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Diversity in Our Own Terms

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Abstract

This part-research paper and part-reflective piece is a response to the work of Lawrence Venuti, who advocates resistant and foreiginising methods of translation, as opposed to fluent Anglophone translations. Foreignising translations are supposed to control ethnocentric violence and thus promote democracy, subsequently aiding in true diversity. Considering the practice and theory of Gayatri Spivak, who seems to have produced such translations, I argue that diversity is maintained because her methods attend to the specificities of the text rather than to the language. I further posit that text-specific analyses of translations will educate us of the diversity of our texts and their stakes, as well as the diversity of translation strategies that open wide the theoretical framework of translation to different possibilities. In the second part of the essay, I illustrate the previous thesis with the example of the English translation of the Holocaust memoir, *Night*.

Keywords: anglicisation, translation, foreignisation, marginalization.

What would count as diversity in the field of literary translation? Would it be more number of translations of literature from languages that are underrepresented in the global literary market? Perhaps, translations of different literary forms, as opposed to overwhelming numbers of novels and short-story collections, could count: not only forms that are popular in

the canon of Western literature, but also forms that have had indigenous lives in their literary traditions. More writing from genders that have been marginalised. Indeed, all this builds a rich and diverse body of translated works to choose from. Some theorists, who are not only interested in the quantity of translations, are quick to remind us that in creating this diverse body, we must not compromise on those aspects that actually make them diverse. In other words, while translating works into English—the language that receives the highest number of translations—we should be vary of anglicising them: such a process would erase all the lines that actually make them translations, the lines that actually make our body of translations diverse. The point is well taken. However, by being severe about anglicisation, are we also not creating impositions on how diversity must look like? In our demand for the non-anglicised translation that retains linguistic specificities, especially, we are also narrowing the possibilities of heterogeneity in translation. Instead of necessitating specific modes of translation for all of literature—here, strict non-anglicisation—text-specific methods ensure the transmission of the unique stakes of every text thereby diversifying not only the body of literature but also the theoretical framework of translation.

In the past two decades or so, the cultural politics of translation and the violence of representation have dominated the discussions around translation. Lawrence Venuti's work on the regimes of domestication in English encapsulates most of the discussion around the subject. One could treat his theory as a treatise for non-anglicisation of translations, which he formulates as 'foreignisation.' One should remember: although 'foreignisation' would mean 'maintenance of foreignness', the word suggests—with its suffix '-isation'—that one has to *make* foreign. This is expected, of course, since translating is an act of creation; while translating, one foreignises to emphasise the foreign nature of the texts. This foreignness marks their diversity.

While the preferred method for Venuti is foreignisation, he broadly classifies all translating methods to two kinds: domestication and foreignisation. In the language of the lay-people, the first brings the author to the audience and the second takes the audience to the author (Venuti 209). Although both these methods exist in theory, it is evident that domestication has reigned the English literary field for years now. From John Denham to Dryden, from Frere to Nida, several theorists and practitioners hold domestication as ideal. Their beliefs are not unfounded: they choose to "capture [the] spirit" of the text (212), for which language is perhaps a barrier, and paradoxically a channel. Where one language directed the readers to the aforementioned 'spirit', the language of the translation here does the same: a translation is yet another pathway to literature. This does not preclude fidelity either. In fact, domestication operates on "double fidelity" (212): fidelity towards the text i.e. the ideas and intention, and fidelity towards the effect it creates on its audience.

The argument for foreignisation places pressure on the "ethnocentric violence" (Venuti 210) domestication can cause: while aiming at "eternal human verities" (214), the translation also shoots out foreign cultures, "trivialis[es] and exclud[es]" them (208), reconstitutes the texts in English traditions, thereby participating in ethnic and racial violence. By chasing only the intention of the text, the "wholesale domestication of the foreign text" (209) maintains its own literary canon and culture. It unwittingly leads to a hierarchisation of English "values, beliefs, and representations" (209) as normative. The transparency of the domesticated translation conceals the erasure of cultural markers. Foreignisation, hence, is advocated. Venuti calls his strategy as "abusive fidelity" (217): the translation not only attempts to capture the idea of the text, but also manages to carry the *how*: "the play of signifiers," the rhetoricity, the "phonological, syntactical, and discursive structures" (217). In short, the "lexical and syntactical peculiarities" of the language of the text is forced on English—it is thus abusive—so as to project the foreignness of the text; fidelity is maintained; diversity is promoted.

