Translation Impossible: The Ethics, Politics and Pragmatics of Radical Translation in South Asian Literatures

Introduction

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Since the growth of translation studies, translators and literary scholars have increasingly come to acknowledge the intense ethical and political, as well as practical, issues involved in preparing, producing and circulating translations of literature. In the field of South Asian literature, questions of status and visibility affecting authors, regional literatures and marginalized populations have been paramount, for instance, surrounding Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translations of the late Mahasweta Devi or the Marathi poet Arun Kolatkar's poems in English (Devi 1995; Kolatkar 2005). However, in this special issue of *Sanglap* we are also particularly concerned, following Lawrence Venuti (1995), with the *translator*'s visibility or invisibility and how this may be bound up with either 'fluent' and 'domesticating' or 'resistant' and 'foreignizing' strategies of translation[1] – above all when faced with the 'mission impossible' of texts that present more or less insuperable challenges to the traditional goal of linguistic fidelity. The title of this special issue – "Translation Impossible" – intends to address these challenges and explore the interstitial and contradictory spaces between possibility and impossibility, success and failure, communicability and silence, in literary translation from and within South Asia. How does one find solutions to translating songs, proverbs, jokes, dialect, slang, and political rhetoric or allusions? How do we negotiate translation choices with a publisher whose main concern is the readability and saleability of translated literature? To aim at a straightforward kind of communicative 'fluency' can result in suppressing challenging or deviant textual elements altogether, which may be an ethically problematic approach with respect to the original aesthetic or political context.

The present collection of essays arose out of a roundtable session that took place at the International Convention of Asia Scholars in Chiang Mai, Thailand, July 2017, and seeks to address these and further questions across a range of South Asian and European languages, drawing from diverse literary genres and discussing the translingual and transregional incarnations of cultural products ranging from Sanskrit classical poetry to contemporary magic realism. Our contributors offer what we hope is a fresh combination of personal, practical experience (including of the obstacles and power-struggles involved in the translation process) with the scholarly exploration of historical and cultural contexts. We do not seek to define a single solution or methodology, much less a single 'perfect translation', but rather see translational strategies as fundamentally dependent upon genre, medium, literary and translational history and the 'interpretive community' (Fish 147–174) aimed at through the translated text. What the cases addressed in these essays have in common is a concern with the specific texture, contingency and difficulty of the translator's task, and the need to consider radical possibilities in the face of the text's resistant elements – where 'radical' in our title is interpreted literally, in the first instance, as going to the 'root' of creative rationales for the author's inclusion of such resistant elements to begin with. Ethical and political implications thereby show themselves to be woven into the translator's engagement with even the smallest details of language.

Equally, however, we have tried to make 'radical' choices from the point of view of content and methodology. Content-wise, we tried to include non-hegemonic literature which often slips out of more conventional canons, discussions on radical aesthetics, condemned or censored literature, as well as literary works more outspokenly subverting the status quo. For instance, a number of papers collected in this volume address problematic aspects of translation related to the language of sexuality, obscenity and social taboos such as alcohol consumption (see Italia, Cappello, and Lorea respectively), while other articles explore the political significance of decolonizing translation practices (Nirmal and Dey) and translating socialist theatre for pedagogical purposes (Banerji). Methodologically, we prioritised radical approaches that navigate the possibility of liberating translation from the burden bestowed upon it by the model of communication. The view that emerges allows us to see translation – far from previous formalist or functionalist models – as a creative art or

a *poietic* technology (Sakai). It can thereby function additionally as a mirror to re-examine social action and as an invaluable gateway to understand power relations and the politics of gender. Finally, putting into practice our attempt to go back to the (grass)roots of work on and in literary texts, we consciously decided to give a prominent place to the figure and the subjectivity of the translators themselves, their emotional selves and everyday struggles, their intimate choices and work ethics. The sum of these individual and professional endeavours makes up the history of translational practice. Therefore, we tried to include scholars who are also, predominantly, or simultaneously, literary translators themselves, allowing them to share personal histories and to integrate their scholarly discussion with personal experiences and narratives, reflecting a profound interaction of practice-led research and research-led practice.

