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Challenges of Literary Translation with Reference to Maithili Literature: A Critique

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Abstract

Although Maithili literature has been very rich yet there is huge crisis of English translation in this field. English Translation has potential to bring Maithili literature on the map of the world literatures since translation is the conduit of cross cultural communication and dissemination of knowledge. We take the cognizance of the world through translation in this 21st century and if we want to make our society a 'knowledge society' then we have to accept and embrace translation as a vehicle to achieve our goal. Translation has been emerged as a disseminating and democratizing force in the realm of all disciplines and discourses since the history of human civilization.

This research paper explores the poetics and politics of English translation of Maithili literature in general and Maithili fiction in particular. It seeks to examine the problems and prospects of translating Maithili fiction. It also tries to trace the history, principles and practice of English translation in the field of Maithili literature. It also tries to delve deep into the linguistic and cultural barriers that a translator encounters while translating Maithili literary texts. We have been witness to the fact that translation has made local literature as global literature, for instance, Bengali literature. So, this research paper also devises and discovers the ways and means which can

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pave the way for how to make Maithili literature as a global literature (local to global), and it is only possible through translation.

Keywords: Translation, Maithili literature, World literatures, problems, prospects, poetics and politics

Introduction

A couplet in Shri Ramacharitamanasa by Goswami Tulsidas highlights the role and relevance of translation in the 21st century.

> Ati apaar je saritbar jon nrip setu karahin
>
> Chadhi pipeelikau param laghu binu shrama paarahi jaahin
>
> (Baalkand, Shlok 13, p. 38).

(If kings get bridges constructed over big rivers, which are too broad, even the tiniest ants cross them without exertion.)

The above couplet displays the role and responsibility of translation as a bridge across the cultures in the 21st century since it is a 'knowledge century'. All the literary texts exhibit linguistic features and socio-cultural characteristics. Therefore, literary translation has that power and potential to become the medium for cross cultural communication. Houaria Chaal remarks in his popular essay "Literary Translation Difficulties: Cultural Barriers" that "The diversity of language, the variety of cultures and necessity of communication in human life caused translation to be a very effective factor in communicating, exchanging cultures and knowledge" (134).

Translation has become the part and parcel of our life. Therefore, it has been said that "Every act of communication is an act of translation" (Singh 2014: 7). Translation is such a Powerful tool that is essential for generation, dissemination and democratization and preservation of knowledge in the 21st century knowledge society. Local literature can become global through translation and we have seen it in the case of Bengali literature. Tagore got Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 since his *Gitanjali* got translated into English. All regional/local literatures have potential and literary merits to come up to the level of world literatures. Just we need to disseminate it across the globe through translation. Maithili literature is one of such regional literature which has been ignored by writers and translators, therefore, it has not been able to catch the attention of the world. There are many great poets and writers such as Vidyapati, Hari Mohan Jha, Raj Kamal Chaudhari, Baba Nagarjun, Lalit, etc. in Maithili literature whose works are of great literary value and merits

but due to certain orthodox and political reasons it is dying in its own courtyard. There is huge crisis of translation in Maithili literature, therefore, it has not yet been reached the non-Maithili readers or speakers. Many great works have been written and published but there is acute crisis of readership as even Maithili speakers do not read Maithili texts. If great texts of Maithili will be translated into English, a global language, then it will get national and international readers. Why Maithili texts are not being translated? The problems are multi-layered. There is a plethora of reasons for this such as

1. Maithili writers seem to be hesitant in allowing translators/scholars/ academicians to translate their texts.
2. There is a monopoly of a particular caste or class on Maithili language and literature as they think that they are the only right inheritors and others cannot touch it. Due to this reason it has not been disseminated and it has become stranger in its own courtyard. We need to free Maithili language and literature from its Brahminical orthodoxy/monopoly.
3. There are many Maithili writers who write for *Swantah sukhay* (self-pleasure) and to get some kind of awards and recognitions but they do not encourage youngsters and others irrespective of their caste, colour and creed to join this venture and enrich this tradition.
4. There is lack of political will to enrich and connect/link this language to education and employment so that it will get market value in this age of globalization and marketization.

