

Limitations of Translation: Cross-Cultural Barriers of Gender Politics in Selected Short Stories of Malti Joshi

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Abstract

The debates of 'equivalence' and 'fidelity' in translation have been giving way to newer concepts of Culture Turn, and more inclusive interpretation of texts. This paper tries to study the problems of translations across cultures- both indigenous and outside India. The question of power relations within typical Indian (Hindi) households is faithfully depicted by the eminent author, Malti Joshi, (winner of the prestigious Padmashree award), through her extremely insightful short stories. But the translation of these stories into English would involve a three-fold difficulty in overcoming the barriers of language, culture and power relations. The emotions, experiences and interactions of characters in Malti Joshi's short story 'Problem Child' (Hindi lay open for the readers to interpret in the perspective of gender references between a Hindi text and its translation. Even though the English used could be in the capacity of an Indian language, the limitations remain, as the translated story is now visible to any Anglophone outside the country also. It therefore attracts cultural adaptations and explanations which might reduce the efficiency of the translation. The paper tries to discuss some possible effective translational theories through practical demonstration by translating from selected short stories of Malti Joshi from Hindi to English.

Keywords: cultural turn, cross-cultural barriers, indigenous culture, translational theory

1. Introduction

The task in front of the researcher is to translate excerpts from a thought-provoking Hindi short story of Malti Joshi into English. Though it was not pre-decided, the kind of language that naturally comes to the mind is not a very formal kind of British English but the kind that would probably be spoken by an Anglophone in India.

To quote Lakshmi Holmstrom, "the (Indian) English is indeed the language in which most translation takes place". It has been a tradition for texts in Indian languages to be translated into a second language, like Sanskrit (the high-flown version of Sanskrit which was not spoken) or Persian and now English. And according to Ramanujam, "English is the 'other' through which we have returned to ourselves".

2. Definitions

The researcher is guided by the definition of some of the terms that would appear frequently in this paper- 'Culture' is a group's shared values and conventions that guides thoughts and behavior; text is what Wolfgang Iser has defined it in *The Act of Reading*, Text

is not what the author thought it to be but what the reader sees in it.” ‘Language’ is the medium through which basic communication takes place between and among intellectual beings. ‘Thought’ is something that cannot be measured but is an important, perhaps the most important, tenet of shaping Culture.

3. Theoretical Understanding

Once a story is translated from Hindi to English, the language changes and it is now visible to any Anglophone. The way in which things are interpreted is something specific to middle-class Hindi families. In order to comprehend and appreciate the complete nuanced interpretation, the reader must be familiar with or at least made familiar with the prejudices and biases, the strictly partitioned gender roles and the naturalized and hence accepted patriarchal family set-up of such families. This becomes inevitable if we were to apply the Sapir Whorf Theory of language and culture, which states that, “the relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Different ideas stem from differing language within one's culture and the whole intertwining of these relationships start at one's birth.”

There is an allied theory which is one of linguistic determinism that states that the language you speak determines the way that you will interpret the world around you. Thus, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf worked to establish the relationship between language, thought, and culture. The familiarity mentioned above can be given to the readers either with the help of foot-notes or by resorting to a translation method which acts as a bridge from one culture to another, thereby ensuring a smooth transition. So the translator has to ensure linguistic equivalence as well as try to achieve ‘cultural congruence’, and thus grossly disprove the 17th-century French critic Gilles Menage who coined the phrase “les belles infidèles” to suggest that translations (like women) can be either faithful or beautiful, but not both. The relation between author and translation was made out to be like that of man and woman respectively. To quote Avadhesh K. Singh,

“Even in culture oriented approach the translator has to be governed by the language of the SL text. In the TL text, the language similar/equivalent to the SL text alone can, to a great extent bring in cultural congruence. Linguistic equivalence and cultural communication are thus complementary to each other as language is culture generative and culture bound”.

The Sapir Whorf Theory has been criticized on several grounds but, what is definitely established is the link between language and culture. Theorists have also endeavored to arrive at some commonality of languages thus ensuring more or less common ideas and thoughts. For example, Walter Benjamin advocated a common origin of all languages in The Translator's Task or Umberto Eco in his book The Search for the Perfect Language gave a priori codes or Leibniz who “...will give substance to this requirement with his idea of the universal characteristic, which does not aim at anything less than drawing up a universal lexicon of simple ideas, complemented by a compilation of all the rules of composition among these veritable atoms of thought” (Ricoeur).

4. An excerpt in Translation

The researcher now analyzes (through translation) an excerpt of the story of a family of a husband, wife and child as depicted in the story, Problem Child by Malti Joshi, which a middle-class Indian family (at the risk of being accused of homogenizing) can understand easily without the need for any further explanations and clarifications because they share a

similar background, but the same cannot be said in case of readers unfamiliar with the culturally accepted gender roles or the concept of water-tight division of labour among typical Indian families. An excerpt from the story would clarify this point (all translation is by the researcher).

