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Lost in Translation: The Cultural Subtext

Shahin A.B

S. Priyadharshini

Abstract

The paper raises concerns about cultural untranslatability, as proposed by J.C. Catford, which is alarming, especially with the advent of technology. The polarization of the world leaves everyone with questions regarding the agency of a translator. Beyond the debate about translation, whether is an art or merely work, the paper calls to focus on cultural subtexts that one might overlook in the process of linguistic translation. Semantics, and semiotics of a language are highly evaluated, but not the culture at most times. In times where there are cries for uniformity from the majority, it is of necessity to amplify diverse voices, in which translation plays a pivotal role. The paper discusses cultural untranslatability, and the carrying forward of everything said and implied, in

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The world we live in is attempting to bring about cultural homogeneity, and find common grounds amidst diverse groups, not to appreciate uniformity, but to dismiss uniqueness, thereby leading to eradication of culture

that's not mainstream. The danger this carries is otherization of cultural, regional, religious, and language minorities. This eventually leads to a group assuming superiority over the others, leaving no space for people to practice anything that's not what the majority ascribes to. The erasure of vivid practices, notions, and sentiments of minorities not just reflects in political set-ups, but also in literature, where the majority assumes certain elements either trivial or alien to talk about. In an attempt to make truth acceptable and digestible, liberties are taken, and gratitude is expected of the minorities for being given a voice and space. While these might seem conscious choices to oversimplify the world to make it livable enough for the majority, there happen to be subconscious choices too. These choices do not come from a place of assumed superiority, but from ignorance, born of that superiority. Majority, drunk with power to alter the world to suit their needs, once chose to let the practices of minorities, albeit not under their purview, exist. That does not seem to be the choice anymore, for the very existence of the other, they believe, threatens their existence. The vilification of symbols and dresses that are embedded in the culture of minorities, and the celebration of the similar when it comes to the majority is only an example to what holds in store for the future. This reflects everywhere. Naturally, oppressed people will resort to dissent, and the most influential form of dissent that is capable of existing beyond their time is not physical protests, nor fiery speeches, but literature. It is literature that is most welcoming, and also their weapon against homogeneity. We have seen literature be a medium not to just express the personal, but also the political. One might go out on a limb and say that behind every personal, rests a political, that would expose itself to the discerning eye. Literature holds no barrier, allowing minorities to articulate their concerns in the language of their choice. It has helped register dissent, topple governments, and has been an accompaniment to history.

However, if one is fascinated by cultures and wants to learn about minorities through their works, and if the said one isn't familiar with the language it's written in, the only choice they have is to pick up the translated

version of the said work. The concern with translation that most have is the loss of context, and the omission of anything relevant in the name of liberty, both creative and ignorant. The most recent example of this is when people found offence with the subtitling work for the Korean series, Squid Game. People pointed out the alteration of narratives to cater to a majorly white audience. It could have a deliberate attempt, or simply another case of loss of cultural context, but it is alarming. What thereby stands on equal footing to literature in recording voices, is Translation, for it helps the voices gain an international stage, hitherto unapproachable. This applies not only to political texts, but to every form and genre of literature, for every human is innately political, and every text carry information relevant to the culture the author belongs to, and it doesn't matter if it directly reflects in the text or not.

Translation, as defined by the Oxford dictionary, is 'the process of changing something that is written or spoken into another language'. The definition might seem sufficient, but it is best defined by its true meaning. The Latin word *translatio* means carry over, or bring over (www.etymonline.com). It is ironic to know that the word that defines the process has a foreign origin. Thus, translation is more of a carrier of information, invariant or otherwise, less of a changer. Although Translation Studies as a discipline only evolved around the 1950s, contrary to popular belief, translation is as old as literature. It is said to have been practiced in Mesopotamian era. Religious and moral texts have been translated into several languages. Susan Bassnett's Translation Studies still happens to be the most sought-after work in the concerned discipline. As earlier discussed, the diverse world now has opportunities spilled all over for people to tell their stories, and having not to rely on unknown people to amplify their voices. However, language is still a barrier, and the relevance of translation is purely of that context. The language in which the text is originally written is called the Source

Language, and the language that it has been translated to, or needs to be translated to is the Target Language. The bridge between the message from the source language and the receiver of the target language is the translator.