This choice, besides bringing the advantage of added colour and character across this collection of essays, has the potential to disclose more intimate and often overlooked aspects of translation, based upon specialized practitioners' lives, their positionality, sociocultural ideas that connect them to the author and the text that they work on, and their often difficult relation with multiple 'horizons of expectations' (Jauss 22-28). Considered from the perspective of reception studies, translation is not merely a communicative process starting from source text A and ending with target text B. Its history is a continuum and its meaning-making takes part most importantly in readers' minds. The success or otherwise of a translation, in our view, has to do with its readers' responses rather than with appropriate linguistic correspondences or with the functional goal of equivalence. Especially when the translation taken into consideration is a radical work, its success can depend heavily on the openness and curiosity of its readership: the tacit commitment of a radical reader to not 'be lazy', to be culturally malleable and permeable, ready to enter 'like a tourist' (Nandrajog 88) into the foreign context that the translator is offering. Shifting our attention from translations' faithfulness to the readers' agency liberates the translator from the unbearable burden of being the only vehicle of intercultural communication, and accords a prominent role to the translated texts' 'interpretive communities' of readers. The essays selected for this special issue disclose with particular sensitivity the deep relations between 'imaginary readers' and the performance of translation practices, discussing interpretive communities as diverse as 19th century affluent intellectuals in Southern Europe (Italia), contemporary American undergrad classrooms (Banerji) and Bengali theatre spectators (Nirmal and Dey).

For all the theory that stands behind it, a reception-based approach thus recognizes the concrete contributions of particular agents – some of whom are apt to be overlooked. Although in the past three decades the reader response 'turn' put much emphasis on the ways in which aesthetic communication is based upon meeting the 'horizon of expectations' projected onto the translation of a text, there is still little concern for the subjectivity of translators and their 'horizon of expectations' regarding readers' motivations and level of engagement with a text's foreignness. Such expectations, which inform the translator's choices, will then be subjected to greater or lesser restrictions, negotiations or compulsory editing on the part of publishers and editors, who respond to the text in accordance with their own 'horizon of expectations' defined by consumption habits and saleability. These pragmatic aspects, which equally contribute to a translator's work rhythms and ethics, cannot be underestimated, especially in a culturally commodified sector in which readers are serviced by a neo-liberal publishing industry and translators are often underpaid workers with insecure lives and little bargaining power (a condition that applies, indeed, to both young academics and translators).

In some of the papers here, those by Arti Nirmal and Sayan Dey, Maddalena Italia, and Matthew Pritchard, 'radical' translation strategies are identified as already embedded in the work of earlier translators – both famous (such as Rabindranath Tagore) and obscure, aiming now at European markets and now at audiences on the subcontinent itself – whose texts are explored for the creative, aesthetic, and political possibilities of what Nirmal and Dey call 'transcontextualisation.' Sometimes referred to as 'cultural translation', such a procedure adapts the literary text to the cultural environment of the target language, altering imagery, selecting or rearranging textual elements, and searching for substitute meanings that, while not necessarily precisely 'equivalent' to those of the original, can nevertheless perform some of the same intended functions in the reader's experience. To highlight the

role of such an approach is to foreground the extent to which any creatively responsible translation is always what Susan Bassnett calls a 'rewriting' of the original text (Bassnett, n.p). Translation as (conscious) rewriting must be responsive to the essential 'fluidity' of the original (Tony Harrison, cited in Bassnett, n.p.) – a fluidity evident as soon as one transcends static texts on the page toward considerations of the ways in which various readers (and in some cases, performers, listeners and spectators) make sense – and make use – of those texts.

