

TRANSLATING THE VOICE OF THE OTHER IN PERFORMANCE

Mrs. Anitha Merin Vincent
Assistant Professor
Department of English – Evening
Justice Basheer Ahmed Sayeed College for Women
Teynampet, Chennai 18.

Abstract: *This paper looks at how translation, as an act of communication, decodes and encodes the ‘invariant core’ – the consciousness of the other. Nadugadhika is a text rooted in the culture of the tribals of Wayanad, one of the districts in the Malabar region of Kerala. By a close analysis of K. J. Baby’s Nadugadhika in original and translation by Shirly M. Joseph, the paper looks at translation of performance texts. This paper also focuses on the issues involved in decoding the text of a marginalized culture to a dominant culture: issues related to the interpretation of material and social culture, including law, economics, history, values and world view. Nadugadhika may be viewed as an act of resistance. The text creates a world composed of multitude of codes, discourses and languages. The question is whether a reader of the translated text could enter the text’s linguistic zone? By analyzing the various nuances of translating performance, we see how the translation emphasizes the importance of reinscribing the marginalized consciousness into historical discourses.*

Keywords: *Translation, Theatre, History, Language, Tribals of Wayanad, Cultural Untranslatability*

I. INTRODUCTION

Nadugadhika tells the story of resistance by tribal groups against the dominance of colonial masters and feudal lords. The play empathizes with the Adivasis who have lost their land and identities when the ‘civilized’ world encroached upon their territory. The focus of the study is to look at how the translation of a performance text decodes and encodes the ‘invariant core’ – the consciousness of the other.

Theatre, in *Nadugadhika*, is a political space to showcase anger and resistance. For Tejaswini Niranjana, resistance is a deliberate and interventionist act of translating history (Niranjana 6). The playwright translates the history which was until then not heard or recorded and thereby by giving an expression for it he deconstructs the history. *Nadugadhika*, a ritual of the Adiyas, is conducted to exorcise all the spirits causing diseases in the land. All the evil spirits of the land is brought to one place and is exorcised (Baby 34). In its dramatic form it demonstrates the need for tribal social/cultural lives to be purged of all kinds of evil spirits that has affected them. The act of writing the text could be seen as a complex act of translating the sensibilities of the tribal population. The translation of texts plays a vital role in creating a historical awareness as well as historical sense through this interlinguistic process. The inference of historical sense will help the historical recovery of the tribals through the mode of translation.

To understand the play as an episode rewritten from the history, it is important to understand the political and social situation and the time that lead to the production of *Nadugadhika*. When the proletariat ideas started being reflected in art, like Hapman who worked among the proletariat to understand their problems and talk on their behalf, K. J. Baby spoke for the *adiyas* and *paniyas* of the hills of Wayanad. Malayalam theatre had already witnessed powerful performances such as *Ningalenne Communist Aakki* and *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arngatheyykku*, which carried the spirit of revolution and the call for change. Though *Nadugadhika* shares the same spirit of rebellion it is different from the rest because never before in the history of the Malayalam theatre had the life of tribals become subject of the theatre.

Nadugadhika was enacted by a troop of actors which included both the tribals and the others. It was not only enacted among the tribals, with the purpose of reawakening in them the urge for freedom, but also among the elites of the society to let them witness their own act of oppression (Baby, ix). In *Nadugadhika* we see multiple levels of domination. The tribals of Wayanad were dominated by the landlords, the immigrants and every faction that came into power. Even today their lives remain unchanged. Therefore the political significance of the play increases. The interplay of power relations within the text makes the job of the translator all the more challenging. The power relations don’t limit to the superiority of the original text and the inferiority of the translated text. It operates in the level of the power relations between the characters, the language within the text and that of the source language and the target language. *Nadugadhika* stands for certain ideologies and the playwright has encrypted this in the linguistic, nonverbal and cultural aspects of the text. It is the responsibility of the translator to empower the translation by decoding and encoding the core of the original effectively in the translation.

