Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Week 1 Lecture 3: Translation (Introduction); Nagamandala and Hunger of Stones
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Professor: Hello, and welcome to this session on Modern Indian Writing in Translation. In this session, we are going to discuss our concepts related to the idea and practice of translation. And I want to go back to the pre-colonial period to talk about some of the issues related to translation. I am going to draw quite heavily from an article titled 'Towards an Indian Theory of Translation.' And this article is written by Shibani Phukan, Shibani Phukan, and I am going to draw from the introductory paragraphs of this article, and see how valid and applicable these concepts are when you put them against the texts from periods ranging from the colonial to the contemporary. So we will begin with pre-colonial translation and the perspectives related to it.

The first point that I want to bring to your attention is this idea and I am quoting from the article. "In pre-colonial India, most translation activities were concerned with retelling Sanskrit texts in other Indian languages." So, we do have the concept of translation going back to the pre-colonial times. So Sanskrit texts were retold in other Indian languages and this is how the texts were disseminated across the Indian nation.

And she says the term retelling is noteworthy because "as Ayyappa Paniker points out, at this time translation was not understood as a literal word by word rendering of the original from the source language to the target language." So there was not transliteration happening at those moments. So it was a kind of a retelling, a transcreation, where there is a kind of scope for creative refashioning, but at the same time, there is a kind of a fidelity to the original, in tone and spirit.

So retelling is a concept that is pretty ancient, and it has been ongoing since the older periods. A lot of the texts chosen for retelling, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were regarded as much as Kavyas, that is poetic narratives, as they were regarded as scripture. Thus, transcreation or creative departure from the original text became the prevalent norm in pre-colonial India. So, this creative departure still remained loyal to the spirit of the content of the original and this kind of translation as practice was constant and consistent down the ages.

So these are some of the ideas that we need to keep in mind to understand the nature of modern Indian writing in translation or regional literatures in translation. So, this is the context. So translation is not new to the contemporary period, to these modern times. We have been retelling stories in other Indian languages. We were not kind of sticking to the English, English was not there because it is pre-colonial. So, translations did happen in those days as well.

Now, the other point that we need to remind ourselves is that, to understand the practice of translation in pre-colonial India, it is imperative, it is important to acknowledge the predominance of India's oral tradition. So there is a heavy oral tradition and we need to constantly remind ourselves of that. And in this context, I want to go back to Girish Karnad's Nagamandala. Mridula, would you like to talk about the context of oral tradition in relation to that particular play?

Student: So, in that play Nagamandala, you can see that he is basically using the myth that is prevalent in his area.

Professor: Yeah, the folklore.

Student: Folklore, but to some extent, you can see that he is not really sticking to what the actual folklore is.

Professor: Absolutely.

Student: He is harnessing it to the modern literature, which can which can be applicable to the modern sensibilities, and just it, it is a put in a way that is appealing to the modern generation, but there is also this tendency that, since he is doing it in that way, he is passing on the folklore also.

Professor: Yes.

Student: So, there are a lot of ways in which writers are employing the folk tales and all these stories and they are employing it in their current works. So, we are basically going back to our tradition, but still it is keeping up with the modern pace.

Professor: Yes, yes. So, if you want to kind of relate Nagamandala to the kind of ideas of retelling and transcreation and translation that we have been just talking about, there is a retelling, from what you have pointed out just now, Girish Karnad is retelling the folklore for

the benefit of the contemporary audience. So we are in that tradition of retellings, from the Sanskrit text to other languages, the texts are adapted for the various languages, diverse Indian languages. So that kind of narrative retelling is happening, structurally speaking in Karnad's Nagamandala.

Bu, embedded in that idea of retelling is also a kind of refashioning, isn't it? A reorienting, a kind of an adaptation for contemporary times. And if you kind of look at the character of Rani quite closely, she is very traditional, she is very conventional and she wants to do the right things, she wants to kind of function as a proper wife, do the cooking, and get the attention and affection of the husband and practically kind of fit into the role of the wife, which is expected of tradition and society. She wants to do that.

At the same time, at the same time, she is also modern in the sense that she questions the figure whom she thinks is her husband, who is kind of toying with her. So, the moments in the play in which she kind of very righteously, with righteous anger, questions the husband are very modern. And even the solution that we get, the solution to the dilemma is also very modern, even in its narrative structure. So, this is a perfect example or a very good example of the kind of tradition of retelling that we have in the Indian indigenous tradition.

