Salesian Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences, Vol. III, No. 1 (May, 2012)
ISSN: 0976-1861 | DOI: 10.51818/SJHSS.03.2012.21-29 | Page No: 21-29| Section: Article

It's All in the Speaking: The Dynamics of Intralingual Translation in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Tar Baby*

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Abstract

Bhattacharya attempts to re-read two women's texts namely Jean Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* that deal with diasporic or deterritorialized experiences. He goes beyond Jacobson's exclusive stress on linguistic practices and focuses on Cutter's sociological orientation. He says that the case of intra-lingual translation may also be studied from an entirely different perspective - that of intra-lingual shift, i.e., translation within a language or between different codes or dialects.

Keywords: Conga, Dialect, Individual Identity, Intralingual Translation

Our interest in translation stems chiefly from the need for interlingual transactions; for, it has been the urge to make texts as well as authors accessible to a wider readership that has primarily motivated the project and the process of translation till now. Roman Jakobson, while stratifying different kinds of translation, talks of three distinct types. We distinguish three ways of interpreting a verbal sign; it may be translated into other signs of the same language, into another language, or into another, nonverbal system of symbols. These three kinds of translation are to be differently labelled: i) Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language; ii) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language; iii) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.[1]

However, going beyond Jacobson's exclusive stress on linguistic practices and going by Martha J. Cutter's sociological orientation, the case of intra-lingual translation may also be studied from an entirely different perspective - that of intra-lingual shift ('translation within a language or between different codes or dialects'), that is often necessitated by either the expectation or the promise of a greater social acceptance.[2] For, as Pierre Legrand has pointed out:

1 R. Jacobson, "On Linguistic Aspect of Translation," in L. Venuti, *The Translation Study Reader*,London,Routledge, 2000, p. 114.

2 Martha J. Cutter, *Lost and Found in Translation, Contemporary Ethnic American Writing and the Politics of Language Diversity*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carline Press, 2005, p. 4.

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"[…] the idea of "tradition" also raises the matter of intralinguistic and intracultural translation given how members of any community [esp. an underprivileged one] must inevitably presentiate the past [at once 'lived' and 'left'], which is always foreign and strange".[3]

In a new world characterized, as it is, by frequent linguistic encounters between dominant languages on the one hand, and endangered vernaculars on the other, the elusive and illusory standard language often forces non-English or underprivileged speakers to seek linguistic immigration to the relative safety of the standard languages.

In the present paper, efforts will be made to re-read two women's texts namely Jean Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* that deal with diasporic or deterritorialized experiences to see and show: i) How translation may be intra-lingual as well as intra-textual; ii) how the author/character divide may get erased in and through the process of translation, and iii) how identities are destabilized and reconstructed by such linguistic productions.

At the very outset it must be conceded, however, that the present paper is at once an elaboration on and a critique of Martha J. Cutter's pioneering work *Lost and Found in Translation: Contemporary Ethnic American Writing and the Politics of Language Diversity* (Cutter: 2005); for I think that Cutter's insights may also be applied to analyze certain non-American texts. Besides, I think that some of Cutter's assumptions and inferences are open to be contested. In fact, the lure of the standard language that Cutter foregrounds is counterpointed by what she conveniently overlooks - namely, a coeval lag of the native vernacular. So, even if the lure may at first seem irresistible, disquieting thoughts still haunt the translated individuals dragging them back to their ethno-linguistic roots.

As non-native writers of British or American English, Rhy and Morrison deal with the thousand questions of intra-lingual translation in their own ways. Significantly, for these writers, translation does not merely entail a simple moving of ideas and values of one particular language-culture to a newer one, but also involve transplantation and transformation of the same ideas whereby they are provided with a new location in a new world and a new language. This type of translation at once unmakes and disperses languages to what Gustavo Perez Firmat calls '*conga*' and constructs thereby 'tentative linguistic formations into discrete idiolects as syncretic wholes' in which distinctness is simultaneously maintained and mystified, 'translation [take us] to a place where cultures divide to conga'.[4] In the words of Cutter, it is 'a place where they [cultures] mesh, mingle, and re-create themselves and other selves in a border

3 Pierre Legrand, "Issues in the Translatability of Law," in Berman, Sandra and Michael Wood (eds.), *Nation, Language and Ethics of Translation,* Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 44.

