Literary Translation before, in and beyond Polysystem Theory

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Abstract

Early theoretical formulations in the realm of translation fanatically zeroed in on the concepts of pure and total(itarian) equivalence, a weird idea of interlingual synonymy and the question of authenticity as undergirding the act of translation. While such a flawed conceptualization is rooted in the xenophobia undergirding the Western civilization, in colonial contexts it was powerfully used as a sure-shot strategy to fashion hegemonic version of the colonized. Such an essentialist and prescriptive model of translation was interrogated around mid-1970s by an alternative paradigm that sought to describe the norms and constraints governing the production and reception of translations in particular context. Polysystem theory, as it was called, imparted a new lease of life to the discipline and examined the power and functions of literary translation in

culture industry. The present paper critically analyses the tenets of polysystem theory and attempts to envision its possible trajectory as a theoretical framework in twenty-first century.

Key words: Translation theory, equivalence, polysystem, translation norms, cultural studies

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"Poetry is what gets lost in translation."

-Robert Frost

"The live dog is better than the dead lion."

-E. Fitzgerald

Axioms like the ones cited above have not only frozen the theoretical explorations in the process of translation but also hijacked translation theory as a stronghold of western, mimetic and biblical assumptions for centuries on end until the late seventies of the twentieth century when Translation Studies came into its disciplinary own. Unfortunately, what these apparently innocuous, epigrammatic expressions have done is to set up a hierarchical order in which not only the entity of translation but also civilizations were positioned against a scale of superiority and creativity. Frostean contention relegated translation for long to a status of secondary and derivative activity, coming well behind other more valued forms of cultural practice, thanks to the centrality of original vs. copy binary to the Western, Platonic-Christian metaphysics. As Theo Hermansputs it, "If the literary artist is viewed as a uniquely gifted creative genius endowed with profound insight and a mastery of his native language, the work he produces will naturally come to be regarded as exalted, untouchable, inimitable, hallowed" (7). It may be

instructive to note thatthe asymmetrical statuses accorded to the original and translation in West are largely due to the emergence of printing which bred the idea of an author as the sovereign 'owner' of his text which can be claimed by a translator only with a self-deprecating sense of personal ineptitude and inferiority. (Bassnett and Trivedi 2) Further, G. N. Devy alludes to the Christian myth of fall, exile and wandering and avers that in western metaphysics translation is a "perpetual exile", a fall from the origin. Perhaps western literary traditions evolving mostly from monolingual and monocultural conditions have always been apprehensive of the intrusion of 'other', a foreign culture entering their lives, through translation. The bloody history of Bible translations into different world languages bears a testimony to the western obsession with the question of authenticity as undergirding the act of translation.

On the other hand, in what constitutes a brazen act of plagiarism (not even a translation), Fitzgerald's use of Biblical metaphor has unmistakable orientalist implications reflected especially in the frame of mind with which he approached the Persian poetry as a translator. His denigration of Persian poetry and poets who were "not poets enough" and the concomitant justification of immense liberty he took with them while rewriting them into English will certainly live in infamy. However, what is not to be missed here is the fact that Fitzgerald used translation as an alibi to underscore the essentially skewed binary of western and eastern civilizations. Tejaswini Niranjana puts this squarely when she says, "By employing certain modes of representing the other - which it thereby also brings into being - translation reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonized, helping them acquire the status of what Edward Said calls representations or objects without history" (3). In other words, the imperial project of colonial expansion unleashed the politics of 'representation', by which Europe, with its logocentric underpinnings, assumed the status of the Original regulating the identities of its inferior colonies

which were obliged to be 'translated' in tandem with Eurocentric discourse. In fact, extensive employment of the tool of translation helped the European colonizers to represent their colonial 'other' within a typical frame of inferiority and legitimize the peremptory assignment of imperial givens to the allegedly uncultured, uncivilized and uncouth colonies and the colonized subjects. It should not, then, surprise one that Western theoretical perspectives on translation are woefully fixated on the glorification of the original and the valorization of notions of transparency, equivalence and fluency as positive attributes of translation. In obsequious deference to such essentialist, simplistic and politically fraught theoretical conceptualization of translation, the activity of translation in East as much as in West, despite its exponential proliferation, has continued to be invisible and on that account undervalued.

