

Translation, Culture and Politics

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A discussion of Translation and its theories often remains circumscribed to a discourse arguing about the issues of authenticity. One of the oft repeated worries being whether the translated piece is able to retain the flavour of the original. Whereas Translation in reality, is a process/act, which is bound to get enmeshed in several conflicts. While at the first level the problem is related to morality and ethics, at an second and a more powerful level, it is an act which can be questioned in relation to hegemony or colonial dominance, when it is a case of transfer from language of under developed or developing countries to the language of a developed country

can throttle the potentials of the original text, it might become, an impersonal illimitable continuum of verbal process, threatening to subsume the authorial intention, but it might as well serve the opposite i. e., unleash the hidden forces and create greater possibilities in a new language.

In the second case greater possibilities might be indicated in the extreme sense where, (in the Barthean sense of the term) there is the death of the author and the signifier is set free to search for suitable and alternative signifieds. Ironically, this process of going beyond the authorial intention also makes translation therefore analogous to the

expected to supersede the attempts to translate the same author's *Ghare Baire* for reasons known to all. Sale of the translated versions of *Gitanjali*, do tip the scales and no one perhaps questions the authenticity of the source from where such translations are done. In such cases, however the problem lies to the extent, texts and signifiers are manipulated to pitch up the sales figures.

Translation, therefore, is never an innocent activity and is often criticized, associated with the practice of cultural and political hegemony which can be traced back to the colonial times why and in what way were certain Indian texts translated by scholars as early as William Jones still remains a matter of speculation. Scholars like Tejaswini Niranjana or Harish Trivedi are vituperative when analyzing the patterns and objectives of translating the cast (read the text) by the west almost echoing a trajectory to be traced to Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

Translating oriental texts becomes a corporate institution for dealing with the orient dealing with it by making statements about it, ruling over it. Among the numerous discursive practices exercised by the orient, one seemed to be a translation whose onus has been to defend and necessitate the white man's burden and to emphatically argue William Babington Macaulay's necessity to establish, English education in India. One has to understand the translation of books like *Manu Smriti* (1974, translated by Sir William Jones) sold, exposed the savage and illiterate practice of the native and thereby adhered to the policies of the corporate which operated on demand, supply and profit making interests.

This inherent tendency of subjection through translation was something that Said, would say, a natural progress towards complete and voluntary subjugation to domination and hegemony, till the native is incapable of retaining faith in his own ability and knowledge.

Why have certain texts become part of the university syllabus and others haven't? Trying to find an answer to this question, traces the politics behind the translation and inclusion of certain texts like U.R Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* or Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*,

not only within Indian syllabus but also abroad. Such investigations might also interrogate why Maheswata Devi's *Draupadi* or Stanadayini or Bijon Bhattacharjee's *Nabanna* have not found a scope for such wide dissemination. Perhaps as critics like Tejaswini Niranjana point out, in these cases, "Who did the translation," becomes a deciding factor. How, why and what ultimately is the impact of such a translation?" Niranjana's observations made her conclude that it is always the Europeans who were considered to be worthy as translators and that translating into a Western language was the only way of purifying Indian culture, so as to make it seem more English.

Such a transnational perspective further establishes the extent of domination certain languages had over others. This exposes the resultant power struggles which find their root in many languages having remained relatively deprived than the others- like Rajasthani, Nepali, Dogri in comparison to Bengali, Tamil or Marathi. This is partially because of the political economic discrimination on one hand, on the other, lack of scholars who could be instrumental in translating them into a dominating language. In India, the North-East in general has suffered from years of neglect due to geographical inaccessibility, as well as political apathy largely stemming from the fact that the people in the region have a distinct ethnic identity.

Even if there were several reasons leading to the "dominating/dominated" binaries in languages worldwide, there is a need to retrieve the dominated languages, a need to disseminate them widely to a larger reading public which could lead to an array of exciting discovery of themes, cultures and way of life. If the reason has been that a language of the "peripheries" had been erstwhile dominated by the Empire then there is a need to write back - as claimed in the much popular book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin.

It is, therefore, imperative that translation as a profession or activity be taken up seriously, if we are to justify the critical study of regional languages/literature within the corpus of Indian and South Asian academia and at least

partially substitute the pursuit of foreign texts in the syllabus of Comparative Literature and English Literature in the various Universities of the country.

"Beyond the postcolonial" and in times when the world is moving towards globalization or better "transnationalism", translation becomes a two way traffic - a window to see and know the world.

This act becomes, not simply an act of appropriation and adaptation, but as Bhabha says, "a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems and values, by departing from their habitual or "inbred" rules of transformation." Translation has to now go even beyond this where the non-literary would share a space with the literary, assuming a fundamental restructuring of economies in the developed and developing world with a strong emphasis on privatization and deregulations. This is a kind of a world which demands appropriate circulation and production process, where an Indian or a Bangladeshi ware must be made potentially attractive to an American customer and it is here the capacity to translate comes to the foreground.

