









Module 5: Postcolonial Translation

Lecture 18: Sakuntala's Colonial and Postcolonial Versions

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Introduction

Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* was one of the first Indian literary works to be translated into English. The translated Sakuntala became a symbol of the colonizer's attitude to native culture and literature.

Sakuntalam was translated by many people at various periods of time from the colonial age to the present. A study of these translations would reveal the translation strategies in these respective periods. Sir William Jones and Sir Monier Monier-Williams are representatives of the colonial Orientalist school of translators, in their somewhat condescending appreciation of Kalidasa. M. R. Kale and Chandra Rajan who are latter day Indian translators, show different approaches to the text. Sir William Jones's translation was published in 1789, Monier-Williams in 1855, Kale's in 1898 and Chandra Rajan's in

1989. Each of these translators is divided not just by the years, but by their cultural ideology which is manifested in their translations. At this point we should also remember that Kalidasa's text can also be thought of as a 'translation', as it is a retelling of a story from the *Mahabharata*. Kalidasa has radically departed from the basic text. Dushyanta in the epic is a king who seduces and abandons Sakuntala. She is an aggressive woman who walks into Dushyanta's court with her son and demands the King to acknowledge her as his wife and crown their son the next emperor. Dushyanta is forced to oblige. Kalidasa's narrative is different. Here Dushyanta is flawless. The ring which Dushyanta gives Sakuntala to use as a token of reminder becomes the 'villain', because Sakuntala loses it at a crucial moment and Dushyanta fails to recognize her as he is under a curse from the sage Durvasas. Sakuntala is a helpless woman who is scorned and repudiated. The focus of Kalidasa's play is the political system under a king and the kingly duties. The translations, however, seem to have a different focus. Each of them becomes representative of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial translation strategies.

Kalidasa's play is a retelling / translation of an episode in the Mahabharata. His play, and the later translations, reveal the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial translation strategies at work..

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Sir William Jones

The East India Company had consolidated its power over India by the 18th century. After securing political power, it sought to expand its cultural dominion also. This was not merely out of intellectual curiosity, but from a practical need to rule the colony better. In matters of daily administration they had to deal with natives who spoke only the native language, for which the colonizers had to know the native language as well. They also needed to make sure that the native interpreters were not misleading them in crucial matters. Hence began the interest in native languages and texts. Sir William Jones was one of the many officers who were studying, and translating texts from Sanskrit, Persian and other Indian languages into English. Jones became interested in Sakuntala after one of his native advisers recommended the play to him. He read the Bengali version (Kalidasa's play has four recensions or versions – Eastern or Bengali, Southern, Kashmiri and Devanagari) and was captivated. He first translated it into Latin and then re-translated it as *Sacontala or The Fatal Ring*.

Jones's Preface to the translation is an explanation of why he undertook to translate the play, and a statement of his admiration for Kalidasa and the Sanskrit tradition. As Romila Thapar puts it, the two problems he faced as a translator were “one, translating it [Sakuntalam] into a foreign idiom although the translation was not the most felicitous; and second, his wish to convince readers of the greatness of Indian civilisation” (199). He is all praise for the tradition of Sanskrit drama and Kalidasa whom he describes as “the Shakespeare of India”. But he has a different opinion about the structure of the play. His opinion was that the play could be reduced to five acts instead of the original seven. Romila Thapar observes that he felt this stemmed from a misunderstanding of Indian culture. One act that Jones felt unnecessary was the one that had the conversation between Dushyanta and Madhavya the court jester. Jones fails to understand that this is much more than a comic interlude and actually is intended to bring out the character of Dushyanta. The other passages were the ones dealing with the love between Dushyanta and Sakuntala, which Jones felt to be too erotic for his European readers. The mention of the ‘heavy hips’ of Sakuntala was toned down to ‘elegant limbs’ by Jones. Obviously the *sringara rasa* of Kalidasa was not understood or appreciated by Jones. What is more important is that Jones's translation was sanitized and made appropriate for the receptor culture. So, despite the praise he had for Kalidasa, Jones felt apologetic about the explicitness of the text. In some way it was an admission of the primitiveness of the colonized country. As Thapar puts it: “Thus the colonized are viewed as civilised, but their civilisation may take some unpalatable forms, and these can be corrected or deleted” (201).

William Jones domesticated Kalidasa's *Abhijanasakuntalam* to suit the sense of morality of his target readership.

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Sir Monier Monier-Williams

Sir William Jones's translation made a deeper impact in Europe than in his native England. By the time his successor Monier Williams translated it, the nature of the English administrators had changed. The East India Company was about to give way to the British monarch, and the indulgent fondness that Jones had for early Indian civilisation was replaced with disapproving intolerance. Gone also was the view that this was a civilisation that could be considered at par with the western. Romila Thapar is of the view that the colonial administration had another purpose: "It was necessary, they felt, for those who governed India to be familiar with Indian culture as, indeed, it had been the policy of earlier scholar-administrators to educate Europe about India. It was also the policy to rediscover the Indian past for the Indian and to revive Indian culture as defined by Orientalist scholarship. The object was not only to make the emergent middle-class Indian aware of this culture, but to imprint on his mind the interpretation given to it by Orientalist scholarship" (218). She points out that this was another way of control, of creating an image and making the colonized accept that image.

