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WHY AND HOW: TRANSLATING FROM THESE 'OTHER' LANGUAGES?

Annie Montaut

The wonder of a Western journalist or literature scholar at Indians writing in 'regional' languages (or 'vernacular', or, in India, *bhashas*) involves an obvious understatement: why don't you write in English, why such a bizarre inclination towards a medium vaguely perceived as archaic, or smelling of dubious revivalism, or dusty, or naïve, a folk dialect, if you wish to take part in the world dialogue of cultures and belong to the real network of the world story?

It is easy to recognize the never-ending 'orientalist' (in Said's meaning) bias, a colonial legacy, behind the persistent asking of the same question to *bhasha* writers who simply write in their mother tongue, as if English was unquestionably a better literary medium, and regional writers were defined primarily by their linguistic medium, as opposed to writers in the world's major languages. The Hindi novelist Geetanjali Shree analyses this persistent surprise of interviewers not only abroad but even at home:

On learning it is in Hindi [I write], there was, and still is sometimes, amazement and responses of the following kind – wow, Hindi, how exotic, or Hindi, how stupid when you can do it in English, or Hindi, good good, be patriotic, or Hindi, how brave of you to be willing to be isolated and poor. Etc. The point I am making is that it is not seen as a natural choice that I am writing in my own language! Normally if one is writing in a foreign tongue there would be this curiosity and surprise. This is the classic colonial condition! [...] There is one more thing about today – the huge pedagogical concern with postcolonial literature in the West that is reinstating a margin and a centre by putting up a tableau with English writers, to the exclusion of most others. (*Pratilipi* 8)

The reason why Gandhi opposed English as a would-be national language was not only because it was the language of the colonizers, but because it was the language of colonization itself as a process of (more or less unconsciously) accepted alienation from the native values and mental frame¹. And even the English-language poet Keki Daruwala has a similar conclusion: ‘Colonial history shows that language can be as domineering as any occupational army. It

¹ The pillory began with the fourth year; I know now that what I took four years to learn of Arithmetic, Algebra, Chemistry and Astronomy, I should have learnt easily in one year, if I had not to learn them through English but Gujarati. My grasp of the subjects would have been easier and clearer. My Gujarati vocabulary would have been richer. I would have made use of such knowledge in my own home. This English medium created an impassable barrier between me and the members of my family, who had not gone through English schools. (...) *I was fast becoming a stranger in my own home.* (My italics). *Harijan* 1938.

supplants myths, whole iconographies, world-views, ideologies. It ushers in its own symbols and its own values. An armada of new texts sails in. Old dogmas are swept away and exchanged for new ones' (1995: 30). The neglect of vernacular languages and cultures started indeed in the middle of the nineteenth century when English began to appear as a key for lucrative jobs (Shukla 1998: 45). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, English was the language of the 'service-seeking mania', responsible for a deep 'social schism' (Di Bona 1998: 350sq).

English is no longer the privilege of the 'collaborating' babus as it was when Macaulay's epochal minute was issued. It is now the language of quick money, as in call centres, and more generally the only door to economic and social success, re-enacting in the twenty-first century the antidemocratic split between the urban and educated haves and the rural have-not masses, deepening the social and cultural schism denounced by Di Bona (Montaut 2010). Education in English medium schools has increased quickly during the last twenty years, and by 274% between 2004 and 2012 (up to more than two crores), far more than Marathi, Bengali or Hindi medium schools. Thirteen new primary Marathi medium schools were sanctioned by the state in 2014 whereas sixty-three new English medium schools were, even though educationists are increasingly warning against children being taught in a foreign language at a young age, notwithstanding the quality of the teaching, generally considered as very low particularly in rural areas (NUEPA reports). Being schooled in English, most of the time, means being cut off from one's 'regional' culture, up to the total inability to read its literary master-pieces, as sadly acknowledged

by K.B. Vaid and U.R. Ananthamurthy². That is how the 'enchanted circle' created by English, according to Vaid, excluding the majority of Indians, came to impose among Indians themselves a mode of communication that perverted the way we perceive each other and similarly the way we and Europe see each other (1980: 88-91).

