

## The Enigma Called Translation: An Exposition

Golam Hossain Habib\*

### Abstract

Translation is the vehicle that takes us across territories formerly unknown to us. Despite the sheer importance of the journey and the beneficial role of the vehicle itself, the latter, that is the vehicle, has suffered much neglect, with its identity continually debated and misunderstood. The present essay tries to weigh this variegated and contentious phenomenon, by putting up different opinions of literary luminaries about it.

Few would argue that without translation it would have been impossible for people to be initiated into the creations of the great minds of humanity, because of the very simple fact that it is next to impossible for us to learn all the languages for studying the various texts in the tongues they are originally written in. Translation encircles us in such a way that it can be compared to our being surrounded by air without being constantly aware of it. Despite this, paradoxically, this omnipresent precious entity that we call translation has suffered a good deal of negligence not only from the commoners, but also in the academia for a long time. Even now, it is plagued by the same scourge, though to a lesser degree as can be seen in the following comment: “Translation was never considered a serious intellectual activity until the seventeenth century although there were some insightful observations on the business of translation from time to time” (Ray ed. 2008, ix).

The concept of translation is a project that is fraught with problems and disputes—all of it starting right from its definition down to its ways of execution. The title of the essay can be vindicated by one single utterance made by I. A. Richards who said that translation ‘may probably be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos’ (Richards 1953, 250). Whether it is really so can be debated *ad infinitum*; but, that it has retained its status as a

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\*Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Chittagong

serious intellectual activity of great interest for quite long, with its ways and scopes remaining yet unsettled, cannot be debated.

According to Mallikarjun Patil, “The word ‘translation’ is derived from the Latin term ‘translatus’. The prefix ‘trans’ means passing something, while the stem ‘slate’ means cover. The generic term translation has several implications such as alteration, change, conversion, interpretation, paraphrase, rendering, rephrasing, rewording, transcription, transformation and transliteration, while the specific meanings of the word are translating, rephrasing, interpretation, rendering, decoding, etc.” (Ray 2008, 9-18).

We are aware of the account of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:19) that is said to mark the beginning of the multilingualism which called for the birth of translation, while we can trace the pulse of ‘common’ people’s negative attitude towards translation in the Shakespearean play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in which Quince utters: “Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee, thou art translated” and Bottom retorts, “I see the knavery, this is to make the ass of me.”

So far, a great number of people, both luminaries and common ones, have tried to define translation in various ways in accordance with their experience and discernment, the one in the first paragraph of the essay being a unique example. It needs to be pointed out here that we are mostly concerned about literary translations.

Theodore Savory, in his *The Art of Translation* defines translation as an ‘art’, while, according to Eric Jacobson and Eugene A. Nida, it is, respectively, a ‘craft’ and a ‘science which consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.’ According to Dostert it belongs to ‘... that branch of the applied science of language which is specifically concerned with the problem or the fact of transference of meaning from one set of patterned symbols into another set of patterned symbols’ (Dostert, cited in J. C. Catford’s *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, p. 35). According to J. C. Catford, one of the major contributors to the theory of translation, translation is the replacement of source language text material by equivalent target language material.

The definitions cited above are all from the Occident; as regards the Oriental attitude towards translation, ‘Classical Indian translation is characterized by loose adaptation, rather than the closer translation more commonly found in Europe; and Chinese translation theory identifies various criteria and limitations in translation’ (Wikipedia). The popular attitude to translation and translators is also evident in the Italian saying—*traduttore, traditore* : translator, traitor.

But, perhaps, the most radical definition of translation was given by Octavio Paz, the famous Mexican Nobel Laureate in literature, who said:

Every text is unique and at the same time, it is the translation of another text. No text is entirely original because language itself, in its essence, is already a translation: firstly, of the non-verbal world, and secondly, since every sign and every phrase is the translation of another sign and another phrase. However, this argument can be turned around without losing its validity: all texts are original, because every translation is distinctive. Every translation, up to a certain point, is an invention, and

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as such it constitutes a unique text (Paz, Octavio, 'Translation: literature and letters', 152-162).