The creative demands of such a strategy are evident. What may be less so are the political advantages it can bring, particularly in an anti- or post-colonial context. Nirmal and Dey's paper highlights the implication of translation and translators in the history of imperialism, and specifically British colonialism in India. As Bassnett and Trivedi have observed, in this context, the privileged literary-aesthetic binary original/translation is mapped onto the geopolitical binary of colonizer and colonized, or Europe/Other (Bassnett and Trivedi 3). From a Western perspective the literature of the colonized country is accessible only in translation and as a deracinated text, 'trafficked' out of its originating context and thereby losing much of its import and richness. As Nirmal and Dey highlight in cases such as Mitra's *Nīl Darpan* (1860) or William Jones's translation *Sacontala* (1789), politically challenging or erotically scandalous elements are silently erased while the new (English) version flaunts its philological correctness. In this aesthetically impoverished condition, the translation is ready to be juxtaposed to 'original' European literature, which preserves all its semantic integrity for the Western audience and is in consequence reaffirmed as superior. Against such engrained hierarchies, the radical strategies of 'transcreation' and 'transcontextualization' visible in Sohag Sen and Subrata Nandy's 1989 Bengali version of Mahesh Elkunchwar's Marathi play *Vāḍā Cirebandī* (The Old-Stone Mansion, 1985) assert the positive value of contextual meaning, and the necessity of recreating it when a text moves from one Indian vernacular language to another. (This scenario is complicated further if we consider that Indian vernacular languages are different in status and are located, historically as well as institutionally, in asymmetrical positions of power.) In Sen and Nandy's adaptation, stage scenery, costumes and linguistic habits are transcreated, and at a deeper level of rewriting, patriarchal structures are challenged to a greater degree by female characters in the play, reflecting concurrent transformations in Bengali society.

Pritchard's paper incorporates a similarly broad initial survey of translation's political connotations, this time concentrating on an epochal stylistic shift, from nineteenth-century Romanticism to modernism in poetry. It is argued here that this transition had a specific racial (and colonial) dimension, being provoked by the discredit into which the idealistic rhetoric of Romantic poetry fell during the First World War – a reaction that affected the European protagonists and victims of that war quite differently from those in Europe's colonial dominions, such as Ireland and India. The 'high' or aspirational 'tone-values' of Romantic poetry retained a palpable political, as well as 'spiritual', function for poets such as Tagore, allowing them both to rouse the national pride of their compatriots in resistance to colonial rule and to make a more universal appeal to readers around the globe. Particularly in translating Tagore's songs, whose combination of spiritualized rhetoric with sensuously Romantic effects of metre and rhyme may seem 'old-fashioned' to many twenty-first-century Western readers accustomed to judging poetry by modernist norms, it is important to resist the temptation to automatically 'level down' Tagore's high-toned idiom or throw out his verse forms. Indeed, Pritchard argues, it may be more aesthetically important to retain these than to be 'faithful' to individual poetic images, which Tagore in his own translations (both from Bengali to English and vice versa) frequently treated loosely, allowing the *vīṇā* of the original Bengali to become a 'harp' or a 'lute' in the English paraphrases of his famous *Gitanjali* (1912).

An equal, and sometimes greater, degree of 'looseness' characterizes the translations of Sanskrit erotic poetry from the same period (1880 to 1930 ca.) discussed by Italia in her essay, and summed up in her epigraph from the Italian Sanskritist Pizzagalli: "Let the learned read the original" (see Ghiron). Recourse to translation, then, was for everyone else, the less scholarly but still culturally refined readers who wanted the flavour of Eastern eroticism without its linguistically troublesome, and sometimes overly graphic, details. To refashion Indian love poetry and "adapt [it] to our tastes" (ibid.) was considered natural by Pizzagalli and his French and Italian contemporaries. What made the

adaptation process more interesting, and 'radical', than the standard 'domesticating' translator's tactics of elision, omission and 'toning down' was, as Italia shows, the creative (as well as moral) license that translators of this period employed – inventing images, embellishing details (which themselves might have only been introduced in a prior translation of the same text), and forging entire chains of transmission in order to give their productions a more alluringly 'authentic' appearance. The resulting texts may cover their tracks philologically – a modesty all too often well-merited, since many of these translators worked from secondary translations rather than from any Sanskrit original – but they were conversely much more open than many later translators about what Italia calls the "sensual and aesthetic roots" (17) of their engagement with these ancient poets, and the audience-oriented nature of the translational choices they made in order to share that engagement as fully as possible.