4 Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen,The Cuban American Way*, Austin University of Texas Press, 1994, pp. 21-22.

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zone or even border dance of linguistic and cultural free fall'.[5] The translative act, here, becomes not so much an actual lexical practice but at once a trope for negotiating issues of ethnic identities and language practices, and a tool for the survival of the vernacular and/or dialect within the linguistic domain of the standardized tongue - how an individual's ethno-linguistic identity can be assessed and transcoded for the simultaneous persistence of both his/her ethnic (original) and standardized (derivative) selves.

Although none of these writers appear as translators per se in their writings, and nearly always camouflage the presence of their ethnic languages under the garb of standardized English, their characters are forced to contend with an almost obsessive preoccupation with the problematics of inhabiting multiple ethno-linguistic cultures. These characters are often seen to move between different language domains, participate actively in the processes of translating/transforming their language-identities and often blend both languages and ideologies in such a way that though the essence of the adopted culture is zealously taken up, the pull of the old culture too cannot totally be dispensed with or ignored. Attempts at translation in such a world often give an apparent impression of the ethnic tongue getting whitewashed by a sudden encroachment of the standardized language. This erasure of the vernacular and/or dialect, however, is far from being an example of linguistic assimilation or homogenization; for it signals a sort of uneasy co-existence of different discourses whereby the non-English vernacular remains invisible or subliminal, no longer excluded within a binaristic linguistic hierarchy, resistant to homogenization and ready to subvert the linguistic uniformity of the standardized language from within or from under the surface.

The reason why I have chosen these texts is that whereas Jean Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea* with its revisionist reworking of a canonical text presents a nuanced exposé of the Creole-British interaction with the underline transactions between Patois and King's English, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* with its origin in a folktale becomes a subtle comment on the 'Black'-'White' relationship in America and a 'Vernacular'-'Standard Language' interface.

Set against the backdrop of Jamaica of the 1830s, Jean Rhy's Wide Sargasso Sea, a 'prequel to Charlotte Brontë's canonical text' as H. Adlai Murdoch points out 're-inscribes what purports to be the untold story of Bertha Mason's life prior to her marginal appearance in *Jane Eyre*'.[6]In Rhy's novel as Silvia Panizza has shown us, 'On the one side of the "battle-line", then, there is reason, Europe and civilization, adult age, white skin, patriarchy and masculinity; on the other, passion, the Caribbean and the "exotic" colonies, childhood, black skin, matriarchy and femininity'.[7]

5 Cfr. Cutter, *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

6 Cfr. H. Adlai Murdoch, "Ghosts in the Mirror, Colonialism and Creole Indeterminacy in Bronte and Sand," *College Literature*, vol. 29 (Winter, 2002), No. 1.

7 ilvia Panizza, "Double Complexity in Jean Rhy's Wide Sargasso Sea," in *Quaderni di Palazzo Serra*, Vol. 17, 2009,

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A Jamaica born Creole married to an English man, Antoinette is forced to inhabit an interstitial socio-linguistic space, constructed by the confluence of two radically different traditions - Anglo-Saxon and Afro-Caribbean. Hers is an essentially hybridized voice that belongs to nowhere and is excluded from both the language-groups for conforming to each's linguistic other. Physically cut off from the two different shores of Jamaica and England, due to the wide expanse of the Sargasso sea and unable to navigate between two ethno-linguistic realities, Antoinette's self falls apart in myriad fragments as she breaks into a symptomatic madness that closely resembles the speechless ravings of an abject Philomela.

A young girl of mixed ethno-linguistic origins, Antoinette from her very childhood is unable to comprehend the real nature of human relationships. While this inability results partly from her introvert nature, it is also due to the fact that she is indeed an outsider in the close-knit ethno-linguistic community of Jamaica. In fact, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has shown us Antoinette is 'caught between the English imperialist and the black native' traditions.[8] To contextualize Spivak's statement, if Antoinette's status as 'a white' denies her complete access to the black culture of Jamaica, then her Creole identity hinders her easy merger into the white European society.