However, in this argument is an overdetermination of the cultural significance of the language of the text. More often than not, the text follows the general turns of the language of origin: general turns that come about due to the arbitrariness of grammar, punctuation, and syntax. It is important to remember that we are translating literature and not language. No doubt literature is contained in language; but language is not what entirely contains the 'values, beliefs, and representations' that Venuti believes would be lost in a fluent translation. *Literature* contains that, and a translation to fluent English need not replace those specific markers. If it is an erasure of language itself, though, that one is concerned about, then one is fighting the battle in the wrong field: translation essentially narrates the same story in a different language. Moreover, forcing the linguistic turns of a different language on English does nothing to exhibit the language that is being lost: what readers would see is an English with a different, sometimes distracting, syntax and structure. English with the linguistic markers of another language is not equivalent to that language at all; in no way, hence, is it a strategy against ethnocentric violence. It is actually the emphasis on language that brings to belief that a fluent English translation will automatically belong to the English literary tradition, as Venuti claims, and thus participate in violence. Translations today, in truth, have not belonged to the literary—let alone English—canon; this is in fact a complaint among translators and writers alike. A translator can manage to curb ethnocentric violence without being caught up in the tentacles of specific characteristics of the language of a literary text—characters that are arbitrary, that came to the writer by chance, simply because she wrote in that language.

Obviously, there are counters to the above argument: the English translations of Mahasweta Devi's works, for example, by Gayatri Spivak. As Sherry Simon notes in her essay on the intersection of translation, post-colonialism, and cultural studies, Spivak appeals—through both her practice and theory—for "what Lawrence Venuti would call "resistance" and "less fluent" practices of translation" (Simon 474). Gayatri Spivak fiercely advocates an

attention to language in order to produce an honest translation. She perceives "language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency" (Spivak 398). There is a rhetoricity, she notes, that should bear more weight on the strategies of translation rather than the semantics, or quite simply, the plot-meaning of the text. Her dense, rich prose in her translations is reflective of her theory: from the choice of the title of 'Stanadayini' to 'Breast-Giver' rather than 'Wet nurse' (400), to the long, winding, sentences in most of Mahasweta Devi's stories—'Breast Giver', 'Douloti', 'Draupadi'—she demonstrates how the peculiarities unique to the text need to be staged in the language of the translation as well; any shortchanging here would amount to disloyalty.

Spivak's practice and critique is also part of a larger feminist agenda. While women writers from Third World countries need to "be made to speak English" (399), they should not be translated into a uniform international translatese that carries only the message across and disregards the forms of expression. This will lead to a solidarity based on the position of "she is just like me" (400)—a position unfavourable to democracy, and to further critical engagement. Such translations would lead to paradigms similar to Cixous' reception of Clarice Lispector's works: as Rosemary Arrojo argues, Cixous' reading is "far from letting the alterity of Lispector's work speak as such and, in fact, ends up serving and celebrating its own interests and goals" (Arrojo 144). A translation, also a form of reading, should not serve such purposes; for critical consideration, the rhetoricity of their work must make it into English. In other words, they should speak English, but in their own terms.

However, Spivak's method has less to do with linguistic peculiarities that Venuti talks about, and more to do with the "textual specificities of the works" of Mahasweta Devi (Simon 469). Here, the textual specificities take the form of stylistic Bangla, the form of long but stunting sentences, the form that reveals the gendered agency that Spivak is concerned about. As Spivak suggests in her essay, Devi belongs to a group of women writers who are non-

conformist and resistant in their writing already. Devi's title 'Stanadayini' is defamiliarising in the context of the story to the Bengali reader as well. 'Draupadi' is written in a language that is harsh, tempting and shocking. And it is this that is cast back in Spivak's non-fluent, resitant-to-the-international-translatese prose. It is not the unique syntax of Bangla that has been reproduced in English, but a stylisation of Bangla that has found an equivalence in Spivak's English; at places Spivak even uses American slang to create the disconcerting tone (Simon 470). The translations are not language-centric as much as they are Devi-centric: the ruggedness is a function of Devi's deliberate stylisation rather the general turns of Bangla. Spivak's translation is thus very work-specific. And one proposes that 'Politics of Translation' be read as an accompaniment to Spivak's translations of Devi's works, and also as a case-study of honest translations leading to marvellous—and diverse—results.