When the well-known chemist P.C. Ray tried in 1932 to oppose education in a foreign language, he explicitly argued that such a system was bound to extinguish all creativity and originality. His illustrations were humorous: 'Imagine for a moment what would happen if the English lads were compelled, first of all, to learn Persian or Chinese, and then had to read through the medium of such a tongue' (Habib 1995: 348-352). The point has also been made in our own days by a sociologist of cultures like Ashis Nandy (1980): one's creative potential in hard science, which deals with imagination and not only knowledge and technical skills, is affected by the language and culture one imbibes when a child, and is then nurtured in one's adolescence with the classical texts of the regional language. This upbringing echoes what Gramsci used to call the 'rural intellectual', rooted in a specific relation with his natural and supernatural local environments, as opposed to the 'urban intellectual'. If this type of education is no longer valued, since it is deemed useless in the global market, the very access to its textual tradition is at risk, as was pointed out by Sheldon Pollock twelve years ago: 'After a century and a half of Anglicization and a certain kind of modernization, it is hardly surprising that the long histories of South Asia literatures no longer find a central place in contemporary knowledge in the subcontinent itself, however much a

² One lamented that his grandchildren would not be able to read his works, the other one that his children already could not...

nostalgia for the old literary cultures and their traditions may continue to influence popular culture' (Pollock 2003: 3). And if one has to read it in translation, as has become the case for the younger generation in France in their own language – one now reads the sixteenth-century writer Montaigne in translation and practically knows only the names of the great Pleiade poets who forged our modern language, whose poetry every high school student learnt by heart fifty years ago – one has to find translators.

In India, these traditions are still vividly enacted in the so-called 'regional' writers, a denomination all the more paradoxical since they use the languages of the people of India. As rightly coined by Satchidanandan when he was a secretary of the Sahitya Akademi: 'Who are the true 'Indian' writers? Kalidasa, who wrote in the supposedly pan-Indian Sanskrit language or Vikram Seth who writes in the presently pan-Indian English that has quietly replaced Sanskrit and Perso-Arabic as the language of power?' He then analyses the language situation in a dispassionate way:

The critical tools of the majority of our Anglophile critics, I fear, are hardly adequate to grasp the civilizational significance of hundreds of rich, complex and stimulating works of every genre in the Indian languages that they may choose to qualify either as 'vernaculars', a term with implied derision for the 'natives' inherited from the colonial masters or as 'regional languages', a term that vainly imagines the existence of some other 'Indian' language and slyly hints at the pan-Indian appeal of Indian writing in English and silently asserts its hegemonic role [...] English (is) a legitimate product of our historical and existential conjuncture, a genuine expression of our

profound postcolonial crisis. Only I am unwilling to concede to it the centrality it seems to claim: it is but a peripheral region of Indian literature and there is an obvious disparity between the publicity it attracts and its literary quality and ability to reflect our social as well as spiritual lives. It is the politics – the power-knowledge nexus – behind Indian writing in English that has attracted greater criticism than the writing in itself. [...] Our postcolonial condition, with all its complexities inherited both from the colonial and the pre-colonial days, finds its most authentic expression in [these ‘regional’ masterpieces]³. The belief that the subaltern can speak only in English or in Sanskrit (the *Encyclopaedia of Post-Colonial Literatures* in English has a long entry on Sanskrit literature, but none on the living languages of India) is certainly more than a joke since it has disastrous political implications in our context (Satchidanandan: 1999: 13-15)

The problem is not with the addition of a new culture and language – India had long been famous for its legendary capacity for ‘digesting’ newcomers and new modes of thinking. The problem lies in the radical change

³ Full quote : ‘ novels like Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s *Coir*, O.V. Vijayan’s *Dharmapuranam*, U.R. Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara*, Phanishwarnath Renu’s *Maila Anchal*, Mahasveta Devi’s *Agnigarba*, Ananda’s *Marubhoomikal Undakunnathu*, Shrilal Shukla’s *Raag Darbari*, Nirmal Verma’s *Raaka Reporter*, Krishna Sobti’s *Zindaginama* and Sundara Ramaswamy’s *Oru Puliyamarathin Kathai* or in the poems of Muktibodh, Raghuvir Sahay, Shreekant Varma, Dhoomil, Kunwar Narain, Kedarnath Singh, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Subhash Mukhopadhyay, Namdev Dhasal, Dilip Chitre, or in the plays of Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar or Mohan Rakesh ...

