



'TRANSLATION' OR 'MUTILATION'? HEM BARUA'S TRANSLATION OF AJIT BARUA'S "MONKUNWALI SAMAY": AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

Translation is carried out by substitution of words between the Source Language and the Target Language. However, literary translation may not be adequate if only word equivalence guides such a translation. Cultural and aesthetic concerns of both the language also needs to be carefully studied. Language proficiency and cultural understanding of the translator may not always help, if the context of the literary piece or the author's conscious use of language and style(s) are overlooked or the translator ignores them unintentionally. It may lead to a shift in the interpretation of the new creation and even ruin the original intended meaning(s). Though literature is considered open-ended as far as its multiplicity of interpretation is concerned, the author has a definite meaning or layers of meanings that he aspires to put forward to the reader. Translation of literature is a complex phenomenon. Translating Poetry is more elusive and challenging than prose translation because translation of poetry is engaged with more linguistic as well as extra-linguistic complexities. The present paper aims to examine some of the consequences of poetry translation in the light of Hem Barua's translation of the Ajit Barua's poem "Monkunwali Samay".

KEY WORDS: equivalence, translation, source text, target text, target culture, target language, target reader

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Literary translation is considered more complicated than non-literary translation. Poetry is even more complex among the literary translations. Poetry is a unique creation; it is novel in form and content and characterised by the poet's individual artistry. It may have several interpretations among readers according to their perception, world knowledge and experience. In the journey from an original to a translation, poetry is confronted with a number of shifts or changes. Collocations, metaphors, slang-words, symbols, imagery and even the auditory appeal of a poem are language specific, and more importantly culture specific. Metaphors and collocations, for instance, are in themselves a

new production; they are imaginative of the poet and in the way of the poet's expressing and experimenting. Imagery and symbols of a poem circulate around a given culture under the law of availability (a culture avails a set of ideas and objects which can get entry in a literary discourse). These attributes make translating poetry challenging. A poem in its distinctness as an individual entity and in readers' multiplicity of interpretation faces with elaborate complications. Poetry is an elevated mode of expression that is knitted in language; it not only presents an idea but also fabricates the idea in a tongue. Therefore, transferring a particular content alone is not the single function of a translator of

poetry. The content or subject of a poem can be re-written in a different tongue, but can the auditory and incantatory effect be transported into the TL (Target Language)? The answer is not entirely positive. Poetry translation, hence, is both a gain and a loss: loss of original physical beauty as it cannot be substituted with linguistic equivalents and gain of a new linguistic body for the ST (Source Text) theme or content which is re-told in the TT (Target Text). Interestingly, in many cases, even the subject of a poem has to confront shifts, and even loss-partially or even in subversion of the ST. A translator can at best reflect the original content and form in the TL to give the impression of the original. Nevertheless, a translator's expertise in both the languages, his knowledge of both the cultures and his efficiency in tackling immediate inadequacies that may arise in the act of translation have much to do in translation of poetry. The servile attitude of a translator to render an original 'as it is' may result in a rough rendering of the ST; on the other hand taking too much liberty is characterised by untruthfulness to the original. A translator therefore cannot be expected to do complete justice to a poem.

The poem becomes a common property of the reader the moment it is published; the reader interprets the poem in their own right, where their personal experiences, knowledge also come into play. However, the poet himself, as the creator of his poem has some ideas that are attempted to express through language. Here comes the question of reliability of an interpretation by someone other than the poet. Whether the translator has been just or loyal to the meaning or set of meanings of the original poem and whether he has been trustworthy to the poet are some of the issues emerging out of this phenomenon.

The present paper intends to study how Hem Barua's translation of Ajit Barua's poem-*Monkunwali Samay* unfolds some of the above stated issues. Ajit Barua is a modern Assamese poet and translator with a great knowledge of theories of poetry. He thinks that poetry should be systematically written, the poet should know what he wants to mean; use of words and images should be governed by the poet's conscious plan. While

criticizing translations of some of his own poems by Hem Barua -another famous poet of Assam- along with an explanatory note on background information of some of his own poems, Barua says that the poet, 'being the first reader of his poems has the right to interpret his poems and to translate them; he has a definite meaning in his mind that makes up his poem. A comparative study of the translations of Hem Barua and his own, unfolds a lot of issues about the exercise of translation. The discussions in his book *Padyar Pasor Kabya* (1994) are a very useful source to discover relevant issues about translation of poetry.

