadgita into the tongue of an indigenous culture is as difficult as translating a native culture and language into another. Since language is embedded in power politics under the sign of globalization, the acquisition of English as a language invariably reflects the class, say bourgeois or elite class. Hence, in today’s world of information technology where various information bombard our psyche, in a country like India where there is population explosion, language operates as a pointer of an episteme, a sort of diagnostic system. Therefore, any translation of an oral culture of Kannada into

English results in English getting richer. Since English has become one of the languages of India and much sought after today, it is wielding much power vis-à-vis day-to-day affairs as well as in the academic circles. Another factor is India advocating free trade policy and opening its market to foreign investors has added more power and glamour to English in India. In other words, if a person is a glib in English, he is intelligent. Immaculate use of English results in bestowing undue credit and intelligence to the person speaking in English. Hence, Indian Writing in English and other regional languages and literature (not Desi for god's sake) should be studied as comparative literature and not as a hegemonic structure. It also should not be viewed from that sweeping generalization of Fredric Jameson who calls all third world literatures are national allegories. I think it is here that translations vital contribution rests.

In a polylingual and polycultural situation like India, translation should aim at building a chronopolitan<sup>2</sup> culture that aims at homogeneity and not difference. In doing so, translational process paves way for the interfacing of Translator-Reader-Source Text, resulting in what Deborah Bower opines: "The wholeness of one person can be received in a known context by the wholeness of another".<sup>3</sup> There rests a tendency to anglicize and clothe the oral/regional (Kannada experience here) thus falling into the trap of "English as universal" or "Postcoloniality as the inevitable real condition, a paradigmatic exercise of enlightenment". In the words of Theo Hermans,

Translation, then, is the visible sign of the openness of the literary system, of a specific literary system; it opens the way to what can be called both subversion and transformation depending on where the guardians of the dominant poetics, the dominant ideology stand!<sup>4</sup>

Any translator of a folk/oral narrative confronts three referential systems-the verbal/oral into text, the system of language and culture into which the verbal/oral gets translated into (Kannada here) and the cultural system into which it gets re-created as a meta text through English. Culture no doubt is a site of contestation and translation must negotiate the complex realities of language which the culture comprises. Translation thus is a process of unlearning, de-colonizing the mind. When one translates oral into the written, English in this case, one is just not asserting his ego but also showing the richness embedded in a tradition which the west has been ignorant of. The translational process of oral to the written can be viewed as a percolation function where the text gets re-created with a new set of ideological framework generating a specific response. This sort of an enterprise I suppose, results in breaking down of hierarchies, a discursive project of writing back or writing home or returning the gaze. Just as we have received translated texts from the west since Sophoclean times, the non-western has been little talked of. Hence this endeavour. Susan Bassnett McGuire's observations are apt here:

Language, then is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril".<sup>5</sup>

In this paper I have included folk narratives that talk about RAIN and LORD GANESHA (otherwise known as Benava, Vinayaka) and excerpts of interviews of singers of folk narratives. It appears that there is a connection between Rain and Lord Ganesha in folk narratives. Lord Ganesha is one of the oldest of Gods in folk communities. Because of this, an invocation to lord Ganesha is sung before the rendering of any narrative by all folk. A noteworthy issue is the fact that Ganesha festival falls immediately after the monsoon rain

