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Rethinking Translation: A Hypothetical Exploration in the Indian Context

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore the concept of translation vis-à-vis the Indian metaphysics and poetics. Sri Aurobindo, the great Indian poet and seer conceives translation as a search for the 'right psychological function' 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 consciousness which is beyond words and ideas. He suggests that the translator might even transgress the limits imposed by words and ideas and seek to penetrate to the knowledge behind. It is proposed to build upon Aurobindo's view point to hypothesize translation as possibility, seeking to express the consciousness of a literary work or the essential spirit of a literary work into another language which partakes of an incorporation of the source and the translated text into a new form and being as it were. The linguistic and aesthetic categories of Indian epistemology have also been referred to in the course of the deliberations undertaken.

Keyterms: Consciousness or spirit of a literary work, levels of consciousness, linguistic levels (*para, pashyanti, madhyama, vaikhari*), binomial relationship of inspiration and sound (*dhvani*), writing/translation as evolution.

Remember Derrida who asserted that translation is impossible¹, which makes it all the more imperative to attempt translations. Derrida's observation may be contrasted with the stance of Sujit Mukherjee and others that Indian's have a translating consciousness² (this may be viewed as a near cognitive view vis-a-vis the Indian mind). As such, this paper attempts to rethink the concept of translation in the context of Indian epistemology, particularly with regards to Sri Aurobindo's conception of translation which is placed within the dynamics of the evolutionary human consciousness. Consciousness is a term which incorporates a wide range of meaning even in the English language ranging from the state of being conscious or aware (about one's own existence), the thoughts and feelings of an individual or a group of people as well as full activity of the mind and the senses. In Indian world-view, the term gains both contextual and metaphorical meanings vis-à-vis the awareness about the process of creation and comprehension of the phenomenal world with regards to its referentiality to the cosmic order. Consciousness is thus the source of creation as well as of comprehension and knowledge about the meaning and purpose of creation.

The cognitive and structural foundation for evolving a model of translation as evolutionary possibility may be traced back to the upanishadic analogy of creation as outlined in the *Brahadranyaka Upanisad*. 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). Just as creation is an ongoing process, with every object in the phenomenal universe perpetually undergoing transformation to manifest itself through various forms (of matter and energy), a literary work also grows and develops through a process of association with other literary works and modes of perception and interpretation to acquire new dimensions of meaning to evolve into a fresh discourse of knowledge.

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 Bhartari’s cognitive-linguistic modes of *para* (pre-linguistic state), *pashyanti* (perception), *madhyama* (the intermediate mental level) and *vaikhari* (the spoken linguistic level)³ (Kunjuni Raja 147-8). As S. Gopinath points out, Aurobindo develops his concept of translation from these levels of perception and expression and “gives a further psycho-spiritual division of the levels of consciousness at the physical, mental and supra mental levels” (“Translation, Transcreation and Culture”)⁴. The text has to be grasped intuitively at the highest level of *swarupa* before it can be translated at the other two levels of *namah* and *rupa*.

Translation is not a linear process as there is constant shifting of these three levels. In fact, Aurobindo felt that “translation becomes more communicative, especially when the higher meaning of the text is significant” (“On Translating Kalidasa”). This calls for a metaphysical communion between the translator and the author, and functions at a much higher level than the reading and understanding of a text at its denotative and connotative levels. Further, the process of communication between the original author, the translator and the knowledge which is revealed by the text forms the cognitive triangular basis of translation. This triad is again repeated in the form of the translator (who, by the perceptive process, identifies with the author), knowledge revealed by the translated text, and the reader of the translated text who will have a communion between the two. Since not only words, but even ideas are symbols of knowledge which is eternal, being beyond words and ideas, Aurobindo suggests that the translator must transgress the limits imposed by words and ideas to penetrate to the knowledge which inheres the text.

This might read as a purely theoretical and therefore improbable statement for the lack of proper examples and illustration and therefore demands authentication with the help of three tropes. The first trope pertains to the biography of Abraham Lincoln read in a school text

book. Lincoln acquired a copy of the autobiography of George Washington, one of the great American presidents, with much effort, and this book became his most precious possession. He remarks that he read and re-read the book till it became a part of him. In other words, Lincoln imbibed the spirit of George Washington as enshrined in the book to himself become a part of the league of great leaders. The second trope comes from a reading of Maxim Gorky's autobiographical novel, *My Childhood*. Gorky, an orphan, had to work on a ship for a while to earn a living. It was the cook of the ship who initiated Gorky into reading and writing after his 'Nani' (maternal grandmother), who first ignited his creative spirit with her numerous stories. When Gorky could not make sense of a book which the ship's cook gave him to read, the latter taught a very significant lesson to the young boy. He asked Gorky to read a book as many times as he has to till he becomes aware not merely of its literal meaning, but the wonder that it holds within its pages. My third trope comes from actor Naseeruddin Shah's dramatic reading of Manto's story "Toba Tek Singh". In spite of having taught the story so many times in a classroom situation, it was for the first time, while listening to and watching the actor's narration [at the 'Think Summit' 2013]⁵ that the story evolved into a living mode for me and it became possible to appreciate certain aspects of the story which I had overlooked so far. These three tropes led to the thought and belief that every work of art and literature worth its name is infused with a spirit or consciousness of its own, which must be comprehended and expressed in a variety of ways to accord a cognizable character to it.