If we want to globalize and democratize Maithili language and literature then we need to translate Maithili literature into English as much as possible since translation has that power and potential to transform literature and transcend the linguistic, cultural, geographical and political boundaries. The sooner we give up this hypocritical linguistic pride and prejudice, the better it would be for Maithili language and literature. Let this language and literature flow like the water of the river and merge into to the ocean of the world literatures.

Literary Translation: Problems and Perspectives

The practice of literary translation is different from translating knowledge texts. However, the act of translation in itself is complex and it becomes more taxing and arduous when we practise literary translation. There are several issues pertaining to the problems of literary translation which need to be addressed properly so that the

dignity of the author, originality of the texts, loyalty to the target readers, and beauty of translation must be maintained. Like a mediator, the job of translation is to make both parties (authors and target readers) happy, satisfied and convinced, and this task of translator is not easy as it seems to be at the surface level. Robert Brooks, in his blog *Challenges of Translating Literature*, remarks on this issue stating that "One of the key challenges of literary translation is the need to staying faithful to the original work with the need to create something unique and distinctive that will evoke the same feeling and responses as the original" (1).

The politics of translation is also involved in this activity since it is not an innocent act as it appears to be. Like history, translation is not objective but subjective. The negation of the self, emotions and personality are essential for true artists so is for the translators. Like any other artists, translators are also great artists and they need to escape their emotions and ideologies, prejudices and biases for becoming better and greater translators. Daniel Hahn, the director of the British Centre for Literary Translation, sums up the issues of literary translation:

> There is not a single word in any of the languages I translate that can map perfectly onto a word in English. So, it's always interpretative, approximate, creative. Anything that is, itself, 'linguistic' quality will by definition be anchored in a particular language - whether it's idioms, ambiguity or assonance. All languages are different (qtd. in Brooks 2017: 2).

Hahn hints at the problems of exploring equivalent terms/words in translating literary texts since the words or expressions of source language cannot perfectly match to those of in the target language. He also emphasizes on couples of skills- interpretation and creativity which translators should master to produce effective translation. Nida states that

> since no two languages are identical either in meanings given to corresponding symbols, or ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. . . No fully exact translation . . . the impact may be closely to the original but no identity in detail (1964: 126).

Urdu language translator Fahmida Riaz outlines her approach to such thorny issues: "Every piece you translate comes from the pen of an individual, so you have to give it an individual treatment. I try to retain the ambience of original culture, rather than the language, as it is reflected in the texts" (qtd. in Brooks 2017: 2).

According to Fahmida, loyalty to source culture is essential for the translators to produce authentic literary translation. She is also in favour of developing and devising approaches and strategies depending upon the kind of authors-texts we are undertaking for the project of translation. There cannot be any single methods/ approaches/strategies which will fit into all the literary texts of the world.

Boas in his *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (2013) accepts "the form of language will be moulded by the state of that culture" (63). It is evident from this statement that cultures do influence literary translation. And language is also the product of culture which we adopt/practise. This issue of language and culture produces a plethora of problems for translators who practise literary translation particularly regional/Anchalik literature like Maithili. Kashi Prasad is very much concerned with translators of Indian languages and states that

> The translator has to catch the spirit of the original. What does the word spirit mean? The word appears to have become a cliché. It means breath, the vital force. It is not making contact with any individual writer but with an entire culture, with a value system. It is this spirit which is sought to be conveyed through translation (1982: 86).

So, the job of a translator is to follow the original texts through any approach or method. It is also the duty of the translator to make the culture alive when it comes to the practice of literary translation. Anthony Burgess is of the view that "Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making whole culture intelligible" (1984: 4). Now it is evident that literary translation is not just a linguistic act but also a cultural practice. So, translation is inherently a cultural affair and activity.