Needless to say that these approaches are woefully reductionist and purblind to the finer points and subtler issues involved in the extremely complex and reticular act that translation professes to be. In the middle of such stultifying and suffocating academic-literary climate, poststructuralist discourse wafted inlike a current of fresh air. Radical and avant-garde perspectives like deconstruction and intertextuality have remarkably problematized the very conceptions of originality and superiority, both of writer and his work, by foregrounding notions of textual openness, heterogeneity and intrinsically derivative nature of all texts, irrespective of the original or the translation. Forwarding a counterargument to the corpus approach outlined in some detail above, the non-essentialist approach to translation disclaims the idea of literature as a self-governing, autonomous category and views it as functioning in a more expansive socio-cultural frame, as influencing and being influenced by multifarious socio-politico-economic "signifying practices" manoeuvring within that framework. This position is in line with semiotician Julia Kriesteva's formulation of intertextuality which looks upon any signifying

system as already consisting of other modes of cultural signification (1). Thus, the argument that a text is a locus of not only other literary texts but also other modes of signification like myths, fashion, indigenous medicinal systems, food, metaphysical structures, literary genres and devices and other symbolic structures contends that all writing is derivative and thus a form of rewriting.

The discipline of Translation Studies experienced a much-needed paradigm shift around mid-1970s following the publication of *Papers in Historical Poetics* by Even-Zohar, a scholar from Tel Aviv who brought about a sea-change in the way literary translation was perceived and researched and laid the much-needed ground for the future theorists like Gideon Toury and Andre Lefevere. Polysystem theorists, as they were called, viewed literature as a complex and dynamic system and further advocated an approach to literary translation which is descriptive, target-orientedand systematic. They drew the problematic of translation away from the obsessive idea of finding equivalents to a systematic concern with the critical examination of "…the norms and constraints that govern the production and reception of translations…in the place and role of translations both within a given literature and in the interaction between literatures." (Hermans 10-11) The polysystem theorists altered the premises of investigationby describing the status, function and reception of a translated text in the target culture as well as the power of culture on the decisions that a translator makes than in explicating the process of translation. Even-Zohar defined polysystem as "a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent" (40). Additionally, he believed that the various subsystems and subdivisions within a particular polysystem vie with each other for a dominant position. Thus a literary polysystem comprises not only literary texts but writers, readers, publishers, editors, professors, patrons, governments, agents, advertising agencies, literary

festivals, social networking websites etc. Secondly, in a literary polysystem of a particular era, there is a constant friction between the *centre* and *periphery* represented by their respective literary forms, practices, poetics and tactics.The degree of conflict between "high" genres like epic, lyric and novel and the "low" ones like children's literature, popular fiction and translations unfolds in terms of the strategic role the low genre plays in either strengthening or subverting the central /mainstream component of polysystem. What imparts Evan-Zohar's formulation a radical edge is the recognition of these low, peripheral forms as the agents of literary evolution in a particular polysystem. Zohar makes a call to discern a specific pattern and relation amongst all the seemingly isolated and random translations available in a literary polysystem and avers that majority of this corpus of translations would be texts that directly or indirectly corroborate or espouse the dominant poetics of their times. This is so because, he explains, a low genre like translation would not be allowed within a system to fall too far out of step with what is considered acceptable and literary in a particular polysystem. However, he warns against perceiving translation's inferior position as perennial condition and identifies specific contexts in which translation occupies more and more central position in literary system. Despite certain obvious flaws, the non-prescriptive approach has yielded several extremely important insights into the way translations come into being. Polysystem, rather than being a fool proof, watertight theory, has served a point of departure to scholars like Andre Lefevere and Gideon Toury and enabled them to carry it further in a more systematic and pragmatic manner. Here Toury's notion of translation norms and Lefevere's notion of ideology and patronage are discussed in some detail.

In Search of a Theory of Translation, a collection of Gideon Toury's papers articulate his trail-blazing theory called Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) according to which"translations

are facts of one system only: the target system" (19) Two major breakthroughs that DTS accomplished relate to (1) an insistence on understanding the historicity of translated texts i.e. to examine how the historical conditions operating in the target culture impinge upon the translation (2) expanding the scope of translation research by scrutinizing the critical writing on translation like prefaces, reviews and reflective essays etc. If anything, DTS has helped narrow down theoreticalinvestigation to those concrete factors which unmistakably determine the nature and nuances of decisions made by a translator operating in a specific socio-cultural matrix. In his seminal book *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti surveys such evaluative writings on translation in North American and European contexts and concludes that they are obsessed with the norms of transparency and fluency. He illustrates his point by citing frequently-used deprecatory qualifications like *translationese* which tendentiously play down the status of a translated text that militate against these norms. He concludes that such criticism of translation practice in the West smacks of hegemony and ethnocentricism. Against the backdrop of these theoretical assumptions, Toury deploys his avant-garde concept of *norms* that designate the regularities of the translation behaviour in a given socio-cultural context. In order to be accepted and acclaimed as translators in a particular literary system, the translator has to religiously acquire a set of translatorial norms which unfold in terms of (1) *initial norms* which dictates the choice of norms specific to source text/culture or target text/ culture (2) *preliminary* norms which determine the choice of text / author/ genre to be or not to be translated (3) *Operational norms* which regulate decision making process while translation is in operation with regard to the distribution of textual material, segmentation, omission etc.