However, before dwelling further on a hypothesis of translation as possibility within the framework of Indian metaphysics and poetics, it would be in order to briefly establish the context and background for suggesting such a model of translation. The need for adopting a composite of translation has often been felt by the present writer based upon my experience as an amateur theatre artist. While adapting and scripting plays for representation on the stage, which is a mode of inter-semiotic translation, one has to take recourse to the composite, hybrid mode of stage representation, where facial expressions, body language, costumes, set design, light and sound, and special effects produced through dance, music and even cinematography enable the theatre artist to suitably manage the gap between perception and representation to a great extent.

The second point of reference is my attempts at translating Toni Morrison's *Beloved* into Hindi and Krishna Sobti's *Mitro Marjani* into English for over a decade now. The only plausible success so far has been in translating parts of these books, while a cumulative and comprehensive translation thereof remains a far cry. It is not merely the metaphorical richness of Toni Morrison's expression which poses challenges of translatability; her expression is permeated with folklore and myths drawn from the life, culture and traditions of the blacks. Any translation of Toni Morrison will therefore be fraught with unwieldy gaps without a proper comprehension and expression of these aspects in the mode and manner of expression of the language of translation.

The problems and challenges of translation are equally complex in Krishna Sobti's context. Not only is the translator confronted with the challenge of grasping the cultural and

connotative nuances of Sobti's novella, as in the case of Toni Morrison, *Mitro Marjani* employs a highly idiomatic mode of linguistic expression. Although written in Hindi, the content as well as the context of the novella is infused with Panjabi culture, which, in a manner of speaking, is genetic to its tone, texture and overall atmosphere. Sobti, who breathes in this cultural context, has beautifully interwoven the Panjabi idiom into the Hindi diction used by her as the vehicle of expression.

Mitro Marjani has been translated into English by Gita Rajan and Raji Narsimhan for 'Katha India', titled *To Hell with You Mitro*. While reading this translation for the first time, the general feeling was that it was done in immaculate English. However, the awareness and understanding of the original Hindi text soon began to interfere with the appreciation of the Katha translation: there is something amiss in the translation – something which the translators have failed to carry through. Panjabi as a language is very rich in culturally loaded idioms and proverbs, which tend to get lost in translation. Does this imply looking for equivalence between peculiar Panjabi expressions and their rendering in English? Certainly not! Even the Indian concept of translation does not aim at equivalence of expression.⁶ There can also be no major problem with the policy of 'Katha' that a translated work should read like an original in the language into which it has been translated. My problem is that Sobti's *Mitro* was read first in Hindi and hence the continuous harping upon something being amiss in the translated work.

The foregoing argument evokes a contemplation of the Aurobindonian mode and model of translation as an alternative, wherein the text, which is to be translated, must be grasped intuitively at the highest level of consciousness or its essential *swarupa*, which corresponds to the supramental level. Within the framework of the four levels of consciousness postulated by Aurobindo, the supramental transcends the physical, the vital and the vital mental of one's psyche. It is not that he devalues the physical or the vital levels of consciousness. "Sri Aurobindo values physical consciousness very highly in aesthetic creation; for after all, aesthetics does not deal with abstractions and ideas per se. According to him art, no matter how mystical or philosophical, must have a sensual foundation" (Ranchan 40). Thus he praises Homer and Chaucer as exemplars of physical consciousness in *Future Poetry*. Vital consciousness is the domain of emotions, instincts, passion and individual desires and drives. The mental level, however, is viewed as interfering with physical and vital consciousness with a tendency to tamper with the visitations from the higher consciousness.

It is here that Sri Aurobindo accords a seminal place to inspiration as a creative and aesthetic force for literary expression including translation at the level of higher consciousness. To quote from his epic poem, *Savitri*:

A fourth dimension of esthetic sense

Where all is in ourselves, ourselves in all

To the cosmic wideness realigns our souls,

A kindling rapture joins the seer and the seen,

The craftsman and the craft grown into one

Achieve perfection by the magic throb. . . .