While her mother Annette uses this essential 'Otherness' both as a weapon against the contradictory pulls of the two communities and as a tool to rope in a wealthy English man after the death of her husband, and thereby tries to secure a place for herself within the dominant discourse, Antoinette fails completely to cope with her post-marital transcoded identity as 'Mrs. Rochester' and gradually begins her downward spiral first towards insanity and then towards suicide. Significantly, Antoinette's psychological crisis is caused by her separation from both Jamaica and her Afro-Caribbean vernacular - the land and the language to which her identity was tethered. She had always visualized her marriage as a means of reaching out to the world of warm companionship only to realize at the end that for her husband, it is little more than a 'drama of barter and exchange'. According to M. M. Adjarian:

> When Rochester looks at Antoinette, though, what he sees is a beautiful and exotic player in a drama of barter and exchange, "when at last I met her," he recalls, "I bowed, smiled, kissed her hand, danced with her. I played the part I was expected to play". Marriage is what he offers to gain the economic security she represents and which he has been denied by the English law of primogeniture.[9]

Antoinette is further alienated from her husband as Rochester refuses to call her by her maiden name and instead rechristens her 'Bertha'. Besides, Rochester tries to alienate her from her nurse Christophine; for he does not like Christophine's language

p.2.

8 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Text and a Critic of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry*, Race, *Writing and Difference,* Vol.12 (Autumn 1985), No. 1, 250.

9 M. M. Adjarian, "Between and Beyond Boundaries in *Wide Sargasso Sea*," in College Literature, Vol. 22, 1995, p. 205.

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(patios) and by implication does not like Antoinette conversing with Christophine in Patois.[10] This act of Rochester is doubly detrimental to Antoinette's mental well being; for in this new unknown land (England) Christophine is the only link left for Antoinette with her spatio-linguistic past. First and foremost, these acts of Rochester are symbolic of the English patriarch's attempts at supplementing the Creole Antoinette's 'unknown', hence apparently 'dangerous' and putatively 'savage' Afro-Caribbean self with a standardized and acceptable English identity. Secondly, they also signify the dominant discourse's attempts at erasing the native vernaculars and thereby trying to gain an unchallenged linguistic supremacy over all and sundry.

Such an attempt at coerced translation not only destabilizes and disrupts Antoinette's identity, but also (de)constructs the free woman in her into the conforming and conceding male dependent 'wife'. What is more, it pins her down to the stasis and stagnation of both an alien land and an unknown language. To save her marriage and adjust herself in the new language-community, Antoinette desperately tries to embrace the standardized language with the result that within no time she willingly though unwittingly surrenders her Creole self to the processes of coerced translation and its resultant deracination. The more she embraces the standardized discourse, the more Antoinette lends herself to the process of enforced transcoding of her identity, and gradually steps into that terra incognita where there are thousands of pitfalls awaiting a naïve and unwarned wanderer.

As and when the translated Bertha takes possession of Antoinette, she experiences a growing intra-personal split - the Creole Antoinette dissolving into the English Bertha but still potent enough to rise again and haunt her in dreams and dream like visions:

> All day she'd [Antoinette] be like any other girl, smile at herself in her looking glass *(do you like this scent?)*, try to teach me her songs, for they haunted me. *Adieu foulard, adieu madras, or Ma belle ka di maman li. My beautiful girl said to her mother (No it is not like that. Now listen. It is this way.).* She'd be silent, or angry for no reason, and chatter to Christophine in patois.[11]

Confounded with the new and translated being inside her and condemned to keep within the attic of another's language, Antoinette makes one final attempt at healing the split in her self. Completely deranged now, she tries to trace her own footsteps back to her past and dreams as if in her native language the end of Thornfield Hall:

[...] it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will remember I thought. I will remember quite soon now.[12]