So this course, if you remember, is also interested in the local traditions, the way stories are told in India on the various Indian specialities, various pockets of space, regional space across the landscape of India. So you have a perfect example in Nagamandala.

The other point that is interesting to note is that in an oral tradition, the retelling of texts inevitably involves the practice of transcreation, of taking linguistic as well as thematic liberties with the original.

So there are creative departures, both in terms of language, as well as in terms of theme. You are also as a translator, as a translator, you are also kind of playing with the content, which is what Karnad does, right, when he kind of offers certain dialogues to Rani. So there is narrative as well as conceptual liberties taken with the original.

And somewhere in this article Shibani quotes AK Ramanujan and AK Ramanujan observes that a translation has to be true to the translator. A translation has to be true to the translator no less than to the original. And that this involved, this kind of being true to the translator as well as to the original involved a double allegiance, your loyalties are dual, a double allegiance. Indeed, several double allegiances, like loyalties, become multiple. You have to

stay true to the original, you have to stay true to the regional language, the local language, so several things are at play. Several issues are at stake here.

So it's not only all right for a translation, or for a translator, to take liberties with the language, but it is also all right, legitimate, for the translator and the translation to take liberties with the theme. So once again, Karnad is very helpful in this regard because he has dual allegiances, if you apply it, he has an allegiance to tradition, the folklore, the continuity of certain principles associated with the woman, with the family, with the society. He has allegiances towards that as well as allegiances towards the contemporary, the modern, the feminist, where the rights of the female becomes as important, right, as the principles which structure a wife, a mother, a girl. So, these dual allegiances come through in Karnad's adaptation, transcreation and retelling. You can use several words to define it. And it becomes very interesting because Karnad has translated his own work. We do not have another figure coming in between the original creator and the translator.

Okay, the other point that I want to bring to the attention of the audience is this, and Shibani says that perpetually changing texts were the norm, texts which spoke about the same thing, change shape, across the centuries if the same text was kind of retold but also across the regional landscapes. So, no two stories with the same content look the same in two different regional specialties. So, texts constantly change the norm, perpetually changing texts were the norm, and consequently as K Sachidanandam observes, the original has never been specially privileged.

So this is a very key tenet. The key tenet of translation is that the original text has never been specially privileged. It is not sacrosanct, it is not sacred. There is nothing sacrosanct about the original. Of course, I mean we kind of appreciate the original in the sense that it is offering something unique. But it is no more unique than a translation or a retelling or a transcreation. So, a translation, a retelling is as unique or as sacrosanct as the original and the translator's position has never been secondary in India.

So this is her argument. The translator's position has never been secondary in India, so this is Shibani's argument. There are other arguments which say that translators have been looked down upon and that is the contemporary kind of trend. If you kind of read some of the perspectives of translators, they believe that they are secondary to the original creators and translation is an activity does not get its due limelight.

But several festivals are kind of trying to recuperate and draw attention to these are translated works and I have a couple of festivals that I can point out— the Jaipur Literary Festival, Gateway Literary Festival, JCB literature prize, these are all given to translated works. So, these new contemporary award bodies and literature festivals are trying to bring the attention back to these important translations. So that is something we need to keep in mind.

And Rehman, a critic says that, this field, this field of Indian literatures in translation is diverse because you get voices across the nation, not only from certain regions which get attention all the time, but across the landscape of India. It is very heterogeneous, we get a wide array of concepts, themes and narrative forms and it's very distinct in that regard. There is still no homogenizing subtext to these diverse voices. So these are some of the ideas that we can keep in mind when we think about translation.

Now, let us think about the colonial context of translation. So, so far, we have talked about pre-colonial context, let us think about the colonial context of translation. So I have a critic here for you, Harish Trivedi. Harish Trivedi points out in the *Introduction to post-colonial translation*, that these renderings, these translations in that period, in the colonial period, displayed I quote, "a common translatorial temptation to erase much that is culturally specific and to sanitize the text, so as to gain for them acceptability in the west."

So the argument put forth by Harish Trivedi is that translations in the colonial period erased the specificity, the regional specificity, the indigenous specificity, so that it becomes easily readable for the western audience. So, that is, that is the kind of criticism levelled against translations that were undertaken in that period. And it is very interesting to kind of try to understand that concept because we have for our course we have Tagore. We have Tagore's 'Hunger of Stones', which was translated in that colonial period itself. But the text that we read is Amitav Ghosh's, it's a post-colonial translation. And I think it will be very, very useful to kind of compare that colonial translation with this post colonial translation that we have as the text for our course and see what are the differences.

