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## The Ambivalence of Representation: Fiction and the Filmic Craft

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The present paper attempts to explore the dynamics of filmic representation of literary texts under the mode and manner of intersemiotic translation *a la* Jakobson. The adaptations of the famous novel *Samskara* and a short story *Ghatashradha* by U.R. Anantha Murthy for the celluloid by Pattabhi Rama Reddy and Arun Kaul respectively are studied as a case in point. The concept of 'ambivalence' in the title of the paper is viewed as a creative category vis-à-vis the concept of transcreation and the search for a new form of meaning and manifestation of the contextual truth of a narrative as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo and Walter Benjamin. The filmic adaptation of *Samskara* is viewed as following the norms of contextual fidelity while delineating the contradictions and conflicts of a South Indian Brahmin community through the experiences of its leader, Praneshacharya. Arun Kaul's representation of Anantha Murthy's story titled *Diksha*, however steps beyond the immediate concern of the story to integrate the cumulative context of other narratives by Anantha Murthy as well as the director's own psyche and awareness as a Brahmin in the contemporary context in creating fresh paradigms of representation on the celluloid.

As a student of translation and an amateur theatre artist, I have often argued in favour of the need for a composite mode of translation to accord a plausible delineation of the various inter and intra-textual, aesthetic, socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of a text which is sought to be translated, whether in a *intralingual* (rewording or rehashing within the same linguistic system), *interlingual* (from one linguistic system into another) and *intersemiotic* (from linguistic to non-linguistic sign system like art or music) as envisaged by Roman Jakobson. Indeed the intersemiotic mode of translation, which includes the adaptation of a literary text for the stage or the celluloid, entails a composite mode of representation. It partakes of the process of translation into the active, representational mode and the problems central to translation apply to theatrical or filmic productions as well -- and the problems of trans-adaptation entail fresh dynamics. In reworking a textual source into a script for the stage or filmic production, the translator-adaptor takes recourse, consciously or unconsciously, to the entire repertoire of one's experience of the texts and intra/intertexts of the same or diverse genres, socio-cultural interactions including the oral-folklorist tradition(s), cognitive and archetypal patterns of perception and behavior, which impinge upon the psyche in the collective mode. This necessitates the recourse to a hybrid mode of stage or filmic representation where facial expressions and body language, costumes, set design, light and sound and special effects produced through dance, music and even cinematography to a certain extent enables the theatre artist to move beyond the limitations of the three walls of the stage, to transcend the purely textual/intellectual dimension into the domain of experientiality.

In this paper I propose to focus upon the filmic representations of two texts by U.R. Anantha Murthy – *Samskara*, which has evolved as a seminal text grounded in the Indian context

post independence and *Ghatashradha*, a short story, which like *Samskara*, focuses on the theme of death rites which are in turn intimately wound up with multiple issues of religious, cultural and social concern. This paper is partly an extension of a paper titled “Cinema as Trans-active Representation of Literature” presented at a conference in 2013. The title of the paper, “Ambivalence of Representation: Fiction and the Filmic Craft”, has a particular bearing on the filmic adaptations of the two texts by Anantha Murthy. The term ambivalence is grounded in the authors’ reaction to his friend and teacher Malcolm Bradbury after watching the Bergman film, “The Seventh Seal”. The film is based upon the crisis of faith being faced by a Christian character. Anantha Murthy records his response thus: “It was a great and a symbolic film, but I saw it without sub-titles. I was stirred by it. Often creativity is aroused by imperfect understanding and even misunderstanding. I told Bradbury, ‘Look Malcolm, as an Englishman you have to create your medieval times through learning and knowledge acquired with hard scholarship. But the medieval times are part of my consciousness; centuries can co-exist in the Indian mind’” (quoted in Baral, Rao and Rath 2005: 70). If temporal and spatial dimensions of experience continue to operate without causing any cognitive aberration in our perception of reality, creativity might not happen. It is only when our perception of static reality, as is often the case with members of a specific religious, social and cultural configuration, is impinged upon by an awareness of the present that ambivalence about our identity is generated. It is such ambivalence about one’s being or existential environment, as with Praneshacharya in *Samskara* or Sheshagiri Udupa in *Ghatashradha*, that creative potential gets unfolded. The expression of the creative ambivalence through the mode of art and literature involves aesthetics of representation, which holds good for any form of translation also.

