

TRANSLATION AND CULTURE

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The term culture has extensive significance in the process of translation. Literary translation takes place between two languages. Human language has its origin from the practices and behavioural patterns of human beings that is termed as culture in its narrow concept. Translation is thus a sum-total of language and culture that are inseparable elements in the process of transformation. Culture constitutes a variety of things such as signs and symbols, languages, beliefs, customs, values and ethics, codes of conduct and dressing, rituals and religion, morals and law and many more which are handed over from generation to generation. It is culture that separates people from one group to another. The problem of un-translatibility as well arises mainly when a work abounds in words and phrases symptomatic of extreme cultural phenomena.

The basic call for translation rests on the disparities of culture between nations and consequently the languages spoken by those cultural communities. Cultural disparities pave way for linguistic differences. Two different languages having different cultures, aim for a merging or blend through the process called translation. Due to globalization and commercialization, many people are inquisitive as well apprehensive to know the world in a healthier way. Language originates from the physical and mental dealings of people in relation to the different economic, social, geographic and cultural backgrounds.

Decoding is necessary when one encounters lack of comprehension. Similar cultures never call for decoding, as there is no scope for such a phenomenon. Literary translation is an activity both indispensable and enviable for cross-cultural understanding. Translation of Greek, Roman, Arabic and Russian authors into many languages has really paved way for understanding their culture. The Orientals and the Westerners could mutually comprehend the patterns of their culture through literary translations. In a country like India having diverse culture, translation has really contributed largely, oneness of thought and action, for the smooth function of the nation. World is brought close at one's grip through translation.

Every culture is unique and therefore every language. Due to the differences in beliefs and values, the language structure, word-order syntax and the meanings of phrases have wide changes in different languages. Unless otherwise the translator assimilates the culture of both the source and the target languages, he cannot produce an adequate translation. Since people possess different communicative skills in relation to their culture, it is quite difficult to represent completely the thoughts and feelings of one community to another through translation.

The earlier definitions on translation clearly perceive the fact that translation is an act, which purely deals with language. J.C. Catford in his *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* defines Total Translation, which states that translation is the 'replacement of SL textual material by equivalent TL textual material'¹ in another language. Theodore Savory as well, maintains that 'translation is possible by an equivalent of thought that lies behind its different verbal expressions'². What we perceive is that most of the definitions as well theories give due reference to linguistic aspects than culture. It was Eugene Nida, who,

though not explicitly, refers to cultural consideration in the process of translation. According to Nida, translating consists of 'reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style'.³ One cannot affirm that 'closest natural equivalent' has direct reference or relation to culture, but it is admitted, no doubt, by many theoreticians, that Nida has rendered this concept of 'closest natural equivalent' in his translation of Bible. The references say that in his translation of "Lamb of God" into the language of the Eskimos, he prefers to use "Seal of God". The Eskimos are not familiar with 'lamb' and hence the innocence of 'lamb' in the context of sacrifice, which is symbolic, cannot decode into that language.

There are many definitions and theories formulated on translation in general, yet, only very few have references to culture. In India, translation and creative writing are not two separate entities in the ancient times and hence no specific theories were formulated on translation. Later the concept changed and theories like 'Chaya Chaya'⁴ came into being.

Culture has a very significant role in the life of man and language and literature are the main canvasses to portray the true colours of life. Hence translation, which is the sum total of language and culture cannot blindly deny the significant role played by culture in the whole process of translation. The translator must consider the cultural background of the source text and the target text while undergoing the process of translation. It is important to focus on the TL culture for the ultimate purpose of comprehensive communication. The translator must adopt a more closer and natural way of communication, without omitting the cultural values of the ST while decoding to the TT.

