

Literary Translation: Choices and Predilections

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Literary Translation is an activity not to be considered an impossible task or looked down upon as less creative than writing poetry or fiction. If one were to embark upon this task by reading books on theories, it is bound to be a despairing exercise. Nobody seems to have done that. This literary/imaginative endeavor was started by many without knowledge of any theory or theories. In Telugu, literary creation began with the rendering of Sanskrit texts like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The bare essentials that go to make a successful practitioner, to begin with, are the love of literature and familiarity with the two languages, the language of the source text and the language into which it is rendered. Translation, generally, has come to be considered as a highly complex process, inaccessible and beyond the ken of understanding of enthusiasts, thanks to the ever expanding theories. Against this scenario, an interaction with actual practitioners would help the aspirants and enthusiasts sharpen their skills while leading to gain insights into the art and craft of this imaginative/literary exercise, call it rendering, transcreation, translation or what you will. This paper is based on such useful interaction with practicing translators, creative writers and academics and hopefully provides insights into the much-needed activity of literary translation.

I had the privilege of holding a Symposium by Mail on Practicing Literary Translation in 2007. Sixty-one practicing Literary Translators participated in the symposium each voicing his/her views and experiences, sometimes cautioning other practitioners against usual pitfalls. In two rounds, examples of multiple renderings of a text are given along with comments on the merits and demerits in them. It is a matter of real gratification that the symposium could accomplish this, giving an opportunity spread over several months to the participants for fruitful, thought-provoking exchange of views and shared experiences. The participants are drawn not just from India but from the US and Canada as well. Participation has been voluntary and cooperative in a cause to promote the activity and finesse of Literary Translation. Experienced practitioners translating from English to our regional languages and vice versa and translators from European languages with lots of published work in the field have responded to the call and as Moderator I spared no pains to contact them individually when once their addresses were obtained. On the whole, it had been a fruitful and pleasurable experience since the symposium provided a platform for scholars and practitioners to exchange notes and views based on personal experiences.

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We have the satisfaction of achieving that which a three day conference involving huge sums of money and lots of effort could achieve with practically no bother of travel and expense. Another important achievement was that with minimum of discussion on theoretical aspects the focus had been on individual experiences.

The Symposium, through a happy chance, emerged from an essay by the Moderator (who never dreamed of such a possibility then) setting forth his ideas on the practice. The essay dealt with issues relating to translations of various kinds with various purposes, discussion of common concepts for the benefit of new entrants with suitable examples.

In the First Round creative writer and poet J P Das, academics E Nageswara Rao, Suresh Kumar, Motilal Jotwani, Ashok Kelkar, Malathi Nidadavolu, K B Gopalam and Editor of *Re-markings* Nibir K Ghosh participated. Das wrote that it would be best to involve a native speaker of the language of the original and that his collaboration with Arlene Zide and Paul St. Pierre of Montreal yielded excellent results. Nageswara Rao cited the Italian proverb that translators were traitors. His emphasis was on fidelity. Suresh Kumar wrote that the output should be as literal as possible and as free as necessary, since it is part version, part adaptation, part rendering and part interpretation. Motilal felt that translating poetry had always been an unsatisfying experience. Malathi mentioned her experience rendering the source language idiom to the target language readers. She had always given extensive glossaries for being reader-friendly. Gopalam felt that the practitioner is only a spoon, which does not add any new taste. If the contact with the spoon changes the taste, the practitioner is not to blame. Nibir wrote that the end product must retain the creative flavor: “Reading the translation of Omar Khayyam by Edward Fitzgerald offers such great pleasure that one doesn’t give a damn to think of how faithful Fitzgerald was to the original text of the poems in Persian.” The Moderator concluded the Round stating that collaborative efforts, especially with the native speakers of the source text when possible, would give credibility to the output. In case the writer of the source collaborates with the practitioner, the output would no doubt be authentic too.