Of course, the notions of performability, actability and speakability of a text are quite pertinent when it comes to its visual representation. These notions are rooted in the question of “translatability” of a text à la Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>. The apparently unwieldy gaps between perception and representation of a text on the filmic plane also need to be addressed in a plausible manner. A viable answer to these problems is offered by the notion of “transcreation”<sup>2</sup> used by P. Lal to designate and justify his translations of *Shakuntla* and the *Brahadranyaka Upanisad* (1974), which might offer the best possible solution for the problems of culturally oriented literary texts. In fact, the *Brahadranyaka Upanisad* itself provides an answer to the problems of intersemiotic representation of a text vis-à-vis the process of creation. According to the upanishadic dictum, “This universe before coming into being was unmanifest (*avyakta*). It became manifest (*vyakta*) through the conjunction of *nama* (name) and *roopa* (form)... It expressed itself thus.... Therefore, even at this time, this unmanifest object becomes manifest as ‘has this *nama* and *roopa*’” (*Brahadranyaka Upanishad*: 11.4.7). A natural corollary to this is Sri Aurobindo’s notion of evolution from *nama* through *roopa* to *swarupa*, or the essential figure of truth (*The Interpretation of Scriptures* 1972). Aurobindo further relates the process of translation/transcreation to the levels of human consciousness, *namah* being the physical or the material level, or the written word, *rupa* representing the mental level or the figure of meaning, and *swarupa* the super conscious level of the image of truth which is sought to be expressed. This may be further linked to the cognitive-linguistic modes of *para* (pre-linguistic state), *pashyanti* (perception), *madhyama* (the intermediate mental level) and *vaikhari* (the spoken linguistic level) – the four distinctive features of the vedic conception of sound, which provide a link between the physical and the transcendental as modes of perception through the intellectual and the mental intermediates to creative expression.<sup>3</sup> Thus, translating a text through

interlingual, intralingual or intersemiotic modes partakes of its linguistic as well as intellectual analysis at the levels of the word-play and the form of meaning.

What still continues to be problematic and elusive concerns are the questions of the proper communication of idea, figure of speech or emotion associated with a word(s) or mode of expression (suggestive meaning or *dhavani* as laid down by Anandavardhana) and the propriety (*Auchitya*) thereof. Sri Aurobindo suggests that the translator should search for the “right psychological function” (Aurobindo 1972[10]: 31) of the words, images or symbols deployed by the original writer which should be founded on proper philosophical justification and should fit naturally into the context where it occurs. According to Aurobindo, both words and ideas are symbols of knowledge which is beyond words and ideas (Aurobindo 1972[3]: 115), the translator might even transgress the limits imposed by words and ideas and seek to penetrate to the knowledge behind. The arguments that I am trying to advance also have a bearing upon Walter Benjamin’s conception of translation as “mode” as outlined in the “Task of the Translator”. According to Benjamin speaks of translation in terms of “recreation” that seeks to transform and renew something living – the original or the source text – by supplementing it and according to it a kind of “afterlife”. Benjamin believes that there is always something “unfathomable” in a text which evades the translator (Benjamin 1969: 71).

Thus translation, particularly intersemiotic translation which requires the involution of the linguistic syntagm into an active, paradigmatic mode, invariably necessitates a ‘transgression’ of sorts to facilitate a viable representation of the multidimensional levels of expression and meaning which lie embedded in the textual narrative. *Samskara*, as a case in point, has been approached and analysed from a variety of standpoints ranging from socio-cultural, psychological to linguistic, political and other theoretical perspectives. The form and content of *Samskara* have been studied from the perspectives of religious and cultural and individual identity vis-à-vis the tenets of Brahmanism and the issues of caste and gender as well as the notions of the self and personal desires in an ethnographic context. No doubt *Samskara* became the centre of debate as soon as it was made into a film in 1970 by Pattabhi Rama Reddy.