Here is an excerpt from 'Kali-play' by Unni.R translated by C.S.Venkiteswaran-

“According to the customs that prevailed, one did arpu-vili, if it was a boy-child, and beat the earth with coconut fronds if it was a girl. All the four children of Kurinji were boys. Kurinji gave birth for the fifth time and when people went eagerly into the labour room after they heard Kaliaamma’s arpu-vili, what they saw was a girl-child lying beside the mother. When they said what she did was wrong, she left saying there was nothing wrong in doing arpu-vili upon the birth of a girl-child.”⁵

We can see a cultural transformation even while transliterating words like arpu-vili⁶ and names of people. From the contextual meaning one can comprehend, the life patterns and attitudes of a community referred here. Translation is possible if the translator has creativity and an understanding of both the cultures of the SL text and the TL text, though impregnated with the constraints due to cultural disparities. The readers of the target language comprehend the cultural aspects of the source language text from the contextual and culturally equivalent expressions by way of the sensible use of resources rendered by the translator. To transcend the cultural aspects from one language to another is the responsibility of the translator. Only a responsible and dedicated writer can overcome the hurdles of cultural disparities while translating works embedded with cultural components.

India has a diverse cultural history. In Kerala, a group of Brahmin women wear an off- white attire called ‘Veshti-mundu’⁷, on all joyful events like marriages, birthday celebrations etc., irrespective of age. In North India, only widows wear white or off-

white sari on days of celebrations. The North Indians are astonished to see as many women wearing off-white dress misunderstanding all of them as widows on watching the video clippings of a marriage ceremony. A multilingual state like India where there is a blend of different cultures, customs and traditions, as well familiarize with the diverse cultures and systems through the translations of different literary works.

What Ward H. Goodenough says in his *Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics*, has significance to the fact that culture is not a thing separate from one's life situations- physical and mental.

“As I see it, a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning: knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term. By definition, we should note that culture is not material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances. To one who knows their culture, these things and events are also signs signifying the cultural forms or models of which they are material representation.”⁸

Material phenomenon is only the part of the whole organization called culture. People, through the realization of material phenomenon and through the emotional, behavioural and the attitudinal interactions develop a culture of their own.

Culturally bound words and phrases are difficult to translate.

For example in Malayalam there exists innumerable words like, 'Namaskaram', 'Pambinkavu', 'Onappukkalam', 'Ezhunelippu', 'Vaikkurava', 'Thudichukuli', 'Arppuvili', 'Pathirappuvu', 'Nalukettu', etc., which do not have an equivalent in English. These words completely relate to the culture and traditions of a particular community in Kerala.

With the advent of science and technology, especially of television and cyber net, people could enhance their basic knowledge of reading and writing. The visual media underpins largely for the development of the translational process. More over the concept of comprehension of culture is no more a challenge as people all over the world watch Films, Documentaries and News related to different nations and communities. This has really contributed for the understanding of diverse cultures and traditions. Due to this, easy transliteration is possible of many terms, which have no literary equivalents, even without losing the charm and meaning in the target language.

The stories of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer⁹ overflow with a typical language- a quintessence of the Muslim culture. One encounters much challenge when translating the stories to retain the cultural essence. In his 'Ana varyium pon kurissum' one can perceive many instances where the translator may find difficulty to decode the text matter.

The passages for instance –“Sainabakku cheriyathothil... Mandan muthappa muthalayavar”⁹ are so cultural - bound and if translated may not receive the exact meaning and effect of the original. The depiction of the culture of the illiterate and innocent villagers of Malabar in Kerala finds no cultural equivalence in English or any

other language. Many are such instances where culture encompasses the work where translation process finds its lead impossible. The lines of the famous Malayalam poet Akkitham¹⁰ proves this.

These lines mirror a complete culture of a typical Malayali. The more the gap between the cultures of the SL and the TL texts, the higher is the degree of untranslatability. Yet there are many possible ways for satisfactorily decoding a culturally clothed text. Keeping in mind the fact that an absolute translation is impossible between two distinctly dissimilar cultural texts, we can introduce certain procedures like transliteration, giving foot -notes to explain the meaning, addition of certain details not in the SL text, or even omission of certain culturally bound words or situations, which do not have any significance in the TL text.

In the Legends of Khasak, self -translated by O.V. Vijayan¹¹, many incidents recorded in the original are deleted, many added and yet some over- translated. He has made use of these techniques probably to facilitate intercultural communication. It is the duty as well the responsibility of the translator to acknowledge the cultural beliefs and ethics of the SL text and document them into the TL text in a most acceptable and pleasing manner.