The Second Round started with the Moderator’s opening statement. The 14-15th Century Telugu poet Srinadha in his Telugu rendering of Harsha’s *Naishadha kavya* in Sanskrit set out prolegomena which it is impossible to improve upon even today. Srinadha “followed the sound that wins the hearts of innumerable noble-minded, understanding the intent, emotion, opinion, paying attention to inner feeling, sustaining the inner essence, ‘*rasa*’, purging improprieties, keeping to the original.” This may sound impossible but the trio who rendered *The Mahabharata* into Telugu succeeded in their task. To put it in a word, they ‘transcreated’ the immortal text and left behind another immortal text, more accessible to their huge language community. In this round Jnanpith winner Gurudial Singh, and accomplished poets, distinguished writers and academics Umesh Joshi, Sarita Jnanananda, Atulananda Goswami, Sitesh Alope, Jai Ratan, Indra Prakash Batra and Makarand Paranjpe participated. Gurudial stated that but for literary translations it would be impossible to access texts in any other language for none could possibly know all languages: “Good or bad translation is a must for any society”. Umesh Joshi likens the pleasure of the accomplished translator to the joy of the mother on seeing her baby

forgetting the birth pangs she suffered. Sarita caring more to be reader-friendly in her practice wrote that she went to the extent of providing long notes where necessary to explain a concept new to the target language. Atulananda Goswami negotiating between English and Assamese wrote: “Tolstoy and Gorky seem to be our neighbors, thanks to the gift of translation.” Sitesh Alope concluded his contribution with the observation: ‘In any case, some degree of injustice to the original, however minimal, is unavoidable while translating it.’ Jai Ratan felt sour: ‘...translation as a literary activity is considered inferior to creative writing’ and went further to ask, “Have you ever seen a translator forming a part of delegation (of writers) going abroad?” Inder Prakash Batra wrote of tension in poetry and communicating it in literary translation. Makarand Paranjpe’s statement is memorable. “My paper... is to argue for a shift in the discourse of translation studies. This shift may be described as that from structuralism to substantivism.”

In the Third Round, Professors Sachidananda Mohanty, T S Chandra Mouli, Sarojini, S S Prabhakar Rao, D Kesava Rao, R V S Sundaram, Mahamahopadhyaya Appalla Someswara Sarma, Ambika Anant, and poet Nikhileswar participated. Sachidananda also wrote about the efficacy of collaborative work since translation studies belong to the realm of culture. Mouli and Sarojini spoke of comparative study of different versions by diverse hands of the same source language text. And then they too stated that interaction with the writer of the original text would be very beneficial. Prabhakar Rao wrote that practicing literary translation would be forever necessary and forever impossible if one thought of mathematical equivalence: “Though a job with zero financial return, it must go on ceaselessly.” Someswara Sarma believed that faithfulness is the life breath of rendering and it would be best if the original is the object and the rendering its reflection. Ambika found translation using a link language without adequate knowledge of the source language unsatisfying. Translation between two cognate languages would be easier. Sundaram felt that translation gave him an opportunity to understand cultural plurality and stylistic abundance. Nikhileswar believed that translation is a rehabilitation of the original in the target language.

In the Fourth Round the participants were the nonagenarian Professor C S R Murty, who has rendered devotional works from Telugu to English, writer B S Murty, journalist R V Rama Rao, academics Jayashree Mohanraj, Devaraju Maharaju, writer Shanta Sundari and veteran poet Srinivasa Rangaswami. C S R Murty stated that he tried to respect the genius of the target language. B S Murty felt that the translator should capture the soul of the original. While translating *The Gita* and *Sundarakanda* he found an opportunity to carry the soul nurtured in an ancient Indic setting of the texts into English, rendering *sloka* after *sloka* in verse. R V Rama Rao felt that in creative and literary translation manner is primary as distinct from translating informative texts where the matter is vital. Jayashree felt that the person who renders the original text into a target language is a surrogate mother. ‘The surrogate mother knows that the child is someone else’s.’ Still she is a mother. Devaraju held that human values are the inspiration for literary translation. A translated poem is not inferior to the original: it is a parallel creation, the product of creativity again. Shanta emphasized the need for manipulations, omissions and additions to see that the rendering is reader-friendly. Srinivasa Rangaswamy quoted

Frost saying that there should be a lingering unhappiness in reading translation. (But it need not be so for the one who does not have access to the source language.) He felt that the end product should be a seamless piece existing in its own right.