A.K. Ramanujan, who translated *Samskara* into English, describes it as an allegory rich in realistic detail, in which an “abstract human theme is reincarnated in just enough particulars of a space, a time and a society”<sup>4</sup>. The description by Ramanujan embodies the ambivalence about the filmic representation of *Samskara* that Rama Reddy might have been faced with. If Anantha Murthy’s narrative is an allegory, it calls for representation beyond the textual parameters, but if it is to be viewed as a realistic work, it resists any violation of contextual fidelity in its filmic version. The director appears to have settled for a close observation of the textual context while adapting *Samskara* for the screen. Rama Reddy’s choice might also have been conditioned by the atmosphere of realism which influenced Kannada literature in the nineteenth through the twentieth century, particularly in the works of Shivaram Karanth, Gopalakrishna Adige and Anantha Murthy. In fact, the ‘Black-n-White’ texture of the film, which immediately registers itself as a mode of transporting the present day viewer into a past when India was passing through a phase of transformation into modern nation post - independence, is used to advantage by Reddy as the mode of realistic presentation. Moreover, it is mostly the script of the English translation of *Samskara* by A.K. Ramanujan which is used for subtitles in the Kannada film and helps to make it a close motion-picture replica of the novel to the non-Kannada viewers. The motion-pictographic representation is successful in invoking a realistic atmosphere of Durvasapura, the Brahmin ‘agrahara’ and adjoining areas along with the typical landscape and habitat of the rural South India of the times. The impending plague

symbolized by the vultures hovering over the agrahara sky or perching on the rooftops of the houses, the dying rats followed by the subsequent deaths of the brahmins as well as the non-brahmins evolve into poignant metaphors of a decaying community. The greed, avarice and convoluted psyches of the inhabitants of Durvasapura are presented as normal human traits which call for introspection on our own part.

In both versions, *Samskara* is the portrayal of the personal angst of Praneshacharya, the community leader, the man with ultimate knowledge and epitome of righteous behavior, after his sexual experience with Chandri, a low caste woman who lived with Naranappa in the dark of the forest. Naranappa had rejected all Brahmin ways and lived an incontinent life. Now Naranappa was dead and Praneshacharya was faced with a crisis: whether Naranappa deserved the last rites due to a Brahmin or not? He fails to find any resolution to the problems in the scriptures and goes to the Maruti temple across the river to elicit an answer from the god. It is while Praneshacharya is returning home after his utter failure to find a solution to the predicament about Naranappa that the Acharya finds himself succumbing to sexual pleasure, something he had always decried Naranappa about. However, before experiencing a sense of guilt over his experience, Praneshacharya feels a sense of elation, even liberation. His sudden awareness, not only about the beauty and pleasures of the human body, but the world of nature around him to which he had been inane for so long, described by Anantha Murthy in a graphic manner, finds its objective correlative in the enactment of sheer joy and contentment by Girish Karnad who plays Praneshacharya in the film. The filmic version successfully establishes this moment as a turning point for the Acharya as he wakes up in the morning to take a deep look at the sky, plucks the flowers, pulls out the grass and smells these till they fill up his being as it were. The delineation of the guilt and shame which the Acharya experiences once he remembers his ailing wife, the Brahmin community awaiting his return with a solution to the crisis they are confronted with, and, his loss of authority to judge Naranappa subsequent upon his cohabitation with Chandri in the forest, are acted out by Karnad with such depth and intensity that it transforms the textual representation of Praneshacharya's new found awareness about his being foiled by his acute sense of guilt into the domain of actual or lived experience.