II. NADUGADHIKA IN TRANSLATION:

As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi say, translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum. It is an ongoing process of intercultural transfer (Susan Bassnett and Trivedi 2). Translation must be understood as a translingual act of transcoding cultural material (Howland 45). A greater emphasis is to be given on the cultural aspects of translation on the contexts within which translation occurs. As an omniscient reader the translator must know not only the existence of the source text in its tradition and cultural milieu, but also the knowledge of language and cultural significance of the source text is necessary. In the kind of freedom a translator takes, there are chances of ‘aberration’ and ‘misrepresentation’ of the source text. Literature from the margin deals with socio-cultural liberation and a translator needs to be aware of this. As Bassnett says “the role of the translator is to occupy the luminal space between

cultures and to facilitate some sort of contact between theatre conventions”(106). The translator becomes a cultural mediator, who traverses the resonance zone between cultures.

2.1 Cultural Marking

‘Cultural marking’ is a practice of referring to culturally specific items, ideas or concepts within a text to identify that text as inhabiting a particular culture. According to this definition *Nadugadhika* is a culturally marked text rooted in the sign system of the Adivasis of Wayanad. It talks about the lifestyle, ceremonies, rituals and rites that form the background of their expressions. The reader of the play is aware of the foreignness of the text at every juncture: “Yachan: I remember, *vallyyoorakkavu* where *Mali*, the goddess who kept us in leash... and at this slave market our slavedom gets renewed... for a *karikkan* a *methiyadi* and a few coins of *nippupanam*.” (Baby 55) In almost every dialogue he encounters a new concept, which cannot be understood without the help of an explanation. Without these references the text might lose its cultural specificity. However, cultural marking gives the text a sense of foreignness or otherness.

In *Nadugadhika*, both the language and the myth of the play are unfamiliar to the audience. When a traditional oral tale is told, the telling is metonymic (Foley 1987 as cited in Tymoczko). For a traditional audience each telling evokes all the previous telling of the tale that the audience has participated in. It reifies the entire tradition that the audience and the teller share. The content, form and performance patterns of any oral epic or folk lore belong to established traditions that the teller or singer inherits. When Tampuran asks the adiyas to move there huts to a new marsh leaving behind the melons and plantains they had planted, in the minds of the reader is evoked a similar situation beautifully represented by poet Changampuzha in his famous poem *Vaazhakkula* (A Stalk of Plantain). The poet narrates the story of an untouchable tenant who plants a plantain tree in his backyard. The children dream about the sweet nourishment of the fruit will offer. But the landlord claims ownership over the patch of land and snatches away the poor man’s labour. Though the play deals with the life of the adivasis of Wayanad, it brings to mind the plight of the adiyas, pulayas and parayas in Kuttanad, represented by Thakazhi in his works and that of the dalits and the other marginalized people. Valli’s cry “*paikkinto, paikkinto*”, is a refrain from a folk song. For those who share the oral tradition of the character immediately identifies the refrain to the parent song which is a lullaby. For others “*paikkinto*” is just a yell of hunger, the keynote of the slave’s half starved existence. Though the play deals with the life of the adivasis of Wayanad, it brings to mind the plight of the adiyas, pulayas and parayas in Kuttanad, represented by Thakazhi in his works and that of the dalits and the other marginalized people.

2.2 LANGUAGE AND REGISTERS

Language is rooted in culture. The language of the marginalized holds within it the history of subjugation. The translator faces a serious problem in translating the multilingual space of the play into English, where such a variety of registers is absent. Variants of the language are constantly being brought into dialogue and there is a tension rising between them, this process of reshaping each other into new formulations is very complex and dialectical. How languages and cultures can be brought together and fused together without losing their distinctive elements is the concern of the translator. The text moves towards a language of subversion and recreation that forces the readers into a productive dialogue with the multicultural and multilingual aspects of the play.

In *Nadugadhika*, there is a constant shift between the various registers. In the original text the code switches are smooth. However, the reader is definitely conscious of the process. The language shifts from the crude to the refined, from colloquial to poetic, from song to speech, from ancient to old, from unintelligible to intelligible, employing techniques of pitch, speed, pausing, intonation and so on. The language acts of the tribals shape the performance. As Maria T. Sanchez tells in her book titled *The Problems of Literary Translation: A Study of the theory and practice of translation from English to Spanish* “When a language and culture is inextricably interwoven, and are expression of a given society, the non-standard varieties of language with their social and/or regional implication, will stand for the means of expression of a much smaller and more closely knit group” as that of the tribal community in the play.