abates. On the festival day, the peasants garnering clay from their fields, make the idol of Lord Ganesha and offer prayers with seasonal fruits and paraphernalia. The tools that the peasants use in the fields such as rope, sickle etc., find its place in the hands of the clay idol! Lord Ganesha's belly resembles a granary store and is encircled by a snake. Symbolically the snake guards the grains against rats which invade the granary store. After the festival, the clay idol is immersed in water. This means worship of Ganesha is akin to worship of mother earth. In Tamil Nadu, the neighbouring state, even to this day, Ganesha made of clay devoid of painted colours is kept and worshipped. On the other hand, in Karnataka State, with the arrival of blossom showers, the peasants roll the Cow dung into a ball, stick a blade of grass and placing it on the seeds to be sowed; they worship it as Lord Benava. This points to the fact that Lord Ganesha must have emerged as God with agrarian culture and practice. Hence, all over Karnataka, in the folk renderings, Ganesha figures as a warder of evil surrounded by seasonal fruits. Rama, Krishna and Shiva are very rarely invoked in folk renderings. Perhaps because of this, Ganesha could be viewed as a God much older and ancient than Rama, Krishna or Shiva. Ancient because he is a god who emerged when marriage systems were not in vogue. Hence, he remains even to this day the most eligible bachelor! As he is a god who surfaced before agriculture was a practice and remained a God still with the emergence of agriculture as a way of living, he is half human, half animal. Perhaps suggesting human incompleteness. Ganesha must have been a God of all folk communities in India since time immemorial.

Since the worship of Lord Ganesha is associated with "Rain", a narrative on "Rain" is included too. India is an agrarian country. And the folk narrative too has flowered with agriculture as a backdrop. To the folk, their profession, literature and art are one and the same. Their literature and art exist not for entertainment. To the folk, entertainment too is

a dimension of worship. It is interesting to note that the genesis of folk literature occurred with Work and Nature worship as backdrop. It appears that folk literature all over India is identical. Though there are minor variations at the surface level, folk literature of all the states with different tradition and mores resonate with the same breath. Hence, Rain is a life giver and saver to the agrarian based society of India. There are umpteen numbers of folk renderings about Rain in Karnataka State. Some are sung as prayers before the arrival of rains and are followed by rituals too. Rain gets personified as “Maleraya”. If he doesn’t arrive on time, invectives in the form of triplets are rendered. It is the children who sing these songs roaming in the streets of villages! Very rightly so. As drought sets in, the ultimate sufferers are children apart from the flora and fauna.

### **BENAVA (LORD GANESHA) <sup>6</sup>**

(Sung by Pedna Boramma, Bosae Devarahatti, Challakere Taluk, Chitradurga District)

Remember we first the elephant visage God,  
The handsome Benava from the holy mountain Kailasa.

*Accept wet rice and gram, Plantains,  
Pounded Sesame sweet balls and sweet juice.*

In the fields of Sesame, the pot-bellied Benava,  
Pounded Sesame sweet balls and Peanuts for you.

*Uddina balls, wet gram and sweet juice for you,  
Give knowledge and sound mind for us.*

In the fields of Sesame, the pot-bellied Benava,  
*Uddina balls, wet gram and sweet juice for you.*

In the fields of gram, the pot-bellied Beneva,  
Gram balls and Peanuts for you.

Gram balls, Peanuts and Sweet Juice for you,  
Grant us sound mind till we live.

**MALERAYA (RAIN GOD)**

(Sung by Siriyajji, Chikkenahalli, Challakere Taluk, Chitradurga District)

He has fallen in love with a girl afar

Playing dice. Oh Girl

As a partner to you he has stay put there.

Oh girl,

Stands there he, out of love for you.

Wearing the starch fabric is gentleman Rain God

Doesn't budge from the house of the lover. On earth

The lemon shrub, parched, awaits you.

Rain god, the friend of wind and cold

Doesn't budge from the concubine. On earth

Plantain stem, parched, awaits you.

Oh lord Shiva, Saviour of the earth

Dear me, bring rains. Human world

Cries for food.

Food eaten by dogs are eaten by women

Oh lord in heaven save us. On earth

grief of women have enveloped.

Food eaten by pigs are eaten by beauties

Oh lord Indira save us. On earth

The grief of beauties have reached Shiva.

Donning a gaudy fabric, Rain God

Slumbers in palace. Oh Rain God

Indira, bless and save us with rain.

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What is the sound in the peasant lane?

That of twenty nails driven to the plough.