In the Fifth Round Aruna Chakravorty, Mangalam Rama Murty, poet and academic Ayyappa Paniker, besides earlier participants Malathi and Suresh Kumar, took part. The Moderator tried to explain Frost's observation (what is lost in translation is poetry) that could not have been an expression of dislike. The great poet must have implied that there would be no spontaneity in the primarily deliberate act of literary translation. And then, Frost might have had in his mind the reader who knows both the source and target languages, in which case the unhappiness is not unusual. Aruna opined that literary translation is primarily an attempt at communication on behalf of a culture, tradition and imaginative achievement. Readability and beauty on the one hand and fidelity on the other needs to be balanced. The golden mean is 'the El Dorado forever sought and forever elusive.' Mangalam felt that when one exclaims "O! Is it a translation? I took it be an original!", then the practitioner's goal is achieved. For her, far from being a mundane task, the performance is a challenging creative endeavor. Ayyappa Paniker wrote a book on "Translation as Interiorization". He explained his concept citing the practice of our medieval poets who recreated Sanskrit texts. His conclusion was, "If the interiorization is total, a new original text may result." Suresh Kumar declared emphatically that translation gains were not recognized and given prominence and the losses are exaggerated. He made a very sensitive statement, which all practitioners would do well to bear in mind. Our judgments regarding the quality of the translation in our second language should be couched in a careful manner. To rephrase it, it is easy to damn a rendering, something done, without the least experience of practicing the craft.

In the Sixth Round, Suresh Kumar sent a fresh paper and Manjeet Baruah, Nirmalananda and the poet and academic Sachidanandan and poet KMVG Krishna Murty, who translated Dominique Lapierre's poem on Bhopal Union Carbide disaster in India, took part. Suresh Kumar sent a comment on the Moderator's rendering of a famous poem in Telugu, which Suresh Kumar said reinforced his conviction that in a cross-cultural communication value judgment may better be made in terms of the broadest parameters rather than the narrow ones. He enjoyed the English version of the Telugu original. This was done in the tradition of literary creation and value judgment of English and opined that the translation was successful. Writing for Bengali and Assamese readers Manjeet always had to choose between structure and meaning and he could strike a balance giving prominence to meaning. Nirmalananda held that the practice enriched the target language. He was of the opinion that it is not fair or enough to condense famous works in other languages in rendering. Sachidanandan stated that literary translation is a 'simple miming of the responsibility to trace the other in the self.' His conviction has been: "If all works are polyphonic and polysemic, translation, like reading, is a fresh composition, a construction." He observed that translation (of literary texts) almost always connoted other meanings, which recognize the non-identical nature of the source and the target. In this connection, he quoted Gayatri Spivak: "(The practitioner) earns permission to transgress from the trap of the other—before memory—in the coldest spaces of the

self.” This is valid in the renderings of the trio who transcreated *The Mahabharata* in Telugu 500 years ago. Krishnamurty came down heavily on the practical modalities of the assignment and execution of the tasks: “Much of the qualitative literary output comes only outside the portals of the universities and bureaucratic literary academies, who work on budgets to be somehow exhausted, deadlines to be somehow met and flow through the canals of financial years and aimless work calendars.” Bound by a sense of duty to the readers the Moderator confesses that his idea to enthuse the activity by posing a task of rendering a famous Telugu lyric into English while announcing prizes for the best five renderings drew a painful blank.

