

## TRANSLATION ACTIVITY AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION

**Dr. Elangbam Hemanta Singh**

Department of English  
Ideal Girls' College (Govt.), Akampat  
Imphal East, Manipur (India)

### Abstract

*My present article seeks to study based on the concept of cultural translation and the argument will be in the line of Talal Asad's "The Concept of Cultural Translation" stated how anthropologists inevitably translate the language of "primitive" cultures for using in academia is too limiting. It seems to suggest having the term conceptualized as Homi Bhabha did in discussing The Satanic Verses to benefit hybridity as the unavoidable condition of Diasporas is also too limiting. As an alternative, my paper would suggest that the cultural activity shall be practical when considered in terms of the root meaning of the word "translation," as the movement of ideas accepts in languages from one part of the world to another in classic moments of history; of course, we could witness the phenomenon of cultural integration. In this regard, I propose to show how the concept can benefit from Walter Benjamin's idea about the revolution of the target language through literary translation. In addition, Lawrence Venuti shows how translation activity attempts to bridge cultures and unlock the damage done in human relations. Eventually, translation work on cultures, I hope to show, is the only way the world could restore itself and travel from one sphere to another over time. In the present era of IT, cultural translation promises much for worldwide cultural integration, even as its materializations make us at times wary of globalization's ways of appropriating all concepts for its colonization of the world.*

**Keywords:** cultural translation, Talal Asad, Walter Benjamin, Salman Rushdie, Birgit Wagner, Antonio Gramsci, Lawrence Venuti.

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The word “culture” according to Ian Buchanan’s *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, “a set of beliefs, practices, rituals, and traditions shared by a group of people with at least one point of common identity such as their ethnicity, race, or nationality” (105); and the word “translate” has been defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* in three ways: firstly, “to express the meaning of speech or writing in a different language” secondly, “to change from one language to another or into a different form” and thirdly, “to understand something in a particular way or give something a particular meaning.” Coming back to cultural translation work, for instance, Shakespeare was perhaps intending to make his audience laugh by invoking all three of its meanings when he brought the ass-headed Quince Bottom on the stage. For the surprised Bottom is no longer the person he was and has become “translated” in manifestation in the most serious possible way. Now, the audience would have shown their laughter at Quince’s misuse of a word normally associated with the manner of words and phrases that are twisted from one language to another, it is called, “interlingual” (114) translation, according to Roman Jakobson. But the courtly members of the audience would have also smiled at the practice, because they would consider Bottom’s “translation” as an inter-textual chant by Shakespeare of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and a sarcastic reference to Arthur Golding’s translation of the Roman text<sup>1</sup>. To them Ovid has been transformed into an English context pleasingly by the dramatist. The cultured section of the audience would, as a result, probably have enjoyed the scene. However, common ones could not have because of cultural transformations taking place

in the renaissance that would enable them to hit into a vein that ran deep in western literature by this time. This stratum by nature would allow them to enjoy the Ovidian implications of the scene as well as excitement in the linguistic wordplay.

Of course, this translation activity carried out on a wide scale in Renaissance in Europe, particularly in printing technology transforming a kind of cultural fusion that Shakespeare might be rhythm in his comedy for the audience of his age. Next, I would endeavor to draw on views about works in recent decades by scholars of translation studies and also the concept of cultural translation and its development.

Anthropologist Talal Asad suggests about the views of Godfrey Lienhardt and Edmund Leach in his essay "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," published in *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (1986) that the task of the anthropologists has to convey the thought processes of a remote tribe to his or her peers in the west by close reading and empathy analogously in the line of the linguistic translators. At the same time, they could benefit from them who, representing people of a less accessible culture, know very well the pitfalls of translating from one language to another, and who are also aware that a satisfactory translation is not an impossibility that can do through experience and commitment to the work of making other cultures known to their own ones. However, we feel that there is always the danger of misrepresenting a text culturally when the anthropologist of more developed society, "is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power—professional, national, international" (Asad: 163). But, once conscious of "asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the language of dominated and dominant societies" (Ibid:164) and willing to explore the possibilities of cultural translation divested of prejudices and a priori assumptions, the social anthropologist, like the linguistic translator, can do "cultural translation," which in this context means conveying another culture for people in their home culture.

In this context, it is noteworthy that a passage in Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator" where the German theorist suggests that "the language of a translation can—in fact must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*" (260). The task of interlingual translation, Benjamin implies in these lines, is to create an inspired version of a text of another language which will create a new text that will have a life of its own in the target language. This is why, interlingual translation done imaginatively can have an impact on the recipient culture that is lasting and that may be potentially transformative.

Benjamin further suggests in his essay that a text is chosen by the interlingual translators because of its "translatability" that has a "specific significance" manifested in its "afterlife" that makes it worth translating. Indeed, the translation of such texts "marks their stage of continued life" (254). This is no doubt why certain texts are chosen for translation again and again and why they have a long-lasting impact on another culture. That is also why in good translations "the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding" (255). Good translations in their afterlife, Benjamin goes on to say, are "a transformation and renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change" (256). To go back to Shakespeare and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* once more, that is why Goldsmith's anglicizing of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* flowered in the hands of the great Elizabethan dramatist who saw its comic potential. Here, for sure, was a case where translation from one language to another of a classic text had led to cultural transformation because of an eminently translatable text. Moving beyond mere "transmittal of subject matter" (257), great interlingual translations fertilize other cultures in unpredictable and even permanent ways through such texts. As Benjamin puts it, the able translator knows that by translating creatively a resonant work from another culture, he is "allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (262).