The claim to foreignisation, on the other hand, is not specific to the needs of each text; it simply attaches consequence to language. There is a post-colonial dimension to this focus: English continues to be seen as a hegemonic imposition on countries; translations to fluent English only seem to cement the imposition. Both the replacement of the traces of a language with chaste English and the subsequent power the translation receives among audience can amount to a hierarchisation, paradoxically, of the translation as the superior: with a wider audience, 'better' fluency and style, etc. This only corroborates the "notion of the colony as a copy or translation of the great European Original"—because now the translated text seems as English as an English text—marking the "colony [as] less than its coloniser" (Bassnet and Trivedi 4). This thought is a result of an anxiety of supposed cultural imperialism, for usage of a global Anglophone language—in writing or in translation—does not need to preclude the cultural signifiers of the text it represents. Nor does it make the translation superior because of readability and fluency—such acts, like the replacement of Han Kang's "spare and quiet" lines by Deborah Smith's "high, formal style with lyrical flourishes" (Yun), are necessitated to create

similar effects as the original; what the Korean can do, the English can't, and suitable measures had to be taken. Provided the literary aspirations of the work can be negotiated through English too, a forced 'foreignisation' is unnecessary: the culture and the text would already be foreign to the native English speaker. Numerous examples have shown this possible: *The Aunt Who Wouldn't Die* by Arunava Sinha, *Ghachar Ghochar* by Srinath Perur, and *The Handful of Sesame* by Maitreyi Karnoor, for instance.

The democratic ideal of diversity is achieved not though practices akin to foreignisation, but by text-specific approaches and analyses. What needs attention is not the language and its techniques, but the values and intentions of the text: they need to be suitably reproduced in English. The question to ask, Sherry Simon proposes, is "to what extent can we consider this [foreign] concept equivalent or analogous to the one which we can frame in our own terms" (Simon 465). And, I would add: if such concepts have not been framed, how can we frame those terms in the English language? This framing is what, one would think, both Gayatri Spivak and Deborah Smith have done: attended to the specifics of their own texts and reconstructed the same values in English.

Such a text-specific critical analysis of a translation is presented below—to further illustrate the necessity to consider each case separately, to understand diverse methods of translations as well.

Night: The Hours of Re-creation in Translation

Night, a Holocaust memoir written by Elie Wiesel, has multiple versions: from the earliest, Yiddish text published in 1956, the French *La Nuit* in 1958, an English *Night* in 1960, to the English re-translation in 2006. Each version shorter than the other, the text has undergone several modifications, the latest being endorsed by Wiesel as "the *accurate* interpretation of my testimony in English" (emphasis mine). 'Accurate' seems to be an inaccurate word to describe this translation *if* we comply with the notions of fidelity or honesty considered so far.

An exploration of the different modifications that have gone into crafting *Night* prompts us to realise that the stakes involved in the translation differ from those in the original, thereby justifying the informed alterations made through the translation.

The Yiddish version of *Night,* an eight-hundred page narrative, was pruned to one-fourth of its size when translated to French and English. The reasons ranged from apprehension about the reception – "[my] testimony would not be received" (Wiesel ix), to the tedious length – "[it] was still long" (x). When the re-translation was announced, then, it was expected that the new version would excavate the lost notes in those generous truncations. As it turned out, the re-translation was shorter by fifty pages.