Problem Child (The original story by the same name is written in Hindi by Smt. Malti Joshi)

- 1 As soon as the door opened, Alok hid behind a picture book. The plan was that as soon as his darling reached out for the book, he would pounce and take her in his arms. It was a long eight days since he saw his lovely child. Now he could not wait any longer.
- 2 But the door was opened not by his darling daughter but by her mother. He should have known it even before he saw her. Would his daughter have delayed so much? She would eagerly wait in anticipation for the door-bell to ring.
- 3 “Nimmo, please take care of the luggage while I pay off the gentleman”, said Alok handing his bag to her. But when he returned after paying for the autorickshaw, he found his suitcase and bag still at the door. He barely saved himself from falling over them.
- 4 “Nimmo, please make some hot tea, while I bathe and come. My head is whirring after the noisy ride by the diesel vehicle”. Saying this Alok opened his coat and hung it on Nirupama’s shoulder and entered the bathroom. He came out wrapped just in his towel as he knew that he would find his clothes on the bed. But he was disappointed not to find them there.
- 5 “Nimmo, where are my clothes?” he yelled.
- 6 “On the rack” came the response from the kitchen.
- 7 “And where is my kurta-pajama?”
- 8 “Look for them in the Almirah. Why are you shouting? I’m busy preparing your tea”.

(The paragraphs have been numbered for ease of discussion)

5. Discussion

In paragraph 2, Alok refers to his wife as ‘his child’s mother’. This may imply several things- (a) that he thinks that the mother is closer to their child than *he* is or, (b) that he considers his wife as their child’s *mother* first and then his *wife*, or (c) that he was not used to address his wife familiarly or affectionately.

The sentence in Hindi if translated literally would read like - “He should have known it earlier”. But this would be incomplete in its sense, *known what*? The explanation to the word *it* is given in the next sentence. The next sentence is – “Does his darling daughter delay so much?” - a purely rhetorical question meant to emphasize the fact that his daughter never delays in opening the door to him (as opposed to his wife who did!)

In Hindi, the father refers to his daughter as ‘gudiya’ meaning doll, but if in the translation the word ‘doll’ is used it may confuse the readers because in English slang, a wife or a lover is sometimes called ‘baby-doll’ or just ‘doll’!

In paragraph 3, the Hindi sentence if translated literally would be- “Nimmo, please look at the luggage”. But it has been translated as “Nimmo, please take care of the luggage”, because ‘looking at the luggage’ would not mean anything otherwise, normally. It is clearly implied that he meant her to take it inside and is in fact annoyed that she leaves it right at the door for him to almost stumble over. The role of an Indian translator would differ vastly from any other who is unfamiliar with the subtle nuances of the Hindi language.

In this context Jeremy Munday can be quoted as saying about Nida, “Eugene Nida stresses the importance of context for communication when dealing with metaphorical meaning and with complex cultural idioms, where the sense of the phrase diverges from the sum of the individual elements”. Also, “the text is a configuration of text and context. Further, the text is not to be studied in isolation but rather as a part of a socio-cultural set-up (Cf. Kussmaul 1986, and Honig and Kussmaul 1982). Because of this phenomenon, the translations of the same SL text differ from one another when written in different ages by different translators. The age determines its perspective and form.” (Avadhesh K. Singh)

To quote Edward Sapir: “...The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached” (The Status of Linguistics as a Science, 1929)

The words ‘yelled’ in paragraph 5 and ‘shouting’ in 8 have implications other than just in the linguistic sense, they also are words with *affective implications* (such as emotion) according to Katherina Reiss’ ‘Extralinguistic’ criteria. The husband ‘yells’ at his wife which has several of his emotions concealed – the emotions may have stemmed from any of the reasons- that he is annoyed that his daughter had not opened the door, that his wife had delayed opening the door, that he was disappointed that his daughter was not at home to receive him after his 8-day trip, that it was usual for his wife to be unenthusiastic or very matter-of-fact on his return from such trips, and so on (but not necessarily in that order). These probably qualify as extra-linguistic text.

If the word ‘Kurta’ in paragraph 7 above is translated as ‘shirt’, it will be incorrect as they are two different articles of clothing, but if it is retained as it is in the English translation, there may be charges of ‘exoticizing’ (Christiane Nord) the Hindi word.

The researcher, in the role of the translator, takes a feminist interpretation of the text and not an ‘unmediated’ one. In the words of Sherry Simon, “Far from being blind to the political and interpretative dimensions of their own project, feminist translators quite willingly acknowledge their interventionism”. The Feminist Translation Theory of Sherry Simon “aims to identify and critique the tangle of concepts which relegates both women and translation to the bottom of the social and literary ladder”.

6. Conclusion

Women in the past all over the world have been restricted from indulging in creative endeavors like writing; they started out in a small way by translating religious books. Whether the activity of translation was traditionally considered inferior because it was undertaken by women or whether women were considered inferior and so were given the ‘privilege’ of translating, is a paradox which requires some thought. Now, there is a third ‘inferior’, the character of Nirupama (the wife) in the story. Whatever the sequence is, it still meant that both were inferior and so women were equated with translation.

In the words of Sherry Simon, “The alliance between translation studies and feminism (therefore) emerged out of a common intellectual context...Translation Studies have been impelled by many of the concerns central to feminism: the distrust of traditional hierarchies and gendered roles, deep suspicion rules defining fidelity, and the questioning of universal standards of meaning and value. Both feminism and translation are concerned by the way

“secondariness” comes to be defined and canonized; both are tools for a critical understanding of difference as it is represented in language.”

Thus, the power relations, language and norms within the cultural constricts of Middle-class Hindi family have been attempted to be translated from the Hindi short story of Malti Joshi to Anglophone readers with the intention of bridging the cultural gap and, trying to acknowledge the limitations of such translation.

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