Volume 20 Issue 61
Originally issued as A16



Global Journal of human-social science: A
Arts & Humanities - Psychology
Volume 20 Issue 16 Version 1.0 Year 2020
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Fifty Years of the Song of the Road: A 'Good' Translation or a 'Successful' One?

By Dr. Swagata Bhattacharya
Jadavpur University

Introduction- What is a translation – a product or a process? For us, who are in the field of academics and who try to engage often with the activity called translation, it is a process. But for the reader, it is a product and products can either be good or bad. Yet, when we were taught Translation Studies as part of our curriculum at the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, we were told that there is nothing called a 'good' translation or a 'bad' translation, translations can only be either successful or unsuccessful.

Translations have a sociology of their own, more so in case of Indian texts being translated into English and/or other foreign languages. One may be reminded of Andre Lefevere's 'Introduction' to *Translation/History/Culture: A Source Book* which says, "translations are made by people who do not need them for people who cannot read the originals." It complies with the age-old Italian concept of posing the *traduttore* (translator) as a *traditore* (traitor). The imposition of one language and culture considered to be 'superior' on an 'inferior' one is an old colonial practice. How do we, then, determine the 'success' of a translation? One sure-shot way of determining lies in the reception and survival of the text.

GJHSS-A Classification: FOR Code: 190499



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



© 2020. Dr. Swagata Bhattacharya. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Fifty Years of the Song of the Road: A 'Good' Translation or a 'Successful' One?

Dr. Swagata Bhattacharya

I. Introduction

What is a translation – a product or a process? For us, who are in the field of academics and who try to engage often with the activity called translation, it is a process. But for the reader, it is a product and products can either be good or bad. Yet, when we were taught Translation Studies as part of our curriculum at the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, we were told that there is nothing called a 'good' translation or a 'bad' translation, translations can only be either successful or unsuccessful.

Translations have a sociology of their own, more so in case of Indian texts being translated into English and/or other foreign languages. One may be reminded of Andre Lefevere's 'Introduction' to *Translation/History/Culture: A Source Book* which says, "translations are made by people who do not need them for people who cannot read the originals." It complies with the age-old Italian concept of posing the *traduttore* (translator) as a *traditore* (traitor). The imposition of one language and culture considered to be 'superior' on an 'inferior' one is an old colonial practice. How do we, then, determine the 'success' of a translation? One sure-shot way of determining lies in the reception and survival of the text. If a translated text survives for long, it is bound to be considered successful.

The year 2018 marked the fiftieth year of the publication of *Pather Panchali- The Song of the Road* (1968), the English translation of Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's Bengali novel of the same name *Pather Panchali*, first published in 1929. Till date it is the best known and widely circulated English translation of the novel though another version was published in 1976 translated by Kshitish Roy and Margaret Chatterjee. Survival of a text for fifty long years is indeed an achievement in itself. It is a great marker of the success of the book. As academic practitioners we know that the survival of a work depends to a great extent on its reception. If we are to answer the question how well was this English translation of *Pather Panchali* received, or, how did Clarke-Mukherjee's translation manage to remain the best translation of the Bengali novel, we have to ask first—to whom did the English text cater and why? These questions shall serve as the entry-point as I delve deeper into the discussion of the text and analyse what actually is meant by a 'good' or a 'successful' translation.

Author: Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata-700032, India.
e-mail: swagatarchithi@gmail.com

II. The Task of Translation

In the words of Alexander Fraser Tytler, a 'good' translation is that-

> In which the merit of the original work is completely transfused into another language, as to be as distinctly apprehended, and asstrongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work. (Lefevere 1992: 128)

Paul St.-Pierre feels-

> The very purpose of translation –its 'carrying across' texts between cultures-raises the question of the extent to which communication is possible from one culture to another and of what is or can be communicated...translation remains difficult, since the negotiation of cultural, temporal and linguistic differences--...always takes place in a space which is never neutral. (1997: 186)

