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MISINTERPRETATION AND UNTRANSLATABILITY IN THE TRANSLATED VERSION OF *KARUKKU*

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Abstract

Translation functions to overcome language barriers and enables cultural exchange in a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic world. The task of the translator is to 'translate' the foreign reader into a native one. A translation is not a monistic composition but an interpretation and conglomerate of two structures. The present scenario in translation is mainly characterized by the earlier unseen interest in the translation of subaltern literatures, Dalit literary writings in particular. This study seeks to analyze the translated version of Bama's *Karukku* and the serious distortions and misinterpretations in Lakshmi Holmstrom's translation. Quite ironically, Dalit texts have been translated mostly by the Brahmins. When a culturally privileged Brahmin translator translates the culturally marginalized Dalit text, the problem of untranslatability becomes more significant, thereby widening the gap between the source and the target texts. One who reads Bama's *Karukku* in Tamil can obviously feel the rhythm, the orality and the implied caste-cultural markers of the narrative. But by completing the broken sentences of the dialect, wherein lies the orality of the text, Holmstrom seems to have missed something in the English translation.

Key Words: Translatology - Untranslatability - Polyglossia – Transcreation - Transliteration

Translation functions to overcome language barriers and enables cultural exchange in a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic world. Translation is a transfer of texts across cultures. A K. Ramanujan says that "the task of the translator is to 'translate' the foreign reader into a native one" (*Post-Colonial Translation* 16). So a translator has to take the readers from one cultural world to another cultural world. According to Susan Bassnett, "a translation is not a monistic composition but an interpretation and conglomerate of two structures" (*Translation Studies* 16). On the one hand the translator should focus on the semantic

content of the original text and on the other hand the translator has to focus on the entire system of aesthetic features.

The translation of fictional and non-fictional works by Dalits is inevitable for enhancing the growth of Indian literature as well as for promoting its spread both in the foreign countries and within the Indian country itself across different cultural and linguistic ramparts. The present scenario in translation is mainly characterized by the earlier unseen interest in the translation of subaltern literatures, Dalit literary writings in particular.

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This study seeks to analyze the translated version of Bama's *Karukku* and the serious distortions and misinterpretations in Lakshmi Holmstrom's translation. This paper problematizes the translation of a few cultural and linguistic peculiarities that require utmost attention, and points out the impossibility of a faithful translation. It also focuses on the cultural untranslatability in the English translation.

A Dalit narrative, while reflecting the socio-cultural life of the marginalized communities, also operates for creating space for the elevation of the same communities out of the enforced oppressions. The loss of these cultural and political implications in the translated version has the danger of alienating the text from its very creative purpose, when presented to the non-Tamil readers.

Dalit literature is usually not only culture-specific, but it is also dialect-specific. It is thus obvious that for a study to provide a detailed and comprehensive picture of the Dalit reality it is necessary for all these specificities to be considered. Consequently in order to ensure more successful translation of Dalit literary works, it is necessary for a good translator to take into consideration not only the broad cultural traits of the Dalits but also the dialect and local specificities. This paper thus focuses not only on the broader problems of translating *Karukku* from Tamil to English, but also on the problems of translating the slangs, polyglossia (Bakhtin), and the cultural pregnant words from Tamil into English.

Translation is an intercultural as well as an intralingual activity as it deals with two or more linguistic systems embedded in different cultures. However, the complexities inherent in the translating process fluctuate proportionately with the measure of distance between the languages and the cultures involved. Translation of Dalit texts into English is a translation from one language culture into an alien language culture. It has been pointed out by Hornby that "the extent to which a text is translatable varies with the degree to which it is embedded in its own specific culture, also with the distance that separates the cultural background of source text and target audience in terms of time and place" (Hornby 41).