10 *Ibid*

11 *Ibid.* p. 76

12 *Ibid.* p. 153

The nature of Antoinette's dream is disturbingly suggestive; for not only does it foreshadow a disastrous future that holds for her both revenge and a suicide, but also foregrounds the return of the native's long silenced past to reclaim her access to everything that she has been robbed of - the land, the language and the identity lost therewith. As Antoinette 'steals' out of the virtual prison of the foreigner's language she overcomes the constrictions Rochester has imposed on her. The pool that Antoinette sees at the end of her last dream and the hazy figure of her childhood friend Tia near the pool beckoning her to jump from a burning Thornfield Hall and join her beyond the great bound suggest the reassertion of her native identity that is at once ethnic and linguistic.[13] This is how as Emily Eaves suggests, 'In Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys writes an adaptive text that privileges the Caribbean over the English, transports "Rochester" out of the Gothic Romance and moves away from linear recollection based on memory'.[14]

If Jean Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea* zooms in on the post-translative trauma suffered by the intradiegetic translated heroine Antoinette, the Bartha of the novel's linguistic 'now', then Tony Morrison's *Tar Baby* depicts the problematics of code-switching between a non-English vernacular and the dominant language. The primary setting of *Tar Baby* takes us inside what Philip Page calls 'a kind of laboratory where racial, familial, class, and gender expectations can be tested'.[15] It is in this 'laboratory' that we come across thenovel's near assimilated Afro-American heroine Jadine who inhabits the 'comfortable' and 'convenient' language-zones of standardized English and 'fluent' French. As Martha J. Cutter puts it: "Perhaps her lover Son is too harsh when he calls her a 'little white girl', but his statement has a ring of truth. In her way of speaking, acting, and thinking, Jadine has become 'white'.[16]

This is why Doreatha Mbalia has indicated how Jadine expresses 'her hatred of Africa and all that is associated with it'.[17] Not only does she completely deny her ethno-linguistic roots but also scoffs at the Vernacular Black English and the world it embodies. As Cutter has further pointed out, 'She [Jadine] associates the vernacular with poverty, with a life that goes nowhere, that is uncultured and even unlettered.[18] So, when Son, a Black runaway from the US to the Caribbean islands, tries to explain Eloe's values to her, she mockingly sings, 'Ooooo, Ah got plenty of nuffin and nuffin's plenty of meeeeeee'.[19]

13 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

14 Emily Eaves, "Adaptation and Appropriation", *Innervate,* Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies, Vol. 1, 2008-2009, p. 62.

15 Philip Page, *Dangerous Freedom, Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1995, p. 31.

16 Cfr. Cutter, p. 142.

17 Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, "*Tar Baby, A Reflection of Morrison's Developed Class Consciousness,*" London, Susquehanna UP, 1991, 72.

18 Cfr. Cutter, p. 143.

19 Tony Morrison, *Tar Baby*, London, Vintage Book, 2004, p. 171.

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Significantly, it is the Son's attempt at 'explication' and Jadine's reluctance to hear the same issue from their divergent subject positions. It is in this context that Jogita Goyel comments:

> "As an authentic representative of blackness allied at once to the mythic female presences as well as to a masculine itinerant culture, Son functions in opposition to the white Western world. In contrast, Jadine follows a broadly cosmopolitan approach, where rootedness and tradition signify backwardness, and an easy elite status enables a smooth ability to uproot and retrench".[20]

Jadine's 'reluctance' skillfully camouflages both an inability and an inhibition which is why as Goyel further asseverates:

> "Looking to the world's global cities like New York and Paris, and devaluing the small towns of Florida as well as the Caribbean island without modern amenities, Jadine can ultimately feel comfortable only in a city or a plane".[21] In fact, beneath and beyond Jadine's sniggering tone remains her utter inability to connect with her linguistic roots; for in trying to master the acquired languages she has abandoned her own ethno-linguistic origin - her blackness and the vernacular Black English. In fact, as Margo Natalie Cawford has asserted, "In *Tar Baby,* Morrison depicts light-skinned Blackness as becoming a sign of hybrid culture when Jadine's cosmopolitanism is viewed by other characters as inseparable form her 'Yalla' skin".[22]

Thus, Jadine's inability to negotiate between the Vernacular Black English and the Standardized English betrays the struggle of the non-English hybridized 'light black' to transcode his/her linguistic identity; and her inability to make sense of the conversation of Son and some Eloe women shows the dangers thereof. When Jadine goes to Florida with Son to visit Eloe, his homeland, the 'prudent White lady' in Jadine finds to her utter surprise that there can exist people speaking 'such uncivil languages'. Here, we may do well to listen to what the narrator has to say in this context:

> She said yes . . . but she didn't understand at all, no more than she understood the language he was using when he talked to Soldier and Drake and Ellen and the others who stopped by . . . no more than she could understand . . . the news that some woman named Brown, Sarah or Sally or Sadie - from the way they pronounced it she couldn't tell - was dead. . . . Jadine smiled, drank glasses of water and tried to talk 'down home' like Ondine.[23]

Although Jadine tries desperately to 'talk down home', to approximate as closely as

20 Yogita Goyel, "The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby," in *Modern Fiction Studies,* Vol. 52 (Summer 2006), No.2, 396.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Margo Natalie Cawford, Dilution, *Anxiety and the Black Phallus,* Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2008, p. 168.

23 Cfr. *Tar Baby*, pp. 248-250.

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possible to what Son says she really 'is', but all her attempts are tentative and tenuous, and the therefore foredoomed to failure. With time slipping by, Jadine realizes that she can hardly cope with Son's southern black world and decides to leave Eloe, to return to Paris, the world of high fashion and heady escapism. However, this return to the white world of glamour and money in which she had once been at ease, if not entirely contented, and to the standardized language she loved, cut her off, this time perpetually, from her 'ancient properties', leaving the Afro-American lady afloat yet rudderless in the world of urban sophistication.[24]

Jadine leaves Eloe with the proud proclamation that 'its rotten and more boring than ever. A burnt-out place […] a place where there is a past but no future, and no air, and taxicabs and no conversation in a language she understood'.[25] In fact, as Susana Vega González has remarked:

> "*Tar Baby* represents a good example of cautionary tale because of […] its exposure of the mistaken behaviour of a particular character, in this case Jadine, and the consequences such behaviour brings about. Her college education does not fill in the gap created by her racial, cultural ignorance”.[26]

But, this 'ignorance' notwithstanding, the memory of the native world refuses to leave her alone; for as Tudier Harris has indicated:

> "Through education, severing of connection to black people, and general disposition, Jadine is 'white'. She has traded a cultural heritage for what she considers the finer things of life”.[27]

However, the persistent memories of a Black place, Black people, and the native vernacular have so altered her that she can no longer feel at ease in the luxurious vacation house L'Arbe de la Croix. Besides, the persistent search of Son for this errant girl gives us hope for her ethno-linguistic rescue and rehabilitation, because as S. Kannamal has shown us, in *Tar Baby*, 'Fixism [of any kind] eludes characters as well as situations'.[28]

In these texts the intra-lingual translation from dialect to dominant language systems inheres in the texts themselves. As the translative process is initiated by an Antoinette or a Jadine even though it is instigated by both 'lack' and 'lure', the status of each constantly shuttle between that of an author and a character. Last but not least, this translative act entails a destabilization of their identities that can only be reconstructed

24 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

26 Susana Vega Gonzalez, "From Emotional Orphanhood to Cultural Orphanhood, Spiritual Death and Re-birth in Two Novels by Toni Morrison," *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses,* Vol. 9, 1996, p. 146.

27 Tudier, Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 153.

28 S. Kannamal, "Deferrals of Social Structure, An Intertextual Reading of Tony Morrison's Tar Baby," in R. K. Dhawanm (ed.), *Afro-American Literature,* New Delhi, Prestige Books, 2001, p. 128.

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through a final defiant act of self-annihilation for Antoinette or in a possible proleptic future for Jadine. Though the dominant tongue seems irresistible and the process of translation irreversible, the splits can be healed and the ethno-linguistic roots retraced; for as John Rickford has indicated, "So you ask, why does the vernacular persist? It is because it feeds into a whole alternative set of identities and purposes that speakers find rewarding and valuable".[29]

29 John Rickford, "Holdidng on to a Language of Our Own: An Interview with Linguist John Rickford", in Theresa Perrry and Lisa Delpit (eds.), *The Real Ebonics Debate, Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1998, p. 65.