(*Savitri* 112)

As Som P. Ranchan elaborates: “Although it is not difficult to have physical, vital and mental inspiration, or to . . . experience the impact of inspiration at these levels the psychic inspiration [or inspiration at the level of supramental or higher consciousness] is much harder. It is predicated on access to the inner mind, access to the soul within [the creative mind of the artist or the essential spirit of a work of art in our context]” (44-45). Aurobindo would agree with western poets like Robert Browning that higher inspiration is something very rare and sparse; God, or the source of overhead inspiration, like the Muse in Greek mythology or the Goddess Saraswati in the Hindu cosmology, only gives a line or two to be further inhaled into a work of art through a *sadhana* of sorts, which partakes of an active interaction of the different levels of consciousness orchestrated by the distillation of the intuitive or the inspirational into the form and content of a narrative.

Since Sri Aurobindo himself was a profound translator of literary works including scriptures, his aesthetics takes into account the notions of form and style of literary works also. His ideas on form and style are a natural corollary to the five principles of poetry or literary creations as described in his *Future Poetry*: spirit, truth, beauty, delight and life with regards to their conglomeration in creativity and aesthetics. While a detailed description of these principles is beyond the scope of this paper, their bearing on form and content, which includes the essential parameters of language and style, are both relevant and central to the concept of translation.

In actual practice of writing and translation, Aurobindo recommends the practice of receptivity to inspiration, no matter what form inspiration takes. He seeks to put us on guard against the contaminating influence of the intellect which tends to impinge upon the imagination the habitual forms of perception and thought. As such, the intellect must be trained to receive the thin and sparse ‘visitations’ of inspiration. [As a case in point, we might recall the ‘inspired’ version of “Kubla Khan” by Coleridge in a wake-dream state, wherein the hold of the intellect upon his imagination had been weakened by the effect of drugs, but was lost upon being interrupted externally.] Aurobindo, who claimed that the source of *Savitri* was an overhead inspiration, believed that inspiration can determine its own form and expression like nature itself, if it is allowed to do so. The task of the writer or the translator is to subsequently revise, improve and refine what has been accorded by inspiration through one’s knowledge and experience of technique of writing.

Since inspiration has to be expressed in writing through words, Aurobindo values the knowledge of the *sabda* or the word, which to him is the manifestation of the *Brahman* [God], or the controlling and governing principle of the universe. Thus, inspiration and writing are placed in a binomial relationship by Sri Aurobindo. For him inspiration comes

clothed in *dhvani* or its linguistic equivalent. Anandavardhana, the greatest exponent of the concept of *dhvani* in Indian poetics, maintained that it is the soul of poetry. *Dhvani* implies the layer of meaning beyond denotation and connotation and often becomes the very essence of a work of art. As TRS Sharma describes it, “[*dhvani*] is the region of puns and polysemy, of personal allusions, esoteric symbolism, and indigenous myth, which often commune beyond words” (Sharma 115). Creative inspiration must be received as *dhvani* before it evolves through the stages of *para* and *pashyanti* into the graphic form of *vaikhari*, or linguistic expression as outlined earlier. *Dhvani* is the primordial vibration or the sense of the sound which orchestrates the meaning and purpose of existence for different species of the existents in the Indian epistemology. Lord Brahma is said to have reverberated the primordial sound ‘*Da*’ before humans, gods and demons which was perceived and interpreted differently by them⁷ [a symbolic interpretation of life and its manifestation popularized by TS Eliot in the *Wasteland*].

While deliberating upon the English translation of *Mitro Marjani* by Krishna Sobti, it was felt that the language employed by Sobti is unique in the sense that she imbues Hindi, which is the vehicle of her expression, with various hues and shades of Panjabi language and culture which forms the essential context of her work. The English translation of Sobti published by Katha India appears to be unwittingly sabotaged by the hegemony of English in academics and publication industry (with the subtle design of imposing homogeneity of sorts on all forms of literary expression?). Unlike the fecundity of meaning and interpretation concurred by the Indian world-view as above, does not the story of the Tower of Babel (*Genesis* 11: 1-9) which is characterized by confounding of comprehension through linguistic aberration when the source of meaning is sought suggest such a view point? As George Steiner puts it, the “epistemological importance [of the theory of translation] lies in its contribution to the ‘theoretical practice’ of homogeneity, of the natural union between the signifier and the signified. This homogeneity is proper to that social enterprise which we call writing” (Steiner 12).

It is precisely this apparent emphasis on homogeneity which makes the essential spirit of a narrative like *Mitro Marjani* ‘amiss’ in translation. It is a generally accepted premise that the grammatical and etymological functions of one language cannot be applied to another language. Therefore the language of a translated work ought to be contemplative and suggestive rather than monologist and hegemonic. This might be the reason for Sri Aurobindo to aver that the translator might transgress the limits and boundaries of language while attempting a translation.

