

Reading More Intimately: An Interrogation of Translation Studies through Self-Translation

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Abstract

Pinto focuses on the phenomenon of self-translation. The phenomenon of not treating self-translations as translations is prevalent perhaps because even the publishers as well as the authors do see an open enteredness. Basing on examples like Tagore's *Gitanjali* he highlights the need to consider self-translation astranslation and the intricacies revolving around it.

Keywords: Translation, Self-Translation, Post-Colonial, Feminist, Translator

Translation studies since the post-structural turn has evinced serious attention and concerns from diverse domains, namely post-colonial studies, feminism, and cultural studies, as against the older disciplines of biblical studies, linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy. The turn not only weakened previous concerns and modes of inquiry which treated the need for translation as granted and the process of translation as a natural one, but also began to question these very taken-for-granted positions. The social, political, economic and cultural aspects that govern translations became more important than the issue of linguistic concerns in translation. Consequently, the how of translation found it extremely difficult to be the guiding principle of translation?

Self-reflexivity of the domain of translation attained through post-structuralism showed that translation was not merely a linguistic exercise but strongly embedded in the political process of gender, colonialism, patriarchy, state and nation. While postcolonial translation studies, brought to the fore the unequal relations of cultures and languages within which the process of translations took place, feminists looked at translations as not only subduing and displacing women's work but also inscribing patriarchal and masculine agendas in them.¹ Cultural studies took both the post-colonial and feminist concerns on board in the study of translations and looked at the role translation played in shaping identities and enabling different ways in which meanings are made. Although these domains drew attention to different aspects of translations they worked with the model of translations across time and space leaving out multiple other practices of translation which might not have been universal in nature. One such is self-translation.

The dominant idea of a translator in translation studies is of a second person, a person other than the writer of the source text, translating the work of a person living or

1 Cfr. Bassnett, Susan, and Harish Trivedi, (eds.), *Post-colonial Translation, Theory and Practice*, London, Routledge, 1999.

dead, in the same linguistic or national community or in another linguistic or national community. Postcolonial questions have been raised largely in the context of a person from a colonising culture translating the works from the colonised culture and looked at the assumption of the coloniser getting embedded not only in the choice of texts but also in translating within the framework of the worldview of the coloniser. The most prominent of such cases is that of Edward Fitzgerald translating Rubaiyat.² Studies influenced by cultural studies have taken the postcolonial interrogation further by showing how the translations by the colonisers not only shape the worldview of the colonised through the acts and products of translation but also the nature of reverse translations, i.e. translations of texts from coloniser's language to the language of the colonised, and the way these translation practices get materialised within the discourse of the coloniser, thus aiding and complementing the project of colonialism.

In the presumed model of translation in translation studies, because a second person translates a text, a serious debate on the faithfulness of translation has emerged. In the case of self-translation, since the writers themselves translate, the question of faithfulness seemingly becomes irrelevant.

It needs to be noted that self translation also raises serious questions on the notions of original as well as to whether the original is the one written first or the one written later. If one were to argue that the first work is original then original gets defined only in terms of chronology and not due to its inherent properties.

It is interesting to note that self-translations are normally seen as original. For example, Tagore's *Gitanjali* is seldom seen as translation of its Bengali version. Similarly, people are hardly aware that all plays of Karnad were first written in Kannada, but for two.

Postcolonial studies, and feminist studies now find it difficult to engage with the phenomenon of self-translation as it does not easily lend itself to the assumptions of enquiries borrowed from translation studies. Such inability to engage with the phenomenon of self-translation questions and threatens the boundaries and more importantly the legitimacy of the inquiries of these theoretical approaches in translation studies.

While there have been marginal interests in self-translation in some countries in southern Europe mainly in Italy, and parts of the United States of America and Canada, in most other countries there has hardly been any research activity in this domain. In India although self-translation has begun attracting attention, publications in this area are still minimal.

Standard works on translation namely, *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, works of Eugene Nida, Susan Bassnett, Tejaswini Niranjana, Harish

² Niranjana Tejaswini, *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism and the Colonial Context*, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 1992, pp. 58-59.

Trivedi, G. N. Devi, have no reference to this phenomenon. The only exception among standard reference works on translation is Mona Baker's Routledge Encyclopaedia of TranslationStudies which has an entry by Rainier Grutman on self translation.

The name for the practice of self-translation has also been contested. The first edition of Routledge Encyclopaedia of TranslationStudies published in 1998 uses the term 'auto-translation' as against the 2009 edition which uses the word 'self-translation'. However, the recently held conference on self-translation at Swansea University from 28th June - 1st July 2010 chose to title its conference 'The Author-Translator in the European Literary Tradition', thereby throwing in yet another term for the phenomenon 'Author-translation'.

Considering that most recent studies and research publications choose to use the term self-translation, the term self-translation has become more accepted. Although a Google search provides nearly 42,000 results for 'self-translation' as against 98,600 for 'auto-translation' and 64,000 for, 'author-translator', since auto-translation also signifies automatic, i.e., computer-mediated translation, and author-translator has overtones of pre-structuralist understanding of the presumed relationship of the writer to the text, self-translation seems a more suitable label.

Self-translation is a fairly common practice in non-literary writings, especially academic writings where scholars do translate their works to different languages for publication. While that is also an important area to interrogate, this paper intends to concentrate only on literary translations as it is this domain which has been much theorised by non-linguistics based scholars.