In fact, in a way the history of translation is broadly the history of rivalry and heated debate between two warring groups: the proponents of fidelity to the original or source text, and those of freedom of the translator in general. Here we are reminded of the theory of translation provided by the English poet and translator John Dryden in his 'Preface to Ovid's Epistles' (1680):

First, that of Metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and Line by Line, from one Language into another. ...The second way is that of Paraphrase, or Translation with Latitude, where the Author is kept in view by the Translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered. The Third way is that of Imitation, where the Translator ...assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion: and taking only some general hints from the Original, to run division on the ground-work, as he pleases.

With an aim to illustrate his points, John Dryden gives examples of three types of translations—Ben Jonson's translation of Horace's *Art of Poetry* (metaphrase), Waller's Translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* (paraphrase), and Cowley's rendering into English of two odes of Pindar, and one of Horace (imitation).

The point to be noted here is that it is the ancient Greeks who recognized the difference between metaphrase and paraphrase, and Dryden adopted it. Even more interesting is the fact that the Russian novelist, poet, and translator Vladimir Nabokov, who was of the opinion that even the sweetest paraphrase of a text is inferior to and less desirable than a peculiar literal translation, adopted almost the same concepts of Dryden, or those of the ancient Greeks, though with his own nomenclature: lexical, literal, and paraphrastic. He termed his favourite way 'the servile path', that is, strict adherence to the original text, especially while translating poetry. Ketaki Kushari Dyson, the eminent Bangla essayist, poet, and novelist, described this attitude as 'fundamentalism of translation', thus suggesting instead that it is not servility to the text that is required while translating, rather friendliness with it.

Long before Nabokov, Horace (65-8 B.C.) uttered a few words of caution against the too much faithfulness in translation and rather advised translators to shun the path that the Russian novelist advocated for:

A theme that is familiar can be made your own property so long you do not waste your time on a hackneyed treatment; nor should you try to render your original word for word like a slavish translator... (*Art of Poetry*).

It seems that the champions of literal translation are perfectionists who are scrupulous and concerned about the phrase that has come to the verge of becoming a cliché: lost in

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translation. They are totally forgetful about the fact that in hair splitting terms translation is impossible, and hence a compromise, a practice that we are won't to in many of our daily activities. They cannot accept the fact that loss is inevitable in the process of translation, and translation, as Derrida says, is not transcription. So, translators and translation theorists better accept the fact of loss, thus, abiding by the dictum of Rabindranath Tagore: “যা হারিয়ে যায় তা আগলে বসে রইবো কত আর?” (Something which is lost eventually, can how long be kept?).

The advocates of the ‘loss in translation’ or those of strict adherence to the source text, whom Ketaki Kushari Dyson calls ‘the fundamentalists of translation’, seem to forget that there are certain limits of translation. There is no language in the world that, in terms of equivalence of its words, has accurate equivalent to all of them in any other language. So, in most of the cases the length of the Target Language text is not the same to that of the Source Language text. Good translations often getting lengthier than the texts of the source languages (SL). The length apart, there are other things that defy translation, namely jargons, critical terms like ‘romanticism’, ‘structuralism’, ‘deconstruction’ ‘objective correlative’, etc. ..., cultural words, rhyme and rhythm in poetry, jokes and puns and humour, slangs, advertisements, etc.

More deserving of study, it seems, is what is gained in translation, because translation is, after all, as has been said before, a compromise. However, before we delve deep into the prospect of ‘gain’ in translation, let’s take a look into the idea of translation prevalent during the Middle Ages since it cared little about the so-called ‘loss’ in translation:

Medieval translation was a very different undertaking from modern academic translation. It is more akin to what we might call ‘adaptation’, a free rendering of an earlier text that concentrate more on what it says than how it says it: more on *matiere* or *san* (to use Chretien’s terms) than on form. When Chretien set out to translate a story from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as he apparently did in the case of Philomela, he sought to convey not so much the words or the Latin poetic form as the meaning, or import, or—as he would put it—the *san* of the original. He did not hesitate to add anachronistic touches to make the text more comprehensible and enjoyable to his courtly patrons, or even to include entire developments that were not in Ovid. Yet I venture to say he still considered his work a ‘translation’ of the Latin original. Similarly modern ‘literary’ translators such as Ezra Pound, Stuart Merrill, or Kenneth Rexroth seek not so much to reproduce the exact words or images or the poetic patterns of the originals they translate as to convey the mood or feeling or tone of the original (Beer 1997, 256).