Hem Barua translates the poem *Monkunwali Samay* with the title *Mind: A Mist-Tide* and Ajit Barua himself translates it as *Mind-mist Time*. Ajit Barua asserts his title that he uses the pair word 'mind-mist' in a Hopkinsian style that avoids explanation or long title and this is a meticulously chosen title to his poem. What Hem Barua has done is dissatisfying to him because the compactness of language is affected by his title. In the discussion, Ajit Barua regrets Hem Barua's not noticing the influence of Hopkins which in turn ends up losing the stylistic use of language by Ajit Barua. Hem Barua as alleged by Ajit Barua merely gives a conventional title to the poem. This is very interesting to see Ajit Barua declare how his poem(s) should be interpreted by the readers. And, of course, he admits the necessity of explanatory notes to assist his poems so that the intended meaning evokes or the 'most suitable' interpretation occurs. A few lines from the original Assamese poem will showcase the stylistic use of language by Barua:

Kati mahor eta dhonwa-
ratipuwa
Kunwali-goli bhahe
Ei puwa jen otit jivan
(ebosor boyosia)
Punor japon kori uthilu. Karon
Jua bosor ene puwa
Uthisilu notun hamiyai.
(Ajit Barua)

The translation by Hem Barua for the two initial lines is: "It is a smoky morning in autumn in which the mists dissolve and float". The poet himself translates it as:

“A smoke-morning of the
month of Kati
Floats mist-melting.”

Ajit Barua declares that Hem Barua’s translation of the two initial lines keeps nothing of the original; the whole expression is destroyed and the image of the poem is ruined. Hem Barua’s rendering does not maintain any structural and formal (of form) compactness of the original lines of Ajit Barua and hence in the backward journey from the English translation of the original Assamese lines by Hem Barua to the original Assamese lines, a remarkable shift can be witnessed. Hem Barua’s lines will read as follows if translated into Assamese that sound as descriptive prose lines:

shorot kalor ek dhonwa bhora
ratipua
Jot kunwali gole aru bhahe

In this translation, mists float but in Ajit Barua’s poem, what is floating is the morning, not mists and this makes a great change in the imagery of the poem and hence affects the original meaning. Ajit Barua writes that the translation of Hem Barua in English will retranslate in Assamese as: “a smoky autumn morning where mists dissolve and float”. Hem Barua’s translation keeps nothing of the original as alleged by the poet himself; this may be due to either his ignorance of the poet’s conscious use of Hopkinsian pair words or inattentiveness to the stylistic or formal features of the poem. This results in a narrative set of sentences which hardly retains the terseness and compactness of the original poem. In addition, this again results in the violation of the poet’s purpose of writing that way; Ajit Barua wants to make a revolutionary step against the use of so-called ‘poetic language’ (poetese), which is narrative, emotive and lengthy. This is why the poet uses ‘smoke-morning’ instead of ‘smoky morning’ (*dhonwa- ratipua* instead of *dhonwa bhora ratipua*), ‘mist-melting’ instead of ‘melting of mist’ to give brevity and compactness to his poetry. As a result, Hem Barua’s translation could not do justice to the form of the poem. Ajit Barua’s efforts to make a holistic composition of poetry - that is a poem in entirety, including message and style- to consider both content and form is what creates these difficulties in translating

this poem. Language of poetry and its subject should not be separately considered because the constituents like rhythm and selection of words produce an incantatory effect on the ears; images in a poem open up an imaginative comprehension of the poem in the reader, and their (images) relation to the content or subject altogether make a poem. Thus, poetry is as much a form as it is content; one has to not only render the content in a translation but also introduce a form for it, so that both its soul and body unify. However, normally what is considered more important is the content. Many a times, in order to transfer the message, the form and the style of a poem are sacrificed in inter-lingual translation. But a translator’s responsibility is to familiarise both the content and style in the target language based on a deep observation of both form and content which may help to establish a similarity with the ST as much as possible. And this is not so easy because keeping both the considerations in mind while translating, and creating an aesthetic effect in the translation require something more than linguistic equivalence or accuracy of message.

Ajit Barua provides an explanation regarding his use of language in this poem. The word ‘kunwali-goli bhahe’ (‘mist-melting’) is a joint word or pair word -such use is rare or even absent in the contemporary Assamese poetic convention- which does not mean ‘mist melts and floats’, it rather is close to ‘morning is floating melting like mist’. The imagist condensation and concreteness is not maintained by Hem Barua in his writing of narrative prose lines for the original Assamese poem *Monkunwali Samay* in the English translation. This shows that establishing equivalence become cumbersome even for original poets like Hem Barua in this context. One more thing can be noticed in both the translations that, whereas Hem Barua uses autumn for *Kati* (an Assamese month) in the original, Ajit Barua keeps it *Kati* in the English translation which may be because the target reader in his mind is the Assamese readers themselves. Another phrase- *notun hamiyai* is a peculiar and innovative combination of words; the poet calls it a metaphysical conceit as well as a Hopkinsian pair word; it refers to ‘breathing in newness’, not air. To translate it, a translator must be aware of such

innovative assimilation of unrelated words. Again Ajit Barua criticises Hem Barua for ruining the phrase *samay bandh hoi jai* ('time stops'). This phrase is an allusion to Aldous Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop*; it is followed by a question mark in Ajit Barua's Assamese original (in his English translation too) to investigate the relevance of the statement. This is translated as 'time stands dead' by Hem Barua that fails its connotation with the book because this rendering does not indicate that it is used as an allusion and hence makes the meaning shift to a great extent. The biggest failure of Hem Barua's translation occurs when he literally translates the nursery rhyme excerpt which is served by the poet to indirectly refer to his childhood days: '*edinakhon eta dhekura kukure mukhot mongoh loi*'. It is translated by Hem Barua as:

One day
A dog with a bit of flesh
In his mouth
Gripped my heart with fear.

