



SHIFTING THE SOURCE TEXT MEANING: ANANDACHANDRA AGARWALA'S TRANSLATION OF H. W. LONGFELLOW'S "A PSALM OF LIFE"

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ABSTRACT

Translation is not only an inter-lingual enterprise but also a cultural endeavour. It would not have been characterised by complexities if only word for word substitution would suffice the act of translation. Translation is considered as the transfer of meaning from a source text to a target text. However, whether the source text meaning is acceptable for the target reader and whether the target culture would allow the source text meaning to its periphery is a question which has made translation an elaborate venture. A language is embedded with meaning-greatly in relation to its culture; every expression and utterance has a culture specific implication. In addition, the existing world views, thought mechanism and belief system of a particular language group are inextricably attached to their culture. Hence, while translating a ST (source text) with a definite meaning, the translator has to occasionally shift the original meaning in the TT (target text) and even alter the same so that the receiving society can easily accept the translation. This paper intends to explore how H. W. Longfellow's poem *A Psalm of Life* gets contradictory meaning in its Assamese translation as *Jivon-Sangit* by Anandachandra Agarwala.

KEY WORDS: translation, meaning, equivalence, source text, target text, target culture.

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Translation is a transfer of meaning from one set of language signs to another. However, in practice, it is a complex process of negotiating two different worlds. The differences in geographical location, culture, language, rites and rituals, value system, thought process and religious practices of different groups of people in different places make them distinct from one another, with their unique characteristics. Nevertheless the basic emotional and intrinsic similarities force people living in a particular place to enjoy literature of other language communities. The speakers of a particular language

community are under the power of the language they speak, hence their perception is the product of that particular language. Their thinking and knowledge systems are not permitted to go beyond the limits of that language. As a result, everything existing in a particular language community cannot be translated. Accessing to equivalent words or concepts can therefore become a difficult area for a translator. The elements, exclusive to a particular culture and language come out to be non-existent in a different language, for which a translator has to take recourse in creating 'new semantic fields' or

'super-ordinate'. Baker comments that, semantic fields are the division 'imposed by a given linguistic community on the continuum of experiences' and 'superordinate' refers to translation by a more general word (Baker, 1992, p.18). Many a times, the translator has to eliminate some ideas and facts in the SL (Source Language) text due to complications in inventing or re-producing them in a new language or culture because it may not suit the alien culture, as it does in case of the home culture and native language. In such cases, the target language rendering should be introduced as a foreign text to the target reader. Apart from it, in many cases the source language text can be nativised or domesticated in the target language by executing the new rendition with local setting and characterisation. The cross-currents in the phenomenon of translating add to the range of inconveniences in creating a standard translation. Culture is embedded in a language so unavoidably that one cannot keep culture aside in translating a literary text. Bassnett and Lefevere state that in translation "neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational unit" (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990, p. 8). Edward Sapir believes that language has a power over social reality and language which is the medium of social norms and reality keeps human at its mercy. People have to represent or concretise their experience and feelings through language. Thus, human experience and linguistic expressions are interrelated and specific to a particular language community structure. One cannot translate an SL expression to a target language which is not present in the target language. Therefore, separate linguistic structures express separate reality. Sapir said: "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live, are distinct worlds, not world with different labels attached" (as qtd. in Bassnett, 1980/1991/2002 p. 22). Therefore inter-lingual translation is not a mere exchange of surface meaning between two languages that can be done with the help of dictionaries; rather it is a complex operation where a number of extra-linguistic issues come in. This is what creates a gap of meaning and knowledge that

restricts a translator from transferring everything in the source language and transporting every bit of a literary work. This is because a literary text is characterized by emotions, thought process, belief system, and way of living and so on. Consequently, establishing equivalence becomes more complicated and even impossible in many cases. Further, words are culture bound and exclusive to a particular language community. For ideas which are genuine and universal, one can access word equivalents but for ideas and objects which do not exist in the target language, it is hard to get a substitute and hence it results in untranslatability.

