

The Invisibility of Translator's Presence

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Abstract

“I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections— scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. It should never call attention to itself.” Norman Shapiro. When a translated text, be it fiction or non-fiction, verse or prose is free of regional, stylistic or linguistic peculiarities, it attains fluency and transparency and gets readily accepted by publishers, reviewers, and readers alike. It reflects the original author's style, personality and intention in the target language with complete ease, and no longer reads as a translation. This illusory effect of the original that is created by the translator paves way for her own invisibility. The greater the fluency, the greater the invisibility of the translator, and, presumably, the greater the visibility for the original author. Despite being faithful to the original and rendering themselves invisible, translations and translators do not get their due as they are treated as a second order representation, a rewriting, a derivative, a copy. The copyright laws and contractual arrangements between the publisher and translator or author and translator also remain largely unfavorable and ambiguous. In this paper, I would like to focus upon the travails and dilemmas faced by translators, the tight-rope walk that they have to undertake to make the translation seem “natural” and the consequent feeling of being let down/short-changed by the system.

Keywords: Translator's Invisibility, Fluency in Translation, Faithful Translation, Copyright Laws

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Introduction

The notions of visibility and invisibility of translators have often been talked about. It is not anything new nor is it mine alone, but it's a lived reality. Translation theorist Lawrence Venuti has written extensively about it in his polemical monograph *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), wherein he is of the opinion that the translators by and large are all partly responsible for their own collective disappearing act when they render a seamless translation that no longer reads as translation.

Through this paper I shall explore the angst of the translators who despite having rendered "faithful" translations and ample visibility to their authors and publishers, are themselves left in the lurch – unseen, unsung and anonymous. I shall delve into the existing marketing practices and mechanisms that have led to this marginalization and deliberate upon a way out that is feasible to all the concerned stake holders.

Portuguese writer José Saramago, acknowledged the immense contribution of translators in his 1998 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, "Writers make national literature, while translators make universal literature. Writers would be nothing without translators, and we would be forced to remain secluded in our own languages." Translations play a major role in promoting shared values, experiences and awareness about hordes of issues being faced by the world at large. The coming together of two languages revitalizes their literatures and encourages newer experimentation. The "Indianization of English language" in the works of Raja Rao, or "*chutnification*" of two cultures, Indian and English, explored by Salman Rushdie in his *Midnight's Children* are such examples. The very act of translation is a rewriting of sorts which involves some element of maneuvering and representation within it. There are some positives, like it introduces new concepts and new theories which have the potential to reshape cultures. On the flipside, it also has the power to distort or convolute through its various machinations.

Role of a Translator

Translators often find themselves caught in conflicting dilemmas. In her seminal work, *Translation Studies* (1980), Susan Bassnett has quoted Cicero wherein he had expressed his angst when he wrote, "If I render word for word, the result will sound uncouth and if compelled by necessity I alter anything in the order or wording, I shall seem to have departed from the function of a translator" (p.51). Since words are closely associated with memory, achieving equivalence is a challenging task. The gold standards in translation require the translation to be read as though it was originally written in that language, clear, concise and declarative sentences, all foreign words are avoided and even if they are there, they are put in italics. All cultural or regional specific references are explained to avoid confusion. In her July 8, 2022 article in *The Japan Times*, Jennifer O'Donnell has quoted translator Louise Heal Kawai wherein she wrote, "It takes skill and talent to interpret the words of the original author and create an English equivalent." When the translated text, be it fiction or non-fiction, verse or prose is free of regional, stylistic, or linguistic peculiarities and uniqueness, it is said to have passed the test for it reflects the original author's style, personality and/or intention with complete ease, and no longer reads as a translation. "I guess I consider myself in a kind of collaboration with the author," says American translator Norman Shapiro, "Certainly my ego and personality are involved in translating, and yet I have to try to stay faithful to the basic text in such a way that my own personality doesn't show" (Kratz 1986:27).

Translations: A Paradigm Shift in Literary Canons

It is through translations and retellings that languages acquire their meanings and significance. Translation presents a “space of liberated intertextuality where languages endlessly merge or migrate (Hartman 1981:28).” The original works and their translations determine each other, they complement each other. In his *Des Tours de Babel* (Derrida 1985), Derrida does not regard translation as a copy or a replica of the original nor does he feel that it is under any obligation to transmit the exact content of the original but must show “the affinity between languages, must exhibit its potential” (Derrida). He contends that a translated work “does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond the means of its author (Derrida).” He further states that “the original... begins by lacking and by pleading for translation” (Derrida) and that “the translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself in enlarging itself... (Derrida).” Walter Benjamin also resonates the same axiom, “the life of the original attains... its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering” (Benjamin 1923:72).