This paper first focuses on language and its connection with culture, and then it shows how the original text is misinterpreted and how the vigour is lost in the target language. Language doesn't carry and

express just the meanings but carries certain cultural codes and signs which give a special significance and uniqueness to a work of art. Bama gives the full picture of the codes of Tamil Dalit Catholicism and this hailed her as a renowned Indian writer. To decode those codes and signs and to cover them is a challenge for a translator, especially when the original work is written in a particular dialect. Translating such texts becomes a double challenge for translators for they have to transpose the readers to a specific cultural context through the nuances of the dialect and its cultural associations. In the paraya Catholic dialect the word 'pusai' refers to the Holy Mass but in another dialect it refers to severe blows.

In attempting to translocate India's tremendous linguistic complexities, every text is a challenge. The challenge is to make the text beautiful, clear, without embellishment, over-writing or losses. A translator is translating not just words but a whole culture. English is from a land where there is no caste system and complicated kinship terms. So a third language is to be found out – where voices are thrown and it is literary ventriloquism. Example, the word Chittappa used in *Karukku* refers to paternal uncle, who is the younger brother of her father. One word carries so many meanings. But the word uncle in English does not refer whether he is a paternal or maternal uncle and whether he is younger or elder. So Holmstrom introduces the word Chittappa to her non-Tamil readers. Lakshmi Holmstrom's work with Bama is especially important in terms of bringing marginalized dalit voices to both Indian and Non-Indian audiences.

When we look into *Karukku*, the cultural aspect does not get fully translated. When there is cultural exchange, the flavour is lost to some extent. Example: "Did this man ever help us, even with the dust of his feet?" (38). In the original Tamil text Bama has written as "கால்தூசி மொயற்சி எடுத்தாரா" (49). But in the English translation this is misinterpreted and the flavour is lost. Bama has used a local Tamil dialect in her work which is oral in nature. Since caste has its material and geographical existence in India, especially in Tamil societies, use of this dialect has become a tool to strengthen the content of *Karukku*. Ayyappa Paniker points out that in an oral tradition, the 'retelling' of texts inevitably involves the practice of 'transcreation', of taking linguistic as well as thematic liberties with the original. Bama's *Karukku* is written in the oral

tradition. In the English translation linguistic liberties are clearly visible. Holmstrom has mixed Tamil words with English like chittappa, macchaan, paatti, periamma, akka and so many other words.

Bama in an interview says, "One thing that gives me most satisfaction is that I used the language of my people – a language that was not recognized by the pandits of literature, was not accepted by any literary circle in Tamil Nadu, and was not included in the norms of Tamil literature" (Bama). One who reads Bama's *Karukku* in Tamil can obviously feel the rhythm, the orality and the implied caste-cultural markers of the narrative. But by completing the broken sentences of the dialect, wherein lies the orality of the text, Holmstrom seems to have missed something in the English translation.

The double-edged critique of *Karukku* as suggested in the title gives the uniqueness to the text. The original Tamil text has a sharp attack on both the suppressions in Christianity and caste oppressions in Tamil society. But the translation seems to have missed this sharpness. "The unresolved question of capturing the spirit of the language in abuse / humour continues to remain unaddressed. It will remain unresolved till the translators are willing and ready to bend English to accommodate the raw energy of Dalit tongue" (Mangai).

When Bama, as girl returned to school after her holidays, the warden would say, "Look at the cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home – just skin and bone!" (17). In Tamil it is read as "இந்தச் சேரிப்பிள்ளைகள் பாருங்க இங்க இருக்கையிலே நல்லா தின்னுபோட்டு உருளக்கெழங்கு மாதிரி இருப்பானாக. வீட்டுக்குப் போயிட்டு வந்து பாருவத்தல் கணக்கா வந்திருக்கானாகன்னு சொல்லும்" (29). The language of the source text sounds very sharp but Holmstrom has failed to reproduce this sharpness in her translation. "Throughout history, translators have had to contend with the fact that the target language is deficient when it comes to translating the source text into that language" (Brisset 338).