Language is also the product of its culture and, so, it is not dissociated from its culture. Culture is the part and parcel of any language and translation. Inter-language translation poses a plethora of problems, prospects, challenges and threats. The task of the translator becomes complex and very difficult since "he has to serve the two masters- the ST author and TT recipient" (Mannikar 2020: 64). The complexity of culture and language is quite profound in Maithili literature and it makes the activity of translation challenging and problematic. It is one of the reasons that there is acute crisis of English translation of Maithili literature since no scholar/academician/ translator attempts to translate it. Larson addresses this critical issue. He writes that "one of the most difficult problems facing a translator is how to find lexical equivalence for objects and events which are not known in the target culture" (163).

Challenges of Translating Maithili Literature

I will also share my personal experiences as a translator which I have realized/ faced during translating Maithili stories and novels. I will discuss some of the relevant examples from Harimohan Jha's short stories "Kanyak Jiwan", "Babak Samskar" and "Graduate Putauhu" and Lalit's novel *Prithviputra* (2012). There are many problems/challenges in translating Maithili novels, short stories, poems, plays and essays. The similar challenges are also figured and faced by translators when they translate Hindi literary texts into English. Translators have to face serious challenges in translating phrases, idioms, proverbs, symbols, metaphors, images, titles of the texts, satirical and humorous expressions, cultural terms, etc. Due to these problematic issues, translation of poetry is very challenging and complex. Tthese problems are universal in all the literatures of the world. Despite all these challenging issues, there is nothing which is untranslatable. For translators, linguistic and cultural diversity may seem to be obstacles but it is an opportunity which needs to be celebrated. Since India is a multilingual and multicultural country where knowledge exists in different languages and cultures, we need to consider "translation as a bridge between knowledges and cultures", as it has been rightly stated by Prof. Avadhesh Kumar Singh in his essay "Celebrating Translation as a Bridge between Knowledges and Cultures". Venuti views it as

> translation is a process that aims for looking at similarities between language and culture, but it does this because it is constantly facing dissimilarities. It can never and should never aim to remove these dissimilarities entirely. A translated text should be the site at which different cultures emerge, where a reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other and resistency. A translation strategy based on an aesthetic discontinuity can best preserve, the differences, the otherness, by reminding the reader of the gains and losses in the translation process and unbridgeable gaps between cultures (305).

The following are several challenges that one faces as a translator while translating Maithili fiction since it is packed with cultural and linguistic peculiarities.

1. **Translating Maithili Titles of Short Stories and Novels**

   "Kanyak Jiwan," "Babak Samskar," "Ghar Jamai," "Sasurak Chinh," "Totmaa," "Vikat Paahun," *Kanyaadan, Dwiraagman* all by Hari Mohan Jha; *Madhushrawani* by Shailendra Mohan Jha; *Vidaagari* by Chandra Narayan Mishra; *Gaam Sungait* by Vibhuti Anand; *Son Dayak Sohag* by Prof. Hansraj, *Gaam Wali* by Sushil; *Laal Bhauji* by Indra Narayan;

Vaatbhaksha by Usha Kiran Khan; *Agnibaan* by Jeevkant; *Navturiya* by Yatri, etc.

2. Translating Regional Expressions

Besi lub lub nai karu, aangan me chaur chhatait chhalon, raahar ulbait chhalhi je khapari pataik ka daurlih, kharam khat khatbait baahar ka gelah, chhaur lagaakar sat sa jeebh kheench lebaih, dunu haath aanchal jodi sausak charan sparsh kailnih, dur jo dhur batah, aekhan dhari bhak bhakaa rahal achhi.

3. Translating Cultural Expressions or Terms

Kharaam, naihar, sasur, aai-mai, neepal, naagdahwali, sharbat, teetar dai, jhaadphunk, kanyadaan, dwiragman, sindurdaan, mangalsutra, godaan, bhatij, bhagin, bhauji, saali, amot, pidhi, ojhaji, nanadi, shradhak bhoj, maaldah aam, Gangajal, saaun, bhadwak.

4. Translating Phrases and Idioms

Lanka me sabse chhot se unchaas haath (Proverb), chaalani dusalak soop ke jinka bahatar ta chhed (Proverb), sikka par chadhaa rahal chhathi (phrase), gad gad bha gelaah (Idiom), Gangalaabh karaabay (Idiom), mana changaa ta kathauti me Ganga (Idiom).

