

Module 7: Role of the Translator

Lecture 27: Translation as Resistance

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Introduction

The roles that the translator can play are limited, considering that her area of work is not as large as that of a creative writer's. However, there is one role that the translator, as well as the writer can undertake, which is that of the resistant fighter. Translation is often overshadowed by creative and 'original' writing, and so this aspect of the process is often neglected. Resistance means the opposition to or interrogation of, received notions of literary, cultural, and social norms. Resistance in translation can be at various levels. There are a few questions that any translator would ask herself before embarking on a translation project: Why do I translate? What do I translate?

The translator, through her choice of text for translation and translation strategy, is capable of acts of resistance and subversion.

For whom? How? The answers to these questions are crucial in determining the sort of translation that would follow. The decision to translate rather than write, if it is taken by a creative writer, is a significant one. For instance, the famous Russian writer Boris Pasternak (author of *Doctor Zhivago*) chose not to write anything during Stalin's rule in Soviet Russia. This was very much a political decision, an act of protest against the tyrannical rule that did not allow freedom of expression to the writer. He devoted himself to translations instead, mostly of Shakespeare's sonnets. The sonnets with their theme of love and friendship overcoming death and brute power were also coded messages of hope sent by Pasternak to discerning readers suffering under the repressive Communist regime.

The foreignizing strategy of translation can also become one of resistance, depending on the context in which it is done. The decision to translate marginalized literature can also become an act of subversion. This is most apparent in the case of literatures that are marginalized, like women's writing or Dalit literature in India.

Women writing in India

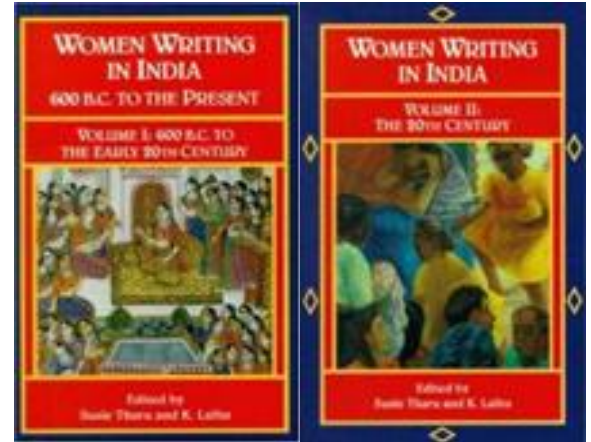
The two part anthology *Women Writing in India*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita was a conscious act of subversion.

It contained a selection of women's writings in India from 600 BC to the 20th century, mostly in English translation,

with a polemical preface that states at the very beginning:

“We began work on these volumes with the premise that critical assumptions, historical circumstance, and ideologies generally have been hostile to women's literary production and have crippled our ability to read and appreciate their work” (xv). The book thus became an attempt to provide a

forum for all those women who had been excluded from the canon of Indian writing. It painstakingly documents the writings of hitherto unheard of women writing in different languages in different parts of India in different times. The anthology interrogates the validity of the male-dominated canon, and provokes us to think about the exclusions and selections that go into the formation of a canon.



The translation, as the editors state in the Preface, is not target-language oriented. They point to the politics of translation from a regional Indian language into English – by translating from a regional language to English, they “are representing a regional culture for a more powerful national or “Indian” one, and when this translation is made available to a readership outside India, we are also representing a national culture for a still more powerful international culture – which is today, in effect, a Western one” (xx). Hence the conscious decision was to avoid domestication, and a translation strategy that “demanded of the reader too a translation of herself into another sociohistorical ethos” (xx). What it did was to maintain the basic regional flavor of the text and recreate the historical context in which it was originally composed. Here translation becomes an archaeological tool to further a subversive ideology that is essentially gender-based.

Other modes of resistance

Lawrence Venuti interprets the translation strategy of an Italian writer Iginio Ugo Tarchetti as a tool of dissent with accepted notions of literature. Tarchetti (1839 – 1869) was a bohemian writer, at variance with the notions of realism in Italian literature of his times. His strategy was essentially one of foreignization – both in terms of style and choice of text to be translated. He deliberately chose texts that were foreign in terms of language and also literary practice, thereby questioning accepted notions of literary canon and style. This expression of dissent is palpable in the novels that he wrote besides the translations. Venuti observes that he “deployed the conventions and motifs of nineteenth-century fantasy to issue a fundamental challenge to realist representation and its ideological grounding in bourgeois individualism” (*The Translator’s Invisibility* 149). The texts he chose to translate furthered his dissident agenda. He was the first to write the Gothic tale in Italy and made active use of fantasy in his own writings. Venuti terms this as a form of translation whereby one genre is adapted to another cultural milieu.

