







Module 5: Postcolonial Translation

Lecture 16: Post-colonial Theory and Translation

The Lecture Contains:

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Introduction

Unlike the last lecture, the term postcolonial is used with all its theoretical implications here. In the field of translation it provides us with a framework to assess the dynamics of political power between languages, and also the position of translations in a given linguistic / cultural context. As Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre put it, the term 'postcolonial' is useful in suggesting two 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" (13). With postcolonial theory, we are moving from an epistemological framework that is centred in the west, to a broader scheme that is skeptical of received notions of knowledge and sensitive to plurality. Although it has its share of critics who deride it as the product of Anglo-American academia, postcolonialism has successfully theorized and foregrounded the condition of colonization and also helped to interrogate the act of translation as an apolitical and innocent linguistic activity. For instance the translation of the Sanskrit classics by the Indologists in the 18th century was called into question. Their decision to translate only the ancient Sanskrit classics and ignore contemporary Indian language works indicated their contempt for India of the present as a land of inferior culture and literature. This translation activity was seen as a deliberate attempt to demoralize Indian literatures and help in the creation of the passive colonized subject, thereby furthering the political act of imperialist expansion. Thus the theory has helped to identify the socio-political dimensions of literary and linguistic activity, and has broadened the horizons of translation studies especially in the former colonies of the world.

Postcolonial theory helped to interrogate the Anglo-American bias of many systems of knowledge, including that of Translation Studies.

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Post colonial literature and translation

There are critics who have pointed out the commonalities between translations and postcolonial literature. In fact, the colony was thought of as a copy or translation of the 'great European original' (*Postcolonial Translation* : 4). Maria Tymoczko points out that translation can be perceived as a metaphor for post-colonial (19). She goes to the etymology of the word 'translation' as 'carrying across', or as the transportation of sacred relics like the bones of saints, and notes how it has much in common with the linguistic activity of translation. A 'minor' literature of a former colony is written/ carried across in another language to a more secure place or centre of power – think of Indian literature written in English for an international readership. Isn't this also a form of translation? Like translation, postcolonial literature also straddles two cultures, but the difference is that the translator's domain is limited to one text whereas the writer's domain is the vast area of her / his cultural context. S/he has to capture all of it in her writing for an international readership. In this process, s/he is free to choose what s/he will represent. The translator, bound to one text, does not have the same range of choice.

Both the postcolonial writer and the translator are addressing an intercultural audience, and are trying to convey material from one culture or language to another. Hence these cultural differences have to be bridged. The translator has recourse to footnotes, glossaries and prefaces to help fill the void between the source language and target language. This does not appear to be the privilege of the creative writer, but it can be seen as part of the narrative strategy of many postcolonial novels. For example, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Nirmal's diary is used as a tool to introduce the reader to the terrain of the Sunderbans. This introduction is necessary, as this part of the country is relatively unknown to even the Indian reader. Rather than write a preface that might go unread, Ghosh has made it an integral part of the novel by making the central character Kanai read his uncle Nirmal's diary in the first chapter. However, there are writers who deliberately disrupt the narrative and provide maps and footnotes; this is in keeping with postmodern narrative strategy.

The postcolonial writer has a vast cultural space to represent through her/his work. The inclusion of some elements would automatically exclude certain others. This is somewhat like the translator who has to decide which elements of the source text s/he will downplay for the benefit of the receptor readership. This process of selection in writing, and interpretation in translation, are politically or ideologically nuanced. Aravind Adiga's selection of one aspect of contemporary India ,

“Another name for the choices, emphases and selectivity of both translators and postcolonial writers is interpretation...Such a process of selectivity and interpretation is ideological and will inevitably invite controversy.”—Maria Tymoczko

that of the gaping chasm that separates the rich and the poor even in the so-called 'postmodern' India, in his novel *The White Tiger* is very much a political decision. His aim is to subvert the image of India as a progressive country on the rise to economic superpower. Similar ideological choices lie behind the decision of a translator to choose a particular text, and translate it as s/he deems fit for the receptor culture.

