

## Role of English Translation in Indian English Literature

**Sunita Lama** is a part time lecturer in St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling. Her interests include postcolonial literature and Indian English writing.

### Abstract

Lama highlights the role of English translations in Indian English Literature. She says that though translation work has been popular in India right from the pre-colonial days, translation into English was initially a European enterprise which started with the invasion of the European powers and advent of the missionaries in India. It is her submission that translation into English can foster the growth of a holistic view of Indian literature.

---

**Keywords:** English Translation, Indian Literature, Dutt, the Ramayana, Colonial.

---

India is a land of diverse cultures, traditions, religions and languages. Regional literatures capture the essence of the culture of their respective regions. Such works receive widespread recognition only when it is translated into a language understood by all. Translation of a work into another language not only gives it popularity but also the work and language both turn valuable, making it all the more very important. Translation of a work in English particularly has propelled success of regional language literature in India: "The terrain covered by translations of Indian literature into English is both extensive and thickly sown, making it very difficult to provide even an exhaustive listing of the language, genres, and texts that have been mapped by translations over the last two hundred years", Writes Arshia Sattar in her work '*Translation in English*'.<sup>1</sup> Translation of a work has been popular in India right from the pre-colonial days. Examples of great works of translation from Sanskrit to Hindi and other regional languages are plenty. Great sage Tusli Das translated the great Indian epic, Ramayana from Sanskrit to Hindi. But translation into English was totally a European enterprise which started with the invasion of the European powers and advent of the missionaries in India.

### Translation: A Challenge to the Western Discourse

India existed in the European imagination during the classical period of Greece and Rome primarily through trading contacts. For the Europeans, India was a strange land inhabited by strange beings. For some, it was an exotic land just like the one created by Shakespeare's character Prospero in the play *The Tempest*.<sup>2</sup> For some, India remained as a land of snake-charmers, magicians, and witchcrafts, yet for others it remained a virgin land all full of rich resources. Every European viewed India through a coloured

1 Arshia Sattar, *Translations in English: An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003, p. 366.

2 *The Tempest*, a Shakespearean play: in the play Prospero creates a magical island, all full of exotic beings.

lens and found it in a fanciful colour. What true India was like remained a hazy picture in the western imagination.

By the 18th century, the British made their presence felt in India, first through trading contacts and later through direct conquests. But the missionaries and administrators felt handicapped in their respective enterprise by the lack of access to local languages. The need paved the way for the field of translations. The setting up of the Serampore Mission Press, in 1880 by the Baptist missionaries proved to be a milestone in the field of translation. Started with the prime motive of translating the Bible into local languages, the press soon turned into one of the biggest publishing houses, bringing out dictionaries, textbooks, grammars, literary journals and newspapers.

The Europeans showed wide interest in Indian classical epics. This led to translations of major Indian classics into English language. The task initially started with the translations of religious epics such as *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagvat Gita* etc. These attempts soon turned towards other secular writings. This not only gave them a wide reading public, but along with popularity it also helped in breaking the myth that the European culture and tradition is of superior kind and that Indian literature is of far inferior kind. When translated, the great Indian epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* received equal footage to the great Greek classics. Romesh Chunder Dutt was among the few Indians to translate Indian classical texts into English. He has clearly stated his purpose in translating the Indian epics in the Epilogue to his translation of the *Ramayana*. To quote him:

“Ancient India, like ancient Greece boasts of two great epics. The Mahabharata based on the legends and traditions of a historical war, is the Iliad of India. The Ramayana, describing the wanderings and adventures of a prince banished from his country, has so far something in common with the Odyssey. Having placed before English readers a condensed translation of the Indian Iliad, I have thought it necessary to prepare the present condensed translation of the Indian Odyssey to complete the work”.<sup>3</sup>

Dutt has tried to capture the essence of the original version of *Ramayana* in his work. How beautifully Dutt describes Sita's abduction in his translation of *Ramayana*:

“Vain her threat and soft entreaty, Ravana held her in his wrath,  
As the planet Budha captures fainted Rohini in his path,  
By his left hand tremor-shaken, Ravana held her streaming hair,  
By his right the ruthless Rakshas lifted up the fainting fair,  
Unseen dwellers of the woodlands watched the dismal deed in shame,  
Marked the mighty armed Rakshas lift the poor and helpless dame”.<sup>4</sup>

3 Cfr. Arshia Sattar, p. 370.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 370.

Such passage reflects the aesthetic and poetic values of the then time. One finds an insight into India's rich culture and tradition in such works.