Why the new translation, then? Wiesel answers in the preface: "as a result of [the translator's] rigorous editing, I was able to correct and revise a number of important details" (Wiesel xiii). Some of these details were mistranslations: for example, the earlier translation erroneously said that a couple "copulated in [the] cattle cars" to Auschwitz (Wisse); the re-translation corrected this to "a couple caressed," which was all the lovers could afford in the suffocating death-ride (Wiesel 23). The other details were amendments to the original Yiddish text: Wiesel corrected the ages of people including himself, and the chronology of some events that had gone askew. These revisions are only fair, for they are rectifications of errors accidentally committed, rather than creative modifications. The objective of the new translation, as yet, seems to be veracity; *Night,* a memoir, is expected to be truthful.

Despite this claim for truthfulness, a large part of the Yiddish text remains buried in the new translation. Wiesel gives the same reasons as before: it was "too long" and "superfluous" for a general audience outside the talons of the Holocaust (Wiesel x). The omission of several pages takes the translation far, far away from the original text. For more clarity, though, one examines these omissions. The Yiddish version begins thus:

In the beginning there was faith—which is childish; trust—which is vain; and illusion—which is dangerous. We believed in God, trusted in man, and lived with the illusion that every one of us had been entrusted with the sacred spark… That was the source if not the cause of all our ordeals (Wisse).

Clearly, these lines are not from the perspective of the subject-self that linearly experiences Holocaust; they are lines of commentary by the writing-self, who reduces the lives of Jews before Holocaust—with their "faith," "trust" and "illusion"—to naïve and ignorant existence. Such powerful lines are akin to what Spivak calls "rhetorical interferences" (Spivak 398). There is a silent, pragmatic—not semantic—meaning in these lines: the trauma of the Holocaust—the ghettos, concentration camps, gas chambers—pushes the boundaries of human faith to such limits that faith ruptures and disappears. This meaning, "beside language, around language" (398) is lost in disowning these lines. His personal rhetoricity—his cynicism, inscribed by his text—cannot be snatched away: it is, after all, a memoir; the personal is the political. The elimination of such power from the text for the "convenience of the reader and publisher" (404)—Wiesel's original manuscript was "rejected by every major publisher" which led to the cuts, as did the fear for reader's response—abuses the autonomy of the text (Wiesel x). That the erasure of rhetoricity is in the wiping out of the very storyline, and not, for example, style or syntax—like in Spivak's argument—is more bothersome. The ending of the Yiddish version, also an extension of Wiesel's cynicism, is also edited out:

And now, scarcely ten years after Buchenwald, I realize that the world forgets quickly… I am not so naïve as to believe that this slim volume will change the course of history or shake the conscience of the world. Books no longer have the power they once did (Wisse).

Were the readers or the publishing house of French and English so obtuse to push a writer to consider his psychic degradation—so intensely that even after an eight-hundred page memoir, he remains faithless in the power of literature—as "superfluous"?

While the loss of rhetoricity *is* a setback, it is perhaps an oversight to blame the convenience of readers or publishers. The omission of these passages seems to have a more purposeful exercise: to distil the tone of the narrative in a "singular voice" (Wiesel xiii). The Yiddish text was, for Wiesel, a diary-entry of sorts; he could let his pen fly and muse, complain and bemoan; he wrote to "go mad to understand the nature of madness that erupted in history and in the conscience of mankind" (vii). The translations to French and English are pathways for a global audience; here, his aim is "to preserve a record of the ordeal" and simply "bear witness" (viii). The titles themselves reflect a difference in tone, and by extension, of purpose: *Un di velt hot geshvign*, the Yiddish title literally translates to 'And the World Remained Silent,' which is an indictment against the world, like the beginning and ending lines we discussed; the French and English titles, by contrast, shift to *Night:* a setting, an atmosphere of darkness, a direct narration of the nightmarish experience. Several random lines confirm this: "the shopkeepers were doing good business, the students lived among their books, and the children played in the streets," he says without premonition; "hundreds of naked orphans without a tomb," he writes without detail; "a truck drew close and unloaded its load: small children," he narrates without comment (Wiesel 6, 99, 32). Brevity is the soul of *Night*: when Wiesel says "too long", he is referring to the economy of words. The pessimistic and accusatory tone of the lengthy beginning and ending, and several other pages in the original manuscript, would have smeared the innocent simplicity and brevity of the narrative. Similarly, his musing on his father's death is also removed from the translation for it is "too personal, too private" (Wiesel xi): the focus of his translation is the communal degradation during the Holocaust told through the eyes of a subject rather than the later-self's writerly reflections about it. Hence, the pruning. The translation itself becomes a response to his pessimism: his "slim volume" acquires "the power [books] once held" for it captures the ruthlessness and meticulousness of the Jew-annihilation, sans analysis or exaggeration. Instead of accusing the world for forgetting, he re-

crafts the book to maintain only the story: “the world did not know and remained silent” (Wiesel 118); the book will educate and evoke.