According to Julio César Santoyo, despite some of the most prominent writers like More, Du Bellay, Calvin, Donne, Goldoni, Mistral, Beckett, Aitmatov or Julian Green being self-translators, their practice of self-translation as well self-translation as a practice have remained unknown.³ The position of self-translation in India has been no better. Like in Europe, in India it got subsumed within the broad term of bilingual translation. Non-acknowledgement of self translations in India has perhaps been due to two reasons:

- a) One, given the multilingual nature of the country, there was no much opportunity of knowing whether the English version was an independent work or a 'translation' from the native language.
- b) Two, the practice of most of the translators not mentioning whether the work was a translation may also have contributed to this silence. But, instead of insisting that they should have self-translations, it is useful to look for reasons for the practice of not mentioning self-translations as self-translations.

3 Julio César Santoyo, "Autotraducciones: Una Perspectiva Histórica." *Meta: Journal des Traducteurs*, Vol.50, 2005, No. 3, 858, www.erudit.org/revue/meta/2005/.../011601ar.htm.

In the case of Rabindranath Tagore he did not call his works self-translations or even translations, perhaps partly because there was a re-writing of the poems rather than reproducing them faithfully from its Bangla version. Down south Girish Karnad also does not mention that the plays in English are the translations of their counterparts in Kannada.

The phenomenon of not treating self-translations as translations is prevalent perhaps because even the publishers do consider them so. If either the writer or the publisher had insisted on calling the 'second' work as translation, it would have been called so. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a consensus between both the writer and the publisher in not referring to a successive work as translation.

One reason for this could be the dominant practice of calling only that work which has been rendered into another language by a person other than the writer a translation. This dominant imagination perhaps has caused such a practice of not calling a translation by writers of their own works not translation.

The second reason for the non-acknowledgement could be due to the prevalence of self-translation largely in multilingual countries as against monolingual and economically dominant countries. The phenomenon of self-translation is seen in countries such as India, Canada, Brazil, and Italy which are not in the league of 'theory producing' countries. Hence, the practice then does not get the attention of theorists.

A third reason is predominance of bilingual writing. The idea of bilingualism was so strong that the practice of self-translation got associated with bilingual writing. Since most bilingual writers wrote in English and their purported mother tongue, it was taken for granted that the works in English were the 'original' works and not translations.

These points then beg the question what is self-translation? According to Rainier Grutman, "the term 'self-translation' refers both to the act of translating one's own writings into another language and the result of such an undertaking".⁴ John Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson in their landmark survey work on self-translation *The Bi-lingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-translation*, discuss self-translation in the context of bilingual text: "... the bilingual text is a self-translation, authored by a writer who can compose in different languages and who translates his or her texts from one language into another".⁵

Grutman makes a distinction between bilingual writers and self-translators. He notes that unlike the bilingual writers, self-translators make a conscious choice of creation in

4 *Ibid.*

5 Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson, *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation*, Manchester, St. Jerome Press, 2007, p. 1.

two languages.⁶ In the case of bilingual writers, the context determines their choice. In the case of self-translators in India, most importantly Tagore and Karnad, a work is generally written first in the native language, Bangla and Kannada respectively, and the successive recreation is in English, a language that allows communicating to readers in other languages and those from outside the country. It is also important to note that in both their cases the only 'literary' works would be written first in the native languages but that does not apply to 'non-literary' prose writing. However, there are a few works in the case of both Tagore and Karnad which were written first in English and then in the native languages. It cannot be overlooked that both Tagore and Karnad were part of the global academic community with significant exposure to the Euro-American life, language and academics, which may have shaped this phenomenon.

Self-translation will have to be either seen as a separate domain of inquiry, independent of translation studies, or as part of translation studies. The problem of considering it as part of translation studies is that then translations studies will have give up the premise of translator as someone different from the writer. But considering self-translation as a separate domain will raise questions about translation studies itself.

A more productive approach then would be to consider the questions being raised by the study of self-translations and reinvent the domain of translation studies leading to more fruitful insights into human societies. What kind of questions can self-translation raise? The primary question it can raise is regarding the relationship of translation studies to text. Text for translation studies is the material text. The rendering of that material text in another language by a person other than the writer of the first text constitutes translation for translation studies. This in turn draws attention to two features of translation, one, the source text comes before the second text hence sourceness of the text is marked by chronology and not by something inherent in it. Two, that translation is only that which is done by the second person. This assumes that the first text has fixity. This fixity of the text is challenged by a different kind of literary practice where Karnad writes a text in Kannada and then a similar one in English creating two source texts. If one were to produce a Marathi version, and were to argue that an understanding derived from both the Kannada and English texts was considered for translation, then, the argument is already outside the scope of present translation studies. For then, the person is not translating the text/s but a particular reading of the texts.

The secondary and subsidiary question it can raise is regarding the idea of the original. The idea of the original is posited only in relation to its inferior re-production by a 'non-creator'. By the same principle if the creator were to create two works in two different languages of similar structure and content, which one of these is inferior, or

6 Cfr. Rainier Grutman, Self-transaltion, Mona Baker, (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*, London, Routledge, 2009.

which one of these is the original. If one were to apply this thought to translation studies then the idea of the source text/or original text assumes the translation by a person other than writer. Therefore, the originality is determined not by the text but by the presence of a non-writer translator. These questions that arise from considering self-translation within the domain of translation studies draw attention to the fundamental assumptions formed by translation studies by not considering all activities in the nature of 'translation' to be translation. This bypassing of such translation activities contributes fresh question for the stagnating domain of translation studies.