While not venturing into the debate surrounding realistic representation and verity of art to life which informs any hegemonic discourse on literature and translation, it would be in order to build upon the Indian view of translation as manifest in the word *anuvad*, which is generally looked upon as the equivalent of translation in Hindi. As Harish Trivedi⁸ has pointed out, the word *anuvad* did not carry the connotation of translation until it was incorporated in the matrix of its meaning by Sir Monier Monier-Williams in his standard *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1899). Before that the term *anuvad* carried the meaning of repetition in general or repetition by way of explanation, illustration or collaboration of what

already existed. This also has a direct bearing upon the first oral and later on written transmission of the scriptures by way of various commentaries so that varied thoughts on the fundamental ideas of the Indian epistemology came to the fore in different contexts and situations, enabling its evolution into a living tradition.

A viable parallel of Aurobindo's exhortation to the translator to transgress the limits of content and language of a work (although he also advocates affinity to the original at some places), may be found in the *Natyasastra*, the foundational work of Indian poetics by Bharata. Of the different categories of dramatic art enumerated therein, the first two – *Nataka* and *Prakarana* are noteworthy in this context. While the idea of a *Nataka* is informed by a well-known theme and a famed hero, the *Prakarana* is characterized by ingenuity of the writer in terms of story and characterization. The idea of originality in a *Nataka* which was assumed to be the higher form of art was not delimited to the originality of story and character but to the originality of the novelty of treatment of a well-known theme, as is also evident from the varied adaptations of the monumental epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

The notion of originality of treatment of a translated text coupled with the philosophical and the linguistic model of literary practice by Sri Aurobindo and the broader framework of Indian poetics therefore offer a viable model for rethinking the practice of translation as a creative possibility as opposed to academic translation popularized by the publication industry and the cultural hegemony of the global north. Of course, to rethink translation requires a good deal of more research backed by adequate number of 'experimental' translations in this mode, which partakes of the search for new paradigms and metaphors thereof.

To conclude, it might be reiterated that translation like writing is not a linear or confined process but an evolutionary one. Therefore, in order to arrive at the awareness of the thematic and textural richness of a work which is sought to be translated, the translator should perhaps seek to comprehend its polysemic scope and inner space by approaching the work not as an isolated unit, but as an inclusive identity which has a distinct bearing on other works by the same writer as well as other writers who might have influenced the writing of the specific text. Such works inform the referential context of the work and the knowledge thereof is indispensable for a translator. As a case in point, in Toni Morrison's fiction, the demonic rage of Beloved in *Beloved* is the retribution for the timidity and convalescence of Pecola in the face of repressive circumstances in *The Bluest Eye*. Similarly, the promiscuity of Mitro in Sobti's *Mitro Marjani* finds its stay in the character of Ammu in *Ai Ladaki*, which is shaped by a deep and intimate interaction with her environment. Indeed, a creative interaction between the physical (linguistic, socio-cultural, temporal) and metaphysical (knowledge, cognition, consciousness) of a work and the translator's own emotive, cognitive, ideational and temporal context may result in a new, syncretic form⁹ of the translated work thereby not only making translation possible, but also according to it a new *namah* and *roopa* in the evolutionary trajectory towards *swarupa*.

Notes:

1. This is a plausible postulation since different languages differentiate words and their meanings differently.
2. The expression “translating consciousness” has been coined by G.N. Dewy, *In Another Tongue: Essays on Indian English Literature*, 1993 rpt. Madras: Macmillan, 1995) 136.
3. 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 *sphota* or wherein meaning exists as a whole. 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.
4. The essays by Sri Aurobindo cited here are included in his *Collected Works*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972.
5. A recorded version of Shah’s dramatized reading of “Toba Tek Singh” is available on You Tube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkVRLWsXriw.
6. See GN Dewy, *op. cit.* Dewy explains how the concept of equivalence in translation is essentially a western metaphysical entity and is not central to the Indian context. Responding to Hillis Miller’s statement: “Translation is the wandering existence in a perpetual exile”, he observes: “In Western metaphysics translation is an exile, and an exile is a metaphorical translation—a post-Babel crisis. The multilingual, eclectic Hindu spirit, ensconced in the belief in the soul’s perpetual transition from form to form, may find it difficult to subscribe to the Western metaphysics of translation” (135).
7. See Harish Trivedi, “Translation in India” in Theo Hermans ed. *Translating Others*, Vol. 1(London & NY: Routledge), 2014.
8. The three groups of existents viz. demons, humans and gods expanded the sound ‘Da’ into *damyata* (control), *data* (give) and *dayadhvam* (be compassionate), which determined the nature of their existence.
9. K. Ayyapa Panniker’s translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred book of the Sikhs, into Malyalam is a case in point. See See Aditya Behl, “Premodern Negotiations: Translating Between Persian and Hindavi” in Rukmini Bhaya Nair ed. *Translation, Text and Theory: The Paradigm of India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 89-100 for more details.

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