There are also some stylistic changes that the translation undertakes. Let us consider two versions of a small passage, side-by-side:

First, a direct translation from the Yiddish version by Ruth R. Wisse:

Both adults were already dead. The noose had choked them at once. Instantly they expired. Their extended tongues were red as fire. The slight Jewish child with the lost dreamy eyes was still alive. His body weighed too little. Was too light. The noose didn't catch…That evening the soup had no taste (Wisse).

The latest translation by Marion Wiesel reads:

The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing…That night the soup tasted of corpses (Wiesel 64-65).

Again, brevity is maintained: the new version is shorter, while the details are unaltered. We notice, though, two considerable changes: firstly, a move to fluent English style from Yiddish-y description: “extended tongues” to “tongues were hanging out”; “the noose didn’t catch” to “rope was still moving”; secondly, drama is downplayed: “red as fire” to “swollen and bluish,” etc., while injecting just the last line with shock: “the soup tasted of corpses” from “the soup had no taste”. The second modification is a function of, as we have discussed, the new purpose of the translation: the exact translation must be exacting in its simple narration, with only the final line delivering a jolt.

The first modification, however, is susceptible to criticism. As discussed, Venuti propounds that the anglicisation of such phrases—which he would call “the wholesale domestication of a foreign text” (Venuti 209)—constitutes “ethnocentric violence” (210). As an originally Yiddish text, the phrases contain Yiddish formulations: “extended tongue,”

referring to a dead person's visible tongue, or "noose couldn't catch," personifying the noose, both of which are not natural to English. These "conceptual paradigms" need to be maintained in order to uphold the unique "linguistic, cultural, ideological" and literary frameworks of the text (210, 209). Nevertheless, the Wiesels choose to replace these phrases with readable and fluent English. The "absence of syntactical or lexical peculiarities" in translation, when in reality there are—as we have seen in the direct translation—amounts to several damaging perpetrations: a hierarchisation of English "values, beliefs, representations" as the normal mode of being (p.209), a trivialisation of the same in Yiddish, and the loss of an essential Yiddish and Jewish experience. This loss is highlighted even by Ortega y Gasset, who favours the "emphasis [of the foreign text's] exotic, distant character [to] make it intelligible as such" (Gasset 62).

In the case of *Night*, however, the 'original' is only Wiesel's Holocaust experience: his journey from a happy neighbourhood to Auschwitz and Buchenwald, where he loses his family, and survives the camp until liberation. The Yiddish turns of phrase are accidental. Indeed, Wiesel admits that while "[he] had many things to say" about this experience, he "did not have the words to say them" (Wiesel ix). Any language—English or Yiddish, it does not matter—was insufficient for his testimony. He painfully relates how "verbs, images, and silent cries" from his mother tongue—Yiddish—did not seem *right* to invoke the hopelessness and dehumanisation at the concentration camps (ix). Why did language evade him? It is not, in this case, an instance of the general theory Gasset forwards: speech being utopian, with humans only "partially succeed[ing] in [speaking]" language (Gasset 56). Wiesel's predicament is specific to his condition: while the words, "hunger, transport, selection, fire, chimney," correspond to appropriate signifieds in all languages—barring minor cultural differences, of course—they conjure entirely different sensations in Wiesel's mind (Wiesel ix); 'bell,' for example, signified the forced regimentation (Wiesel 73), and 'discipline' brought the image of