The son repairs the plough driving a nail.  
There is thunder and lightning some where  
On the flagstaff erected by the Durga chief  
The rain god plays dice.  
Enters the field a peasant carrying a plough  
Ploughing did I, but no rain. On the earth,  
Pearl like clouds gather in the sky.  
On the head a pearl studded plough  
Accompanied by a woman of high birth, the peasant son  
Departs to sow seeds.  
Earth Queen desires a husband,  
Rain God bless. Oh the earth queen  
Yearns a man with plough,  
Men with plough and eight Ox  
Akin to the great Pandavas. In the fields  
Dances the Rain God.  
Kind is mother earth wearing an anklet  
Roaming in Sesame fields. Peasant son,  
Spreading your towel on the floor, bow, and pay respects.  
Oh Peasant, nurturer and preserver of Flora and Fauna  
Who feeds all. To peasant son  
We offer betel leaves.

Going through the above lines, one can envisage the fact that in any translation of oral into the written, the oral/rendering nature of language of the original content cannot be completely grasped but can be put across comprehensively. This is because the affinity between content and language of the oral is entirely different when it is translated. Walter Benjamin's comments are apt here:

“That which withers away in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions, it substitutes a plurality of copies for unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced”.<sup>7</sup>

Reading a translated version of an oral piece might push the reader to experience a sort of estrangement. But this estrangement also performs the function of erasing the strict demarcations between author-translator-reader-original text. Pirandello’s observation on acting and camera reflect the issues discussed vis-à-vis translation of an oral piece into the written. He observes:

“The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one’s own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where it is transported? Before the public”.<sup>8</sup>

It is here that writing and translation render their vital contribution. Just imagine these voices not recorded in Kannada language? A whole community would have been hit by an epidemic called aphasia and would have been erased from this world. But the other vital question that needs more attention is, are the translations of Folk Narratives meant for readers who are ignorant of the original or for a particular set of readers? The answer would be yes because the attempt is to say the same thing by re-creation in a different medium. In other words, it is not just a function of transmitting information but an endeavour of transmitting essential things in a meticulous fashion. This then pushes the translator to muse over the translatability of the original work since the oral creation is devoid of any mass appeal but sets out as a matter of tradition or ritual.



To conclude, Literatures, it is essential are to be translated because of their translatability. Translation, no doubt might be considered less significant than the original but the original has affinity with the translation, a vital affinity. The task of the translator in translating an oral piece into the written should focus on the intention of the original getting reflected in the language into which s/he is translating. Basing on the premise that the translated work is not a literary work but a literary enterprise marked by an attempt to integrate language, literature, culture etc., because “the intention of the author is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. Translation is midway between poetry and doctrine”.<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Ajaz Ahamed, Key Note Address. National Seminar on Translation and Socio-literary Space, 12-14<sup>th</sup> February 2004, Department of English and Modern European Languages, Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi.
2. Chronopolitanism is developed as a theoretical as well as ethical opening that reconfigures the search for a world political community in time and history. It is a move that has the explicit aim of extending social and political responsibilities to past, present and future generations, as well as to the diversity of histories and rhythms of life that co-exists in the global present. S. Werner, "The Chronopolitan Ideal: Time, Belonging and Globalisation" (2000). Time and Society, Vol 9, Nos 2&3, PP 331-345.
3. Deborah Bower, “Squaring the Circle: The Problem of Translation in The Temptations of Big Bear” in W.H. New Ed. Canadian Literature, No. 117, Summer. P

4. “Why Waste our time on rewrites? The trouble with Interpretation and the role of rewriting in an alternative paradigm” in Theo Hermans Ed. The Manipulation of Literature Studies in Literary Translation. (Croom Helen: London, 1985) P 237
5. Susan Bassnett McGuire, Translation Studies. (London: Routledge, 1980) P 14
6. Krishnamurthy Hanur Ed. Folk Narratives of Karnataka. Trans. Vijay Sheshadri. South Central Cultural Zone Centre, Nagpur. (In Press)
7. Walter Benjamin, Illuminations. (Pimlico: London, 1999) P 215
8. Luigi Pirandello, Si Gira. Qtd. By Leon Pierre Quint. “Signification du Cinema”. L’Art Cinematographique. P 12-14
9. Walter Benjamin, Illuminations. (Pimlico: London, 1999) P 77-78

