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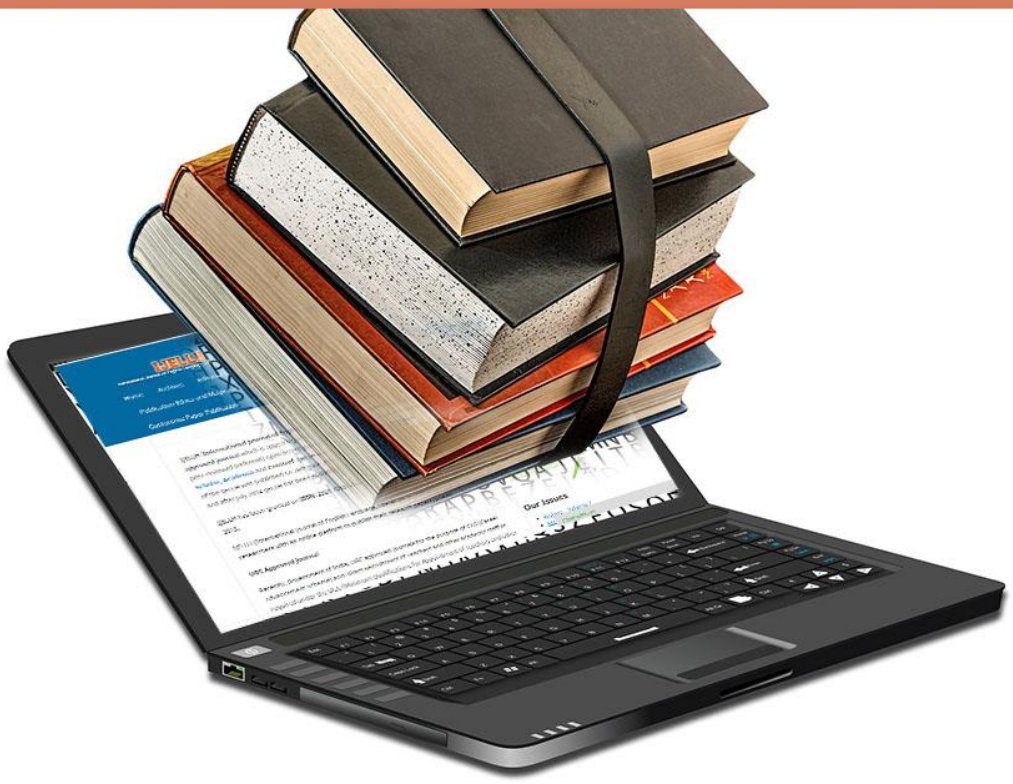

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Translating a Metaphysical Fiction: A Case Study

Abstract

Translation demands a deep understanding of two (or more) languages, time, space and culture. Drawing on his own experience in the translation of the metaphysical fiction in Malayalam titled as *Maranaparyantham: Roohinte Nalvazhikal* (*The Afterlife: A Rooh's Diary*) written by Shamsuddin Mubarak, in to English, author of this article presents a case study. The paper explores the promises that the fiction has given in the process of translation because of its story being a fused content between the classical Islamic textual narrative and localized experience of the textual version. The study also lists numerous challenges in translating a localized version of universal experiences in a global language, English.

Key Words: Metaphysical Fiction, Translate-ability, Semantic vs. Literal Translation, Time and Spatial Translations.

1. Introduction

Translation of literary works is process of faithfully transferring the message with all its communicative effects from one language, culture, and mind to another language, culture and mind respectively. Technically, it is the act of replacing text in the source code by an equivalent text in the target code (Catford, 1965), but essentially it is another act of communication, which has touch of originality. Degree of originality or faithfulness to the source code, in fact, determines what type translation has been rendered. As Dryden rightly pointed out, any translated communication can fall under any of the three labels: Metaphrase, Paraphrase and Imitation (Dryden, 1680). Traditionally, much has been debated on how a translated communication can be distinguished from literal and free translations (Newmark, 1988). Modern linguistics look at the faithfulness to the original code and originality of communication (i.e., license used in the communication) from a more advanced theoretical perspectives, like Nida's “formal” versus “dynamic” correspondence, Catford's “formal correspondence” versus “textual equivalence,” or Newmark's “semantic” as opposed to “communicative” translation (Shen, 1996).