When you read the story, did you see any elements in the translation which kind of took you back to the period? And told you that, yes, there is some kind of accommodation going on, which would have appeased the colonial administration. Do you understand my question?

Student: Yes, I did understand your question. But I don't know how to respond to that question, because when I read this piece, I just read this as any translated text. I did not keep

in mind that you have this colonial translation as well as post colonial translation. I have a mixed feeling about what this critic has pointed out, that we, these translated texts are trying to give, they are trying really hard to accommodate things that can be accepted by the western people. In this text, I do not really see anything that can be said as….

Professor: Which are kind of feeding the expected stereotypes of the British audience?

Student: Yes. You have a lot of, when you read this text, definitely there is this oriental stereotype that is present in the text. But you have to keep in mind the era that this, that the time when Tagore has written it, and maybe...

Professor: Okay, yeah. Okay, good. I can see your mind working and come to a kind of a different position from the one you took to begin with. There is also this idea which I will kind of share with the audience, then I will go back to that idea that you were mentioning. So, even English translations, I am again quoting from Shibani's article, "even English translations by acclaimed Indian authors such as Rabindranath Tagore, of Indian language text, display a disturbing tendency to tacitly comply with Western literary standards or expectations, as Mahasweta Sengupta has pointed out".

I will read this again, even English translations by acclaimed Indian authors such as Rabindranath Tagore, of Indian language text, display a disturbing tendency to tacitly, subtly, quietly, comply, agree with, comply with western literary standards or expectations, as Mahasweta Sengupta has pointed out. So, what Mahasweta Sengupta is pointing out is that even Tagore tacitly, indirectly, subtly complies with western stereotypes of Indian way of life, to put it very simply.

So, we have like, very disturbing criticisms being levelled at our beloved Indian writer, Rabindranath Tagore. And I want to kind of go back to 'The Hunger of Stones' and see what are some of the major stereotypes which come through in this particular story. And the major stereotype is very obviously, the Persian women. The Persian Women in that Marble Palace of Pleasure. That is a very classic example, the standard example of orientalism, very Said-ian in the representation of femininity.

So if you want to read something from this story, that would be great because that is exactly what we are talking about here. But, having said that, I also want to suggest that that's not the full story. That is not the full story. We do have stereotypes. But there are also other things going on, which destabilize perhaps, the function of such stereotypes. So why don't you

begin by reading certain excerpts from the story which you think are related to this kind of idea, wherein Tagore is perhaps tacitly feeding the expected images?

Student: “She was from Arabia, her firm, rounded arm, looking as it were curved from marble showed below her broad sleeve, a fine veil hung down from her cap across her face. And a curved dagger glinted in her waistbands.”

Professor: Yeah, yeah.

Student: And then you have references where he compares her to a she-serpent and also there is, he goes on describing her physical beauty. And maybe to some extent we get an idea that when we think about her, we tend to think that she is a voluptuous figure.

In that regard, you may see that you can, you can read it like, you can see that there are a lot of stereotypical ideas that are present in this text. But I don’t know to what extent we can say that Tagore has included this solely because he wants to, he wants to appease the foreign audience.

Professor: There is one very important thing which we need to understand is that the central female characters in the story are not Indian women.

Student: Yes.

Professor: They are not Indian origin women. They are transported to this palace of pleasure from outside of the Indian nation. So that is, that is something we need to remember. So they are objects, they are objects who have been snatched from their homelands by this Emperor, Shah Mohamed, and kept as prisoners in his palace for his pleasure. So, we have all these exotic images also transported and brought to this Indian spatiality and we need to see it in that larger context of that particular administration over which Shah Mohammed was ruling.

So while there is exoticism, it is a kind of a negative exoticism that we get, it is not a very positive exoticism, in the sense that we are told very explicitly that these are incarcerated figures wanting to get out, wanting to get out from the beautiful cages of pleasure. So, while these women are being narrated, we are also indirectly told about the nature of the emperor himself in a very roundabout way.

So there is a critique as well, there is a critique as well directed at this figure who is responsible for these women being here as spirits or as human figures of flesh and blood. So,

you are right in the sense that we can't see them as distinct images and kind of directly lay the burden of blame at Tagore's feet. So, these figures or traces of these figures have a specific function to perform in the story. And that is connected with the political power of this particular ruler.