In the original text, the language of the tribals is a crude dialect of the Malayalam, the Tamburan uses a more polished form of Malayalam, occasional declarations that are made by the authorities are in official Malayalam. Tone is an important non-linguistic feature which directly communicates with the audience. The tone could also communicate the identity or the feelings of the speaker (Hardwick 57). It defines the character. Tamburan’s language is one of command. Where as in the dialogues of the adiyas and Gadhikakaran is charged with tones of sorrow, love, compassion, care. The translated text should successfully try to convey the speech intonations as they play a significant role in the characterization of the play. However, in the translated text appear various situations where the tone of concern skips to that of anger. The translator in her effort to make the language of the tribals more sophisticated and civilized transforms it. Whether such an alteration was desirable is a question?

2.3 UNTRANSLATABILITY

The difficulty or impossibility of interpreting indigenous experience for the reader is a crisis that the translator faces. Rey Chow explains this as ‘untranslatability’: “As we challenge a dominant discourse by ‘resurrecting’ the victimized voice/self of the native with our readings... we step too ... into the otherwise silent and invisible place of the native and turn ourselves into living agents/witnesses for her. This process ... neutralizes the translatability of the native’s experience and the history of that untranslatability” (Chow 37). Untranslatability occurs when it is impossible to build functionally relevant features of situation into the contextual meaning of the target language text. Untranslatability of two kinds could be seen in *Nadugadhika*, linguistic and cultural untranslatability. When the target language has no functionally relevant formal feature in its system to parallel the source language feature the translator faces linguistic untranslatability. The play is deeply rooted in the consciousness and life of the tribals. Their literature, in which songs and dance are central, is primarily oral. The lack of a written language makes the language more complicated to express in a tongue alien to their culture. When it comes to translating the folk songs the translator fails to find a system to parallel the target language. The tribal songs flow in even, melodious rhythm. The tunes of the songs have the spirit and the rhythm of energy. The

song that the characters sing while working (Baby 36), they imbibe the energy for the physical work from the tempo of the song they sing. Similarly the song of rebellion at the end of the play also carries in the original the spirit and desire for change.

Cultural untranslatability is referred to as 'extralinguistic voids'. When a situational feature functionally relevant for the source language is completely absent from the culture of the target language arises the problem of cultural untranslatability. Tribals are owners of rich culture, one that was not affected by the improvisations and adaptations of modernity. Their history goes way back to the days of Maveli. Several aspects of their lives are difficult to be explained in the target language. The act of conducting *gadhika* is to ward off all kinds of evils that have come upon the tribal lives. The play is built upon the act of *gadhika*. Unfortunately the translator does not explain the relevance of this ceremony in the course of the text. Similarly, certain other concepts such as *nippupanam*, *okkal*, *keeyulokaare* difficult to be conveyed in target language.

Certain words represent certain concepts. Tampuran is one of the characters of the play. The meaning of the name Tampuran justifies his role. Tampuran means not just the lord and the master but it is a word that is equivalent to God. He is the one who has control over the lives of the slaves. Yachan becomes a beggar or a *Yachakan*. The name itself defines the situation in which the person is. Similarly, punning and humour are also lost in translation.

2.4 SEMIOTICS

Language is only one part of the textual complex. The semiotic complexity of playing on verbal and non verbal signs is significant in any work of art. Translator's choices have an important role in recreating effectively those sign systems. *Nadugadhika* provides a complex space where the signs that have to be translated are more significant since they arise from a culture whose richness remains unknown to the outside world. Therefore the translator will have to first integrate and assimilate the alien system and encode it into the target language in a way that he does not lose the signification.