the SS officer ready to strike an inmate (35). The Wiesels concern themselves with preserving this defamiliarisation of language through the journey: by leading us next to the narrator of *Night*, we also acquaint ourselves with the abuse to language. The Yiddishness or the Englishness is of scant importance as long as this intensity is conveyed. Moreover, whatever linguistic and cultural references need to be preserved have, in fact, been preserved in this translation: the titles of the Jew and German leaders, 'Blockäleste' and 'Kommando', are maintained as they are (44, 49)—*these* are the cultural referents to Holocaust, and not 'extended tongues'; the command "Achtung" i.e. 'attention' is retained (71)—the sound and the language of the order is as important as the meaning; and so on. Arguably, had Wiesel written *Night* in English, he would have still maintained these words in German. Apart from this, there is nothing quintessentially Yiddish, or Jewish—there is the experience, of course—in the narrative.

If anything, Wiesel believes that there is a universal ring to the sufferings of Holocaust. It was one of those dark moments when people are forced to abandon humanity; and in such situations, "when human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities becomes irrelevant" (Wiesel 118). Wiesel highly regards the crossing of multiple borders for the cause of human solidarity: in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, he invoked the names of Andrei Sakharov, Joseph Begun, Lech Walesa, and Nelson Mandela, thus establishing a brotherhood with a "traumatised generation" (119). The translation too is a crossing of borders: here, human suffering is the common concern and human rights is the common language. Far from the "liberal humanism" that Frere espoused (Venuti 214), Wiesel recognises the different shades of suffering—by the very act of naming diverse people and movements against oppression—while reminding everyone the cruelty we are capable of, through his specific circumstance as a surviving Jew from the Holocaust. For this, the lexical turns of Yiddish are unnecessary, perhaps even distracting. The pertinent and

deserved memorialisation of Wiesel's Holocaust story is more important than the linguistic or literary merit of the Yiddish original. And the pertinence accorded to the Holocaust story does not take away the literary merit of the English translation itself.

What has become of the text today? Apart from the extraordinary appeal it has received and the universal disquiet it has created, *Night* is heralded as a testament to the hope and power of literature, to the healing qualities of love and memory. It is a prescribed textbook in high schools and universities across the globe—as it is in one's course in faraway India. It became a stimulus for many Holocaust survivors to speak their stories through other media—"films, plays, novels, conferences, exhibitions" (Wiesel xiv)—accomplishing the crucial task: to provide the "future generation of a past that belongs to our collective memory" (xv). Indifference, abundant before *Night*, has turned into understanding.

When the objectives of *Night* are being realised, when the influence of the text has reached beyond its expected loci, when the author treated the translation as an opportunity for the creation of a more accurate and compendious impact, when the preoccupation of the novel—"to bear witness for the dead *and* the living" (Wiesel xv)—is being upheld, to dwell on translation issues—such as infidelity towards the original, and erasure of semantic and rhetorical meanings—is perhaps a disservice to *Night*. For its direct depiction of violence and pain, for its immense power to affect, it is fitting to say, as Al Alvarez writes, that *Night* is "certainly beyond criticism".

The theories of translation, though, as we realise through the example of *Night*, are certainly not beyond criticism. At least the theories discussed here are too steeped in linguistics, aesthetics, readability, position of the original, and cultural politics—significant issues, no doubt—to focus on the text at hand. *Night* poses them a problem: it is only concerned with the implications of telling an important story, in as many languages to reach as many people; it is almost a recreation from the original, with a specific mood being favoured. The English

translation of *Night*, here, is a mode through which *the same story*—let us remember this—of a Yiddish text is told more tautly, carefully, and heavily, the economy of words directing our response to the text.

Night, and other texts, when considered in their own terms, generate different questions of translation that need to be theoretically considered, leading to a more organic diversity than the narrow emphasis on language and language loss in the prescriptions articulated above. One needs to travel from conceptual thinking about translation—i.e. in the context of post-colonialism or cultural studies or language politics—to text-specific approaches. The evaluation of specific stakes and the transmission of the same into another language are the most essential moves in diversifying both the body of translations and the theory that accompanies them. One must not forget that diversity is conducive to the human reasons of writing literature, reasons that translations most definitely consider: to find ourselves in others, to find others in ourselves, and appreciate what is the same and what is very, very different.

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