

Challenges of Translating Drama

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Drama constitutes an important part of world literature and the translation of drama between countries has been going on for many centuries. Yet only limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the translation of drama, probably owing to the special problems confronting the translator for the stage. This disconnect between drama as text, which becomes the object of criticism, and theatre as performance, which carries on merrily untheorised upon, seriously impairs even the former enterprise, that of critical reflection.

The translator for the stage faces a problem unlike that involved in any other type of translation process. The principal difficulty resides in the nature of the dramatic text itself, for drama is at once literary art and representational art. Whilst interlingual translation involves the transfer of a given written text from the source language to the target language, all kinds of factors other than the linguistic are involved in the case of theatre texts. (Bassnett, 1985:87)¹

Unlike the translation of a novel, or a poem, the duality inherent in the art of the theatre requires language to combine with spectacle, manifested through visual as well as acoustic images. The translator is therefore faced with the choice of either viewing drama as literature or as integral part of a theatrical production. The translator may approach the play as a literary work when, for instance, the translation of the complete works of a particular playwright is undertaken.

There are also some theatre texts written as plays but designated as strictly literary (e.g. the 'plays' of Byron and Shelley, where performance is expressly discounted by the authors). However, it has to be pointed out that drama is a unique type of literary art in that it is composed mainly to be acted in public, and only secondarily to be read and reflected upon in private. For example, Shakespeare did not seem to have had any of his own plays published, though he did publish his poems. The great First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays appeared years after the dramatist's death. Even today, new plays are usually performed before they are published. The text of a play is something like the score of a symphony, which is a finished work, yet only a potentiality until it is performed.

A theatre text exists in a dialectical relationship with the performance of that text. The two texts – written and performed – are coexistent and inseparable. Because the written theatre text forms part of an integrated whole, great demands are placed on the translation with respect to its performability, thus increasing tension between the need to establish relationships between the target text and its source text (the adequate factor) and the need to formulate a text in the target language (the acceptability factor). (Baker, 1998:71)²

The primary purpose of a playwright, which is for his work to be performed on the stage, determines that the targeted reader of drama translation should first of all be the audience in a theatre. The translator of theatre texts, therefore, needs to take into consideration the varied interests and education backgrounds of the vast audience. His job is to adjust the translated version accordingly and make it acceptable to the majority of the audience group.

The drama translator is not the only mediator between source text author and target reader or audience. A drama translator does not convey a message directly to the audience. Language is only one of the semiotic codes that constitute a theatrical performance. Audiences in theatres receive the message from many senders, i.e. the author or the translator, the director, the players, the costume designer, light and sound technicians etc. The essence of theatrical communication is the performance by actors in front of an audience with both groups actively interacting with each other in Real Time Performance.

I would like to take up the case of Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*. I was invited by one of the colleges to speak to its literature students on the play. I began my presentation by playing the CD of the recorded play which could illustrate samples of Bhaṣkar Chandavarkar's music composition. There was a comment from one corner- "I had decided not to study this text, but now I would enjoy doing so." The point was to show that if one wants to understand Tendulkar's drama text, one has also to understand the complex musical text that Chandavarkar created (wherein he repeatedly juxtaposed "sacred" music with the erotic or profane), the movements of the actors on the stage because that would explain in some measure why Ghashiram became an example of "total theatre" and "theatre of the roots".

Especially in the case of this play, it is often commented that from the beginning to the end the play showed the great potentiality of a theatrical presentation. It was as if Tendulkar had visualized the actors performing in a rhythm; the background music for each scene was also directed by Tendulkar.

Nothing in the history of theatre in Marathi could have foretold a text so totally theatrical. Noted actor Nilu Phule's comment on *Sakharam Binder* is more true of *Ghashiram*. Phule writes:

As a playwright, Tendulkar's great strength lies in his dialogues... The man seems to be able to see every action, every move from curtain up to curtain down. (Nilu Phule.p.57).3

Ghashiram Kotwal is certainly a mile stone in the progress towards experimentation in the theatre. In the written play there are inherent ideas about the actual performance. The idea of such a form of dance drama itself was very novel. There

were attempts to imitate the form but the homogeneous form of *Ghashiram Kotwal* was rarely attempted earlier.

Now, this kind of a musical text was radically different from the older natyasangeet, both formally and because it engaged with Maharashtra's caste politics in unexpected and provocative ways. The caricaturist movements by the actors and the actors participating in the stage settings is one significant factor of the play. A critical appreciation of Tendulkar's text would have to consider this aspect, something we, the English teachers, seem to be totally unaware of.

Then one needs to consider the socio-cultural aspect. In this case, the basic concept of Brahmanism, its political correlation with power in a certain era and hence its degradation have deep historical roots. Hence these become a challenge for the translator.