Attempts were even made to translate the *Jataka Tales* into English which were originally written in Pali language. These tales are one of the greatest instances of the Indian folk literature. These tales not only serve as vehicles of Buddhist ethical teachings but also highlight the moral pitfalls that can befall an individual in everyday life. The myths and folklore too have a rich tradition. The western world seemed very keen to get a glimpse of Indian folk culture and mythic tradition and it was possible only when the Indian literature replete in folk culture were translated in English.

India, so long was represented by the British as an uncivilized, inferior race having no culture and tradition of its own. In order to justify their stay in and colonization of the country, the British represented India as a backward race who needed to be governed by a superior race. But the various works of translation helped in breaking such myths. Translations helped in challenging such discourses which had so long kept the western world and India too under delusion. It will not be an exaggeration to say that translations helped in inculcating a love for the country and its rich culture and in shattering the halo of the civilizing mission of the British, for one could clearly see through the real intention of the British now. It thus helped in nurturing the feeling of nationalism among the people during the freedom struggle. With the translation of various works into English, people realized that the torture and subjugation was the common lot of every Indian, adding fuel to the fire of nationalism. It showed that the project of nation-making was intimately connected into the wide dissemination of works in translation.

The translation of Indian literature into English is a widespread activity among the English educated elite since the colonial times. They strive to overcome the sense of alienation by translating literature from the Indian languages into English. Translation becomes one of the inevitable and creative contrivances of giving oneself a sense of belonging, a nationality and of locating oneself in the present historical and cultural context. The translators have sought to locate themselves in the 'true Indian society' by translating what they conceive of as 'truly Indian'.

### **Translation in the Post-Independence Period**

If translation played a vital role during the freedom movement in India, it has a far greater role to play during the post Independence era. Under the Nehruvian enterprise, Indian art, culture and literature was given due prominence. One important field that received importance was drama. India has a rich dramatic tradition which got repressed due to the colonial regime. In the early 1920s, a 'Back to Classics' movement started, according to which Indians have their own languages, a rich source of classical theatre and a sense of the revival of the classics. Other avant-garde modern Indian theatres such as 'Theatre of Roots' came up in the 1960s. According to the Indian view

of life, the purpose of drama and theatre was to create feeling of pleasure and bliss (Rasa) by delineating different situations, mental status and feelings of human beings. Translations paved the way for the growth of Indian dramas in English. Plays written in various Indian languages are being translated into English and other languages as they are produced and appreciated in the various parts of the country. A closer contact is being established between the theatre workers from different regions and languages through these translations. This enabled the readers to become aware of the yet unknown diverse cultures and traditions followed in different regions in India. It helped to recover the fading performing arts. *Nautanki, Yakshagana, Ras Lila, Bhavaii, Tamasha, Jatra, Khyal* etc are various types of traditional dance-dramas which received wide spread popularity, a larger audience and importance as cultural dance forms when it was interpreted in a language comprehended by all. Some of the important Indian dramatists in this field are Badal Sircar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Girish Karnad in Kannada. *Yayati, Hayavadana, Nagamandala, Fire and the Rain, Tughlaq* etc. Of Girish Karnad, *Ghashiram Kotwal, Silence, the court is in session, Gighade (Vutlures), Sakharam Binder* of Vijay Tendulkar, *Evam Indrajit, The Mad Horse, Bhoma', Procession, Stale News* etc. Of Badal Sircar are very good works of translations. Their works appear as an insight into their respective cultures, their whims and fancies. Translations of regional works into English served as a pillar for the emergence of 'national theatre' into which the streams of theatrical art seem to converge.

Many legendary writers would have remained totally in oblivion, had there been no attempts made to translate their works. This is true of every culture, tradition and language. Rabindranath Tagore and his Nobel Prize winning work of poetry *The Gitanjali* would have never gained such appreciation had his work not been translated into English. This is just one example, Indian English Literature is replete with many such examples. The epics and classics when translated in English become an important part of Indian English literature. Translated texts when taught to the students, increased their creativity and English translations popularized the Indian traditions among the scholars. If not translated, such works would have remained in the shelves of some regional library, worn out and eaten by worms.