2. Translating a Fiction

Though these theories have considerably helped and promoted the way the literary translations were handled and understood, its focus predominantly fell on poetic translation only. Applied to the translation of fictions, these theories appear to be insufficient (Yongfang Hu, 2000). Stylistic approach towards the translation was one theory which was directed towards translating the fiction. Shen Dan (1996) argued that introduction of stylistic approach to the translation of fiction solve the problem of “deceptive equivalence”. Yongfang Hu (2000) argues that even the stylistic approach offers a limited solution to challenges in translating a fiction. He states that

translation of a fiction raises several questions: whether the translation should be source-language-oriented or target-language-oriented, or whether a given original should be adapted for certain pragmatic purposes. As is generally accepted, fiction translation becomes extraordinarily complicated because it deals not only with bilingual, but also bi-cultural and bi-social transference. It is intertwined with complex of emotions, associations, and ideas, which intricately relate different nations' languages to their lifestyles and traditions.

As Yongfang Hu (2000) rightly pointed out, various factors, including aesthetic conventions, historical and cultural-social circumstances, authorial individualism and the author's worldview are major factors which determine the success of a translation of fictions, among which reproduction of the fictional style is regarded as its core. Out of all these, two factors are of prime importance in the make of a fiction: (a) authorial factors (authors' individual style applied in the text) (b) social factors. The reproduction of the both the factors are very much critical in the translation of a fiction. In other words, the social experience of individuals in the fictional world has to be transferred to the readers of other culture and society. According to him, these factors can only be taken into account through socio-semiotic approach.

3. *The Afterlife: A Rooh's Diary*

The narrator, a soul of an ordinary Malayali Muslim, reveals his experiences beginning from the moment of his death. Narration progresses, with the nuanced experiences of the dying body, dead body and the departed soul from funeral to Heaven. Soul becomes witness narrator of what happens to the departed body in the grave, on the day of judgement, hell and finally in the heaven. It also narrates its experiences of meta-physical torments, and, at the end, ethereal pleasures in the heaven. The soul and body go through unimaginable death pain followed by

torments in the grave and disfiguring and humiliation on the Day of Judgment. Finally, the individual was mercilessly thrown to the abysm of the hell. After many years, on recommendation of son, who happened to dies in his childhood; the protagonist is lifted from the hell, washed with holly water and shifted to Heaven. In the heaven, he experiences the kind of pleasures that he had never known in his worldly life.

The author interestingly brings the events which are admittedly out of the time and space references into the timeline. He presents each one as a sample episode of a particular segment in a metaphysical event. The death of the protagonist happens on 17 August 2015 the physical world completely collapses on 13 May 2278. The second part of the novel begins at 01.01.01. Again, after resurrection of body from the earth and re-fusing of the body into the soul, narration continues till 10.12.3103.

In the grave, the soul, which goes through different torments, gets occasional respites and is given freedom to visit the earth. During the respite, the soul not only travels throughout the globe and gives a witness account of the events on the earth, which undergoes colossal ups and downs, but also passes through the generations of human beings and kingdom. The soul also meets the souls of his worldly friends, and hears the story when he could not visit the earth during the torment days.

Though this is a self-claimed fiction, the story is not entirely fictitious. The content of the story is highly influenced by the Islamic version of death, dying experiences, grave torments for bad souls, the end of the world, resurrection, final judgment of good and bad, punishment in the Hell and reward in the Heaven. The description of angels, the metaphysical cultural contexts of the novels, the way the experiences were visualized or sensualized undoubtedly corresponds to the Islamic textual version, as it is briefly acknowledged by the novelist. The author definitely has

taken his freedom to visualize the whole post-life experiences and organize it in such way that becomes a serial of the worldly life. The novel could not have been possible for the novelist without a deep insight on the classical Islamic versions. In terms of the reality of the story, the novelist takes only limited freedom, though he uses his poetic imaginative licence in giving a convincing description of the textual information.