This remark might bring to our minds the extreme example of Edward Fitzgerald, translator of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, who had written to his friend Reverene Cowell in 1851, "It is an amusement for me to take what Liberties I like with these Persians, who (as I think) are not Poets enough..." (Lefevere 4)

A 'good' translation is one which aims for a perfect balance of fidelity to the source language text and readability in the target language. That is to say a 'good' translation is one which is able to convey the meaning of the original text in the target language and that too in the current usage. As Perrot d'Ablancourt has stated-

> I do not always stick to the author's words, nor even to his thoughts. I keep the effect he wanted to produce in mind, and then I arrange the material after the fashion of ourtime...ambassadors usually dress in the fashion of the country they are sent to, for fear of appearing ridiculous in the eyes of the people they try to please. (Lefevere 6)

Translation always sets a goal for itself. Its literal meaning contains this goal. To translate is to carry forward or to carry across-to whom is the big question.

© 2020 Global Journals

The intended readership, the target audience of a translated text is the ultimate yardstick to judge how 'good' a translation is. On the other hand it must not be forgotten that "translations are made by people who do not need them for people who cannot read the originals." (Lefevere 1) In the 'Introduction' to *Translation/History/Culture* the two basic questions are asked- "Who makes the text in one's own culture 'represent' the text in the foreign culture?" and "How do members of the receptor culture know that the imported text is well represented?" (1992: 1)

III. Who Represents Whom and How

These questions shall help us in analysing the English translation of Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's Bengali classic *Pather Panchali* by T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji. The translated text is a part of the 'UNESCO Collection of Representative Works—Indian Series'. The English copyright is held by UNESCO and the Copyright page shows, 'This Book has been accepted in the Indian Series of the Translations Collection of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'. This probably answers the second question-how do members of the receptor culture know that the imported text is well represented-since it is a part of UNESCO project, it is bound to be "well represented". But the first point which comes to our minds whenever we discuss Clark-Mukherji's text is that it is an incomplete translation of the original. Hence some critics have even considered the text as not a translation but an abridged version of the original. However, while K. Roy and Margaret Chatterjee's 1976 translation was officially declared as an abridged version, nowhere is it mentioned that Clark-Mukherji's translation was abridgement too. This is because Clark-Mukherji's intention was clearly not abridgement. Rather they have their own explanation for leaving out the third part of the novel 'Akrur Sambad'. Clark says,

> The climax surely is reached when Opu and his parents leave Nishchindipur; and what follows, if the readers go on with it, is something of an anticlimax. ..As the train draws away from the station the last chords of symphony are struck, and the rest should be silence. (Clark-Mukherji 1968: 15)

Here the word "should be" is noteworthy. It brings back the question who represents the text of one culture into the other? Again the answer is probably the fact that T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji were both teachers of Bengali at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. Hence M.G. McNay's comment about the translated text was something like this, "Well, the translators are scholars and must know what they are about..." (Bandyopadhyay 1972: 22) While Harish Trivedi sees this as suppression representing "the aesthetic subjugation of an Indian sense of valediction by a Western sense of ending" (47), Sujit Mukherjee points out the real reason-

> The film must have impressed Clark/Mukherji so much that they had to concoct a justification for leaving out the third part of the original work. Also, thereby they fulfilled what a British publisher expected would go down best with his readers (Mukherjee 1994: 97-8)

The fact remains that the Clark-Mukherji text was published mainly for those western audiences who have seen and probably admired the cinematic version of *Pather Panchali* made by Satyajit Ray in 1955 (in Bengali). It was considered to be Ray's masterpiece, a movie that shot him instantly to international limelight. Hence the English translation ends where Ray's film ends, here has been no attempt to venture further since the audience has not seen anything further in the movie and might not be familiar with. This is a queer instance of faithfulness not to the original text but to its cinematic version. One might safely conjecture that it was so because of the film's world-wide acclaim and admiration especially from the Western audience. From the question of the power of the language, the debate here shifts to the power of the medium because cinema has by then already become a more powerful medium than literary text.