5. Translating Symbols/Image/Metaphors

Maduaa khet me kahun kesar lagait achhi.

6. Translating Figures of Speech

Je aehi ghar me aelih se gelih (Paradox), jaun abitainh rakhane ta prithvi par pairo na dharti (Hyperbole), ol san kab kab bol kiyek bajai chhi (Alliteration), aha loknik muh me lagaam achhi (Sandeha Alankar), naihar sa ekta kag-kauaa ta aebai ne karai chhainh (Simile).

7. Translating Satirical and Humorous Expressions

Dur jo! ehan taad gaachh kahun maugi bhelay, hamar naak kataa rahal achhi aur oo apan swasth banbait chhathi, aekpithiya nahi pitiaayun kahiau, Srikant ta okda agaan chhuchhun lagait chhathinh, vaastav me ee maugi jag jitne chhai, jena aankhik paani jhari gel hoik, sasurak aeilaapar maath jhapalkaik, anhun chamatkaar karait chhi, je ang strik lajja thikaik se ta jhapnahi nai chhal, aaur ahan ke kewal maathe taa sujhait achhi.

Analysis of the Above Mentioned Challenges of Translating Maithili Literature

The major issues that a translator encounters in translating Maithili literature are based on linguistic and socio-cultural peculiarities which seem to be a Herculean task. First of all, translating titles of any Maithili literary texts, for instance, "Babak Samskar," *Kanyaddan*, *Dwiragman*, *Madhushravani*, *Prithvi Putra*, etc… are problematic. This task is very taxing since these titles are rooted in cultural ethos which is not there in the culture of the target language. The cultural practices/rituals like *samskar*, *kanyadan*, *dwiraagman*, *madhushravani*, etc. are not practised in western culture therefore there is a crisis of equivalent terms/expression in the target language. It is not the case only with English language but all the languages of the world. It is also the same issue with all the Indian languages within India. The translator faces similar problems when s/he translates titles of Hindi literature such as *Godaan, Mangal Sutra* (novels by Premchand), "Kafan", "Sava Ser Gehu", "Pus ki Raat" (stories by Premchand) etc. So, cultural diversity and peculiarity add to the level of linguistic difficulties for the translators. Apart from translating titles, translating other cultural terms and expressions, for instance, *kharam* (roughly translated as wooden sleeper), *dalaan*, *sindurdaan*, *aangan*, *Gangajal*, *shradhk bhoj*, *nanad*, *bhauji*, *saali* (all the kinship terms), names of Hindi months, so many and so forth, in Maithili literary texts, are deeply rooted in customary cultural practice and superstitious customs. These words create cultural barriers which hint at untranslatability. However, it is almost impossible to find exact and correct equivalent in the target language and culture since above mentioned customary activities do not exist in another culture. If these things are not the part and parcel of any culture, they cannot exist in language as language is a by-product of socio-cultural activities. Nida points out the difficulty level of such complicated cultural gaps "differences between cultures may cause severe complications for the translators than do differences in language structure" (1964: 130).

However, the challenges mentioned above at the no. 4, 5, 6 and 7 are fundamentally based on linguistic differences which display lexical, syntactical and dialectical variations and peculiarities in any two different languages of the world. Since no two different languages of the world are identical in any ways, so, exactness and appropriateness in literary translation is a myth. Nida also remarks that

> Since no two languages are identical either in meanings given to corresponding symbols, or in ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages . . . no fully exact translation . . . the impact may be reasonably close to the original but no identity in detail (1964: 126).