of the global network accommodating the plural cultures that had always been in a more or less conflicting and mutually enriching relation in India: from a traditionally fluid network built on a mosaic of ‘subcultures’ in constant interaction, with no hierarchy, hence no centre, a more rigid architecture emerged; strongly centred, with the new culture of science, technology and ‘progress’ as its hegemonic centre (Nandy 1983). In the traditional pattern, dialectic continuity, with inner criticism as the motor for change and eventually subversion, was assumed to be the invariant of Indian culture, a continuity made fecund by an incessant process of exchanges both vertical (time) and horizontal (space) and a continuous dialogue between the various moments of this long history. For instance, the great Sanskrit epics have been rewritten, reinterpreted and sometimes quite ‘deconstructed’ to voice the changing social and political environment, in all regional languages, for centuries; on the other side, there has always been a living dialogue between popular folk culture, local songs and performances, and the learned ‘high’ literatures. This continuity between what is often called the *marg* (‘high way’, high literate culture) and the *deshi* (local) is a main feature of the Indian cultural tradition:

One of the great things about our regional literatures is the remarkable way in which the brahmanical tradition is acquired by the entire non-Brahmin populace, that is, how it is acquired, revised, reworked, [...] put into all kinds of theatre, and so on... [...] Our vernacular languages have survived because the masses speak these and not *Samskruta*. And these masses are the carriers of our culture, of our great stories and epics (Ananthamurthy 2009: 380).

Along with the Hindu cultural roots claimed above, the Muslim and Sufi culture is diffused in a more or less explicit way, Buddhist culture had also a considerable impact (Nagarjun, Rahul Sankrityayan, to mention only modern Hindi writers), and of course, the less easily detectable in the learned culture yet strongly present tribal cultures, those rightly claimed by Kosambi to be the base and heart of Indian culture.

We translators have indeed many good reasons to decide to favour the dis-privileged literature, not only out of a need to contest its unfair discarding, but also because its deep 'civilizational significance' has a direct bearing on the future of humanity. In a global world, including the present Shining India, the powerful voice echoes the viewpoint of the urban intellectual – now an English-speaking intellectual, obliterating the diversity of local traditions and cultures. Helping other voices to impact by presenting strong and new alternatives, forged in a distinctly formatted mind-set is a great challenge. The impact of this creative imagination may result in a farther-reaching 'deconstruction' of the so-called euro-centric system, than any discursive critique of the present hierarchy of the centre-periphery.

Now, after identifying the works which we translators want to make readable in other languages, what is the concrete challenge we face if we want to avoid making them like a 'poodle' compared with an 'Alsatian', in the words an Indian literary critic judged Krishna Sobti in front of Amitav Ghosh? This degrading comparison was reported and commented on by Geetanjali Shree (2008) who explains it through an example of the poor English translation, unable to convey the flavour, power and rhythm of the original. Certain works may just be too

loaded with untranslatable ‘realia’ and connotations like Sobti’s *Mitro Marjani*, or K.B. Vaid’s *Dusrā nā koī*, with the constant play on the Hindi/Urdu lexicon, popular and highly literate references, and be similarly judged as a by-product of Beckett in a French publisher’s words, on the basis of its English translation. But many of the Indian masterpieces are translatable, provided we seriously accept the challenge of conveying their inner rhythm, ability for implicit associations, emotional resonance, i.e. their specific *dhwani* or *rasa*. All of this is deeply anchored in what Nandkishor Acharya (2007) has called the grammar of culture (*samskriti kā vyākaraṇ*).

This of course varies with every singular author yet all the great writers are deeply rooted in their own culture and indigenous cognitive schemes, even when they subvert them. Our first job is consequently to identify (intuitively or explicitly depending on the translator) what stylistic devices are of crucial importance in a given text (here again that may depend to a certain extent on the interpretation of the novelist/text). An example to the point is Nirmal Verma’s punctuation: his extensive use of three dots and dashes is usually not appreciated by Western publishers, and I had to fight with my publishers to save them in the translation of *Lāl. tin kī chat*, the *Red Tin Roof*. I did so because I thought that the melodic curve of the sentence, which depends largely on written punctuation, is part of Nirmal-ji’s universe. His lavish use of flat pauses, which oppose the logical demarcations between clauses, and especially the lowering tone of end marks, create here a melodic line with almost no peaks and many silences (... , —), a silent breathing, a space for internal echoes to reverberate. Assuming that standard punctuation in a written text is a marker of logical junctures and helps

