

**Title: "Readerji is about to enter the story"--Moving Beyond
Cultural Translations in an Age of Translating Cultures**

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A translation, by its very definition, is a re-presentation of an original text from one language to another, as well as from one culture to another. These linguistic and cultural exchanges or negotiations are eventually associated with questions of authority and power. That is to say, which language-culture is to be translated by whom and for whom ultimately decides how the actual task of re-presentation via translation is to be carried out. Cultural translation as a term has been much in vogue in the field of translation studies for quite some time now. It is that kind of translation which aims to present another culture by emphasizing on cultural markers such as dialectics, food, etc. But there are certain texts which have never been translated yet in their gestation have been the object of a process of translation. These texts are composed by authors who choose another tongue (most often the colonizer's tongue) apart from their mother tongue to express themselves. Hence, such texts are original texts, translating culture/s for a specific target readership (i.e. the former colonizers in the present post-colonial era). In this complex process of translation, such texts often employ a hybrid language to express a hybrid culture.

As Indian readers we encountered it first in Indian-English writings and later in the English writings of the Indian diaspora. In the 'Introduction' to his book on Indian Writing in English, David McCutcheon had supposed a surface-and-depth model for this kind of writing. He had detected the presence of a "radically different" Indian mind underneath the surface of the English language. Thus according to him, this kind of writing is characterized by a constant and even creative tension between the medium, i.e. the language, and the content. For instance, Raja Rao's

Kanthapura (1938) was written in an English modified to South Indian conditions that reflect Kannada speech rhythms. And in his 1978 essay Rao had confessed that “to stretch the English idiom to suit my needs seemed heroic enough for my urgentmost demands.”(Rao 1996, 147) Years later the same can be said of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) where she, too, mixes English with Kannada speech rhythms.

Any literary activity in a language other than the mother tongue elicits this process of translation while composing the original, which leads Christopher Rollason to comment that “it is already a case of translated literature in the sense that it is already the product of a transfer between, schematically, two cultural systems or polysystems, even before anyone translates the text into a third language.”(Rollason 2006, 2) And this process cannot guarantee a ‘faithful’ translation because after all it is a creative process; it is bound to result in a transcreation. Translations are supposed to maintain absolute fidelity to both the source and target languages while the essence of transcreation is to keep and transfer the cultural ethos as much as possible through the target language, indicating that the translator “must edit, reconcile and transmute”(Lal 1964) the material he/she chooses to carry forward into another language. Thus, according to Dora Sales Salvador, "...such literature written originally in English [is] a sort of transcreation where [other] languages and cultural forms ... survive, as a co-present substratum" at the intersection between "diverse linguistic and literary systems"(Salvador 2001, 1-2). This means that English language-surface constitutes the visible stratum while the native thought-patterns remain as the substratum with the language trying to express the world-view of the ‘other’ tongue which remains deliberately hidden behind English. But we need to determine why English, at all, is the chosen language and why does the need for such transcreations arise.

This concept of appropriation of the enemy’s discourse and technology by the oppressed cultures is a post-modern phenomenon.(Rowe 1992) The appropriation of English language as a vehicle of expression, or more precisely, a weapon for hitting back and making one’s displeasure known produces a process that Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird call ‘reinventing the enemy’s language’(Harjo and Bird 1997). It is very common in the writings of Native North American writers as well as Afro-American writers who translate their reality into a language that is suitable for the expression of their agony and oppression. Hence most post-colonial literature written in English

exhibit this tendency of what Bhabha had called “hybridity”(Ashcroft et al 1995) that is using this mixed language as a tool for subverting colonialism.

This paper would attempt to focus on two stories of Yasmin Ladha and Shani Mootoo, ‘Beena’ (*Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories*) and ‘Out on Main Street’ (*Out on Main Street and Other Stories*), two multi-cultural Canadian women writers, whose original texts are actually translations into English of the diverse cultures (languages) into which they have been exposed.

Both Yasmin Ladha and Shani Mootoo are twice-migrants of Indian origin in Canada. Ladha was born in 1956 in Mwanza, Tanzania to parents of Muslim and Gujrati-Hindu heritage. She grew up in Africa with the notion that “Africa is for the Africans.” At the age of eighteen, Ladha arrived in Canada and enrolled herself in a Creative Writing course at the University of Calgary. Shani Mootoo, an year older than Ladha, was born in Dublin, Ireland, to parents of Indian and Nepalese origins. She, on the other hand, grew up in Trinidad, and went to Canada for higher education at the age of twenty. As twice migrants, both these writers are victims of double-displacement. Their origins and their ancestry do not match with their present reality. As a result, their identities, too, are twice displaced and doubly fractured. Confusion and inconsistency are perhaps the two words that come closest to analyzing their fiction – both in terms of content and structure. Undoubtedly these are deliberate attempts on the part of these two writers who choose to pinpoint the effects of dislocation and fragmentation of their identities.

While discussing double migration, critic Vijay Mishra says,

Those twice-displaced, these unfixed selves, signal a diasporic awareness that cannot be contained within theories of diaspora that neglect to specify historical moments, specific experiences, and differences in historical conditioning. The ‘twice-displaced’ challenge theories of diaspora which fail to consider the ‘differential’ and uneven experiences of migration (2007, 158).