In the Seventh Round, two academics and researchers from Tamil Nadu, Parameswaran, Vijaya Raghavan, Professors Bhargavi Rao, Balraj Komal and Aju Mukhopadhyaya were participants. The Moderator opened this Round with a statement by Rustom P Mody in his essay, “From *Vak-Vichara* to *Atma-Vichara*” in *Sri Ramanashram Journal*. Mody stressed the fact that certain texts cannot be translated. Linguistic Relativity and Linguistic Determinism being diametrically opposed, Whorf’s disclosure of the fallacy of the assumption of translatability remains valid. Mody stated categorically: “Clearly the demand and the attempt to translate rest on the assumption of readability.” The Moderator was asked to consider commissioning an English rendering of *Sanatkumara Tantra* which it was found would be a baffling task both for the translator and the prospective reader. Every word in the original is part of a Vedic ritual and drawn from a very complex intellectual, spiritual, faith-related culture. Parameswaran felt that since the replacement of one text with an equivalent text involves transmission of meaning from one language to another, the inputs from Discourse Analysis could throw a new light on the process of translation. Discourse Analysis lays emphasis on context, which is relevant for the target language as well. He also stated that ‘deviance’ is a pointer to the uniqueness of language. Vijayaraghavan felt that translation should not bulldoze the sensitivity of native cultures.

He also raised the question whether there should be two renderings: one for the cognate culture and another for a totally alien culture. Balraj Komal felt that it was the skilful ingenuity and creative versatility of practitioners alone that would enable transcending barriers, cultural and linguistic. Bhargavi felt that cultural proximity between the source and target texts would be an advantage to the practitioner. Aju Mukhopadhyaya felt that translation had not given him the same joy he obtained from original writing. The pang leading to the birth of creation would be absent while rendering a text into another language.

Academic Jesscha Kessler, Vascular Surgeon and poet L S R Prasad and distinguished Professors of Linguistics Suresh Kumar and Arlene Zide and Dr. Mangalam Ramamurty were participants in the Eighth Round. Jesscha Kessler while speaking of translations said that Roman copies of Greek statues were notoriously lifeless. Kessler dealt with exotic languages and achieved remarkable success. About the nature of the translator’s relationship with the original, Kessler held that the only relationship one can have is disinterested fidelity to the story or poem that opens itself to one in an English wording. Surgeon Prasad had this to say: “‘A performance in words’ with an element of hysterical

display, often entertaining both the worlds and people on both sides this literature has something in it, drawing all one and sundry into its fold”. Suresh Kumar raised some questions, which each practitioner would do well to answer for himself. How about compensations and gains apart from losses in translation? What are the limitations of rendering Western classics like *The Divine Comedy* into other cultures? Is it right or necessary to ‘modernize’ an ancient or medieval text making a travesty of rendering? Does every language needs its own theory of (at least) literary translation? Arlene Zide wrote of neo-colonization. She asked: “Should (in fact, can) men translate women honestly or accurately?” She added: “In teaching, I have often used the strikingly contrasting translations (e.g., one by Pritish Nandy and the other by Chitra Divakaruni) of Kobito Sinho’s powerful poem about Eve. Divakaruni’s translation is much truer to the original, while Nandy’s goes his own idiosyncratic transcreative way.” All that one can say is that their individual lights guide translators. She posed two more penetrating questions: Is translation of women by men a bad or good thing? Can the translator ever truly understand the ‘other’? Remembering Bacon’s ‘jesting’ Pilate questions like these are best passed without pausing for an answer, for the task at hand needs to be completed at least to the practitioner’s satisfaction. Mangalam concluded that the more general the work the more interesting may be the translation and nothing will be missing from the original.

The Ninth and Tenth Rounds centered on actual literary translations of Texts from English to other Languages like Hindi and from Telugu to English. A modern Telugu poem by a renowned poet Mr. Raamaa Chandramouli and its three diverse English renderings figured in the ninth round. Rabindranath Tagore’s poem *Gitanjali* (this work won Tagore Nobel Prize way back in 1913) was rendered into Telugu from its English version by as many as 30 practitioners and from original Bengali by two. B S R Krishna, Secretary of the Telugu World Federation and a translation enthusiast, brought out a volume, which provided the basis for the Tenth Round. Professor Suresh Kumar came up with the tentative hypothesis ‘Towards a Law of Compensation’ and this has been illustrated from a rendering of Sumitranandan Pant’s *aah dhartee kitna deteehai* and its English translation *Fruits of Earth* by Murray. The researcher’s conclusion was that a practitioner would succeed in spite of gaps because of some compensation: “The meaning of the source text in its various moods within the text-word may vary from practitioner to practitioner and this can be appreciated within the scope of Discourse Analysis, which talks about ‘situatedness’ and ‘context’ of the literary text.” Another poem, this time in Telugu, and its rendering into English by three diverse hands, too stands testimony to the validity of the claim of ‘compensation.’ Round Ten sought to illustrate how different practitioners drew creative feeling from Tagore’s poem, first from Bengali and then from his own English translation. The Moderator quoted a sentence from Dr. Samuel Johnson in his preface to his Dictionary: “Every other author may aspire to praise: the lexicographer (read Literary Translator) can only hope to escape reproach—and even the negative response has been yet granted to very few.”

