

Pre-translation: Existence of the Non-Existent While Interpreting Culture

Rituparna Das

Abstract

The word translation as far as our general source of information is concerned, is the comprehension of the meaning of a text and the subsequent production of an equivalent text that communicates the same message in another language. The text to be translated is called the source text, and the language that is to be translated into is called the target language, the final product is sometimes called the target text. Now if pondering upon contemporary world literature, it is being noticed that English being an international language, has now become almost a source language even for the writers across the world. Of much visible, is the very fact that these writers are setting up a genre in world literature and which is definitely altering various traditional notions of literature. One of them is this changing concept of translation. As far as my discussion is concerned it is about a very small but factual observation regarding this changing concept of translation, which I called Pre-translation. This operation is often formulated by the writers who are writing in English. Thus, in this case, even the original text goes through at least the two-layered textures i.e., first, the idea or the expression that is originally developed and then, secondly, by translating that idea into the target language, by forming the original text. The use of this pre-translation mode can be seen in the writings of a series of new emerging writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Upmanyu Chatterjee and many others and in many ways, each having their own unique style. After conferring the mechanism of the pre-translation process, the next and important

concern is how this process is implemented in these writings through various features while at the same time also interpreting culture.

Keywords: pre-translation, translation, interpretation.

“Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained.” (Rushdie 16)

The very literary meaning of the word ‘translation’ as in the form of noun given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the process of translating words or text from one language to another and the meaning of ‘translate’ as in verb is expressing the sense of word or text in another language. Now this technical process through which the text to be translated is called the source text, and the language that it is to be translated into is called the target language, the final product is sometimes called the target text. If pondering upon today’s world literature, it is being noticed that English being an international language, has now become almost a source language even for the writers across the world (who are not of English culture). Of much visible, is the very fact that these writers are setting up a genre in world literature and which is definitely altering up various traditional notions of literature. One of them is this changing concept of translation.

At this point, as far as my discussion is concerned is about a very small but factual observation regarding this changing concept of translation, which I dare to call somewhat as a very new notion of Pre-translation. To relate my notion of pre-translation, I would like to narrate an anecdote from my practical experience. A few years back, I was teaching some portions of English grammar to a class III student from an ICSE convent school, and I found that she did not complete her homework. As I scolded her, she suddenly uttered back as a mode

of confession, “Ma’am please forgive me, I am holding your legs!!” Actually, being a Bengali, she tried to say, “Doya kore amae khoma kore dao, ami tomar paa dhorī...” Here, I can just guess what she actually wanted to state is “I beg you, please forgive me...” or something like that only. But to my great surprise, she translated her thought or emotion of confession in English as a means of literal translation from Bengali to English. And now, this anecdote has become as important for me as a subject to discuss here about the very fact that this translation of thought or idea is being done probably by most of the writers who are known for their works in this contemporary postcolonial era, where the expressions are reaching definitely beyond the boundaries, obviously connecting and then globalizing the culture through their writings and texts. Firstly, I am trying to literally elaborate this pre-translating operation, in which the writer before he writes the draft as his ‘original’ work, he has to implement his ideas by translating them from his source language to the target language. This operation is often formulated by these writers who are writing in English. Thus, in this case, even the original text goes through at least the two-layered textures i.e., firstly, the idea or the expression that is originally developed and then, secondly, by translating that idea into the target language, by forming the original text.

The use of this process of pre-translation can be seen in the writings of a series of new emerging writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Upamanyu Chatterjee and many others. After conferring the mechanism of the pre-translation process, I am trying to focus on how this process is being implemented in these writings. The implementation of pre-translation has widely helped in interpreting culture through literature and also reflecting the problems of cross-cultural communications in those literary works. One of the features is the way in which language is used to indicate social relations. Particular terms are used to indicate familiar and other social relationships. Sometimes symbols are also suggested to authorize certain matter that does not exist in the

alien culture. In this regard, Pramod Talgeri has pointed out that the encounter with an alien culture would, in the first instance, amount to a confrontation of two heterogeneous sensibilities which are conditioned by their intrinsic value system of their respective cultures. Such a confrontation would most probably evoke a resistance to experience the alterative or the otherness of the alien cultures. An individual develops, on the basis of his being born and grown up in a certain cultural group, an intransitive attitude of unconditional identification with different cultural objectives of his cultural group in different degrees of priority. The alienness occurs when one cultural group demarcates its unique identity from other cultures. Alienness is the outcome of these demarcations. At last, it is the translator (the author) who has to obliterate these demarcations of alien ness through his inter-cultural mediation and convey the sense of alienness of the source language culture to the recipients of the target language culture.

Jhumpa Lahiri, herself has admitted that she has always lived under the pressure to be bilingual, bicultural, at ease on either side of the Lahiri map. Her short stories *A Real Durwan* and *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* have been criticized by many Indian critics as having a ‘tunnel-vision’ of India. She defended herself by saying that “...my own experience of India was largely that of a tunnel—the tunnel imposed by the single city we ever visited ... by the fact that I was not allowed to explore this city on my own.” (Lahiri 116-17). She has also been criticized of setting stories in India as a device in order to woo western audiences with ‘exotica’. Now if considering the mechanism of pre-translation in her works, she herself interpreted her writings, “...it is something of a betrayal for example, to have the family in *When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine* speaking English when they are at home. For in my imagination, these characters are conversing in Bengali. Were I to tell this story to myself, I think I would narrate the expository passages in English, while preserving all the dialogues, where appropriate, in Bengali” (Lahiri 118). It is also seen that, in her works she has sometimes retain the Bengali words or terms, for example, the ‘durwan’ of *A Real Durwan*. In her opinion, she included it

not out of any need to be culturally accurate, but due to the whims of her own quasi-bilingual brain.