There is a changing relationship between translation and its markets and the translator needs to provide the 'aesthetic comfort of the familiar' with the 'aesthetic comfort of the exotic'.

Translation is thus burgeoning not only as an interesting profession but a lucrative one. A time may come when automation and machine translation may usurp the work of translators to cope with the geometrical expansion in demand for translated information. Yet, many memorable human values have been generated by the encounter of languages and transference between them - the generative function of the encounter - issues raised by and in the process of translation. Perhaps over and above machine translation we might hope for individual verbal exercises of translation imbued with some ethical values which would be capable of spreading fraternity and kinship rather than consumerist competition.

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(and this is an issue very pertinent to South Asia, where the focus could be translating texts in vernacular/ native languages to English).

To the first problem - how far is a translated piece equal to the original, Professor Sukanto Chaudhuri has an interesting observation, "... translation is like a woman either beautiful or faithful but not both." Keeping aside the huge controversy that such a remark may generate, I call upon the cogency of the parallel that the simile evokes - that the departure of a translation from the original evokes the compelling suggestion of a threatening subversive force, the infringement of set parameters of possession and authority. Although, this is true that translation by chance,

Derridean 'difference' which means that translation do endlessly defer and extend meanings and implications of the original.

This is more so, because translation involves the collation of not only two creative individuals, but also two languages, cultures, often two communities and countries. It is this radical shift of the context of interpretation that calls upon contesting sites and questions of domination of one language or one culture over the other, apart from the problem of difference already talked about.

Any Translation of a particular text also reflects the cultural politics behind such translation. Say, for example, the translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali* is

Kissed by the dusk: Eugene O'Neill

S M MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

On the 132nd birth anniversary of Eugene O'Neill, the Shakespeare of American Theater, the question is: did he ever die?

It was in the seventh grade that I first learned about the Big Bang; the space-time singularity that held the universe in its womb, then BOOM! Before it was nothing, after it would be nothing; in-between there is something. The waves and particles of Starlight travel hundreds of thousands of years, millions of miles, until they lace into the eyeballs and drown. "We are, all of us, stardust, born of the same womb over thirteen billion years back," I wonder, "But where is the memory?"

Who was it that lived in your body fifteen years ago? Was it you, the same you that you now call "I"? Who would it be in another fifteen years? Are we but palimpsests of our memories? Eugene O'Neill painted our lives as microscopic specks in the colossus of space echoing in the deathless drumroll of time ticking to our own demise. He is ruthless in exposing the skull clad in skin and slug, wringing out the excess water from his family soaked in nostalgia.

"The past is the present, isn't it? It is the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us." The malady of Mary, the portrayal of O'Neill's mother, Ella, in his autobiographical masterpiece *Long Day's Journey into Night*, is a malady of the knots - a veritable pastiche of the past spilling into the present and the future. Rheumatism blueprints Mary's mental state. Living in-between willed amnesia and forced anamnesis, Mary's faith in herself has been marred by the conscious decision not to become a nun or a concert pianist but to marry James Tyrone who adores her but almost always misunderstands Mary, and is, in turn, almost always misunderstood.

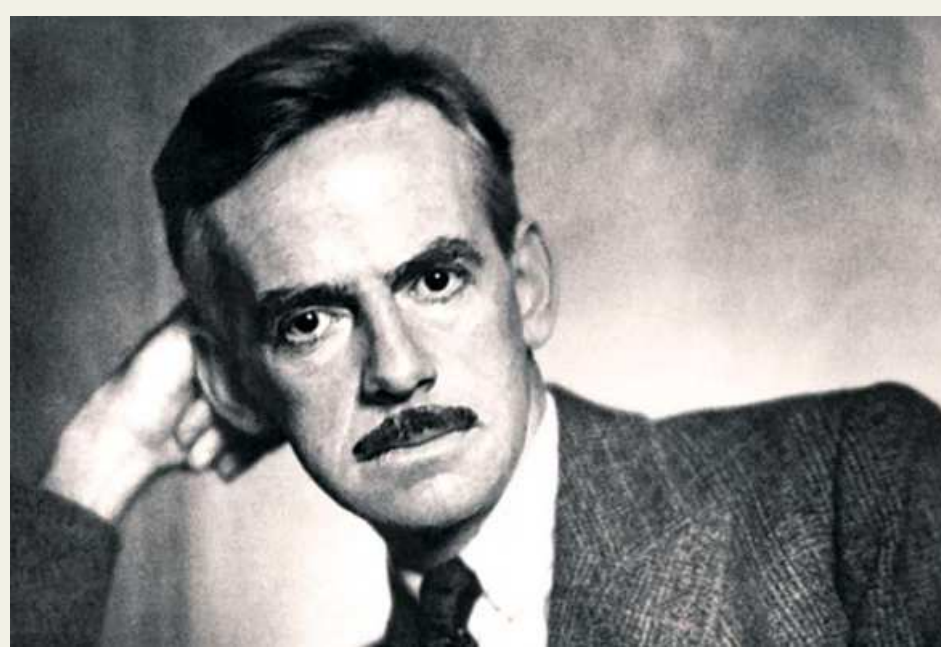
Throughout the play, Mary is pushed to paranoia by her family members' constant