Just like Toury, Andre Lefevere foregrounds a radical formulation which posits that the quest for *the* meaning of / in a text is overambitious at best and futile at worst because

meaning(s) is derived under a set of strict controls and definite regulations which, more often than not, seek to adapt a work of art to a specific ideology or to a certain poetics or to both. He described ideology as "the conceptual grid that consists of opinion and attitudes deemed acceptable in a certain society at a certain time and through which readers and translators approach text" (qtd. from Hermans 127). It is deeply entangled with power and politics and representative of the dominant idealistic concept of society and culture. Lefevere extends this problematization of interpretation of literary work to all those activities which are directly or indirectly involved in generating or imparting meanings like criticism, translation, anthologization, literary historiography etc. and covers them under an umbrella term 'refractions'. Lefevere posited that primary texts do not stand in isolation but are always surrounded by different processing modes and mechanisms through which they are rewritten. The exercise of rewriting presupposes a process of interpretation which in turn exposes the ideological underbelly of all refractive undertakings. Refractions"are made to influence the way in which readers read a text; as such they are powerful instruments in ensuring the 'right' reading of works of literature and in perpetuating 'right readings'" (Lefevere 90). In other words, refractions rewrite a text to validate, valorize or redefine the value structures of a canon.The strategy of selection and omission that a translator chalks out is largely governed by, what Lefevere calls, a "control factor" which operates from within and outside the literary system of the target language. The dominant poetics of target literary system constitutes the inside factor "which can be said to consist of two components: one is an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, symbols; the other a concept of what the role of literature is, or should be, in the society at large" (Lefevere 16). As stringent as the inside regulatory mechanism is the outside factor of *patronage* represented by royal court,

political/religious institutions and publishers with or without monopoly over the book/magazine publishing trade. These apparently innocuous factors exert enormous political influence over the refractors to undertake refractions in such a manner that they fit perfectly into poetological and ideological frames of the receptor language and society respectively.

The insidious power of these inner-outer control factors upon the strategy of translation is nowhere felt so perceptibly and significantly as in the Third World. Philip Altabach contextualizes the problematic surrounding the publication of Third World literature by examining the uneven relationship between Third world nations and industrialized countries who dominate the international intellectual system through their control of the means of knowledge production. He draws on the bleak socio-economics of book publishing in developing countries to aver that issues of economic viability, required technology, low literacy rates, low per capita purchasing power, distribution bottlenecks and market size make it incumbent upon the Third world nations to depend hopelessly upon the developed nations for knowledge production and consumption. Not only do the subsidiaries of British and French publishers dictate terms about who and how to publish/translate, a whole new breed of metropolitan, neo-colonial centers of power pose a considerable psychological barrier to valorization of native cultures and literary tradition through translation. In the post-global marketplace, publishing budgets of the even neoliberal native publishers are governed by authors, famous and canonical, by Western standards, as well as by the power of the absent 'center'. This center is largely constituted by university hierarchy (the god-professor), …the system of recruitment of staff (appointing people, English, American or Australian, whose primary teaching interests are expected to lie in English literature); and by the use of tenure to enforce anglocentric stability and continuity" (Docker 1). Docker's definition of the literary "transcendental signified" acutely overlaps with Lefevere's

identification of the control mechanism within the literary system represented by critics, reviewers, teachers of literature.

A closer scrutiny of the foregoing analysis would reveal that Translation Studies as a discipline has accomplished a quantum leap in graduating from the periphery of literary polysystem to acquisition of center-stage in the domain of critical inquiry. The discipline has outgrown its limited range of concerns and has engaged critically with history, culture, ideology and issues of identity as undergirding the process of translation. In the process, the phenomenon of translation has struck interdisciplinary affiliations with postcolonial studies, gender studies, dalit literature and most importantly with cultural studies. There is a great imbrication of concerns between TS and Cultural Studies especially in their inclination towards negotiating sociology, history and ethnography and uncovering the political dynamics of culture, its historical foundations, conflicts and defining traits. As both are "interested in questions of power relations and textual production" (135), Susan Bassnett has envisioned "The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies" and proposed a collaborative "investigation of the way in which different cultures construct their images of writers and texts, a tracking of the ways in which texts become cultural capital across cultural boundaries and an exploration of the politics of translation" (Trivedi 198).

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