Translators have to adopt different methods and procedures while translating texts bound with multi-cultural elements. While translating the texts of the past centuries, the translator faces more problems as they are time and place oriented in addition to culture. The translator encounters difficulty to decode historically important stories and poems significant of person, age and place into the TL. There are instances where the translator resorts to the use of historical incidents, places and persons from his own cultural arena. The Hindi

translation of Thomas Grey's *Elegy on a Country Churchyard* by Kanta Prasad explicitly proves this. He has converted Hampden, Milton and Cromwell to Ayodhya Nath, Rana Pratap and Magan Singh.¹²

The few lines from 'Aparichithan' a poem by N.N.Kakkad¹³, which has innumerable and significant Malayalam terms untranslatable due to local orientation of words and phrases, place names and persons explicitly proves the situation. Here the translator encounters more risk as he has to deal with place oriented and culture oriented text. Without understanding both the values of place and culture, it is impossible to de-code, re-code or en-code the text. Appropriate choice of phrases, words, signs and symbols from the target language culture suitable for the source language culture is quite difficult. While translating culturally rooted works, the translator undergoes various methods of analysis. He has to use his linguistic, intellectual and intuitive faculties for an adequate communication of SL text to the TL text.

There are innumerable drawbacks in the translation process mainly in the context of culture. Ignorance of cultural and linguistic components leads to bad translation. Documentary texts, brochures and other scientific texts are easier to translate when compared to literary texts, though knowledge of the subject matter is a prerequisite for scientific texts. Considering the culture of Kerala, the terms like 'ezhutthu pali', 'kulappura', 'kuduma', 'velayappam' etc., do not find either literal or cultural equivalents in English. Culture is the main pillar of man's existence in this world. Social and individual progress is unattainable without a cultural background.

Due to the transfer of culture through the print and the visual



media, certain unique cultural values have disappeared completely from some nations. India, famous for its spiritual thoughts, now imitates the ideology of the West, which is no doubt the out come of cultural transfer. In the earlier period, no Indian woman could think of visiting a public bar with men. Now the concept has changed and women themselves defend for their valueless actions not paying any respect to our strong, deep -rooted culture. The dress code, behaviour, ideas, thoughts, emotions and habits connect a person individually and socially to his cultural upbringing. Reflections of these encompass in the literary works of that country, as literature is the depiction of life of man, by man.

Culture, if transferred from one nation to another or from one community to another, has many drawbacks. What we now encounter is the same phenomena, as many of the cultural values of our state as well as our country has vanished and many new alien cultures, instead, came into being. Translation definitely has played its role in these crucial phenomena of cultural transfer. This is no doubt a change, which we cannot completely perceive as good. Culture is something unique and valuable for a community, a state or a nation. It is not a thing for exchange. Through translation, the implications, ideologies and concepts, habits and beliefs, religions and customs, all comprehended, of course, but they are not things to forget, discarded or displaced by new ones.

Many of the works we now observe have the influence of diverse culture and hence un-translatibility is not a major problem. As habits and patterns of life have changed with varied and immixed cultural components, the process of translation, verbal and oral are rather easy.

The great poet Akkitham in his poem 'Bhagyavan'¹⁴ has used English words- 'shift', 'duty' 'porter' and 'bus conductor', which explicitly shows the interference of language, and hence culture. We must not limit our concern with the easiness or difficulty of translation in relation to the efficacy of culture but also the result of the transference of culture through translation. People in a community as well differ in their culture according to the style and habits created by their upbringing. An educated man and an uneducated man belonging to the same family may possess different cultures. The languages used by them differ accordingly. This proves that culture plays a very crucial role in one's life, in the literary works, in the translations.

The transmittance of culture through translation has also paved way, many positive values in the lives of many people throughout the world. It would be unjust if not mentioned about the famous epics of India- 'The Ramayana' and 'The Mahabharatha' and 'The Bhagavath Gita', which has really contributed for the cross- cultural understanding among the Oriental and the Western. Also, the famous work 'Gitanjali' of Rabindranath Tagore¹⁵ is another example of cultural transfer through translation.

The spiritual thoughts of Swami Vivekananda¹⁶, is unquestionably a great contribution to the whole world especially, Europe. There are many works which inspire our self with cultural thoughts and ideologies consequently of translation.