Monier Williams had a more condescending attitude to the play. His translation reflected the colonizer's Orientalist attitude and Victorian disapproval of sexuality.

The Monier-Williams translation bore the imprint of this attitude. He is also full of admiration for the play, but there is more of condescension here. "That the colonised had a civilisation is conceded, but much is made of what is seen as warts...The appreciation of poetry takes second place to practical ways of making society more functional" (Thapar: 235). The emphasis of the play had subtly shifted from a lesson in statecraft to the rustic Sakuntala and her love. It also came to be seen as representative of a Hindu way of life and as an "icon of Hindu culture" (236). This was also a departure from the Indian tradition where the play was translated into Urdu during Mughal rule. The Victorian attitude to sexuality as reflected in Monier-Williams was to influence Indian attitude to such matters.

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Kale

From Orientalist scholars we pass on to a Sanskrit scholar who also happens to be Indian. The translation was published first in 1898 and has had countless reproductions after that. In his Preface to the First Edition Kale points out how the play has been admired by western scholars also, marking what is perhaps a trait that most Indians have – of the need to be appreciated by the west to feel worthwhile. He acknowledges Monier Williams's “excellent edition of the play”, besides Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's and other Indian scholars' translations. Kale is very much a Sanskrit scholar in the translation, and has adopted a literal word-to-word translation that becomes very awkward at times. Published under the title, *The Abhijnanasakuntalam of Kalidasa* by Motilal Banarsidass

Kale's edition is scholarly, with a literal translation, copious notes and extensive introduction to the life and art of Kalidasa.

known for publishing Sanskrit works of high quality, the reader knows what to expect from the work. Kale has an introduction to Sanskrit drama in general, Kalidasa and his works, and a detailed analysis of the play in terms of plot, character and structure. There are also detailed notes with Kale's interpretations. The edition has the original text in Sanskrit on the left-hand side, with the English translation on the other side. There are footnotes as well as copious endnotes. On the whole, this is what one can call a scholarly edition of the play. It does not try to talk down to the reader or gloss over what he considers to be imperfections. His preface and introduction do not discuss the strategy he has used in translation, either. The reader Kale has in mind is the Indian reader who is familiar with Sanskrit and the culture of the country. But Kale is not the critic who is aware of postcolonial theory. It is obvious from the way he uses Europeans like Goethe, Schlegel and others like William Jones, to validate his assessment of Kalidasa as a great writer.

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Chandra Rajan

Chandra Rajan's translation is titled *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time* and subtitled *A Selection of His Plays and Poems*. It has translation of the whole of *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, *Meghadutam* and *Ritusamharam*. Educated in India with degrees in English and Sanskrit, Chandra Rajan is a good representative of the post-colonial Indian who straddles two cultures. She taught English in India and Canada. In her acknowledgements she thanks an eclectic mix – Indians for their help with the text and the foreigners for being the first readers and giving their response as “readers outside the culture” (9). This is indeed the empire writing back. Published by Penguin, its readers can be identified as both outside and inside India who are very definitely unfamiliar with Sanskrit and the Sanskritic tradition. She too has a lengthy introduction which introduces the reader to the world of Sanskrit drama and Kalidasa. The translation is not a word-to-word literal translation, but more of a sense-for-sense one that glosses over awkward structures and words. She has four appendices, which try to place Kalidasa in history, explains the lineage of Dushyanta and deals with passages in the poem *Meghadutam* that have been incorporated in other versions. Like the Kale translation, this too is scholarly, but much more streamlined to meet the demands of a receptor culture that is not familiar with the source text or culture. Consequently this is a smoother translation.

Chandra Rajan's translation is obviously meant for the reader who is not familiar with the Sanskritic tradition.

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Versions of Sakuntalam

A comparative analysis of one passage from the these four translators will help to exemplify the points already made. I have selected one stanza from Act I of the play. This is a four-line verse stanza in which Dushyanta is describing Sakuntala.:

Sir William Jones

The damsel is fatigued, I imagine, by pouring so much water on the cherished plants. Her arms, graced with palms like fresh blossoms, hang carelessly down; her bosom heaves with strong breathing; and now her dishevelled locks, from which the string has dropped, are held by one of her lovely hands. Suffer me, therefore, thus to discharge the debt.



Sir Monier Monier-Williams

Spare her this trouble, gentle maiden. The exertion of watering the shrubs has already fatigued her.