Most often the verbal element is translated while other codes remain unchanged. The most profound fact of performance is that it involves the presence an utterance of live bodies is space shared by the audience. Play is not simply a literary text, written to be read, but a text that reaches the audience by the way of actors' bodies says Pavis in his book *Theatre and crossroads of culture* (136). Even when a play is read as a literary text, the translator has a larger responsibility of getting the readers know the performative aspects of the play. The stage directions help him to build the context. In the original text references to the costumes of the characters are made in the stage directions. Tampuran wears a dhoti and uses another one to cover the upper part of his body. On his forehead and body is the cast marks and he carries a sword in his hands which symbolizes power. These references are very significant because they are the non linguistic elements of the play which are crucial for the understanding of the larger context of the play.

Comic effect the language evokes also depends on the recognition of a cultural element, a public character, a place or an event. The point is missed if the audience do not share the information presupposed or implied. In the play Tampuran claims himself as the educated and civilized one but at the same time his language is flawed and so is his social awareness. Many instances of subtle comedy arise out of this ignorance of Tampuran. Tampuran calls Gandhi *kandi*, communist becomes *communis*, Quit India becomes *kittindy*. For the learned reader these instances offer a hearty laugh.

The reading process allows reflection on the action whereas the performance has to make the point right away and has no second chances. Performance texts are not the texts that are read privately read by individual readers but are rather uttered by bodies that interact with the text, performing it before other bodies (Lindsay 3). A theatre text is read differently. It is only in performance the full potential of the text is realized. The linguistic system is only one of the components in a set of interrelated linguistic systems that comprise theatre. However, it is impossible to separate the text from performance. Words interact with speech, bodies, movement, lighting and space and slight change in any one of these significantly shift the making of the meaning. The task of the translator will be to determine what those structures and to translate them to the target language. In theatre language refers to the visual and kinetic languages. Songs, dance, gesture, miming etc are elements of the resistance theatre. Songs and the musical instruments, *cheeni* and *thudi* provide them a space for expressing themselves.

2.5 GESTURES

In *Nadigadhika*, gestures become very important since other than the songs, the voice of the tribals is made heard through gestures. It is the direct, spontaneous and silent language of the body in action (Lecoq 34). Gesture helps the reader to familiarize with the culture of the source text because gestures are culture specific. They reveal the complex power relations inherent in the society. For instance, in the play the tribals stand with bowed head in front of the master. Though it is translated as bowed head' *aacharamcheythu nilkkuka* shows a higher level of submissiveness, respect and fear.

When a performance text is translated as a literary text, several improvisations have to be made to make the reader feel that the text is meant for performance. The translator becomes true to his role only when he/she succeeds in conveying the message of the original text. The arrival of the British and the impact of colonization on the lives of the tribals is an important part of the play since the goal of the playwright is to retell the history. Unfortunately the English translation of the text omits a significant part where the Tampuran and the adiyas witness the entry of the British. In his excitement Tampuran makes a fool of himself. The scene acts as a comic relief as it relieves the stress that was building up. As a technique too that scene was thus important.

III. CONCLUSION

Playwright K.J. Baby in his text has captured the world of tribals in which the tampuran, the immigrants, the British coexist. However, the translator has focused only on tribals, highlighting the aspects of the lives of the tribals, which made her omit several significant passages. Since the translator has not provided a preface to her work the purpose of her translation is unknown. If the text was written for print than for stage, these omissions leave the text with significant gaps. However, the elaborate introduction and notes provided will help the readers in understanding the codes of the source culture.

Changing concepts of performance determines the performability of the text. The purpose or the cause to which the play stands for becomes very significant here. It determines the mode of expression in theatre. *Nadugadhika* since it handles the theme of resistance, can not be enacted in a closed space like Shakespeare or Ibsen. Instead as in the case of the African protest theater it should be performed under the vast night sky, lit by torch lights, in the streets among the people. For, the mode of expression conveys the message of the play. Therefore it is the responsibility of the director as well as the performer to make the written text performable, that it will convey the ideology it stands for.

As a complex act of communication, the translated text enables economic, strategic, cultural, literary, ideological exchanges throughout the world. In *Nadugadhika* one sees how the translator attempts to decode the ideologies and culture of the adivasis of the hills of Wayanad to encode it into English, thereby providing the text a wider readership. Thus, by analyzing the various nuances of translating performance we see how the translation emphasizes the importance of reinscribing the marginalized consciousness into historical discourses.

IV. REFERENCES

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