4. Translating *The Afterlife:* Challenges and Promises

The translation of the text *The Afterlife* depends not only on how the novel is understood by the translator, but also how the author understood the original classical Islamic texts, how far he has chosen to comply with source texts and how far he has chosen to distance from the classics using his imaginative license. The biggest challenge is in deciding the degree of freedom the novelist has exercised on the source text. One cannot arrive at a balanced judgment about this, unless he/she considers the multiple interpretations available on the original text. The original/classical texts have got multiple interpretations. Some interpreters take it for its literal meaning, which has often resulted in several debates such as theological controversies, sexual inequality debates and the issue of impossibility of equating the worldly pleasures with ethereal pleasures.

On the one hand, this translation has been a very easy and promising exercise, because there is a whole corpus of vocabulary which has already been in use. The only difficulty is deciding which version of the interpretation is preferred in author's narration. The references actually include the interpretation of Quran, Hadith and some philosophical text books. The fact that most of classical text books have already got translated into English makes the job easier.

On the other, to deal with the localization of experiences has been the most difficult task. The novel presents entirely localized story of a Muslim Malabari, who, like most typical Malabaris, has the experience of economic migration to the Gulf countries. The story open from localized environment like this: "The crow of the death which sat on the jackfruit tree on the northern side of the house, flew in to the infinity of the sky, after a relentless cry for a long a time". The images that the author has brought to give a Kerala Malabari feeling is 'the death crow sitting on a jackfruit tree'. Similarly, author has used several localized metaphors to talk about the pain and severity of angel's pulling of the soul from the body. The expression 'pathalakkarandi' (p. 21) does not have any equivalent in English. The typical cemetery scene in Malabar is another notable example. The terms grave and cemetery will not strong enough to give the exact localized meaning of "qabar" and "qabaristan" respectively.

Though the story maintains a universality of Muslim culture in narration of death, grave, funeral description and afterlife, the author has very skillfully managed to present it with a Malabari imprint. The local coloring is poses the threat to the translatability of the text. Regional cultural and ritualistic references are not few in the novel. For instance, the narration of the first and immediate reaction of Malabari Muslim household, as they confirm the death of the protagonist presents a solid cultural reference to Malabar and its emotional response. The scene in which the dead-body was taken to the mosque and entire funeral ceremony are quintessentially Malabari. The description of ritualistic practices and service that the living people do in the region for the dead people also undoubtedly resists translation. The narration also incorporates the consciousness, which has developed from the popular oral narratives prevalent in the community such the conception of reward that a dead person would receive in his/her grave, thanks to the

deeds of those who are on the earth. The localized versions of these theological debates also find its way in the narration.

While dealing with the localized experiences of Islamically universal narratives, the translator has to face a crisis that the author had not to do: the crisis of fusing 'the local' with 'the universals' in a language which is alien to the referred culture. This can be found even in the way the heaven and the hell has been narrated. The beauties and pleasures of the heaven get its descriptions in the novel with an appropriation of classical narratives into the local culture. The ethereal beauty is conveyed in such a way that a Malabari mind can easily catch the pain and pleasure of the heaven. This appropriation sometimes fails when it's translated into the global language. It turned out that a classical text version, which represented as the universal version (across Islamic culture), gets translated into a global language and understanding, at the cost localized expressions.

5. Conclusion

There are several challenges that a translator may face during the translation of *The Afterlife: A Rooh's Diary,* for that matter, in the translation of any classically-rooted fiction. The first is deciding which version of the interpretation of the text can be preferred over the other, because there are multiple versions of interpretations of same classical text. In that sense, it is an interrogative approach to the preferences of author by enquiring how the author himself has chosen the textual interpretation from the huge corpus that has been in discussion for last 14 centuries. When the translator contradicts with the popular or accepted version, the translator is put in dilemma of deciding whether the translator has consciously diluted the narrative or it was an unconscious exercise. The translator tends to use his creative license of modifying the story to

ensure that the translation becomes more faithful to the popular version. The second major challenge was to find apt equivalents of local images, and cultural practices in the target language. Since the story itself is a fusion of universal narrative into the localized understanding and experiences, translating the universal (in Islamic culture) into a global language retaining the local coloring become a highly difficult task.

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