IV. Fidelity vs Readability

The truncated English text, however, shows an attempt to maintain fidelity and balance it with readability for the Western reader. In spite of his bitter criticism about the incompleteness of the text, Sujit Mukherjee has this to say about Clark-Mukherji', "Except for minor aberrations, they have kept close to the original and yet achieved readability." (91) But the problem starts with the title itself. Clark confesses, "The title is untranslatable" (1968: 13) 'Panchali' is a very culture-specific word and it has no English equivalent. Clark-Mukherji has retained the title 'Pather Panchali' probably because Satyajit Ray had so advised and used 'Song of the Road' as a subtitle. Clark has stated," ...it is the nearest one can get by way of translation; but were I free...to choose...I should prefer 'Bends in the Road',...It retains the symbolism." (13) The same problem has been faced by the translators while translating the names of the first two chapters (the third has been left out)—'Ballali-Baalai' (The System of Multiple Marriages) and "Aam Aatir Bhepu' (Flute from Mango Stem) respectively. In the case of the first chapter there is no attempt to translate the title word for word or even sense for sense. Ballal Sen who ruled Bengal in the 12th century had supposedly introduced the 'Kulin' system which placed the Brahmins at the top of the social hierarchy in terms of prestige. They were also entitled to marry as many women as they wanted. Since it is extremely difficult to make foreign readers (who are obviously unfamiliar to such a practice) understand the

© 2020 Global Journals

system of multiple marriages in the Kulin communities of Bengal which continued as late as in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, the translators have opted instead for the subject matter of the first chapter—Indir Thakuran, a 'Kulin' widow whose husband had never cared for her even when he was alive and for whose death she had to observe all the austerities prescribed by the society for widows. Thus Chapter One is titled 'The Old Aunt'. The second chapter is called 'Children Make Their Own Toys' which goes with the sense of the chapter and is again, not a literal translation of 'Aam Aatir Bhepu'.

Since the text is meant for readers unfamiliar with the source language culture, what happens is that the translated text often needs to add extra sentences or phrases to convey the meaning properly. For example, the second paragraph of the first chapter of the Bengali text begins with a simple sentence-"*Purva din chhilo ekadasi"* (It was *ekadasi* yesterday) [Bandyopadhyay 1][1] The translation is "It was the day after her fast—this was the fast all widows are required to observe on the eleventh day of each fortnight" (Clark-Mukherji 23) or, "*Shona jay, purvadesiya ek namjada kuliner sange Indir Thakruner vivaha hoiyachhilo*" (3) has to be translated as "There is a story that Indir Thakrun had been married to a Kulin Brahmin. Kulins had been notorious for multiple marriages and Indir's husband who apparently had many wives..." (25) What is noteworthy here is that in an effort to explain 'Kulin' (upper-caste as well as upper-class), the word 'Purvadesiya' (Originally from East Bengal) gets deleted in the translation since it is of not much importance to the Western reader.

There are also ample illustrations of splitting one sentence of the original text into several in the target language. For example, "*Nishchindipur graamer ekebare uttarprante Harihar Ray-er kshudra kothabari*" (1) becomes "Horihor Roy was a Brahmin. He lived in a small brick-built house in the village of Nishchindipur. It was the last house at the extreme northern end of the village." (23) or "*Satya-i se bhule nai*"(274) is split into "It was true. He had not forgotten, and he did not forget." (303) It is in this way that the translation has been able to retain fidelity while being readable in English.