Salman Rushdie suggests in his essays, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* that etymologically “translation” means “bearing across” that takes it out of the sphere of interlingual translation altogether and applies it to the condition of people like himself who have moved from one country and continent to another. His argument is that “having been borne across the world we are translated men” (17). In spite of “something” that gets lost normally in the process of such cultural translation, Rushdie also declares “to the notion that something can also be gained” (Ibid) from such movement. With this, he has quoted a few lines from Saul Bellow’s novel, *The Dean’s December*:

The central character, the Dean, Corde, hears a dog barking wildly somewhere. He imagines that the barking is the dog’s protest against the limit of dog experience. ‘For God’s sake,’ the dog is saying, ‘open the universe a little more!’ and because Bellow is, of course, not really talking about dog’s rage, and its desire, is also mine, ours, everyone’s. ‘For God’s sake, open the universe a little more!’ (21).

Birgit Wagner is of the view about cultural translation in her, “Cultural Translation: A Value or a Tool: Let’s Start with Gramsci,” what she calls sarcastically “the sometimes inflationary use of the t-word inside and outside of academia” (1). She suggests unequivocally that we view such “metaphorical uses of the term” apprehensively (1). Instead, she focuses on the translation theory and practice of Antonio Gramsci, finding it far more valuable where thinking about the relationship between culture and translation is concerned. She notes that the Italian Marxist, Gramsci wrote about the concept of translatability and worked on translations from Russian and German texts into Italian regularly while in prison. For him then some texts had to be translated as faithfully as possible while others had “to be ‘culturally translated’, that is, adapted to the horizon of a special community of readers” (Wagner, 4-5). Gramsci felt that in the case of some texts the translator has:

to reach the reader, to have an impact on the reader’s common sense, to “educate” the reader’s common sense... to anticipate the reader’s intellectual horizon and her possible reading habits (5).

This, to Wagner, is “an attitude that encourages cultural translation” (5) in the best way but is far from the kind of doubtful attitude circulated by the likes of Bhabha. Wagner feels that Bhabha had taken the term across a “metaphorical threshold” (5) away from interlingual translation in a manner that suggests to her a “lack of conceptual clarity” (5) in his thinking. She notes regretfully that in recent decades the term was being applied to

linguistic and extra-linguistic phenomena like media-bound representations, values, patterns of thinking and modes of behaving; in other words, various kinds of practices that travel from one cultural context to another and by doing so undergo processes of meaning-shifting, or rather: of an extension of meaning, insofar as they acquire a double meaning ( 6).

Wagner would rather put a ceiling on the term to the way Gramsci imagined it when he considered the “translatability of texts” as a key factor in minimizing differences and bridging cultures, a procedure not unlike that advocated by Asad for cultural anthropologists. To Wagner, Gramsci’s practical approach to cultural translation is “an attitude of sharing and *not*, as Homi K. Bhabha would have it for his understanding of cultural translation, a synonym of the staging of difference” (9). Accepting such a viewpoint requires in the cultural translator the value of understanding, for without it cultural translators are vulnerable to hawkers of “globalization” and can always be put at the “service of marketing strategies” (11).

Here along with Wagner, I would like to bring one more critic. Lawrence Venuti’s “Translation, Community, Utopia” shows how a culture domesticates a foreign text in translating it, thereby suggesting another aspect in which translation activity attempts to bridge cultures and unlock the damage done in human relations. Venuti clearly affirms that

Motivated by the ethical politics of difference, the translator seeks to build a community with foreign cultures, to share an understanding with and of them and to collaborate on projects founded on that understanding, going so far as to allow it to revise and develop domestic values and suggestion (469).

Besides, Venuti feels that translation activity completes a circle since the impossible attempt to overturn the consequences is elevating for human understanding taken as a whole. At this point of time Venuti's observation:

Translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign to be received there (468).

A translation can also create a community that includes foreign intelligibilities and interests, an understanding in common with another culture, another tradition (477).

Finally, I would like to make the point that despite many difficulties that are legend in the history of translation that has been venturing to bridge languages and cultures over the centuries, elevating and making possible cross-cultural communication and above all, there is a utopian dimension in translation and its role in inter-cultural communication. In fact, translators' efforts have often been enhancing the value of the original as well as the translation because of the afterlife of their feats of translation. In addition, there is a hermeneutic motion involved in translation, both interlingual and cultural, for people in both source cultures as well as target ones are ultimately enriched by translation activity, whether conceived strictly or loosely. Also, what we can learn from the above arguments is to delight in the hints of the word "translation" and "culture" and the semantic richness that outcome when the two words are put together. Indeed, a culture where translation played a major part had enriched its aesthetic appreciation immensely because of the increase in translation activity and interest in the concept in the renaissance. We can also say that major translation achievement and extensive translation activity occur at exemplary moments of history and impact on cultures in major ways. That means there is a transformation as people observe the

world afterwards. In other words, cultural translation over time has had a dynamic that had far-reaching consequences for the world, transforming and integrating it time and again at major moments of history.

Hence, cultural translation is a term that has come to stay for at least the time being and it will be of diverse use to scholars working in Anthropology, Literature, Cultural Studies and Sociology. One has to be prepared of its transformative potential and appreciate the multiple ways in which translation activity has conveyed cultures from one sphere to another over time. And also to remember the immense possibilities of cultural translation in the age of electronic reproduction even as one has to be cautious of the way it lends itself to the members of capital in the age of late capitalism. In a world of travelling cultures and travelling theory, in the era of digitalization in the new world being created by the paradigmatic shifts induced by the electronic revolution, cultural translation will keep demanding our attention. Along with we must learn to view it critically even as we endeavor to benefit from it for creative reasons and to foster cross-cultural communication. Cultural translation promises much for worldwide cultural integration, even as its materialization makes us at times cautious of globalization's ways of appropriating all concepts for its colonization of the world.

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