The foreignizing strategy of Tarchetti succeeded in undermining the primacy of realism in the Italian novel, and set in motion the trend towards modernism and postmodernism in Italian literature.

Tarchetti’s choice of texts to translate included Shelley’s Gothic tales and other tales of fantasy. Venuti ascribes the increased interest that 19th century Italy exhibited in the Gothic, to Tarchetti and his subversive aim of undermining Italian realism with fantasy. Writers like Poe, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Theophile Gautier became well-translated into Italian after Tarchetti’s pioneering work. Venuti is of the view that it is partly because of this trend that fantasy became such an indispensable part of modernist as well as postmodernist Italian fiction. Tarchetti’s foreignizing strategy was more in the choice of text that he translated rather than the method he used. Thus the conscious dissent that he expressed through his translations successfully subverted established canons and started off a new literary movement.

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Postcolonial Strategy

Michael Cronin points to another way in which translation can be thought of as resistance, especially in postcolonial contexts. These are the “ways in which originals can be manipulated, invented, or substituted, or the status of the original subverted in order to frustrate the intelligence-gathering activities of the Imperial Agent” (35). Cronin observes that this contradicts the basic desire for equivalence that you see in many translation studies discourses where translation is seen as a bridge between two different cultures. Cronin’s concept, on the other hand, is hostile to the idea of an original and a translational other. He uses Irish literature to exemplify his argument. 19th century Irish verse that was translated into English is one such example. Most of the verse that was translated, like Charles Henry Wilson’s *Poems Translated from the Irish Language into the English* and *My Dark Rosaleen* did not have Irish originals. James Clarence Mangan’s famous poem *My Dark Rosaleen* was the translation of a prose translation of an Irish poem. The originals in these cases were either missing or manipulated. As Cronin points out, the target language reader did not have access to the original in these cases. Mangan’s translation, for instance, was clearly a political act that appeared when the Great Famine of Ireland was at its peak. The poem became a symbol of Irish resistance to British imperialism. The mediated nature of the original did not take away from the strength of the translation; on the contrary, the unknown nature of the original was more terrifying for the colonizers. Cronin observes: “The peripheral threat to the centre comes then not from unmediated access to the original but from obliquity, indirectness, a complicated relationship with origin” (36). The problem for the target language reader (which was also the colonizer in this case) was the uncertain nature of the original.

By keeping the source text a mysterious entity, the postcolonial translator made her translation an act of resistance. The enigmatic nature or sometimes the non-existence of the original was what worried the colonizer.

Cronin draws our attention to another part of administration that generally escapes the notice of translation theorists – the murky world of spies. In the postcolonial context, the spy or local informant was invariably somebody who was fluent in the tongues of the colonized as well as the colonizer. The spy also had to translate, because very often the documents s/he passed on to the authorities would have been in the local language. They were the valuable links between the master and the colonized. From the colonizer’s perspective, the good spy was a person who did good or ‘faithful’ translations that did not distort the original.

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Resistance at two levels

Cronin thinks of resistance working at two levels especially in the postcolonial context. These are what he terms “resistance at the level of positionality” and “resistance at the level of text” (39).



What Cronin means by resistance at the level of positionality is the strategy adopted by translators by virtue of their “general position in networks of power and influence” (39). The role of a translator is often defined by his/her class, race or gender. But these are very fluid categorizations that are liable to change. For instance, a translator who belonged to the aristocratic elite in 19th century India would have been expected to be with the ruling class, but there was no guarantee that her sympathies were not with the downtrodden. Thus the translator is / was not a trusted personality, especially in the colonial context. Imperial rule demanded knowledge of the local language which could be provided only by the locals, who could not be trusted as to which side they were really on. One exception to this is the case of Rev. James Long the British missionary who is believed to have translated Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Nildarpan* in 19th century Bengal. The play with its depiction of the plight of indigo farmers under colonial rule was a scathing indictment of the British. Although Long denied his involvement in the translation, he was prosecuted for his alleged act of sedition. Cronin stresses that it is important to know the lives of translators to have an idea of what actually motivates their strategies of subversive translation.

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Textual Resistance

Speaking of textual resistance, Cronin distinguishes between two forms – what he terms as “macaronic subversion” and “attributive subversion” (39 – 40). There was a practice of writing political macaronic verse in 18th century Ireland, where the poem in English was innocent of any subversive connotations but the Irish translation was radically the opposite. The English who had no knowledge of Irish could not conceive of its subversive potential. Sometimes the practice was also made more complicated by making every alternate line of the translated verse forming a coherent subversive message.