Next when we look at the story of Bondan - Mama, there is a sense of celebration in the Tamil narration which the translation has failed to capture. In the Tamil original, this story is narrated in reported speech. This is typical of marginal narratives to oppose the traditional

way of storytelling by not claiming to be authentic. But the English version of Bondan -Mama's story is in direct speech which undermines the Tamil narrative and it claims to be authentic. Thus the narrative has been inverted here. Ayyappa Paniker points out that for Indian Translators the concern for authenticity was never an issue up to the nineteenth century. Insistence on literal adherence was the accepted norm; deviations were liberally tolerated even encouraged and preferred.

The dialogues are punching in Tamil while expressing the levels of suppressions in the convent but in English it has lost its vigour. "அங்க அதிகாரங்கொடிகட்டிப் பறக்குது" (105) is translated as "their authority flying high like a flag" (98), here the punch is lost. In the original Tamil text Bama explains how Tamilians are discriminated and looked down as lower caste in her convent by the dominant Telugu people. In this kind of environment her situation becomes worse for she is not just a Tamilian but also belongs to 'Parajathi', the lowest in the caste hierarchy. In addition, certain sentences that are crucial for understanding this complexity are omitted in the translation. Holmstrom has literally translated the word 'jathipirivinai' as 'caste divisions'. But the word in that context refers to caste discrimination rather than caste divisions. The word 'discrimination' carries with it the caste hierarchy, oppression and bias whereas the word 'division' just means a separate category.

Holmstrom even misinterprets the title word *Karukku*. *Karukku* means koormai in Tamil and 'sharp' in English. In the introduction Holmstrom says, "Karukku means Palmyra leaves, which, with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords" (vii). *Karukku* actually means the sharp edges on both sides of the Palmyra leaf stalk. In Tamil it refers to 'pana mattai' or 'karukku mattai' and the serrated edges which look like double edged swords are found only on the stalk and not on the leaves. The word *karukku* does not bring to mind the leaf but the mattai that is the stalk.

The matter to be focused is that each translation insists the translator to twist the original version in order for it to be better expressible in the target language as the source language and the target language culture are different. They are different in terms of sentence structures, phonemes, and semantics, among other

linguistic yardsticks. In an earnest attempt to express the content of the source language in the target language, the translator cannot just effect some changes and make a choice among the wide range of possible meanings available to her. Prasad rightly describes the difficulty of translating Dalit texts:

The major challenge for anyone translating Tamil Dalit writings into English is the inherent seemingly untranslatable resistance of the language of this literature. The linguistic nuances of this literature are of paramount importance and translation can erase the locational differentiations, cultural oppressions, and the resistance. ("Translating Tamil Dalit Literature")

The next section is an analysis of the untranslatable aspects of the source text. Clearly, there is a sizeable gap between the original version of Bama's *Karukku* in Tamil and its English translation written by Holmstrom. Having overcome the challenges and accomplished the task, a few translators have attempted to mediate the Dalit culture through their translations. Holmstrom has translated the Tamil utterance 'நாலு போடு போடு' as 'give her four blows' in English. In the Tamil context the expression 'nalu podu podu' does not necessarily mean beating or giving a severe blow; but also means even severe scolding or abuses. There are utterances like "கஞ்சி கிஞ்சி குடிக்கப் போயிட்டா" (14) and "கூழக் கீழக் குடிச்சிப்போட்டு" (19). In these instances, the writer has used the colloquial convention of mentioning a word in double with an alteration in the second word. While translating these phrases, the text does not lend itself for making it transportable to other languages. Holmstrom, the translator has also been able to bring these expressions only in a partial manner that naturally drifts from the source language tone.