A translator is an interpreter of the ST in a way. He has to transfer the ST ideas, themes and information in the TT. He decodes the ST first, and then encodes it in a new code-system. In doing so, he becomes the re-teller of the ST; his re-telling becomes more or less an interpretation as things have to be familiarised in the new writing. In this process, he has to look at various aspects: he should write it in a way/style which can be understood easily, and he should ensure that the thematic aspect and the spirit of the ST are conceived smooth and believable in the TT. And if there is anything foreign in spirit or if there are contradictions of beliefs, then the translator has to act as an editor. Since a particular culture contains beliefs and ideals of the given society it is hard to transplant an idea or concept of another culture that does not resemble the receptor culture. Anandachandra Agarwala's translation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* under the Assamese title *Jivon-Sangit* presents some of such issues of translating cultural texts. Bormudoï remarks that this TT presents juxtaposing viewpoints while putting emphasis on the fact that life of man is transient, what is real is but the soul (Bormudoï, p.13). The ST contends the poet's philosophy about life that life is serious and real while defying the pessimistic viewpoint about life as temporary and illusory. Longfellow in this poem stands against the psalmist who says that "Life is but an empty dream"; he does not agree to the fact that life is ephemeral:

Tell me not in mournful
numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!

For the soul is dead that
slumbers,
And things are not what they
seem. (*A Psalm of Life*)

The TT is not a word-for-word or line-by-line translation. A number of couplets are rendered at random without following the ST sequential order. Moreover the length is also increased from nine stanzas in the ST to fourteen stanzas in the TT which shows that the translator has taken much liberty in 're-presenting' the ST in the TT. Coming to the above quote, it says that life is not a false dream, it is real and meaningful; world is not meaningless as people are instructed. The TT, on the other hand puts forward the message that life is nothing but a subject to decay, what people think happiness is not absolute. Only the soul is real, but it is slumbering; human body is short-lived and what can make humans permanent is their deed. In this way, it stresses importance on utilising the present and advises not to hold on the past or fancy the future. The SL and the TL poems are similar only in regards with their stressing on dutifulness. Longfellow is trying to create an optimistic outlook towards life that it is real, not momentary as people say; that it has meaning and people should live in the present and their physical existence is significant, not an illusory means of ordinary pleasure. Longfellow encourages to work and to be spirited, and equally highlights the importance of the human body. But the translator is not sure whether the TR will accept the celebration of body and present moment as the original does. This is because in the moral construct of the Assamese target reader under the Vaishnav philosophy of an all powerful and permanent soul vs. transient physique, establishing the original saying is a difficult job. This is why Agarwala speaks a completely opposite thing in the TT which is very shocking:

Shokar Kabita rasi dudhari sakulo
mosi
Nokora jivon misa nishar sapun.
Osar sansar bhai, eeat sakam ny
Muhomoy mayamoy sakalu
mathun. (*Jivon Sangit*)

It subverts the original idea into a total opposite. It says that life is meaningless, everything that appears to the eyes as real is false. It is added by a call to work because it is the only way one can take up for compensating life's impermanence. The contemporary society of the translator is witnessed as being influenced by the ethical ideas that earth is an illusory place, where humans come and go without accomplishing any good and permanent, and that their journey finally takes them to the grave. Its over-glorification of the soul is a witness of the Vaishnav negation of the body as an obstacle in attaining religious salvation. Since the ST says contradictory things to the Assamese religious ideology, the TT is rendered in a way that it does not question the beliefs of the receptor culture. The need to preach the Assamese folk to be active is therefore accomplished by a strategy which is quite marvelous. This is how Agarwala produces a discourse that reflects native beliefs and ideals about human existence. The following lines from the TT show this:

Soku, kan, nak jabo har sal sang
hobo Matir manuh tumi matit
miliba.
Obinashi nittyadhon omoron,
obhogon Ononta unnatishil
atma janiba. (*Jivon Sangit*)

This stanza also, sings of the greatness and permanence of soul while looking at body as a matter to collapse. The last line speaks of the soul's immortality, that undertones the Hindu beliefs of afterlife. But in the ST, an opposite thing has been spoken by the poet:

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest
Was not spoken of the soul.
(*Psalms of Life*)

Another stanza in the TT upholds an opposite idea to that of the ST regarding human's end.

Osthayi manav deh, korim
dudin beha
Furim dudin matho sansar-
hatot.
Dudinor onta hole ayus dhukai
gole

Sundor dehar thai ses
smosanot. (*Jivon Sangit*)

Jivon-Sangit reveals how a translator has to not only edit or improvise on the original, but also to alter the ST meaning occasionally so that the TR finds it easy going in their cultural structure and non-conflicting with their standards of morality. While Longfellow is trying to inspire humans to be hard-working and self-sufficient through his interpretation of life as important and serious, Anandachandra Agarwala devices the same objective of preaching on a native (Assamese) ground of religious philosophy of human's momentary existence, and meaninglessness. This shows that a translator may be more closely adhering to his TR than merely re-telling a source text in another tongue. In other words, a translation work has to be most preferably one that meets the requirements of the receptor culture and its people.

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