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Translation and Culture

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Abstract

Translation has been a vital process in history of world culture and is perhaps more so today than ever, in an age of globalization. The rise of English as a world language has increased the scope of translation substantially. The grammatical translation is the plain prosaic rendering which helps people not well versed in a language to understand the meaning of a source text. The altering translation is a well known from theoreticians such as Goethe and Schleiermacher, who maintain that to translate means to take the reader to the author.

The focus of the paper is radical analysis of the links between culture and translation, while insisting on the importance of culture in redefining literature. Translation of literary works not only serves as a medium of expressing feelings and ideas but also helps in expression of different cultures. As the case in point, my paper shall examine the main role of translation in transferring cultural concepts between two or more languages and some obstacles or difficulties that translators face in this process. The pros and cons of the translated works will be taken into consideration. The paper would also include samples of translated work and will describe how these works are records of the civilization, traditions and ways of life.

Keywords: culture, society, beliefs, translation, panorama, tradition

Translation has been a vital process in history of world culture and is perhaps more so today than ever, in an age of globalization. The rise of English as a world language has increased the scope of translation substantially. Literature is the mirror of the society, culture and ways of life. At this point it can be said that the variety of languages, diverse cultures and necessity of communication in human life have made translation an essential part of literary scenario. Thus, it seems that language and culture are closely related and translation serves as the bridge between different languages, cultures and societies. There are no strict demarcations for the translator concerning the process of translation. However, he/she has to take into account the background, culture and era of the literary work while translation. Hence, translation serves as an important haulier in globalization of cultures leading to expansion of ethnic habits and customs, or religious values. Translators should not only concentrate on the conveyance of the same meaning, but also on the dissimilarities between two cultural perspectives.

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary culture is, “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations; the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group”. There are large number of difficulties faced by the translators due to the difference of norms, backgrounds and customs, thus has also resulted in enormous misunderstandings among readers. Every age stands on the pedestal of historical background, customs, traditions, specific language and thus constructs

its own culture that becomes an indispensable part of it. Nowadays, the major problem in translation is certainly the influence of diverse cultural norms in the source language and target language. Hence, the translator's responsibility is to choose the significant norms that take priority over others and create a subtle balance between the cultural norms of the source language and target language. As religion and culture are intertwined, it becomes translator's obligation to care of any work which is against religion. Because religion has taken its root from human mind and soul therefore, anything against it stimulates people's emotions and evokes negative reaction by them. Translator has to also keep an account of conveyance of same referential, pragmatic and interlinked meanings while translating a work from one language to another. Thus, a good translation helps the reader to contemplate over the cultural context of the source language. Cultural sharing is one of the very important advantages of translation that serves as medium to transfer ideas, customs, and social behaviours. By an appropriate translation readers or audience of target language culture will acquire a lot of useful benefits as in; hospitality, way of greeting, table manners.

Gitanjali by Rabindranath Tagore is one of the popular translated works in literature. It is the collection of poems in Bengali by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. The original Bengali collection of one fifty seven poems was published on August 14, 1910. The English *Gitanjali* or *Song of Offerings* is a collection of one hundred and three English poems of Tagore's own English translations of his Bengali poems first published in November 1912 by the India Society of London. It contained translations of fifty three poems from the original Bengali *Gitanjali*, as well as fifty other poems which were from his drama *Achalayatan* and eight other books of poetry. The translations were often radical, leaving out or altering large chunks of the poem and in one instance fusing two separate poems (song ninety five, which unifies songs eighty nine and ninety of "Naivedya"). The translations were undertaken prior to a visit to England in 1912, where the poems were extremely well received. In 1913, Tagore became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize, specifically the Nobel Prize for Literature, largely for the English *Gitanjali* which became very famous in the West, and was widely translated. The word *gitanjali* is composed from "git", song, and "anjali", offering, and thus means, "An offering of songs"; but the word for offering, "anjali", has a strong devotional connotation, so the title may also be interpreted as "prayer offering of song" This popular piece of literature has served as the propagator of Indian culture to the world only because of the fact that it was translated and thus translation helps to clear all the barriers and brings the world together by facilitating people to understand different languages and cultures. As the case in point, the following lines from the poem XXXVI, *Gitanjali* could be cited:

This is my prayer to thee, my lord- strike, strike at
the root of penury in my heart.

Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and
sorrows.

Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in
service.

Give me the strength never to disown the poor or
bend my knees before insolent might.(XXXVI 1-4)

Translation plays an imperative role in giving culture a broad-spectrum and making it universal. It facilitates the growth of global network which helps in bringing different countries and people together and thus making world a global village. As without cultural similarities and universalities, there is no way for people of different cultures to communicate with each other.

There are certain drawbacks of translation also which are evident from the illustration of the English translation of *The Second Sex* (French: *Le Deuxième Sexe*). The original French version is written in 1949 by the French existentialist Simone De Beauvoir and is one her best works. It deals with the treatment of women throughout history and is often regarded as a major work of feminist philosophy and the starting point of second-wave feminism. Here, the following lines could be cited, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex* 301). Many commentators have pointed out that the 1953 English translation of *The Second Sex* by H. M. Parshley, frequently reissued, is poor. The delicate vocabulary of philosophical concepts is frequently mistranslated, and much of the text has been excised. The English publication rights to the book are owned by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc and although the publishers had been made aware of the problems with the English text, they long insisted that there was really no need for a new translation, even though Simone de Beauvoir herself explicitly requested for it. However, amendments could be made in the translated text which is one of its great advantages. Here, it could be said that the publishers paid attention to the requests, and commissioned a new translation to Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier. The result, published in November 2009, has met with positive reviews from literary critics, who credit Borde and Malovany-Chevalier with having diligently restored the sections of the text missing from the Parshley edition, as well as correcting many of its mistakes.

The understanding of the cultural value of a translation text has become profound, especially in respect to the identity forming ability of translation. At this juncture the following lines by Venuti on identify forming ability of translation could be cited, “ability of translations to participate, according to the necessity, both in ensuring culture’s coherence or homogeneity as well as in activating cultural resistance or culture’s innovation processes” (Venuti 68). The conception of the utmost necessity of cultural identity for the assessment of political, social, economic and technological development has been called the cultural turn, “The fact that cultural identity is the decisive factor in constructing the specificity of a certain society could be called the cultural turn. It means that the contemporary political and social developments, but also economic and technological developments, whether they have a global or rather a local nature, can only be understood via the concept of cultural identity...” (Segers 384–385).

Cultural Translation transpires in the work *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha. According to him, “Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication” (Bhabha 228). Jhumpa Lahiri is one the meticulous and self-induced example of cultural translator, whose first book of fiction, *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* (1999), made her the first Indian-born writer to win the Pulitzer prize for fiction. According to her, “translation is not only a finite linguistic act but an ongoing cultural one” (Lahiri 116). In answer to the criticism that her knowledge of India as reflected in her stories is discernibly flawed and erroneous, she has replied, “I am the first person to admit that my knowledge of India is limited, the way in which all translations are” (Lahiri 118). Moreover, this superfluous metaphor is persistent and further painted by her assertion that, “Almost all of my characters are translators, in so far as they must make sense of the foreign to survive” (Lahiri 120). Thus, language is rooted in culture and culture is

reflected and passed on to different people and societies at a large with the help of translation. Moreover, culture is the essence and basis of civilization hence, knowledge, beliefs and perspectives transfer through language and culture. Culture links the past, present and future together. Hence, translation seems to be the unsurpassed way to unite all cultures in order to create cultural globalization, which means the union of all the forms of culture.

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