The film version of *Samskara* is successful in portraying the dichotomy between the role of a pious brahmin and community leader which Praneshacharya has envisioned for himself and the demands of his own being including his sexual impulses. Praneshacharya tries to escape from the resulting anguish and conflict by becoming a recluse. However, he finds himself embarking on a journey across a demonic world characterized by passion and desire, greed and anger, cock fights, acrobatics and prostitution. In the filmic version, these clearly emerge as covert but unmistakable lineaments of Praneshacharya's old world owing to the peculiarities of cinematography along with the interplay of the images of the light and the dark and the ghastly and the demonic<sup>5</sup> which highlight the gap between the past and the present of the Acharya. Thus, although Praneshacharya aka Girish Karnad might hide his identity from the world (he tries to hide his face with the corner of his shawl and runs away from the temple feast, afraid that he would be recognized), but he cannot escape from the essential truth about himself and his clan.

However, the choice of the realistic mode does not allow the film to digress from the textual narrative in any significant way. There are obvious limitations with regards to the mode and manner of portrayal of the psychological and existential aspect of the Acharya's dilemma owing to the limitations of cinematography at the time of the production of the film. It makes only two major deviations from the textual context. First is the instance of Putta, whom Praneshacharya meets in the course of his wanderings and who clings to the Acharya like a

shadow. Putta, who is capable of natural and spontaneous behavior, acts as a reality instructor for Praneshacharya and leads him across the fair at Meliege with coffee and bangle shops, the circus and the feast at the temple to the house of Padmavati, a prostitute. Putta feels somewhat repelled by Praneshacharya once he realizes his reality which is a far cry from the delineation of his character in the text. Anantha Murthy's reaction if any, to this diversion from the original is not available. However, he had reacted very sharply to the curtailment of Putta's role in the radio adaptation of *samskara*.<sup>6</sup> The second point of deviation is the fact that Praneshacharya is actually shown as returning to live with Chandri, who is still at Durvasapura, at the end of the film, whereas Anantha Murthy's text is open ended with suggestions of a meaningful relationship between the two.

Now for a comparative evaluation of Anantha Murthy's short story *Ghatashradha* and its filmic version titled *Diksha*. *Ghatashradha* implies a funeral rite performed for a person in one's lifetime. It is the worst form of excommunication imposed on a community member, particularly among the Brahmins, in which a person is denied the right to live (cf. 'death-in-life') for a serious breach of community norms, customs and traditions sanctioned by religion. In Anantha Murthy's story, Sheshagiri Udupa, the high priest of the Brahmin community in a South Indian village, performs *Ghatashradha* for his widowed daughter, Yamunakka, who has not only become pregnant through an illicit relationship with a school teacher hailing from another community, but has also committed the heinous sin of aborting the fetus. The film based on Anantha Murthy's story adheres to the theme of the original in essence. However, Arun Kaul, the translator-director, makes a labour of love to expand and re-contextualize the thematic concerns of the story and to reinvigorate the stereotypical image of orthodox Brahmin hood.

The very title that Kaul ascribes to his film makes it evident that he is going to recast the thematic matrix of the original and seek to add fresh temporal and spatial dimensions to it. The film is titled 'Diksha', which, according to *Oxford English-Hindi Dictionary* means "preparation or consecration for a religious ceremony; instruction (especially in disciple hood to a teacher by reception from him a particular mantra); initiation...; self-dedication (to a purpose, a person)...", which is a far cry from the title of the original story. In the film, it implies not merely initiation but dedication to and continuation of the principles dear to the teacher by the disciple. Udupa is transformed into a brahmin who follows the tenets of his religion with great care and concern, but has the imagination to interpret those tenets in a humanistic context. Thus, when his widowed daughter returns home, she is not forced to shave her head to great consternation of other community members. Udupa is also instrumental in performing the funeral rites for Kateera's aunt, a low-caste woman who did not deserve such rites at the hands of a Brahmin. This episode does not find any mention in Anantha Murthy's story. However, Arun Kaul uses this as a pretext for delineating the contradictions and conflicts inherent in a brahmanical society. This expanded context also allows for a graphic portrayal of the tension between tradition and modernity which Kaul too might have experienced as a brahmin in the contemporary context.