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Hegemony and Power

Both the translator and the postcolonial writer face the vexing problem of having to translate culture-specific terms like food, festivals etc. The choice is to leave the terms untranslated, or give a glossary or footnote. Writers sometimes tend to incorporate the explanation as unobtrusively as they can in the text itself. For instance, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* ends with a Malayalam word “Naaley”, which, if left untranslated, would be lost on the non-Malayali reader. So she immediately adds its translation, ‘tomorrow’, after it. The same can be part of translation strategy also. Tymoczko points out how “translators moving from a dominant-culture source text to a minority-culture audience often leave dominant cultural materials implicit, presupposing knowledge of the mythic allusions, historical events or customs of the dominant culture: such a stance is part of the assertion of hegemony” (28). For instance, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories have a lot of culture specific terms that are difficult for a non-British reader to appreciate or understand. But Doyle never felt the need to address the problems that such a reader might face. However, an Arundhati Roy writing about a Kathakali performance in Kerala, feels obliged to devote an entire chapter for the benefit of the uninitiated reader. Similarly, Indian language translations of great authors like Tolstoy or Victor Hugo do not usually have glosses for culture specific terms. The implicit understanding is that the reader would or should know them. This power equation, in which one language panders to the tastes of the dominant language, is indicative of the unequal relationship between them. It is not surprising that postcolonial or minority literatures, and translations from minority literatures into languages like English, have these rather apologetic interventions. Tymoczko observes that the more confident a writer becomes, the less obliged s/he feels to give these glosses. The example she cites is that of Ngugi wa Thiongo who shifted from English to Gikuyu. By the time he came to write his last English novel Ngugi completely abandoned English translations of Gikuyu words or phrases that he used. After all, if you could have French and German phrases in an English text, why not Gikuyu?

“*Choorails*, witches with turned-about feet who ate the hearts and livers of straying children ” –Bapsi Sidhwa, *Cracking India* .

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Innovation and Experimentation

Translations can also affect literary forms as they afford scope for literary experimentation in the target language. A poem like Eliot's *The Wasteland* is a case in point. It was a bold innovation in English literature; a Malayalam translation would have to reproduce its innovative structural and thematic patterns, thus introducing a new poetic sensibility. This is a way to introduce a new literary technique to the receptor culture. Postcolonial literature likewise brings native literary techniques to the attention of an international audience. Tymoczko again cites Ngugi as an example. The writer can synthesize aspects of his/her culture with a dominant culture to produce vibrant literary works, just as a translator can come up with new literary techniques for the receptor culture. Either way this is a broadening of literary horizons as far as the receptor culture is concerned. Translation also impacts the source culture though this is an aspect that most critics do not think of. The multiple versions of Shakespeare, for example, are an indication of the richly layered complexity of the great artist.

"Because translation is at times one locus in a literary system where formal experimentation is more easily tolerated, translation can even become an 'alibi' for challenges to the dominant poetics." — Maria Tymoczko

The subversive aspect of translation cannot be forgotten either. Tymoczko observes that the "appropriation" of a dominant language to serve the purposes of a marginalized group is helpful in realigning power structures in a shared cultural space. Think of the position of English in India. It is admittedly the language of the colonizer, but it functions like a link language. We have appropriated it, by making it yield to our mother-tongue rhythms and vocabulary. Translations from Indian languages are mostly into English, but it is mainly for the domestic market rather than international. Tymoczko maintains that it is comparable to the hybridisation of the English language, as practiced by the postcolonial writers like Rushdie or Ngugi.

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Poststructuralist translation

Postcolonial theory was very much influenced by post-structuralism, especially the disbelief in stable structures and meanings. It benefited from the Derridean dictum of listening to the silences in a text. Post-colonialism situated itself with respect to these silences or the unheard voices, by interrogating received knowledges. Gentzler says that the post-colonial translators were using translation “as a strategy of resistance, one that disturbs and displaces the construction of images of non-Western cultures rather than reinterpret them using traditional, normalized concepts and language” (176). The people who did significant work in post-colonial translation criticism are Tejaswini Niranjana and Gayatri Spivak. Niranjana's *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* published in 1992 takes off from Derridean deconstruction and interrogates the treatment of colonial cultures by Orientalist translators and writers. Niranjana conceptualises translation as the site where the conflict of cultures and languages was most clearly manifested. She argues that the colonialist translation endeavours sought to depict the colony as the ‘Other’ to the Eurocentric colonizer. This was a two-way process – it helped the colonizers in identifying themselves as distinct from the colony, and also provided a self-image to the colonized.

According to Niranjana, translation was the site where the conflict of cultures was most apparent. Colonial translation endeavours sought to depict the colony as the ‘Other’ to the Eurocentric colonizer.