V. Domesticating v.s Foreignising

There are attempts at domesticating Bengali months 'Baisakh' and 'Kartik', for example, into 'May' and 'November', the Bengali year '1240' into Roman '1833' and the Bengali measure of weight '*mann'* into English 'pound'. Thus "*ek mann chaal*" becomes "eighty-ninety pounds of rice". But the element of foreignising is also present with the retention of culture-specific words such as 'kokil' (cuckoo), 'bokul' (a flower), 'luchi' (dough of flour fried in *ghee* or oil which used to be a Bengali delicacy), 'aalta' (the red liquid with which married Bengali women used to adorn their feet), 'jatra' (open-air theatrical performance, a renowned folk-form of Bengal) and 'neem' (a kind of tree) for example. The names of trees and fruits typical of the Bengal soil such as 'sajne', 'sonamukhi', 'sindurkouto', 'nata phal', etc have mostly been kept untranslated while '*nilkantha pakhi*' becomes 'blue-throated jay' and '*harichacha*', 'magpie'. Certain Bengali culture-specific words such as 'chandi-mandap', 'poush-parvan', 'basar', 'pithe', 'kansar jaambaati', have been rendered into their closest English meanings. 'Chorok Pujo' is retained while 'Swing Festival' and 'Chariot Festival' replace 'phool dol' and 'ratha' respectively, overlooking their religious connotation.

The village folklores have been attempted to translate literally- "O Lolita and Champo, I've a song to sing-o/Radha's thief wore his hair in a ring-o" (29) or "Oh, holy pond; oh, holy flower!/I worship you 'neath the noon-day sky/A maiden's purity is my dower;/My brother lives and blest am I" (92) The word 'phulot' (181) is used along with the explanation that "that was the nearest he could get to 'flute' to convey the proper meaning of '*phulot banshi*". But the dialect of the old Indir Thakrun, different from that of the rest of the adults, as well as sentences spoken by baby Durga, also different from adults, could not be captured in the translation. Besides, as readers we feel it would have been better to retain 'Ma' instead of using 'Mummy' which is perhaps too foreignised for Bengali village people.

The translated text has the very useful Index at the end which lists al the 'foreign' words in the English alphabetical order, explaining elaborately their meanings and even trying to help the reader by providing the closest English/Latin word possible. For example, 'chatim' is explained as "name of a tree, also known as *saptaparna* (seven-leaved), Alstonia scholaris. The *chatim* tree referred to here is that which grows on the village cremation ground, and is therefore associated with death." (309) This was absolutely necessary because of their policy of retention of culture-specific words which had lend the translation an air of familiarity for Bengalis. Alternatively, for the rest the Index was indispensable. This way, Clark-Mukherji's translation aimed to satisfy both the native and the foreign reader because translation is no longer required only by those who "cannot read the original". Though it has already been argued that this translation had intended to reach out mainly to foreign readers, the need for a market of translations in its native place must have been foreseen by the translators. The book had had quite a good fortune in India and is still regarded as one of the pioneer works in the field of translation of Bengali

[1] In the 'Introduction' to their text, Clark and Mukherji have acknowledged Satyajit Ray who "lent his advice in the difficult problem of providing a title and a subtitle for the translated work" (p 19)

© 2020 Global Journals

classics. It has often been criticized but could never be altogether neglected!

VI. Conclusion

In the Introduction to *Pather Panchali* Clark had stated "Whatever therefore has been deemed necessary to bridge the divide between Bengali and English culture has been written into the text." (19) But has the divide really been bridged? Clark-Mukherji's *Pather Panchali* has been a success with its intended readership. This can lead only to a conclusion that there cannot be a universally accepted definition of a 'good' translation. It can only be a successful or an unsuccessful one. If the targeted readers are satisfied, the translation can be termed successful and judging by that standard, Clark-Mukherji's *Pather Panchali* was and has remained a success.

Works Cited

1. Bandyopadhyay, Bibhutibhusan. *Pather Panchali*. Mitra Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd: Kolkata, 1972.
2. Clark, T.W. & Taraada Mukherji. *Pather Panchali--Song of the Road.* George Allen & Unwin Ltd: London, 1968.
3. Lefevere, André ed. *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook*. Routledge: London, 1992.
4. Mukherjee, Sujit. *Translation as Discovery*. Orient Longman Ltd: Hyderabad, 1994.
5. Singh, Avadhesh Kumar. *Translation: Its Theory and Practice*. Creative Books: New Delhi, 1996.

© 2020 Global Journals