And, this particular characteristic of translation in the West during the Middle Ages has bearings on the tendency of looking down upon translation as well as translators and the practice of translation into Bangla in the medieval period and later.

Dr. Sudhakar Chattapadhyaya, in his *Amor anubadak Satyendranath* (The Immortal Translator Satyendranath)—a unique book published in the early sixties of the last century and devoted mostly to the critical appreciation of Satyendranath Datta’s prolific translations from English, Sanskrit, Hindi, French, Persian, and Oriya languages into Bangla—has aptly pointed out that despite the common tendency to consider translation as a secondary activity, we must not forget that the great authors of pre-Modern Bangla literature—Krittibas, Kashiram, and Alaol—are, in effect, translators. The list of names does not end here, Dr. Sudhakar Chattapadhyaya reminds

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us, and goes on to say that it includes Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, the eminent scholar and writer of Bangla and Sanskrit languages and literatures in the early stage of modern period of Bangla literature as well as un-daunting social reformer, whose *Shakuntala*, *Betalpanchabingshati*, *Bhrantibilas* are imitations of different significant works from Sanskrit, Hindi, and English literatures. Munier Choudhury, the prominent playwright, literary critic, educationist, teacher, and martyred intellectual of Bangladesh, in his *Tulanamulak Samalochana* (Comparative Criticism), a volume of comparative criticism or treatise published in 1969 mentions that Jyotiridranath Thakur wrote thirty-three plays of which twenty-two are translations. Munier Choudhury further comments that *Purubikram* and *Sarojini* are not original plays, rather translations of some special kind. Thus, he refutes the prevalent notion that Jyotiridranath's original plays are only four, namely *Purubikram* (1874), *Sarojini* (1875), *Ashrumati* (1879) and *Swapnamayee* (1882).

Now, let's think further about the issues related to the loss and gain in translation. As has been mentioned earlier, today we are almost submerged in translation in our daily life. Even while we communicate with people using the same language, meaning and interpretation of what is being said vary from person to person. Secondly, without translation it would have been impossible for most of us to be acquainted with the realm of great thoughts of most of the great minds. This, certainly, is a gain that none can venture to put aside.

Moreover, if we are to take note of the particular observation made by J. C. Catford that texts of the source language are not completely translatable or completely untranslatable, rather they are partially translatable, then the loss, since inevitable, cannot remain a matter of continuous lament, since we—the human beings—are quite aware of our mortality, braving which we live our life as much as we can.

As regards people's harping on what is lost in translation, their attention now can be drawn to a different kind of loss that, so far, many have seemed to ignore. We can term it as 'lost in creation'. The writer, while preparing a piece of writing, draws on from her/his experience, feelings, insights, intellect, and so on. Still s/he cannot possibly claim to have penned or 'keyboarded' everything that is intended to be delineated. Something, though not so significant, is always lost in the process of creation of the so-called original piece of writing. Often, many of them would confess that the intended 'thing' could not be fully captured. While this may seem to be a modest gesture on their part, there, we have reasons to believe, are some 'taints' of truth in it, for the simple reason that—as pen pushers would bear us out—words, elusive and ambiguous in their nature, tend to go out of control, and sometimes in hiding in the process of writing, thus leaving the writer or author somewhat helpless, and causing the piece to lose something. To say it in a lighter vein, the writer works with impunity here as no record regarding the intended piece of writing lies anywhere (if not in the realm of 'Ideas' championed by Plato) to detect what is lost in the process of creation. But, alas, the unfortunate translator is caught red-handed even for a simple deviation from the so-called original by a reader who knows both the source language and the target languages well.

In the last five or six decades, academics and literary critics in the West have started to look at translation with feelings of respect and awe. The study of translation has gained ground; and, the focus is now rather on what is 'gained' in translation, not so much on what is 'lost' in the

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process. This championing of translation is a daunting venture that has defied and dismantled the age old tradition of considering the task as being hackneyed and not original.

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