### **Translation - A Challenge to Patriarchy**

The establishments of major printing press like 'Penguin India', 'Permanent Black', 'Manas', 'Macmillan, Orient Longman', 'Stree', 'Kali' etc. have resulted in many more translations than before. Translation into English sometimes helps in bringing into limelight the marginalized sections of society - dalits, tribals, women -who lie groveling in pain of being exploited and looked down by the so called privileged, orthodox, patriarchs of the Indian society. Thus, translation also acts an instrument to encourage and empower these marginalized sections of the Indian society. Indian women writers have gained critical appraisal for making social issues a key part of their work. Indian women authors writing in English such as Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy have earned

international renown. But a number of Indian women writing in regional languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada, among others, have gained wider recognition thanks to a strong and growing market for quality Indian fiction in translation. Foremost among such writers in India is, of course, Mahasweta Devi, who has been well-served by her translators in English.<sup>5</sup> A social activist and acclaimed Bengali writer, Mahasweta Devi hails from a family of literary luminaries. The main themes of her fictional work have been the brutalities inflicted upon the tribal minorities by the authorities and upper classes. Devi won the Jnanapith award in 1996 and the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997 for her contribution to literature. A number of her works have been made into acclaimed films, including Rudaali and *Hazaar Chaurasi ki Maa*. Janaki Srinivasa Murthy, who writes under the pseudonym Vaidehi, is one of Kannada literature's most talented contemporary writers and poets. Her work has a strong social focus, especially the condition of women in modern society. She won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2009 for her collection of short stories. Girish Kasaravalli's award winning 2008 film, *Gulabi Talkies*, is based on one of Vaidehi's short stories. Asia's first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women was started in 1984 with the objective "to make available - and visible - the hitherto little known work of women writing in different (Indian) languages".<sup>6</sup>

Another publishing house named 'Stree', a feminist press from Kolkata, has worked wonders in showcasing women's spirited struggle with patriarchy. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha edited a two-volume anthology, *Women Writing in India* (1993), a groundbreaking body of literature which illuminates the lives of Indian women and focuses on women's writing, a substantial part of which is fiction, from 600 B.C. to the present. This work is also noteworthy as it has a specific translation policy which states that in India when translation takes place then not only a regional language but also the regional culture of a particular place is represented in a powerful national platform and when the translated text is made available to the readers abroad then we represent the national culture in an International platform. So, an attempt has been made to avoid 'stereotypical homogenization' in this process. In translation, preference is always given to such causes which do not domesticate the work either into a 'pan-Indian' or a 'universalist mode' rather initiative has been taken to preserve the regional essence of the work.<sup>7</sup> But there are others who have been writing with consistency and commitment for several decades, but were not known outside their linguistic borders because of the paucity of translations.<sup>8</sup>

5 M Asaduddin, "Translation and Indian Literature: Some Reflections," in *Translation Today*, E-Journal, vol. 3, nos. 1 & 2, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, March & October 2006, Internet, browsed on 23 Feb 2012, [www.ciilibrary.org:8000/.../Translation\\_today/Vol\\_3\\_1-2\\_2006.doc](http://www.ciilibrary.org:8000/.../Translation_today/Vol_3_1-2_2006.doc).

6 Ritu Menon is one of the co-founder of Kali for Women, the other being Urvashi Boutalia.

7 Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in English*, vols. 1 & 2, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. xx.

8 Cfr. M. Asaduddin, *Op.cit.*

Currently we are going through a boom in translation - mainly translation of Indian language literatures into English. Nepali is one such Indian language. As such, it is quite interesting to notice that efforts are being made to translate the works of some eminent Nepali writers such as Bhanu Bhakta Acharya, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, Dharni DharKoirala, Agam Singh Giri, Parash Mani Pradhan, Shiv Kumar Rai and some important Nepali women-writers like Parijaat and Lakhi Devi Sundas. No doubt, these works will certainly give new meanings and dimensions to Indian English Literature. One very good example of a work that is translated from Nepali to English is *Khaharey* by late Sukant Lama. It is a collection of short stories written by an eminent Nepali scholar Shiv Kumar Rai. Even though it is regrettable that literary translation within Indian languages has not shown any such resurgence, it should not make us apprehensive of translation of Indian literatures into English. As a link language, English has an important role to play and translation into English can certainly foster the growth of a holistic view of Indian literature.