Adding up to this very fact, the case of Amitav Ghosh also helps to enlighten the modes of pre-translation as he also retains the anthropologist's dedication to 'remembering' stories that otherwise slip from consciousness and from recorded history. Say, in Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*, the literary piece is an excellent proof that deals with the themes of historical and cultural displacement, alienation, something we might call 'subaltern cosmopolitanism', and the complexities of imagining another person's view of reality. Amitav Ghosh, a PhD scholar is writing in English about a culture where English is alien. The novel serves as such a milestone in Ghosh's work where this very issue is getting transparent regarding various circumstances that Ghosh had to suffer.

It cannot be ignored that any project of constructing a national identity is predicted upon two simultaneous imperatives, and accentuating the difference with what lies outside. English is primarily being considered as the language of Britain and America, to be altered, shaped or fashioned only by them. In retrospect, we see that these workers had a very important role to play in the reversal of the centre-periphery paradigm in English literary culture. But even if one did not take a global view, these works offered the readers a playful and imaginative representation of their own recent history and familiar circumstances, which could open out to different kinds of readings. One of the important factors that have worked firmly in mending up this process of pre-translation, to which value is attached in the West these days is cultural hybridism, which is said to offer certain advantages "...in negotiating the collisions of language, race and art in a world of disparate peoples comprising a single if not unified world" (Brennan 7). Experiences of diaspora and displacement are thus privileged in the cosmopolitan discourse.

Though the case is not exactly so with the authors like Chetan Bhagat, who is an Indian-based author and his works are definitely remarkable but has also undergone the process of pre-translation through his works. His novels like *Five point someone*, *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, *One Night at Call Centre* and now specially, *Two States- the Story of My Marriage*, do not show the anxiety of Indian ness but obviously somehow the problems of the cross-culture, although living in India. Even Arundhuti Roy's works can also be in a way put under this sub-genre of the process of pre-translation, where she very aptly presents the typicality of the characters living in the native village of south India in *The God of Small Things*.

Definitely, these writers have changed the existing traditional notions of translations. In Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, it is seen that almost all the characters are translators, as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive, for example, in *The Interpreters of Maladies*, the protagonist literally makes his living off his knowledge, of English and other languages. For her, as she says, "...the biblical definition of translation is to convey to Heaven without death...in my observation, translation is not only a finite linguistic act but an ongoing cultural one...I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a non-existent one...and, whether I write as an American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate, therefore I am" (Lahiri 118).

When Amitav Ghosh tries to gather his memories in his novel *In an Antique Land*, he confesses that though he knew to speak in Arabic, but it was still very difficult to converse with many of the Egyptians as he, in a way, was unable to translate his culture to them, though in their native language. The incident where it was getting more and more difficult to converse with the Imam, Ghosh makes an emotional discovery. He sees the two of them as 'delegates from two suppressed civilizations' (Ghosh 235):

“...the Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us: we had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences.” (*In an Antique Land* 236-37)

Professor Sukanta Chaudhuri has called it a phenomenon that to as an ‘anticipated translation’. Their material is such as one might have expected to encounter in another language or translations there from...and for that very reason do not require a verbal one to convey the society they write about. Thus, these works show ‘on the one hand the organic absorption of an initially alien language, on the other a persistent modifying and alienating function of the language, turning the intrinsic terms of Indian culture into something other than themselves (Chaudhuri 54). He points out that in all such exercises there is a strategy of deviance in more than one sense, a designed mis-match between the language of the text and the substance of what we may still call the source culture.

After discussing the detailed visions of the authors and also highlighting the way they have unknowingly contributed to the subject of my paper, it is a very clear perspective that translation now not only remain as a mere conventional linguistic act, but it has definitely achieved a new genre by illuminating the non-existent one as such. Thus, the process of pre-translation has become a medium to convey even the sentiments and emotions of an author’s mind, which actually the author is eager to convey and preserve the sense. Hence, in a way, the ‘pre-translating’ attitude has helped the writers to connect one form of culture with the rest ones and then by globalizing the culture’s notion to the world.

Works Cited

- Bassnett, Susan and Andre Lefevere, editors. '*Translation, History and Culture.*' Pinter Publishers, 1990.
- Brennan, Tim. '*Salman Rushdie and the Third World.*' St. Martin's Press, 1989.
- Chaudhuri, Sukanta. '*Translation and Understanding.*' Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Ghosh, Amitav. '*In an Antique Land.*' Permanent Black, 2002.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. "My Intimate Alien." Outlook, 2000.
- Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. '*A Concise History of Indian Literature in English.*' Permanent Black, 2008.
- Nair, Rukmini Bhaya, editor. '*Translation, Text and Theory: The Paradigm of India.*' Sage Publications, 2002.
- Rushdie, Salman. '*Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991.*' Granta Books, 1991.
- Rushdie, Salman and Elizabeth West, editors. '*The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997.*' Vintage Publication, 1997.
- Talgeri, Pramod and Satyabhūshana Verma, editors. '*Literature in Translation : from Cultural Transference to Metonymic Displacement.*' Popular Prakashan, 1988.

About the Author

Rituparna Das is an Assistant Professor at City College, Kolkata. She may be contacted at rituurmi@gmail.com.