Linguistic barrier, in translation, refers to difficulty in translating phrases, idioms, proverbs, symbols and metaphors, figures of speech, satirical and humorous expressions, so many so forth. Maithili texts are pregnant with such linguistic terms and expressions, for examples, *mana changa ta kathauti me Ganga* (If the mind is pure then the river Ganga is in every container of water.), *maduaa khet me kahun kesar laglaik achhi* (Kesar does not grow in *maduaa* field.), *oal san kab kab bol kiyak bajai chhi* (Why you speak so bitter as *oal* ?), *aekpithiya nahi pitiaayun kahiau* (Don't say that she is similar in age, say that she is his aunt.). They need to be tackled tactfully in English translation. Literary translation of these types of linguistic expressions in Maithili texts poses a serious challenge for the task of a translator. The question of appropriateness of being 'right and wrong' and 'loss in translation' are something that bothers in the mind of the most of the Maithili writers. They demand exact/absolute translation which is almost impossible since they forget that translation is also a creative act and no two languages are identical. However, the crisis of exact equivalent lexical expressions does not hamper the practice of literary translation. Instead, it allows the translator to devise and discover innovative strategy that should be both creative and critical to tackle these problematic peculiarities of any language. R. S. Pathak also addresses this consequential matter.

> The translator therefore has to bear in mind that there are no exact synonyms even in the same language and its dialects and that a language is not merely a medium through which experience is communicated but is something inseparable from the experience it communicates. Being a unique way of looking at undifferentiated reality, it invests its words with particular nuances (qtd. in Kumawat and Anjana 31).

However, we as readers of translated texts do not raise this question of exactness of equivalence and *auchitya* of being right and wrong when we read Greek, French, German, Russian literatures in English, but the moment we read translated texts of

Indian authors we make hue and cry. Now it is high time to give up prejudices and accept translations of Indian authors for the co-existence of other cultures and languages.

Strategy/Approach

Whatever strategy/approach we as translators adopt to translate literary texts, when it comes to regional/anchalik literature which is laden with linguistic and cultural peculiarities as in the case of Maithili literature, it opens up new challenges for translators at every step. While translating culturally loaded texts, we should keep cultural terms as they are as much as possible and try to provide footnote or endnote or glossary so that meanings will get explained. This kind of practice will give us the local cultural flavours and fragrance and it will maintain the promises (loyalty, readability). This strategy will also enrich local/regional language and gradually such words would occupy space in dictionaries. For instance, the term "paag" has been very popular and has been included in the dictionary. Translator's approach/strategy should depend on the target readers. If the target reader/community is foreigners then the first attempt should be to find equivalent terms in target language as much as possible and after that 'sense for sense' translation should be rendered. If the target reader/community is Indian then translators should keep the cultural terms intact and provide note/footnote/endnote/glossary for the detailed information so that cultural diversity may be shared and celebrated which may promote amity and unity. As Bassnett points out that "the translator must take the SL text in such a way that the TL version will correspond to the SL version. . . To attempt to impose the value system of the source culture on to the TL culture is dangerous ground" (1991: 23). To solve such thorny issues, as translators, we should emphasize on developing various new prospects, perspectives and propriety that should be both creative and critical in its approach rather than looking for the issues of being 'right or wrong' in the practice of literary translation. Prof. Avadhesh Kumar Singh, addresses this issue of appropriateness in this way:

> Propriety of translational act demands that translator should put the source-author's views in proper perspective to do justice to the source texts dealing with the ultra-sensitive issues like religion, language and culture (1965**:** xv).

Venuti suggests the strategies for the translators engaged in the translation of literary texts. He argues that translator should adopt and practise the approach of

'foreignization' and 'domestication' while translating literary texts. The term 'foreignization' refers to "keeping cultural specific expressions intact in the TL texts" (Mannikar 67) whereas the concept 'domestication' "emphasizes on naturalizing and neutralizing the cultural specific expressions in the SL text by replacing them with the expressions of target language cultural terminologies" (Mannikar 67).

Conclusion

A tradition of translation should be developed so that we may provide global platform to local/ regional literatures. English Translation of Maithili literature will create the space and the scope for serious and in-depth research, interdisciplinary research and comparative research. Kriti Kapur states that

> India's multilingualism and multiculturalism ethos can be celebrated in the real sense of the word by understanding and accepting its diverse literatures and this is being done through translation. Thus, cultural dialoguing through translation will facilitate nation building and preservation of cultural diversity (2014: 55).

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