Since time immemorial, the agency of a translator has always been under discussion. The basic eligibility is familiarity with both the source and target language, not of a conversational quality, but of a literary quality. It is important for the translator for lexical, semantic, and semiotic knowledge of the language they are translating the material to. When translating, the translator faces the pressure of finding, what's the most used word in the discipline, Equivalence. One might find semantic equivalence or lexical, or even symbolic, but what is often difficult to take notice of, is cultural. Translators often give all their undivided attention to carry across the invariant information, that is the core of the text, and consciously or unconsciously pay not much attention to the cultural aspects of the text, woven intricately, blind to the eyes of anyone unfamiliar to the people. It is the cultural equivalence that is the most neglected, understandably, for no languages are the same, and no culture is similar to another. The cultural untranslatability according to J.C. Catford, goes hand in hand with linguistic untranslatability (Basnett, Susan, Translation Studies).

In the absence of Cultural equivalence, translators have resorted to cultural omission. This might seem unavoidable, for the chance of ignorance of the source language culture for the target language receivers is pretty much high. Does this warrant avoidance, happens to be the question? Would introduction of foreign culture to enhance the world view of the readers not be the first choice? This propels another question, which is cultural awareness of the translator. While it is highly impossible for the translator to familiarize with the intricacies, a degree of knowledge is recommended for the cultural context to be not lost in translation. Carol Korn-Bursztyn highlights the importance of familiarity of the culture and the cultural context of the chosen text. Lives of minorities are not the same across the world, and the

categorization of minorities changes geographically. A queer person in the US and one in India do not share the same experiences, for the oppression is layered differently everywhere. When translating a work of a queer person from an Indian language to English, it is natural to make the context universal, but it is also necessary to not lose the cultural context, be it the cultural language or symbols, for there might hardly be any

equivalence for it in another culture. If translation of idioms and puns of a locale warrant so much attention, one can only imagine what it takes to not let go of the roots of the concerned text. This establishes the role of a translator as a writer and a researcher, and widens their horizon. Anthony Pym, in a lecture about cultural translation, talks about how cultural translation is not merely about the cultural aspects of the language, but rather about how a whole culture is being translated by another. The translator is advised to detach their personal beliefs from the source text, which is understandable when it comes to absence of choice. That said, translators, when given a choice, choose works that they politically, personally, and generally agree with. We are seeing authors like Meena Kandasamy also translating essays of Periyar and much more.

Colonization left an everlasting impact on literature, and also left the world with a universal Language, that is English. All the Asian nations, barring a few, learn English as their second language. Being accustomed to English from a very young age gives an edge to people who want to choose translating as their profession, for they grow up bilingual. Though conversational language might not be sufficient, it definitely offers a start. It is comparatively easy for a translator to translate a source language text to English if the source language is their mother tongue.

As much as demanding it sounds, it is only just to expect that the culture of the text is not othered. The arising concerns one has with translators forgoing culture is no reason to replace them with technology, however efficient that might be. The foray of artificial intelligence into every field there

is has greatly depleted the requirement of manpower. Translation stands as no exception. The downside to introduction of technology in translation is not absence of manpower, per say, but absence of emotional intelligence, that makes room for not just semantic undertext, but also cultural undertext. To teach that to artificial intelligence, although it is possible, might be detrimental. The translators do not stop with translating what is said, but concern themselves with what is implied. It is of utmost importance to know to read between the lines. Until now, software has hardly fared in doing so. Ted Goossen, in their book “In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means”, talks about translating Japanese literature, especially the works of Haruki Murakami, and the struggle to translate languages that have pictographic scripts and rely mostly on minute changes in script to imply larger meanings. The concern the paper presents is cultural loss, which is a rather significant loss. The deliberate attempts to normalize uniformity should be met with celebration of heterogeneity in any way possible. To conclude, the paper calls for attention on appreciation of cultural subtexts.

Works Cited

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