Of course, this sort of macaronic subversion could survive only on the knowledge that the British knew no Irish.

The other effective strategy of resistance was one of attributive subversion. This was to translate a text and attribute subversive elements, if any, to the original and wash your hands off whatever problem the text might contain. Cronin gives an example of a poem called “Sheelagh Bull” which was published in 1799 in a leading Dublin magazine. It was very critical of British imperialism, but the translator sought to exonerate himself from any possible blame by claiming that it was a translation of a German poem written by the famous author Bürger.

Pasternak can be thought of having used the same strategy when he was translating Shakespeare. Once when he was called to speak at a public meeting, he refused to speak other than mention Shakespeare’s sonnet #32. The theme of this sonnet was the invincibility of the artist even in the face of death. To an audience that knew of writers’ persecution under Stalin, this was a clear subversive message that art will triumph over the most rigorous of controls.

The text can be manipulated in many ways by the translator to make it a subversive translation.

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The Indian Context

Resistance translation can be found in Indian contexts also, especially in the colonial context. The widespread translation of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* into English and various Indian languages is a case of resistance translation where the concept of a splendid Mother India was circulated widely along with the slogan of "Vande Mataram". Aurobindo's decision to translate the novel can be linked to his nationalist leanings.

Translations with a very specific purpose, like nationalist translations in colonial India or the translation of marginalized writings, constitute resistance translation in India.

The political motivation behind the widespread translation of Ambedkar's works into English and other Indian languages was that of popularizing the ideology behind Dalit literature. Dalit writing itself, which was initially vibrant only in Marathi, gradually spread and strengthened itself through translations. This was also largely due to mutual translation between Indian languages, and also into English. It is a fact that much of Dalit literature got noticed abroad and in India through English translations. One such example is the Tamil writer Bama's *Karukku*, which was translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, and published by Macmillan in its translation series. *Karukku* was noticed by the international reading community for its unvarnished account of an educated Dalit woman's status in contemporary India. Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* translated by P. A. Kolharkar was published by Sahitya Akademi in 1998.

The Navayana, which is "India's first and only publishing house to exclusively focus on the issue of caste from anticaste perspective" dedicates itself to the cause of the downtrodden especially in the intellectual realm (http://navayana.org/?page_id=2). Its founders S. Anand and Ravikumar have spoken about the selective translations that were made from Dalit literature into mainstream languages. They point out that only those texts that talk about the dalit as victim get published. This is one of the main issues that they discuss in their slim publication *Touchable Tales*. As they observe: "There has been a surge in publishing dalit writing in translation . . . Dalit writers are being invited to literary festivals abroad. Dalit literature is also being taught in some universities. But who decides what gets published? Who are these interlocutors- the publishers, translators and editors? Why are autobiographies prioritized? While dalits in Tamil Nadu are being forced to consume shit and piss, who are the consumers of dalit literature in English?" (<http://navayana.org/?p=148>) Navayana's publishing endeavours try to answer these questions.

Other subaltern histories

Like the Dalit texts, another genre that has erupted on the regional Indian literary scene is that of the memoir or autobiography of members of the underprivileged classes of society. People who hitherto had no faces or names, are putting down their experiences in black and white, asserting to the world that they have an existence that is worthy of being noticed. These memoirs were translated into English, catapulting their authors to national and sometimes international, attention. The most prominent of these was Baby Halder's *A Life less Ordinary*, the memoir of a maid in Delhi. Written in Bengali, it was first published in Hindi translation in 2002, and the English translation was that of the Hindi version. The Bengali original was published only in 2004, after the huge success of the Hindi version. Baby Halder became an international literary celebrity after this, and was one of the crowd pullers at the Jaipur literary festival.

These translations gave a respectable platform to people who were hitherto looked down upon, and helped in breaking down the barriers in canon formation in India.

Tales of subaltern or downtrodden existences soon made their way to the publishing field. Nalini Jameela wrote of her experiences as a prostitute in Malayalam which was translated into English as *Autobiography of a Sex Worker*. This described without sleaze, Jameela's initiation into such a life and the ways in which she coped with the exigencies she faced.

The translations of such texts ensured that they were heard and recognized along with 'respectable' literary voices. The decision to translate and give visibility to such texts was no doubt a radically subversive move, one that still has not been appreciated by a few purists who think that these semi-literate people have no right to be called authors. Translations of subaltern texts have gone a long way in interrogating the power hierarchy that exists in Indian literature and pulling down the barriers that had been erected around less privileged sections of society.

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Assignments

1. Which are the ways in which translation can be thought of as a resistance strategy?
2. Can you think of an example where a translated work led to a major literary change?

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