### **Issues of Translatability and Intranslatability:**

Many a times, a translator finds it difficult to translate words from a source language to a target language and as such retains the original words. For example, in the play *Nagamandala*, Girish Karnad has retained the original words like 'naga' which means 'serpent'; in the play *Fire and the Rain* Karnad has used words like 'Bramharakshasa' which means 'an evil soul caught in a limbo'. This is done in order to capture the essence of the original language. Likewise, there are many words like 'puja', 'arati', 'ladoo', 'khansama', etc. used by other Indian writers in other source language which are still retained in the target ones. But this must not lead us to a hasty conclusion that total translation is impossible. The issue of translatability and in-translatability has been long debated. Some theorists believe that virtually everything is translatable while there are many who assert that not everything is translatable. The difficulty of finding a parallel word in a target language which is there in the original will lead a translator to copy the exact word from the source language. This not only leads to linguistic in-translatability but also towards cultural in-translatability. An example will make it clearer. Words like 'arati', 'puja', 'ladoo' etc. do not hold any specific meaning for a reader from England or France as they are culturally different from India. In Hinduism a 'naga' which means 'serpent' is worshipped whereas a Christian will relate a serpent with evil or Satan. The controversy over the problem of translatability or untranslatability stem from the vagueness of the notion of meaning. As such, a translator needs to be aware of all such problems and try to encounter it with greater efficiency.

### **Role of a Translator**

Translation is without a second thought very important for a wide readership. It is the only way by which a work written in one language can be read, understood and appreciated by someone who is not familiar with that particular language. As such, the

role of a translator is considered very important. He/she should be well aware of his/her role in translating such works for it is the translator who will introduce the work to the readers who would have otherwise been unable to comprehend the language in which the work is written. A translator should be sincere in his/her task of translating as he/she may get tempted to use such words or expressions not originally meant by the author. There lies the risk of misinterpreting the work. So a translator should translate exact words and expressions, not trying to improve the text in the original but also keeping in mind to capture the essence of the original work. The risk of losing the essence of the original work is always apprehended in works of translation but one can hardly overlook the immense potential such works have when translated in a language which can draw a large readership.

### **Recognition and Appreciation of the Translator's Efforts**

Wendy Leech<sup>9</sup> is of the opinion that the translator of the 21st century is invisible which infers to the fact that the translators are isolated, under-appreciated and have low public profile or not at all. This fact has been a key point of discussion also in Lawrence Venuti's work *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*.<sup>10</sup> Invisibility as mentioned above means under-appreciation, and therefore poor remuneration which, combined with lack of respect, can lead to poor morale amongst the members of a profession. A lack of status will not encourage future generations to enter the profession. Leech highlights the efforts and hard works of a translator which remains concealed in bringing out a good piece of translation which in turn highlights the marginal position a translator holds in a society. Nevertheless, we should realize the power a translator has in relation to the text rather than his relation to society as a professional being. Indian English literature is yet to come to its full bloom. At such a time, we should take the works of translators more seriously and their contributions studied in greater depth.

### **Translation as Co-Creation**

Regardless of whether people know what a translator does, or how skilled he/she need to be, we do need to appreciate the hard work that goes into a work of translation. An author creates a rich, dense and compelling piece of work capable of weaving a magic, inspiring and entertaining for the readers who belongs to the intellectual level. When literary works are translated, the translator's job is to recreate this work of art sincerely and sensitively, true to the original, as well as equally enchanting and entertaining. The essence of the original work must be captured in the translated work and it must inspire the same response in its readers. As such a work of translation can be viewed as co-creation capable of drawing the same kind of appreciation from new readers.

9 Wendy Leech is the author of an eminent work '*The Translator's Visibility: An investigation into public perceptions of the translator and how to raise the translator's status in society*', Imperial College, London, The University of London, August 2005.

10 Cfr. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London, Routledge, 1995

## **Conclusion**

Many sincere and serious works of translations into English are providing nourishment to the roots of Indian English literature, and we are hopeful that in the times to come it will blossom and be fruitful. We can well conclude by saying that translations have forged a link between the east and the west, north and south and have paved a way to find readership outside the country, contributing to the growing richness of contemporary creative consciousness.