This has no link with the sequence of images; Hem Barua's translating in surface level or word by word without knowing the function of the lines ends up collapsing the whole poem into a poem of unrelated lines. The image of *kamrupor map niniya bhoy* (meaning 'fear out of not bringing the map of Kamrup') follows the excerpt by which the poet has assembled images that develop the scene of the poet's school days. Hem Barua's not realising the poet's technique, his intention and the poem's suitability to the target reader results in a poor translation of the original poem. This is how culture makes its impact on language. He could have easily taken any English school rhyme to fit in the place if he had been aware of the fact that it is an excerpt not an ordinary line of poetry. On the other hand the poet-translator makes a similar effect in the target text by substituting a cultural equivalent to serve his point. His translation of the excerpt is a replacement with 'twinkle twinkle little star' because it is not possible to keep the quote in either Roman Assamese in the English poem as Assamese has no power to serve as a quote in an English text due to the vast difference between the two languages as they belong to different language families. Not even a literal translation will suffice it;

that may be rather devastating as it has been seen what happens in Hem Barua's rendition by now. In such cases nothing can be wiser than picking up a cultural equivalent; Ajit Barua's use of 'twinkle twinkle little star' has proved to be successful in this regard. Ajit Barua feels that modern poetry, especially those dealing with personal experience characterised by a number of allusions, conceits and so on should be supported by explanatory notes. T.S. Eliot added notes to *The Waste Land* after the first publication of the poem at his publisher's request because otherwise it was only an assemblage of unrelated and complex ideas/expression. A consideration of the poet's (Ajit Barua) own translation will show how he has committed equal effect in the target text by choosing an English counterpart for the Assamese nursery rhyme:

"Twinkle twinkle little star"
The fear of not having brought
the map
Of Kamrup clutched my chest.

The metaphor of not having brought the map of Kamrup is his personal experience of the fear of a typical angry teacher who censored children; his failure for whatsoever reason, to bring a drawing of the map of Kamrup is told to merely suggest his school days. Hem Barua is a great poet. But he seems to be unsuccessful in the translation; this can be due to his inability to come out of the conventional writing of poetry. During his time the language of Assamese poetry was ruled by the romantic style. Contemporary poets of Hem Barua were still under the influence of romantic poetry; although Hem Barua was called the pioneer of Assamese modern poetry, the romantic indulgence was still present in his poetry. The modern systematised composition and substitution of emotional description with concrete images and consciously-chosen words are not noticed by Hem Barua and this is seen as the root cause of the failure of his translation of Ajit Barua. Ajit Barua has not spared Hem Barua of his harsh criticism for the 'disfigurement' of his poem: "I am shocked and hurt to read his translation which should better be called 'mutilation'". (Barua, 1994, p. 13)

Ajit Barua's poetry belongs to the modern era of Assamese poetry. His study of poets like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Mallarmé has moulded his poetry in both subject and form. For modern poets, singing of inner feelings out to the reader is not important; they present images and words rather than describing their feelings. This indirect way of connecting with the poet's inner self is more effective as it lets the reader strongly experience a poem mentally and intellectually, being a part of it. The imagist notion of presenting pictures for ideas sometimes does not let the reader understand it in entirety by failing them to establish a link among the sequence of shifting images. It makes poetry fragmentary but this dissipating sequence of images and themes finally makes up the central theme of the poem. For instance, Eliot's fragmentary images in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* speak of the doubts in Prufrock's mind, his inability to come to a decision. The recurring scenes are devised to make a link among these superficially un-linking thoughts. Ajit Barua's criticising Hem Barua is not because of his giving own meaning to the poem; it is because, Hem Barua, according to Ajit Barua has failed to put forward what the poet himself wants to mean. He announces that the relation between form and content is not realized by Hem Barua which results in a torturous translation of the poem. Ajit Barua believes that poetry is not a riddle to have only one definite meaning. It is what every reader admiringly and heartily means. Every reader can interpret a poem his way, but a translator should try to retain the meaning of the poet as closely as possible. He should keep the central idea of the poet in the target text. Keeping the invariant core should be the prime concern of a translation of literature. Hem Barua's translation, as apparent from the discussion and from the poet's allegations fails to keep the relationship of content and form. The whole failure is due to the translator's lack of understanding the poem as a holistic entity and as an inseparable combination of content and language.

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