in interpreting logical dependencies, we are dealing here with a process of de-intellectualization, allowing for a parallel reading with relations of equivalence rather than dependency and hierarchy, with emotion rather than logic. Of a different register, yet also contributing to an ambiance of suspension and indeterminacy, his profuse use of such comparatives as *jaisā lagā*, or the *-sā* approximative suffix, or even the *na..na* (neither nor) way of avoiding clear cut notions, often skipped in translations, was in my view another way of blurring the clear delimitations of categories hence helping to transcend the world of clear referentiality, which I thought a prerequisite for the philosophical overtones in the author’s fiction. The use of tenses, particularly of the short imperfect without temporal marker (*vo kartā*) also seemed to me worth maintaining, because it has to do with the shift from an oriented (logical) temporality to a distinctly non-oriented temporality, both cyclic and allowing for what he calls ‘the eternal present’. I quote for a short example the end of the sequence where the young girl is describing the little dog’s death, a traumatic event, described throughout the whole sequence only as a memory, interspersed with the present tense, shifting from third to first person, and many nominal-like sentences, although it pertains to the narrative level and relates to an event, usually considered to be best expressed in the definite past.

ek gatihīn gati, jahā na samay hai, na mrityu, na rāt na din, sirf pṛatriyō ke bīc bhāgtī huī ek jān, ūn kā golā.... jo smriti nahī hai, vah smriti banne se pahle kī smriti hai, jo mere lie ek bahut purānī rāt ka svapn ban gayā, jahā mai bār-bār laut ātī thī, baith jātī thī (51)

The English translations by K. Singh, as always beautifully written and suggestive, reads like this: 'leaving behind nothing, a nothingness, time spinning to a standstill, a living creature running for its life between the rails, a little ball of wool, all of which is a memory, a nightmare that keeps returning. I return to this day'

Paradoxical expressions, such as 'speedless speed' or bizarrely upanishadic negative formulations as 'where there is neither time nor death, neither night nor day', and the bizarre 'memory beyond memory' (lit. memory which is memory before memory is made) are skipped, the dream of a 'very ancient night' (primeval night?) transformed in a more dramatic and very similar 'nightmare', more rational tenses are used (I return to this day), a full point added. I am not judging the result, particularly in a language which is not mine, but only pointing at some specific stylistic devices which I found important and could be transposed in my language without resulting in awkwardness, but in simply unpredictable formulations.

Krishna Baldev Vaid's style could be another example to the point, of a totally different kind. One of the challenges in rendering it consists in not losing the various nuances of comic, self-derision, irony, humour, farcical comedy, often associated with very crude language, allusions to both highly literate culture and popular culture, constant play on words. And his use of repetition, sometimes slightly twisting the meaning. Some of these features are only a matter of boldness and his mastery of the whole range of levels from very popular or argotic to very sophisticated, a mixture which often does not suit publishers. Others are more difficult to argument -- saving the multi-layered comic: only the final action on the reader is the test! Or transposing rather than translating some of the cultural

allusions is a difficult choice, with here again only the effect on the reader as a test. But it definitely makes the general rhythm of long novels like *Guzrā huā zamānā* more acceptable to publishers without cutting huge bits of it, as was asked by the publisher of the English translation *The Broken Mirror*. Length is a relevant feature in the huge sequence of the bazaar (the second part of the novel), with the young narrator loafing around and digressing about the truculent characters on his way, without any salient events, but a feeling of time stretching to the limits of immobility, between the dramatic closure of the previous part (the discovery of his father’s adultery) and the no less dramatic beginning of the following one (his sister’s failed suicide).

Even both these events are represented in a very anti-dramatic way, and the final part of the book is even more daring in the refusal of explicitly tragic scenes, since it ‘sees’ the terrible massacres of the Partition without seeing them, the narrator hidden in an obscure shed, hearing only, fantasizing and conjecturing a lot in both a comic and metaphysical way. This part has been even more shortened than the bazaar sequence by the English publisher. However, this elasticity in the representation of time is of course an idiosyncratic expression of K.B. Vaid’s dealing with temporality; it is also rooted in the Indian tradition of a cyclic and anti-dramatic time, and very rarely perceptible in novels directly written in English.

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