The historical incidents of violence and cruelty against the people of Indian origin in Africa and in the Caribbean Islands in the wake of their independence in the mid-20th century have lent a

sense of non-belongingness to both Ladha and Mootoo. They acknowledge that their cultures are hybrid and cannot be comprehended or accepted easily. Hence they employ a language which is influenced by this hybrid culture. They have at their disposal the colonizer's tongue, at the same time they have other weapons as well. Ladha herself is an English instructor at Alberta College and she replaces English words with words of the 'other' colonizing languages, such as Spanish and French. Thus in her story 'Beena,' words like 'fast' or 'quickly' are never used, instead the meaning is conveyed by using either 'fatafat' or 'pronto,' both meaning the same. To Ladha, French and Spanish words represent the existence of the 'other' colonizers, whose tongues have in turn been marginalized in Canada and the United States respectively. But who is her target readership? The narrator says, "I acknowledge you are not a California reader." (327). She chooses to play with the alternative forms of story telling. Thus while referring to a love story, she says, "Away with Romeo and Juliet...there are other balconies too, and other love stories, like Heer and Ranjha." Her readers must know these in order to understand her story. It is all about knowing the alternative culture which the author is determined to shove into the face of her readers. She points out the Colonizer, the Hindu, the Brahmin and the Male – they all stand for Power. Ladha is vehemently fond of subverting this power structure and hence her protagonist is the colonized, the Muslim and the female. Even the author—reader relationship is also subverted. The all-powerful, omnipotent, omniscient narrator gives way to someone who addresses the reader as 'Reader-ji.' In her words, "one of the 'tools' I implement in order to do away with a consumptive reader is to address my reader, personally. Her name is Reader-ji... I also use 'ji' as an endearment." (322)

She uses all the cultural markers, '*Indian ishtyle*' – the evocation of 'Rasa' the Bollywood style romance between a street-smart city boy and a village belle at the well and smearing the forehead of a village widow with the blood of a lover against all social odds and objections raised by the Panchayat. Even the narration is not linear, the story moves back and forth in time. It begins from one point, moves on to another story, then to another, and finally comes back to where it all began from.

Ladha's technique and language are deliberate attempts to startle her readers – "You correcting me? My Allah! You have joined the critic's English!" (323).

While Ladha expresses her delight in mixing cultures “I am unaccustomed to popping in and out of pages with *achar* and *chai*.”, (323) Mootoo’s narrator acknowledges, “We is watered – down Indians – we ain’t good grade A Indians.” (45) The diasporic sensibility of displacement lends to her language a strange hybridity that can be defined as a translation of the thought-processes of a confused mind. Such a mind has traveled between cultures and languages and could identify with none as its own. And this confusion is heightened because of altered notions of sexuality. Most of Mootoo’s characters experience sexuality in a manner that is ‘different’ from others. Hence, it is natural that their way of expressing these ‘different’ experiences would vary from those of the ‘normal’ ones. So the standard language is unable to express the condition of her characters who deviate from the norm. Feminist critics have always argued that since the language at the disposal of a female writer is essentially patriarchal, and since she has to express female experiences in a patriarchal language, a woman writer’s voice is bound to be fragmented. Shani Mootoo goes one step beyond with her fragmented language since her female voice refuses to comply with the norm of female sexuality. The appropriation of lesbian and bi-sexual voices within the patriarchal discourse of writing essentially involves an automatic translation of the voices and experiences which can not be expressed in any single standard language. In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath talks about this hegemony of Euro-American understandings of same-sex desires, and how ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ identities are defined as oppositional. The title story of Mootoo’s 1993 collection of short-stories *Out on Main Street*, is narrated by one such character who “look like a gender dey forget to classify”(48) The language the narrator uses in ‘Out on Main Street’ is also something like her—unclassified, its a new literary decolonized space that allows accommodation to the dislocated and the fractured. Considering themselves to be “cultural bastards”, the narrator goes on to say:

Yuh know, one time a fella from India who living up here
call me a bastardized Indian because I didn’t know Hindi.
And now look at dis, nah! De thing is: all a we in Trinidad is
cultural bastards, Janet, all a we. *Toutes bagailles!*(52)

Like the English sentence, the French phrase is also distorted, making it clear that the narrator, who is a Canadian citizen, is not only unable to speak English properly, but even French remains

inappropriate for her. She uses 'patois' which is 'substandard' French, and in patois the phrase is 'toute bagaille', it means 'everything' minus the extra's'. Language is a cultural product; it is not only defined but also limited by the society. But Mootoo's characters face social ostracization every moment of their lives which cannot be expressed in socially-rooted conventional languages. Hence, her English, French, Patois all present themselves in inappropriate forms—

I could see dey eyes watching Janet and me, dey face growing
dark as dey imagining all kind a situation and position. And de
women dem embarrass fuh so to watch me in mih eye, like
dey fraid I will jump up and try to kiss dem, or make pass at dem.(48)

No one language can express the thoughts of such displaced writers. Hence the birth of such a mixed language and presentation of story telling takes place. As readers, it is our responsibility to interpret in any manner as we desire because "The critic may forever be buried in the Sahara."
(323)

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