The linguistic variations created by Tendulkar help to build up each character. For example, the language of the Brahmins, that of the kotwal, that of the lavni dancers is associated with their personalities. In the English translation of 'Ghashiram . . .', the translators have managed to catch up the rhyming lines in the dialogue as in the original text, although there is a limitation where the various flavours of the native language are to be translated.

Tendulkar put violence and the degeneration of the ruling elite at centre stage in *Ghashiram Kotwal*. *Ghashiram* is important because it broke the mould of *Sangeet Natak*. The play takes place temporally in a *Peshwa* regime of the Maratha history, and deals with the well known character of Nana and the lesser known character of *Ghashiram*. The title of the play is given after the lesser known character thus subverting the popular norm. The history tells us about Nana Phadnis, who was an intelligent adviser to the Peshwas, and about Ghashiram who was the *Kotwal* during that time. He is also known to have been murdered by the angry mob.

Nana is symbolic of a degenerating political order. With calculating moves he tries to possess Ghashiram's daughter, gets her killed when she is pregnant, and then under the pretext of granting the angry mob's demand to kill Ghashiram, gives a death sentence to him. In the same cold blooded manner, he declares that the devil Ghashiram is dead, to everyone's relief and orders the public to have celebrations after his death.

Ghashiram is comparatively a simplistic character. His increasing lust for power even at the cost of his daughter, paves the way for his destruction. A Britisher appears on the stage as a mere spectator. This helps to locate the play temporally. Also, the Britisher watching the celebrations during *Ghashiram* receiving the *kotwali* as well as observing the final death scene may also indicate the rise of the future political order.

When the Nationalist movement began, the Peshwa regime was a source of Maharashtra's political cultural pride. Nana Phadnis was known as an astute statesman who managed to

keep the British away for twenty years. In the case of Ghashiram, when criticized for his one sided portrayal of Nana Phadnis, Tendulkar refused to call it a historical play in spite of references from history used in the play. This fact has been pointed out by veteran critics like Shanta Gokhale and G P Deshpande.⁴

Thus Tendulkar has very successfully written a critique on the socio-political scenario which could be prevalent at all times. The dimensions of the relationship between the ruling class and the common people do not really change; Ghashirams are present in every society, there are powers which help them grow and these same powers, at the first opportunity do not hesitate to destroy them..The final speech by Nana after Ghashiram's death making 'convenient' comments on him could also illustrate that history is relative and so is the historical truth which is told to us by those in power.

The swaying human curtain chants various names of Krishna in unison, in the manner of the keertankar. Suddenly the chorus returns to the Bavan Khani theme; whereas the keertankar is referring to Mathura. This kind of juxtaposition certainly alienates the audience from the action watched. The scene of Nana's foot falling crooked, Nana hopping around on his leg, becomes the visual incarnation of lechery. Ghashiram offers his bent back for Nana's sprained foot. What happens later is literally history. One of the most unexpected and ironic transitions comes after Ghashiram has been thrown out of the city with allegations.

The play was a great success. The credit goes to Bhaskar Chandavarkar's music and Mulgund's dance compositions. Hence when one speaks about translating the play, it does not remain a translation from Marathi to English, it is also a translation from the text to the performance; in this process the audio visual elements have a great role to play. In *Ghashiram*, songs were integrated into the narrative, and dance was reintroduced. Marathi folk forms like *dashavatar*, *keertan*, and *lavani* were used as expressions of the content. The playback music used while Nana chases Lalitagauri, or when Ghashiram becomes a Kotwal create an impact, thus supporting the description of the characters in the play. Thus the form provides flexibility for satire, subversion, humour, brutality and pathos, and the performance itself is a translation from the text. Samik Bandopadhyay comments:

Ghashiram started with a theme, then came the specific story or incident which was historical and then the search for form began.

(Bandopadhyay, p.viii.) 5

The play received great applause in India as well as in countries like Germany, France, Holland and England. The play very well used the medium of theatre with its audio visual characters. It would reach out even to the audience unfamiliar with the language, thus once again illustrating the translation of the text into a theatrical language, that of the performance. Thus, while translating the form like drama, it must be remembered that translation needs to be done keeping in mind the possibilities of a theatrical presentation.

Works cited :

1. Bassnett Susan, *Translation Studies*, (2nd ed.), London: Routledge, 1985
2. Baker M, *Encyclopedia for Translation Studies*, London, Routledge, 1998:71
3. Nilu Phule, p.57
4. G.P Deshpande in his *Ntiki Nibandh* and Shanta Gokhale in her *Playwright At the Centre*.... Have criticized the denial by Vijay Tendulkar about the historical characters of the play.
5. Bandopadhyay Samik, *Five plays In Translation*, Oxford Publications, Introduction, p.viii