Dilemma of a Translator

The complexities of various linguistic systems make the translator’s work challenging. They playact as authors, repress themselves often, place themselves in the authorial shoes to evoke the right nuances and cultural contexts to accord greater credibility and transparency to their translations. They ensure that all traces of foreignness and alterity get expunged. Ironically, this very illusory effect of “naturalness” renders them invisible and leads them towards a strange sort of “self-annihilation”, as stated by Venuti L. in his book, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995:8). Their creativity too, goes unacknowledged. It gets treated as a second order representation, a rewriting, a derivative, a copy. “The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text.” (Venuti 1995:2). The practice of “domesticating spaces” that they have to resort to, may accord an “illusion of transparency” to translations but it also simultaneously erases experimentations in the translated works since it is likely “to encounter opposition from publishers and large segments of Anglophone readers who read for immediate intelligibility” (Venuti 1995:273).

Why Are Translators Rendered Invisible?

For decades and decades, translators have been getting a rather raw deal. They are unpaid or underpaid, ignored, invisible, toiling away in the background providing greater visibility to others. Although they do not have to conceptualize the plot, or the action or the characters but it is through their eyes that the readers partake in the narrative. They enjoy the journey through the words chosen by the translator keeping in mind the writer’s intentions. This fact is more often than not overlooked and the translator is pushed into anonymity. She is treated as a mere adjunct and is soon forgotten once the work is over. The editor of the book, designer, typesetter all are equally invisible as the translator, but are still better off as a fair monetary compensation is accorded to them. For translators there is no minimum rate that is fixed. Their timeline is vast. It depends on the length, style and complexity of the book that may take several months to translate, retranslate, re-re-re translate. The publishers expect to be given a camera-ready copy that is finally edited, proof-read and error free.

Another angst that the translator faces is when an anonymous reviewer destroys the entire corpus of translation with a single stroke stating that the translation does not do justice to the

work of the writer. Why is it that the same translated work is rejected by one and accepted by the other publisher of equal standing? The translator may have made some inadvertent errors in the process of translating but can the entire work be negated so summarily? Besides, translation is such a subjective endeavor, every word has its own peculiar nuance, it resonates with certain cultural contextual memories, so complete translation is only a myth. As a translator, she is aware of her responsibility of selecting the words judiciously, aware of the ethics involved, aware of the target audience and also aware whether she has to take the translated text to the readers or bring the readers to the text. So how can one's translation be better than that of the other? Who would review a reviewer? Who would judge a judge? Besides, there is a gross mismatch between the effort undertaken and the compensation granted. The payment is meagre and the credits are comparatively non-existent. They are not enough to sustain the translators. Even if the published work has seen booming sales and is a financial success, the royalty accorded to translators either is comparatively meagre or completely absent. Translators are often excluded from royalty clauses.

The U.K. cover of 2021 winner, David Diop's *At Night All Blood Is Black*, which has been published by Pushkin Press has room for placing three blurbs on the cover but NONE for Anna Moschovakis, the translator who translated it from French! Those who are interested in Indian mythology, Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay* originally written in Marathi, published by the Bhartiya Jnanpith was catapulted to a roaring success through its translations into Hindi, but the translator, Om Shivraj's name appears nowhere on the book cover. The publisher and the author get their visibility, what do translators get? Why are they tipped with a thank you note and ghosted forever?

Japanese publishers credit the translator alongside the author on the book cover, but the Western publishers are a bit wary of that. Their plight is same when it comes to newspapers, periodicals, journals etc. The fact that it is a translation, and is not taken into cognizance much and even when it does, it is through cursory asides. The translators get rendered as mere adjuncts who simply work behind the scenes to provide greater visibility to the author and his/her works. The reviewers themselves may be writers of sorts but they too refrain from discussing translation as a form of writing. The legal status is also ambiguous and unfavorable towards the translators. The copyright of the translated copy also rests with the original author or the publisher. Since the copyright laws of India consider translation as an adaptation or derivative work, the rights of the translators get further relegated to the margins. It does not allow the translator any right to copy the work, sell it, and authorize the adaptation of the work, motion pictures and any other rights mentioned in the act.

Use of social media

Since others are not taking cognizance of their contribution to literature, the translators have themselves stepped forward and begun to demand their rights. The disregard shown to them has made them more vocal. Jennifer Croft, the winner of International Booker Prize for translation of Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights*, made a resolution and shared it with her 10,000 Twitter followers with #TranslatorsOnTheCover stating: "I'm not translating any more books without my name on the cover," she wrote. "Not only is it disrespectful to me, but it is also a disservice to the reader, who should know who chose the words they're going to read." By harnessing the power of social media, Croft's push is gaining traction in the rest of the literary world to get the publishers, newspapers and websites to acknowledge their contribution and give them their dues. Publishers have been dragging their feet for they feel that it would affect the sale of books adversely. They are of the opinion that readers are not

open to buying translated books. This gives rise to some more crucial questions - whom are we translating for and why? What do people read? Like any other art form, literature also does not exist in isolation or in a vacuum. It has to negotiate through complex ecosystems of money and power games and the consequences may not be pleasant for everyone.