To continue with a description of the film version, Upadhaya, Udupa's disciple, is sent to confront him on both the issues and to elicit an explanation and possibly an apology from him for the satisfaction of other Brahmins. However, as Udupa explains to Upadhaya, he performed the funeral rites to sustain Kateera's faith in him and in the meaning and purpose of life. Otherwise, Kateera's humaneness would have been annihilated. In the same vein, he upholds Yamunakka's right to live a normal life even after her husband's death. Upon this Upadhaya alleges that why should Udupa expect him to be his mouth piece when he was quite capable of maintaining his independent view point. To this Udupa replies that this is precisely the kind of

*diksha* which he has imparted Upadhaya and he would be happy to be questioned and contradicted by his pupil if he fails to discharge his duty. The debate between the ‘guru’ and the disciple, as they assert their respective rhetoric on the issues of religion and faith emerges as the dramatic correlative for the conflict between religious traditions vis-à-vis their significance for the actual world rooted in action and experience. It adds to the rising action in the filmic context of Anantha Murthy’s story and leads to the climax in the form of Upadhya’s rejection of and protest against Udupa’s decision to perform *Ghatashradha* for Yamunakka orchestrated by Kateera’s vehement and hostile rejection of the same earlier on. This is also in essence the *diksha* or initiation provided to Upadhaya by Udupa. Thus, Udupa’s decision, which is more on account of his inability to redefine and reformulate the norms of his community in a context which is amenable to individual and community existence, is represented as a flawed vision both on the conceptual as well as pragmatic planes.

It is possible to work out several points of departure as well as conflation between the original story as well as its filmic representation. For instance, Kaul makes use of the wider canvas accorded by the virtual space of the film version to develop and delineate certain strands of character and characterization which have been hinted upon in the story. As a case in point, the peculiar relationship between Kateera and Nani, Udupa’s young and naïve disciple, who is also the narrator in the original story, is delineated in a beautiful way by Kaul. When Nani insists upon touching Kateera, as he does not understand why he should not touch him, Kateera climbs on to and jumps across trees teasing Nani to come and touch him if he can, which is a feast to the eyes. Nani’s fondness for Kateera and his consternation upon not being able to reach out to him is a fine rendering of the innocent but subtle relationship between the two.

The filmic representation thus transcends the telling mode of the story to its graphic, pictorial representation involving sound, sight, landscape/geography and habitat rendered in the active experiential mode. The attitude of the community towards Yamunakka, particularly the characteristic widow, Godavamma, the immateriality of Yamunakka’s relationship with the school teacher through his equation with the ‘Brahamrakshasha’ in Nani’s imagination, Yamunakka’s disgust and helplessness about her illicit relationship, her anguish over her situation which she must hide from others, the elemental urge of the motherly instinct in her as she draws Nani’s ears to her womb to experience the magic and the miracle of the phenomenon of life taking form inside her, the scene of the ruined temple invaded by a cobra, where Yamunakka goes to meet her lover, the atmosphere of the settlement of low people where Yamunakka is taken for aborting the fetus – all add new experiential, life-like dimensions to Anantha Murthy’s story in the virtual space without losing its semblance to the original to become its allegorical representation in a trans-active mode.

That Kaul has transcended/transgressed the original story in his filmic representation of it finds sanction in Anantha Murthy’s own artistic vision and practice. The view point proffered by Murthy in his stories is empirical, open-ended. The decision to perform *Ghatashradha* for Yamunakka followed by Udupa’s marriage to a young girl is rejected by Nani, who in spite of his naiveté has a simple but unflinching faith in life and human relationships. The atmosphere in and around the village, the austerity of the brahmanical fold as contrasted with the liquor and tobacco-ridden atmosphere of the people on the margins where people fighting and cursing each other is synonymous with cock-fights, a favourite past time is rooted not only in the immediate context of the story but also in other works by Murthy, including *Samskara*, his magnum-opus, as discussed above. The journey through the demonic and the ghastly most often serves as a foil to the restrictive, life-denying ritualistic existence. Chandri in *Samskara*, who is a prostitute,

steps beyond the atmosphere saddled with the notions of sin and pollution, indecision and taboos, to bring to fruition the seed of her relationship with Praneshacharya, the scholar burdened with the wisdom of scriptures, who might follow suit if he is to live a fuller and freer life. The resolution of the tension between tradition and modernity, which Kaul has tried to work out in his film, also finds a natural corollary in Murthy's later work, *Bhava*, in which the issues raised in *Samskara* are reviewed in a fresh social and temporal context.