The Eleventh Round had Professor Jesscha Kessler, N Kunju, Divik Ramesh, Poranki Dakshina Murty and a Sanskrit scholar and academic Mrs. Rekha Vyas as participants.

Every round was a success in that actual practitioners participated with elan.

Various aspects of Translation, the unique genre of Literary Translation, types of equivalence and genre and task-specific strategies of translation in general and literary rendering in particular have been considered. Concepts on Literary Translation like Freedom, Fidelity, Friendliness, Finality have also been discussed. Language basics like Whorf's Hypothesis and concepts like Discourse Analysis have come up for consideration topically.

A rapid survey of the ideas, opinions and practices of the participants in the Symposium has helped me draw some practically useful conclusions readily applicable to translation practice.

Literary Translation is a unique field of activity. It is distinct from translating an ordinary text, say of an Instruction Manual or an informative piece of writing. In fact, Translation is an activity with diverse objectives and for the fulfillment of specific objectives task-specific strategies have to be devised.

Applied Linguistics, with its concepts of equivalence, descriptions of the nature of language, etc., has been an ever-expanding science involving rigor and discipline.

A study of Applied Linguistics does not by itself supply the student with conclusions immediately applicable to his practice. This does in no way purport to denigrate the study of Applied Linguistics. Study of this science surely helps the practitioner to draw his own inferences while performing his chosen task.

There is no readily available theory for Literary Translation as such. It is not a science but an art involving skills and an understanding of the languages which the practitioner has to work on.

A study of translated texts alongside the originals would help the practitioner equip himself with his own insights. The best school, which teaches literary translation, is the work table/outputs of the practitioners themselves.

There is not much evidence that all practitioners of literary translation have undergone rigorous training in the science of Applied Linguistics.

The prime requirement for a practitioner of this art is enthusiasm for the literary text, deep understanding and love of the source language and the language into which he wishes to import the literary excellence/achievement in the original to the extent possible.

The 'ban' on translating scriptural texts like *The Koran* is well considered and rationally justifiable.

No translation is permanent when it comes to a literary text. A translation can be in currency only till the appearance of a new/better rendering.

Theoreticians make much of 'losses' in translation but in literary translation 'compensation' and gains for the target language are never given their due emphasis.

Knowing the nature of the two, the source and the target languages, and a flair for literary nuances in both, would be helpful.

Literary Translation is undertaken as a labor of love: it is in itself the reward. A prize or an award is fortuitous and none ever undertook the task with any material 'reward' in mind. A literary translator volunteers to undertake the task, quite prepared for self-effacement.

There may be any number of renderings of a given literary text, each justified and each having a right to exist as any other rendering, for each practitioner might have given a focus to certain nuances/suggestions, etc. Multiple translations of a text into one target language enable discerning readers draw conclusions about the merits in the different versions.

Practitioners also differ in the degrees of freedom each has taken with the original text, for each has his own way of presentation of what he construes to be the essence. The individual practitioner has to decide the limits of freedom and accordingly cultivate fidelity to the original. The most important thing is that the rendering has to be reader-friendly. It is the practitioner who enhances the glory of the writer in another language.

It is futile to wait for a valid theory of literary translation, universally acceptable and followed with absolute obedience. The best way for one aspiring to be a practitioner is to roll up his sleeves and sit down to work. With enthusiasm half the battle is won and with patience and with perseverance the other half. After all, one has to perfect one's own theory for one's own self to follow with tenacity and passionate commitment. ■

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