The water-jar has overtasked the strength
Of her slim arms; her shoulders droop, her hands
Are ruddy with the glow of quickened pulses;
E'en now her agitated breath imparts
Unwonted tremor to her heaving breast;
The pearly drops that mar the recent bloom
Of the [S']irisha pendent in her ear,
Gather in clustering circles on her cheek;
Loosed is the fillet of her hair; her hand
Restrains the locks that struggle to be free.
Suffer me, then, thus to discharge the debt for you.

M. R. Kale

Gentle maiden, I see that this lady is exhausted just by watering the trees. For her arms, on account of lifting up the jar, have their shoulders drooping, and their palms extremely reddened; her abnormal breathing, still causes her breasts to heave; on her face has gathered a mist of the drops of perspiration, obstructing (the play of) the Sirisha flower placed on her ear; and the knot of hair being loosened, her

tresses, held (by her) with one hand, are disheveled. I will, therefore, discharge her (lit. make her free from debt).

Chandra Rajan

I see that the lady is exhausted from watering the trees; as it is,
Her arms droop, languid, her palms glow
reddened lifting up the watering-jar;
her bosom still heaves as she draws deep breaths.
The Sirisa blossom adorning her ear,
caught in the sparkling web of beads of sweat,
ceases its delicate play against her cheek.
With one hand she restrains her hair, straying wild,
unruly, released from its knot undone.

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Implications of the translations

A close reading of these four translations of the same passage from the play shows the differing perspectives of the translators. Sir William Jones has translated the verse into prose. The passage is much reduced as he has also edited the passage. Sakuntala does not sweat and the sirisa flower disappears. Monier-Williams also avoids the reference to Sakuntala's perspiration. Harish Trivedi points out that Jones was not aware that sweating in the Indian context could also indicate sexual interest and arousal. A reference to sweat in women was unacceptable to the Victorian sense of propriety and he had to do away with this indecorous trait to cater to those sensibilities. Trivedi is of the view that

The translators differ in their renderings of the culture-specific terms and objects. Their translation strategies are also clearly influenced by the target reader they have in mind.

this is an indication of the “common translatorial temptation to erase much that is culturally specific, to sanitize much that is comparatively odorous” (7). Perhaps it is the difficulty to capture the culture specific flora that also prompts him to drop the name of the flower Sirisa. It is also interesting that both Jones and Monier-Williams think that Sakuntala must have used a string to tie up her hair. Jones says her locks are disheveled because ‘the string has dropped’ and Monier-Williams refers to the ‘fillet’ of her hair which indicates that she had some sort of band around her hair. Indians would know that this was unusual for women in Sakuntala's time. That is why both Kale and Rajan refer to her ‘knot of hair’, which is how women usually tie up their hair, without the help of a string or band.

Kale also has dropped the verse form, but has given a word-for-word translation that does not help in smooth reading. This is because he has retained the word order and structure of the original. Kale has the original Sanskrit text on one page and the English translation on the other, with copious notes in Sanskrit and English. It is an annotated version meant for the reader who would know both Sanskrit and English, or the student of Sanskrit who might find the translation useful. This is ‘faithful’ translation carried to the extreme, without heed for the reader unfamiliar with the original language and culture. Kale does not feel the need to help the contemporary Indian reader who might not know the culture of Kalidasa, either.

Chandra Rajan has verse translation and it has sense for sense translation that retains the feel of the original. It is difficult to capture the meter of the Sanskrit original and she has tried to make the best of it, without sacrificing the culture-specific references. She also has the Sirisa which is a common flower in Kalidasa's time. While Kalidasa just has ‘sirisha’ in his verse, all the translators feel obliged to add

‘flower’ or ‘blossom’ to clarify that sirisha is a flower.

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Reflections

The example given is but a very small token of how translations vary, indicative of the ideological positions of the translators. Both Jones and Monier-Williams have done target-oriented translations at the cost of the original. In fact it has been pointed out that Jones translated Kalidasa into a verse form that was very Shakespearean. The greatest compliment he could think of was to compare Kalidasa with Shakespeare. It is almost as if he is unwilling to even think of the possibility that Kalidasa could be greater. The admiration of Jones and Monier-Williams is like the delighted surprise that one feels when you realize that people you thought to be savages could have achieved such heights of artistic glory. Kale, on the other hand, is a Sanskritist who cannot compromise with the original at all. His is more of a scholarly exegesis than translation, and bears the imprint of a scholar who is unwilling to dilute the original in favour of the receptors. Chandra Rajan chooses the middle path, striking a balance between form and content. Her preface gives detailed explanations of Kalidasa and his times, and of the dramatic stage during his time. This is also helpful for the Indian reader who is as removed from Kalidasa as the western reader. Though not postcolonial in theoretical terms, the Rajan translation situates Kalidasa in context and adopts a balanced approach without condescension.

Assignments

1. What is the attitudinal difference between the two foreign translators of *Abhijnanasakuntalam*?
2. Of all the four translations, which do you think is the best? Why?

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