The essays authored by Arnab Banerji, Daniela Cappello, Carola Lorea and Hina Nandrajog concern contemporary translation practices and offer a more personal viewpoint. Banerji's and Lorea's essays confess the authors' sense of unease and difficulty when faced with the task of recreating South Asian literature for a Western public. As we are reminded in Banerji's article, "some things just do get lost in translation" (Langworthy 379), and it is exactly that sense of loss, or of being at loss, which the authors address, disclosing the ways in which they have coped with the loopholes in the equivalence-seeking mechanism of traditional translation.

Confronted by a lack of translated Indian plays on the American market, Arnab Banerji decided to translate some milestones of Bengali and Hindi theatre for his American undergraduate classrooms. Utpal Dutt's *Kākdvīper Ek Mā* (*A Mother from Kakdwip*) and Jana Natya Manch's (JANAM) *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. Kī Dhā̃dhlī* (*The Corrupt Trappings of DTC*) were selected to illustrate the dramatic political situation in India in the 1970s, the call to urgent political action and the ways in which major playwrights of the period were articulating it. Yet abyssal cultural differences between the play's original context and the target audience affected his translational strategies as well as the readers' perception of the translated text. The everyday life of American students is completely detached from the village reality depicted in *Kākdvīper Ek Mā*, where a mother in despair faces the disappearance of a Communist son absconding from the police, as well as from the corrupted infrastructures of a South Asian urban metropolis and the interminable wait at bus stops portrayed in *Dī.Ṭī.Sī. kī dhā̃dhlī.* Banerji's translation practices took shape through realising that his American students had to be sensitized not only to literary and aesthetic conventions of the Global South, but more importantly to a socio-political ideology – communism – that they see as archaic, impractical, and antithetical to personal freedom.

Lorea focuses on the translation of the language of the margins, intended as social, ontological as well as linguistic spaces, in her 2015 Italian translation of Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Kāṅāl Mālsāṭ* (The War Cry of the Beggars, 2003). Aspects of the 'translation impossible' elucidated in her essay concern the translation of slang, and particularly of alcohol-related slang. Social taboos are seen as fertile semantic fields for slang: to drink alcohol and to get drunk in Bengali, for instance, can be expressed through an incredibly rich lexicon of non-standard 'bad' language. But in Italian, since drinking is part of the traditional culture and is hardly stigmatized, this richness of vocabulary is tragically absent. Lorea argues that a close look at these instances of translingual failure have a great deal to tell us about social norms and values. These sociocultural differences make it extremely challenging for the translator to communicate the issues of class, caste, religious and gender identity at work in understanding who drinks what and in which circumstances in contemporary West Bengal. Thus the translation of a radical novel requires a radical reader, who makes an extra effort to reach an additional level of depth, and shows their readiness to discard and deconstruct assumed cultural notions to open up to different social realities – including the several culturally relative meanings of 'booze.'

The hazards of translating the language of the obscene (*aślīl*), the scandalous, and the socially reproachable, are thoroughly discussed in Daniela Cappello's article about the lexical and semantic choices of the Bengali poets of the 'Hungry Generation' movement. Cappello focuses on the sexual imagery that garnered the 'Hungryalists' a juridical charge for obscenity in 1965, particularly through