Ferit Orhan Pamuk, the bestselling Turkish recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 2016 has sold more than thirteen million books in as many as sixty-three different languages till date. This obviously deals with the fact that his works have been translated widely. His *Benim Adim Kirmizi*, translated as *My Name is Red*, has received the International Dublin Literary Award. The irony is still the name of the translators do not find a mention on the title cover.

Haruki Murakami, the international best seller, writes in a language that is spoken and read by a relatively small population on an island nation of Japan in the North Pacific. His books have broken all records. He has been discovered and rediscovered through translations in over forty languages worldwide. Not only that, he has also found himself in many of these translations. The alacrity with which his works are getting translated, the shrunken timespan between the release of the original and the translation, speaks volumes about his international presence and market value. The global machinery of Murakami marketing operates with such elan that it has left everyone amazed. Yet all this would have been a distant dream and Murakami would still have remained an exclusively Japanese author without the presence of his translators. David Karashima wrote *Who We're Reading When We're Reading Murakami*, a slim but fascinating new treatise about the business of bringing the best-selling novelist to a global audience. Karashima leads his readers on a tour of translational tinkering. Kazuo Ishiguro does not like complex writing style for he believes it would only make translations difficult and they would not be able to reach the masses. Milan Kundera does not want his style to be rendered banal. The translator's "supreme authority", Kundera thundered in *Testaments Betrayed*, "should be the author's personal style.

Kira Josefsson in her article "What's so hard about crediting translators?" has quoted Madhu H. Kaza's *Kitchen Table Translation*, where she proposes that translation should be viewed as an act of hospitality, which "recognizes both the dignity and difference of the other" and which "acknowledges that the host, too, will have to be changed by the encounter." There is no equivalence, and no story is unmediated.

It is also equally true, that sometimes translators also tend to spoil the original through their over zealotry. They get so caught in the nuances and cultural implications, rewriting the complex piece in the target language, re-telling and re-elaborating in a different linguistic system, keeping it as close to the original as possible, that they miss out its core dynamism. The translation may come out fluent with its content well intact, but the style may go for a toss. Writing a fresh piece of literature requires a lot of effort and energy, organization and imagination; but doing a line-by-line translation, placing oneself in the author's shoes to remain faithful is an intellectually taxing endeavour.

The translator's visibility got further compromised with the introduction of machine-aided translations (MAT) and AI-powered software as they proved to be quicker and less time-consuming. But they were never able to replace the human translators. The primary reason behind this is that natural languages are human made and are subjective constructs by their very nature. They constantly evolve and keep amalgamating newer patterns and vocabulary in its fold. MAT can neither accommodate the sense of humour nor the body language or the

tone of the speaker. At best, it can serve as a complement to human translators rather than being an alternative.

Conclusion

The General Conference of UNESCO in its meeting held in Nairobi from 26th October to 30th November 1976, at its nineteenth session also recommended legal protection for translators and translations and practical means to improve their status. More than four decades have lapsed since the recommendations have been made, but the situation is still quite grim. Since translators have brought about a paradigmatic shift in the literary canons and paved way for the evolution of literatures by giving to the world the lens through which different cultures and languages of the world could be observed, understood and imbibed, it is strongly recommended that they should be accorded similar publicity as is generally given to the authors with their names displayed at prominent places on all published copies of the translation. Their names should be mentioned in radio/television broadcasts, credit titles of films or any other promotional material used. It becomes highly imperative that they be treated at par with other salaried professionals so that they too may benefit from various social schemes relating to retirement, illness, family allowance, etc. provided by the administration. Royalties also need to be an integral part of the contract. Since the translators collaborate with the authors who would have otherwise remained contained within their own linguistic borders, it is logical that they benefit proportionately from the proceeds of the sales as well.

Many governments across the globe have begun to take cognizance of the important role that translations and translators play in making the world literature accessible to all. Some publishers have recognized the rights of the translators and have accorded them their due. Awards such as the International Booker Prize for translation, PEN awards, NTA National Translation awards, Kalinga and Sahitya Akademi awards for translations, JCB translation awards, have generated an awareness towards translations and their translators. It is a positive step forward. The journey is still long and arduous but a beginning has been made.

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