At one place, she has translated 'kanji' as 'gruel or porridge' (62) and in another place as 'koozh' (61). This non-uniformity in the usage of the same word contributes to the ambiguous nature of translating such dialects. The sentence "பன்னண்டு மணி ஆனபோதும் பிளேட்டுத் தூக்கிட்டு சத்துணவு வாங்கித் திங்க சாரை சாரையாக நண்டு நசுக்கெல்லாம் போகும்" (18) has been translated as "The moment it struck twelve, they would rush of plate-in-hand, even the tiniest crab-like ones, for their free meal" (7). The expression 'saarai saaraiya' is missing in the process of translation. Again in the sentence "ஒருமாறி சோஹு புடிச்ச பய மாதிரி இருந்தான்" (72), the expression 'sohai pudichavan' is translated as 'melancholic' boy. Some other word must have been

better than melancholic, since the word 'sohai' implies the quality of being inactive, and not sorrowful. But the English word 'melancholic' attributes the quality of being sad. Hence, this sort of typical cultural idioms should be translated only after absorbing the cultural milieu of the speech rendered. This snag in translation can be compensated with an appropriate foot note or a glossary at the end.

In the same manner, the words 'pey, pisaasu' are transliterated but the word 'ketta aavi' is replaced with 'ill-wind' (82) in the English translation. This usage seems to be highly inadequate for conveying the intended meaning. The word 'di' (39) offers the gender specific expression more vividly, there by appropriating the English language to the local requirements. The words like nadar mudalaali, naattamai and davani make a direct transliteration of the source text. The interjection 'chi' (27) has also been just transliterated in the same way. Thus the translation brings to light its untranslatability and fidelity.

Caste names like Nadar, Thevar, Chettiyaar, Aasaari, Naicker, Udaiyar, Kuravar, Chakkiliyar, Pallar and Parayar portay the Tamil Dravidian discriminations based on their work. These Tamil cultural context words are not at all in use in the western context. Hence, it is problematic to find equivalents for these things. So these words are untranslatable and the only possible way is to use the terms as they are, that is transliteration. The English word 'chariot' also doesn't give the exact meaning of the Tamil word 'sapparam'. So Holmstrom finds it difficult to translate this word and she directly uses the word 'sapparam' in her translation. Though it is an attempt to faithfully transport the source text, the understandability of these words, to a reader with no knowledge of the specific culture remains impossible.

In the Tamil language, the word 'sami' means God. But in this dialect, it refers to priest and also a person superior and wealthy. In Dalit dialect 'sami' is hierarchical in nature. Sheriff states that the "relations between hegemonic and marginalized cultures, patriarchal structure embedded in discourses, the marginalization of subaltern cultures within cultures, which are themselves marginalized globally" (178). There is no doubt that no translation is ever perfect, as it is the translator's duty to understand the marginalized culture and produce the translations that do not distort the meanings implied in it. Unless the translator

understands the cultural complexity of certain localized usages, the translation will be misleading and may provoke laughter among the conscious readers.

Translation from a marginalized culture to the mainstream culture should capture the incongruities of the source text in such a way it is recognizable in the target culture. The greatest challenge for the translator who translates a Dalit text is to bridge the cultural gap between the source language text and the target language text.

Finally translating a Dalit text necessitates the mobilization of a good measure of the strategies that reveal the allegiance of the translator and her ideology. More importantly, the translation should also reflect the translator's cultural background. This means that author's culture should be transplanted into the translator's culture and it should fit into it. Thus, the translator needs to be flexible and creative while translating Dalit text which is deeply rooted in their socio-cultural traditions.

The local idioms and the culturally significant usages of such kind have apparent political objectives and resistive functions. These terms are the potential linguistic tools of the specific indigenous population that is in the process of shaping its identity and achieving its liberation. It is this context that makes the task even harder for a translator to load the inherent particularities arrested in the writings of the Dalits that has prolific colloquial usages with the same purpose of political transformation.

The language of Dalit writers is refreshing and carries a lot of elements of the Dalit narrative with tradition embedded in it, which is raw and unrefined. Edward Sapir claims that "language is a guide to social reality" (22). There are multiple meanings within a word and a paragraph in the original language but this is overlooked by the translator. The translator who is unaware of this merely translates with a single meaning. This is where the confusion starts because with the passage of time, it demolishes the powerful narrative vigour in the original and strips it of its impressive appeal to its readers.

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