her in-depth intertextual analysis of the poem "*Pracaṇḍa Baidyutik Chutār*" by the Hungryalist Malay Raychoudhuri, its English translation "Stark Electric Jesus" (1964) by the poet himself, and Cappello's own English rendition of the poem. She argues that, while the Bengali *poètes maudits* of the 1960s consciously introduced images and themes such as the female sexual body, masturbation, bodily fluids and rape in the tradition of modern Bengali poetry, they also used medicalized, sanitized or paraphrased vocabularies to soften or ironically subvert their controversial tropes. Cappello then juxtaposes the poet's self-translated version with her own English translation in order to lay out some methodological principles, arguing for a 'contextual' practice of translation in resistance to traditional notions of fidelity. For instance, after a careful analysis of shifting semantic connotations in the history of Bengali language, and after several conversations with the Hungryalist poet, she decided to translate the word *dharṣaṇ* as 'rape' whereas in the poet's own translation this is rendered as 'copulation.' If the choice, on one hand, disrespects the dogma of faithfulness to the author's intention, on the other hand it does justice to the Hungryalist mission of literary transgression and semantic shock, while giving voice to otherwise implicit ideas on unequal gender roles and *bhadralok* (bourgeois Bengali) male idiosyncrasies. Moreover, her radical approach to translation practices reveals the sensitivity of a feminist translator in a poetic world dominated by men, suggesting for instance that the Hungryalist use of sexual imagery ultimately reveals a misogynist and irreducibly bourgeois attitude, one obscured to a large degree by previous English translations and self-translations of the Hungry Generation.

Whereas Cappello's analysis showed how English terms and Latin loans were absorbed into Bengali poetry to provide a clinical, neutral note to descriptions of sexual organs and acts, Hina Nandrajog discusses the integration of vernacular terms into English and its 'chutneyfication' by Indian writers. This process is interpreted as a radical literary practice related to post-colonial cultural expressions aimed at 'owning' the language of foreign power fully (Achebe, n.p.). With a plethora of examples from Hindi and Punjabi literature, as well as from Indian writing in English and from her long experience as a literary translator, Nandrajog alludes not only to the fact that every translation is an original act of literary creation, but also, and more 'radically', that every cultural expression in itself – and particularly in a post-colonial arena – is an act of translation. Putting in virtual dialogue Indian authors writing in English and the translators of vernacular literature in English, she explores diverse strategies to adapt the English language to suit indigenous expression. Focusing on writers like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, who were able to communicate the "earthy tones and tenors of their native languages" (Nandrajog 84) through twisting, expanding and innovating the English language while mastering it with the intimacy of a so-called native speaker, she suggests that these writers' practices can inform and inspire radical Indian translators. As the repertories of a target language are stretched to accommodate post-colonial 'Englishes', translation appears not merely as a replica of a source text, but rather as a kind of glossopoeia that blends multiple languages beyond ethnic, racial and national schemata, enriching literary, linguistic and cultural heritages.

We hope, then, that this special issue offers prompts to further reflection and research on the 'radical' dimensions of literary translation. As well as thanking all our contributors for their work on the essays presented here, we would also like to thank: the editors of *Sanglap*, Sourit Bhattacharya and Arka Chattopadhyay, for their editorial assistance and enthusiastic support for the project; ICAS, for allowing us to develop these themes in dialogue with each other in Chiang Mai a year ago; and those who attended and contributed to discussions both at and in the run-up to the Chiang Mai conference, including those who could not in the end be present. The editors also owe a particular debt of gratitude to Shantiniketan, the quiet town in the heart of West Bengal where Carola and Matthew lived, found space and support for their own translation work, and began their ongoing intellectual exchange. To conclude, a heartfelt *dhanyabād* to our past and present teachers, and to our readers, with the hope that they will take these conversations further and will keep engaging with translations as a humble but powerful instrument to understand the world and bring people closer.

1"Domestication" and "foreignization" are different ethical attitudes to translation, famously articulated by the scholar Lawrence Venuti. Domestication aims to make the text closely conform to the culture of the language being translated to, which may involve the loss of information from the source text, and more importantly, a pattern of cultural dominance. Foreignization aims to retain information from the source text, and involves deliberately breaking the conventions of the target language to preserve its meaning. See (Venuti; Myskja).

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