Niranjana critiques the notion of translation that is source-text oriented and which claims to have an easy access to the original. Most of western translation criticism, she argues, favours this approach without questioning the notion of equivalence. Such methods only helped to reinforce the hegemonic power relations of the colonizer over the colonized. Niranjana does not spare George Steiner or even Gideon Toury (who advocated target text-oriented translation). She argues that Toury and other polysystem theorists have not considered the part played by translations in the subjectification of colonized peoples.

What Niranjana finds the most enabling in Derrida is the concept of the heterogeneous original, that it is “not some pure, unified source of meaning of history” (qtd in Gentzler 179). Gentzler adds: “With no primordial presence to be re-presented, much of Western philosophy and history, with its stable notions of truth, meaning, presence, logos, and telos, collapses” (179). This in turn would dismantle the principles of translation. By challenging fixed meanings, deconstruction opened up the space for alternative visions which are equally valid. This gives the translator greater scope to present his/her culture in a different light

than the colonizers. Niranjana also draws upon Walter Benjamin in the building up of her argument. Gentzler points out how she focuses on certain aspects of Benjamin. For instance, in “The Task of the Translator” Benjamin states: “It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of the work” (qtd in Gentzler: 180). Niranjana identifies with the liberatory aspect of translation though she may disagree with the idea of a ‘pure’ language. She has case studies of Orientalist translations in her book, to validate her point that history and the so-called ‘objective’ areas of knowledge are actually human constructs. She wishes to make the reader aware of the mediated nature of translations that were commissioned by the colonizers, and also of the treacherous nature of language which can hide multiple meanings. Besides this, she is also pointing out the facade of stability of the original, emphasizing that it is anything but a coherent unified entity.

Gentzler says that Niranjana's theory was effective in showing how the field of translation studies is interdisciplinary in nature. It showed the ‘constructedness’ of categories, be it in literature or any other field of knowledge. But, besides expressing deep distrust of conventional epistemological methods, it did not really show an alternative. His argument is that this is provided by Gayatri Spivak who is herself a translator.

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Spivak and Mahasweta Devi

Gayatri Spivak's first major work of translation was Derrida's *Of Grammatology* which she translated from French into English. But her work in postcolonial theory, especially the question of whether the subaltern can speak (which is the title of her essay written in 1988), probed the issue of translation and transparency of texts, and the mediators who claim to represent a people / a text. Her own answer to the question was a qualified no, in that the intellectuals who speak for the marginalized subaltern cannot hope to represent them adequately. The only way they could do it, according to her, was to follow the Derridean concept of listening to the silences in the text. All that the translator can hope to do is try to listen to the marginalized voices that are caught in the web of representation woven by the colonizer.

She demonstrated her principles through the translation of three of the stories of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, published in *Imaginary Maps*. She uses the translation to help the non-native reader to imagine a culturally different space and time, without letting the reader forget that the text is mediated through a translator. She makes use of a preface and other material like an interview with the author, to locate the text within a specific cultural context. She did not smooth out the source text by choosing a target text-oriented translation. In fact, her choice of title as “Breast-giver” instead of the more common “Wet nurse” for the Bengali “Stanadayini” is an example. There is no attempt to exoticize; on the other hand, this provides her with an excellent forum to work out her overlapping theories on feminism and Marxism.

Spivak inverted the power structure between English and Bengali by forcing the English-speaking target reader to come to the Bengali source text.

In Spivak's translation theory we see a perfect blend of theory and praxis. Her translations succeeded in getting Mahasweta Devi the attention of the global literary field. This was done without the brouhaha of a William Jones ‘discovering’ Kalidasa or the condescension of a Fitzgerald appropriating Omar Khayyam. Spivak was pointing to a pluralistic source culture that was richly textured and difficult to capture in a language/culture that was as foreign as the Anglo-American one. The only option for a translator here was to underline the artificial and constructed nature of all languages and attempt to bring the reader to the text. This postcolonial translation strategy of refusing to move towards the dominant culture is also an attempt to invert the power hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized. This is a conscious political strategy, somewhat like Ngugi's decision to strew Gikuyu words in his English novel. It is a confident assertion of linguistic and cultural equality, a trait that was encouraged by postcolonial theory.

Assignments

1. What fresh perspective does Niranjana's work bring to translation theory?
2. How has postcolonial theory helped translation activity in the former colonies?

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