



Post Colonial Theories and Translation Studies

DR. JENNY RATHOD

Head of the Department of English
L D Arts College

Date of Submission: 08-07-2022

Date of Acceptance: 22-07-2022

Abstract: Postcolonial theories which emerged in the 1980s have now become closely intertwined with Translation Studies. Critics such as Simon Sherry and GayatriSpivak have been drawn towards postcolonial theories in their exploration of translation studies. The Post-Colonial perspective is that translation has played an active role in the process of colonization. The original work is perceived as an inferior poor copy, which is overwritten and deprived of its identity by the colonizer. There is prolific work in various Indian languages, written in a specific cultural and national context, which have achieved recognition in the West because they have been translated into English. Yet the fact remains that these works have a value and significance which are not adequately reflected in the English translations. The translations have created a different construct of both the author and the text, which may be a very far cry from the original.

Key words: Post-colonial, translation studies, feminism, colonization

Post-colonial theory is closely intertwined with translation studies. Post-Colonial theories which emerged in the 1980s and Cultural Studies which emerged in the 1990s have given a fresh perspective to Translation Studies. Simon Sherry has emphasized the importance of the cultural context in relation to translation studies in *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. She has summed up the contribution of Cultural Studies to Translation as follows:

Cultural studies bring to translation an understanding of the complexities of gender and culture. It allows us to situate linguistic transfer within the multiple 'post' realities of today: Post structuralism, postcolonialism and postmodernism. (1)

In fact, several researchers are now drawn towards post colonialism in their exploration of translation studies. Hence the need to understand post

colonialism thoroughly before approaching translation theory.

What is Post colonialism? It is a term which is used to cover the historical and critical studies of colonialism and imperialism; it examines the imbalance of power in the context of the colonizer-colonized relations. J. Daniel Elam defines postcolonial theory as follows:

Postcolonial theory is a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century.

The hybridization of multiple disciplines is substantiated by the fact that translation theorists such as Sherry Simon and Tejaswini Niranjana have cited postcolonial critics and poststructuralists in the context of translation. Simon has referred to Spivak in her charting of translation studies. GayatriSpivak has hitched together post colonialism, post structuralism and feminism in her ground-breaking essay, *The Politics of Translation*. She has voiced her concerns about the distortion involved in the process of translating Third World Literature. She is particularly concerned about the obliteration of the identity of the less powerful feminist writers and cultures when western feminists attempt to appropriate women's writing from non-European cultures into the language of power.

In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan. (2)

Spivak critiques the hegemonic approach of western feminists towards women writers from the former colonies in the process of translating their works into English, without taking into account



the differences of the cultural context of the original work and thereby eliminating the original cultural identity. According to Spivak, the translator should be familiar with the language and the cultural context of the original work. Spivak advocates an approach which includes a better understanding of the language and the cultural context of the original work. Spivak's work demonstrates how postcolonial writing is closely intertwined with translation since translation itself is perceived as a tool of colonization.

The Post-Colonial perspective is that translation has played an active role in the process of colonization. The original work is perceived as an inferior poor copy, which is overwritten and deprived of its identity by the colonizer. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi have referred to 'the shameful history of translation' in the introduction to *Post-Colonial Translation ;Theory and Practice*. Bassnett and Trivedi have referred to translation as the battleground of the post- colonial context. They have focussed on the unequal struggle between the many local languages and 'the one master-language of our postcolonial world, English'.

Both Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi have observed that more than ever before, translation has come under the close scrutiny of post-colonial theorists. For a very long time, translation was completely lop-sided, with non – European texts being translated into European languages.

In current theoretical discourse, then, to speak of postcolonial translation is little short of tautology. In our age of (the valorization of) migrancy, exile and diaspora, the word 'translation' seems to have come full circle and reverted from its figurative literary meaning of an interlingual transaction to its etymological physical meaning of locational disrupture; translation seems to have been translated back to its origins.(3)

The crucial question that Bassnett and Trivedi have identified in relation to translation is in connection with the relationship between the original text and the translation of the text. The question that arises is which is more powerful, the original or the translation?

There was a time when the original work was considered to be superior to the translated version. But as Bassnett and Trivedi have pointed out, this is relatively a recent phenomenon. It is connected to the rise of printing and the rise of literacy. The author or the printer were perceived as

the owners of the original text and therefore the translator had no right to the original and subsequently the translated work was also seen as a poor copy of the original.

Modern perception of translation is radical and it challenges the preconceived notions about the superiority of the original. Writers such as Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luís Borges and Carlos Fuentes see the translated work as a more powerful work.

Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation – first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase.(4)

Postcolonial theories have made it very clear that we need to rethink about the history of translation and the politics of translation, that translation became a tool in the hands of the colonizers and the activity of translation carried out by the white colonizers was a deliberate attempt to appropriate and reduce the cultural identity of the native language and the original text. The Latin American writers perceive translation as an act of colonization and imperialism of the non- European world by the European world. Europe was projected as the Great Original of which the colonies were seen as a poor translation. The value of translation was thus reduced in the literary and metaphorical hierarchy with the implication that European language and its culture were superior to the native languages and cultures.

Thus, translation, which is supposed to be an act of aesthetic enrichment, has been imbued with the hues of social, political and cultural ideologies. It is an established fact that translations of Indian and Arab texts which were carried by the British translators during the nineteenth century were strategically edited, reduced and assimilated to create a certain impression about the cultural identity of the original text and language. The translations of popular texts such the Arabian Nights and The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyyam implied and connoted the inferiority of the Eastern mind and Eastern culture while stressing the superiority of the Western culture and its languages.

Bassnett and Trivedi have cited the example of Sir William Jones's translation of Kalidas's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* :



When Sir William Jones (1746–96) translated the Sanskrit romantic play *Abhijnanashakuntalam* into English as *Sacotala, or the Fatal Ring: An Indian Drama* (1789), a major departure he made from the Introduction from the original was to stop the tender lovelorn heroine from breaking into sweat every now and then. Having lived in Calcutta as a judge of the Supreme Court there since 1783 he could not but have noticed that the climate was appreciably warmer, but he still felt obliged to mitigate this essential bodily function in the interests of his Western notion of the aesthetic. He would not have known, with the *Kama Sutra* yet to be ‘discovered’ and translated, that to sweat was traditionally known and appreciated in India also as a visible symptom of sexual interest and arousal (in contrast with England, where one sweats when one is ‘hot, ill, afraid or working very hard’; Collins 1987: 1477), nor could he have taken recourse to the English euphemism, which probably was invented somewhat later, that while horses sweat and men perspire, women glow. Anyhow, his act of prim and proleptically Victorian censorship neatly points up the common translatorial temptation to erase much that is culturally specific, to sanitize much that is comparatively odorous. (5)

Sir William Jones was hailed as a pioneer amongst the Orientalists in the nineteenth century. His translations of Indian, Arabic and Persian texts into English ushered in what has been termed as the Oriental Renaissance. What is significant is that the flow of translation was from the East to the West. It was later in the twentieth century that European works were translated into Indian languages. And what is yet more interesting is that some of these translations were translations of translations, the classic example being that of **The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam**. Translation became a battleground for those who were eager in accepting the modern Western modes of literature and those who resisted the Western influence in order to assert their own native languages and cultures. There were poets who translated Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Rubaiyat* into Hindi and there were poets who resisted the hybrid version and went directly to the original Persian text and translated it into Hindi, since many Indians had closely imbibed Persian language and culture during the Moghul Era and the influence still held sway amongst the elite and cultured Indians. Hari Vanshrai Bachchan’s *Madhusala* is an inspired and fresh take on the original Persian version and it has a distinct national and

cultural context. This kind of writing is not a translation but a complete surrender of the poet to his subject matter, an approach which is prevalent in oral traditions of literature and the Bhakti tradition of poetry. The approach of the Indian translator towards the original text is vastly different from that of the Western translator.

Gayatri Spivak has advocated that the translator should adopt an approach of love and surrender towards the original text, the kind that she herself did while translating devotional Bengali poetry and the works of Mahashweta Devi into English. It is imperative to examine the politics of both pre-colonial and post-colonial approaches to translation. This is all the more necessary since the implication of post-colonial translation activity is that the Empire writes back only in English. There is prolific work in various Indian languages, written in a specific cultural and national context, which have achieved recognition in the West because they have been translated into English. Yet the fact remains that these works have a value and significance which are not adequately reflected in the English translations. The translations have created a different construct of both the author and the text, which may be a very far cry from the original.

Notes:

- [1]. Simon, *Gender in translation*, 136.
- [2]. Spivak, *The Politics of Translation*, 371–2.
- [3]. Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-Colonial Translation*, 13
- [4]. Paz, *Translations of Literature and Letters*, 152.
- [5]. Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-Colonial Translation*, 7.
- [6]. J. Daniel Elam. *Postcolonial Theory* <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0069.xml>.
- [7]. Jia Liu (2007) *On Postcolonial Perspectives in Translation Studies*, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 9:1, 134–137, DOI: [10.1080/25723618.2007.12015609](https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2007.12015609) <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2007.12015609>.
- [8]. Trivedi, Harish et al, editors. *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2012.
- [9]. Sherry, Simon. *Gender in Translation : Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. New York: Routledge: 1996.
- [10]. Spivak, Gayatri., *The Politics of Translation, Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge, 1993.