reminders of her Morphine addiction. They watch her watching them watch her. What is it about the gaze that sucks us in? When someone, an-other, looks at us, their lenses reflect the image of ourselves. And when we meet their gaze, watching ourselves in the eyes of an-other activates the Narcissus effect - the desire to drown in the eyes reflecting the image of our own. The equivalent for "ghost" in certain Indo-Aryan languages is "*Bhoot*," denoting that which has already been viewed. Dragging her wedding gown across memory lanes, Mary time-travels and freezes herself in the past as a convent girl, unmarried, haunting and haunted by the ghost of herself.

In fact, every family member in *Journey* has made chasing ghosts their forte. James Tyrone is magnetized by his dead mother who wore the crucifix of poverty like a garland around her neck. Fear is contagious; it makes nomads of the minds and steers us gently towards self-destruction. James buys more and more land to stop the mudslide under his feet. Unburdened by pride or shame, he wants to send his own son, Edmund, to the cheapest sanatorium on fatal risk from tuberculosis.

James had learned "the value of a dollar" at home, having been kicked out multiple times for falling back on the rent: his mother, two sisters, and himself at the age of ten - a lesson hard learned, never to unlearn. He, too, lives in pursuit of his ghost - what he might have been - a Shakespearean actor bathed in glory, forever "alive in his great poetry." The terror of death in destitution had nailed the coffin of his dreams. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," James quotes from *The Tempest*, "And our little life is rounded with a sleep."

"We are such stuff as manure is made of," Edmund counters with typical morbidity and cynicism, rubbed off on by Jamie, his elder brother and role model. Jamie is a walking contradiction.



He looks like his father but doesn't; almost handsome but isn't; kissed by the dusk, yet dusky. He had measles at the age of seven, spread it to his infant brother, Eugene, who had subsequently succumbed to it. Since then, Mary had sentenced Jamie to life imprisoned by bitterness, skepticism, lust and drunkenness. Fratricide! Trailing the ghost of his brother, Jamie nosedives into the mist.

Edmund, the youngest, fancies being cloaked by the fog; his name being the only theatrical adjustment. The fact that the author, Eugene, trades his name with his elder brother who died in infancy betrays the centrality of silence and absence. In life, *Edmund* dies to give *Eugene* life; in the play, *Eugene* dies and *Edmund* is conceived to replace the child deceased. Taking the birth of Edmund as the event that hooked Mary to the needle to boot, we realize why Edmund calls himself "a ghost within a ghost."

In essence, O'Neill's oeuvre explores shadows of death in life itself. Hades was his mentor, Poseidon his priest. The sea is the only place he wanted to be, for the sea is everything the world is not. Everything dissolves in the sea; dissolves, then dissipates, finally disappears. The sea is the watery grave of memories. "We must suffer, suffer into truth," Aeschylus said. For O'Neill's project of willed amnesia untying the knots of past sufferings, theater was the perfect medium.

Theater is the edge that impales, holds a mirror before the audience and bars all exit. The spectators - bedimmed, spectral - are central to meaning-making, for the origin of both "theory" and "theater" is *theoria* - "to watch." The audience watch the characters watching the audience - forming centrifugal patterns of concentric circles ever narrowing until they converge at the nuclear core and implode, drowning not just the eyes but the minds from the gallery

into the stage, breaking time and space, breaking barriers.

Writing himself enabled O'Neill to answer that age-old existential question for the theater: "Who am I?" The answer, "No-body," broadening the horizon to transcend the material with the natural. He stammers and limps across the stage of life. But once he starts unfolding the confines of the "I," he belongs "without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself," Edmund finds the sublime in the simplicity of "green seaweed anchored to a rock, swaying in the tide." From a creature, he becomes *the* creator.

Gazing at the "dim starred sky" lacing into his eyes, Edmund is forged into an epiphany - his "I" diminishes in the eyes of the universe - the secret he sees and becomes cannot be expressed, only experienced; being riverrun, the epiphany sails at the interstices of being and nothingness. It is what certain Tantric discourses term "awareness" and "becoming," undoing the existential angst arising from the identification with and centrality of the "I." Edmund must always be "a little in love with death" because he was never born, and therefore, can never die. The "I" from fifteen years ago is not the "I" of today or the "I" twenty years from now; skating the glaciers of Evolution entails no teleology or finished product. Life is about absorbing the world entire in all its minutiae and memories spanning thirteen billion years; to be kissed by the dusk and dissolve, spinning the wheels of suffering till the mist melts amid the falls, weaving truth and the tale of immortality.

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