To translate from any Indian languages to English or vice-versa, is comparatively much easier, due to the historical background of English colonization of India. Many Indian words are now in the English dictionary like curry, sari, guru, swami etc. Similarly

there are many English words in Indian languages, especially in Malayalam which are very commonly used as if they are their own like switch, fan, book, paste, plastic, drawing room, plate, bus, cycle etc.,. Here too a cultural transfer is apparent though unconsciously by the users.

There are many merits and demerits of cultural transfer through translation. Yet considering the entire translated works in the world from the ancient to the modern, it is extremely significant of the contributions of different writers in different parts of the world to exchange concepts and ideas through letters and scriptures. Certain works seem original, not translations, and it is quite difficult to accept it otherwise. The modern technologies are added advantages. Many mistake the English versions of Iliad and Odyssey by Homer 17 as the original writings. According to Goethe, ¹⁸

“There are two principles of translation. The translator can bring to his fellow countrymen a true and clear picture of the foreign author and foreign circumstances, keeping strictly to the original; but he can also treat the foreign work as a writer treats his material, altering it after his own tastes and convictions, so that it is brought closer to his fellow countrymen, who can then accept it as if it were an original work.” ¹⁹

Translation has become an inevitable means of not only literature but also other areas of human endeavour, without which, man cannot progress or come out of the well to a much socially, culturally and scientifically tuned ways of life. Owing to the process of translation, world has really become small and we are made one with the magical spell of languages and cultures. As Juri Lotman says, ‘No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of

culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language.’²⁰

Abbreviations used:

SL- Source Language

TL- Target Language

TT- Target Text

Notes

1. J.C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (London: Oxford UP, 1965)²⁰. Catford mentions about two important aspects of translation ‘textual material’ and ‘equivalent’-graphological equivalent, not cultural.
2. Theodor Savory, *The Art of Translation* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1969).
3. Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969).
4. ‘Chaya chaya’ theory propounded by G. Gopinathan, *Translation, Transcreation and Culture: The evolving Theories of Translation in Hindi and other Modern Indian Languages*.
5. Unni.R, *The Kali- Play, Malayalam Literary Survey* (Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2008 January-March).
6. Arpu-vili: a way of showing victory or happiness by making vocal sounds by a group of men on occasions like marriages, birth of a child etc.,.
7. Veshti-mundu: An off-white attire made of cotton cloth, of

two pieces, worn by mainly Hindu women of Kerala.

8. Ward. H. Goodenough, Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics, D.Hymes ed. (New York: Harper&Row, 1964).
9. Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Anavarium Ponkurisum (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1955)1
10. Akkitham, Manasa Puja, (Kottayam: India Press, 1980)62.
11. O.V. Vijayan, O.V. Vijayan, Khasakkinte Ithihasam. (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1969) Trans. O.V. Vijayan, The Legends of Khasak. (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991).
12. N.N. Kakkad, Safalamee Yatra (Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi PP, 2007)101.
13. G.Gopinath, Translation, Transcreation and Culture: The Evolving Theories of Translation in Hindi and Other Modern Languages. Translation journal (<http://www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/satranlations/Gopin.pdf>)
14. Akkitham, Manasa Puja, (Kottayam: India Press, 1980)30.
15. Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali (Song Offerings), (London: India Society, 1912; Macmillan, 1913).
16. Swami Vivekananda, great Hindu spiritual leader and reformer who received western education and could expound Vedanta education to the West.
17. Homer, the greatest and most influential Greek poet of all times contributed to the world 'The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey-the two great epics. 'The Iliad' tells the story of the wrath of Achilles and 'The Odyssey' tells the story of Odysseus as he travels home back from war.

18. Goethe- one of the greatest figures of German Romanticism and one of the giants of world literature.
19. C.Thriveni, Cultural Elements in Translation: The Indian Perspective ([http:// accurapid.com/journal/19culture.htm](http://accurapid.com/journal/19culture.htm)) Volume 6, No. 1 January 2002.
20. Juri Lotman and B.A. Uspensky, 'On the Semeiotic Mechanism of culture', New Literary History. Susan Bassnett, Translation Studies. (London:Routledge, 1991)22.

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