It might then be stated by way of conclusion that Pattabhi Rama Reddy, while directing *Samskara*, delimited his creative venture to a faithful reproduction of the concerns of the original text. However, he did succeed in creating a popular visual form of it, which created a dent in the stereotyped conception of Brahmins and Brahmin hood. However, Kaul, in stepping beyond the immediate context of Murthy's story in his filmic adaptation of it, makes an imaginative digression to give expression not only to the innate conflicts of a society to which he belongs, but also approximates the artistic and social concerns of Anantha Murthy as expressed in his extant and subsequent works in a cumulative way. He elevates the creative ambivalence faced by Rama Reddy by incorporating his modernistic and contemporary awareness into the basic fabric of *Ghatashradha*. In fact, in de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing Anantha Murthy's story for filmic representation, Kaul does not merely transmit the information contained in it (which would have been a bad translation or representation), he imaginatively and skillfully projects the sub-text embedded in the surface narrative to comprehend and trancreate the complexity of the original. Thus, if the filmic representation of *Samskara* presented a visual 'avatar' of the novel, Kaul's delineation accords a new *swarupa*, an 'after life' to *Ghatashradha* as envisioned by Sri Aurobindo and Walter Benjamin respectively.

#### Notes:

1. According to Walter Benjamin, the first criterion for translating a text is its "translatability": "The question whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: Will an adequate translation will ever be found....? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation and, therefore in view of the significance of the mode, call for it?" (Benjamin 1969: 70).
2. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Fifth Edition) defines *transcreation* as "creative translation, seen as producing a new version of the original work".
3. The reference to these four coordinates of speech vis-à-vis states of cognition have been used in the context of representation of the states of experience through the acting mode. The reference to these coordinates is based upon the analysis thereof in *Approaches to Acting: Past and Present* by Daniel Meyer-Dinkgrafe (New York: Continuum Books, 2001). He builds upon the paradigm of the relationship between language and consciousness as given by the Sanskrit grammarian, Bhartrihari. Although Bhartarihari designates the *para* state as transcending consciousness and ascribes it to the realm of the absolute, he views *pashyanti* as the finest relative level between the physical and the transcendental, where there is no distinction between the word and its meaning or its temporal associations. Bhartarihari further associates the *pashyanti* level with that of *spota* or wherein meaning exists as a whole (see David-Meyer: 72). It may be inferred from this by way of corollary that the four linguistic stages may correspond not only to the process of speech but also have a psycho-linguistic bearing on the form and nature of creation. However, discussion of these precepts is beyond the scope of this paper.
4. A.K. Ramanujan, "Translator's Note", U.R. Anantha Murthy, *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, trans. A.K. Ramanujan (1976; rpt. New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1989), n.p.



5. The expressions have been adopted from R.K. Gupta, “The ‘Ghost’ and the ‘Demon’”: An Approach to U.R. Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara*”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 16, August 1989.
6. Jullian Crandall Hollick and Shebana Coelho, who adapted *Samskara* for a new form of on-location radio drama have recorded Anantha Murthy’s protest over the dropping of the role of Putta in their essay “Praneshacharya’s Dilemma: Adapting *Samskara* for Radio” (in Baral, Rao and Rath 2005: 243): “Yes you can drop the smarta brahmins but Putta is truly the dialectic opposite of Praneshacharya; he is spontaneous, rooted in the sensations of the present moment, and doesn’t exert his WILL. Both Naranappa and Praneshacharya, although they seem opposites live on their WILL. They have a fixed notion of what they are, but Putta doesn’t have it ...” (July 5, 2002).

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