And now, we also need to see how these female figures are perceived by a very anglicised Indian tax collector. So, what these figures do is basically trap that man, spiritually and physically. So it is a very complicated, entangled set of ideas and figures and one thing becomes clear is that Tagore is kind of critiquing or at least drawing our attention to two different power structures— two or three different power structures, we have the Nizam of Hyderabad as well and then we have the Shah Muhammad there too, and then we have the East India Company.

So, several power structures are there, and this tax collector is caught across these networks of power. And at the heart of it are these spirit-like women playing havoc. So Tagore doesn't seem to have anything positive to say about all these various colonial structures, be it Shah Muhammad the two or the East India Company, which is represented by this, this man who is caught in that administration and is kind of signified in the outfit that he dons, adopts.

So I want to read one particular quotation from the story and kind of connect it with the oriental stereotype as well. "A sudden whirlwind swept down carrying the sand of Shusta and dead leaves from the Aravallis like a pennant, and blew away my jacket and my hat. They went cartwheeling through the air, a sweet course of laughter swirled along with them, rising through several octaves, sounding every note on the scale of derision, until finally it dissolved into the sunset."

So, for me, this is the most important or one of the most important passages in the story where you can see elements from nature kind of attacking this figure by taking away his English clothing, accessories, the hat and the jacket. And while that is happening, the women are laughing, the spirits are laughing at him. So we have, we have a bunch of female prisoners laughing at the contemporary prisoner of the English administration.

You see there are several things ongoing here, so that they are kind of fighting it amongst them and we are becoming spectators, watching the spectacle, one of the beautiful spectacle represented by the woman, the central female character, and other is the very professional

looking English man who is kind of taken to pieces at the end of the story by the influence of these exotic women

.So it is not a very simplistic comment, I think it is a very simplistic comment to say that Tagore is kind of feeding the western need to see India in a particular way. Because India is not directly kind of captured. India in its essence, if there is one, is not directly captured in this particular story. He is not talking about the spirit of India, he is talking about how India is kind of under different power structures. So that is the major narrative trajectory. Yeah, the ideological trajectory running through this story.

So, it is very useful however to kind of bring all these criticisms and see how it works in relation to a particular story and see for yourself, whether it makes sense or not, instead of kind of simply accepting certain ideas. There is another point, there is another point and with this point I will try to kind of sum up Tagore and move on. And this is by Tejaswini Niranjana. Tejaswini Niranjana from her work citing 'Translation, history, post-structuralism under colonial context', citing translation.

And she says the desire to domesticate was accompanied in colonial context, the desire to domesticate was accompanied by a wish to present the text, or its subject matter as exotica. Such methods were of course a part of a larger scheme of categorizing the Orient as the other in order to justify the colonial enterprise of the West. So you can see the kind of ideological work translations performed, translations which were commissioned at the behest of the English administration, the British administration.

Translation during colonialism does produce strategies of containment and by employing certain modes of representing the other, which it thereby also brings into being, translation reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonized, hegemonic versions of the colonized. So, translation is shaping the subject, it is shaping the Indian subject for example. And that becomes the real identity, you understand. So that may not be the real identity but translation creates such identities, such versions of the colonized figures.

So, if you want to apply this to Tagore's 'The Hunger of Stones', what are the kind of results would you get?

Student: Not just in case of exoticization of the women, we can also see that there is an exoticization of this landscape and be it this marble palace and other things. In that sense, you can say that there is definitely a different kind of perspective that is given to the Western

people. And that reinforces their idea that they have to come and civilise, so it is to the benefit of civilised people. So we cannot really say to what extent Tagore has played to help and pave the way for this ideology, but when you read it now, you understand that was, that is present. Definitely, there is these, there are these elements present. So I think it is all because of how we revisit these texts. Maybe, when you have read this text at that point of time, it would have given you a different perspective.

Professor: We should also think about the original Bengali story of 'The Hunger of Stones'. So, even Tagore's story of the marble palace is a kind of a refashioning of history, a previous Emperor Shah Muhammad. So he is retelling history as fiction in his story. So there is a kind of a retelling happening in Tagore's story, a reorientation happening in Tagore's story.

And you might want to question the motivations if you want to as to why that era was represented through the Marble Palace and the Persian women. So the choice, Tagore's choice of recapturing Shah Muhammad is basically to sketch his Marble Palace and the women. So that choice of incidents and aspects is very interesting. Yeah.

So I do not think we can take this idea further because that would be a different subject altogether. But I want to come back to that narrative of the marble palace. Mridula, would you pick out that description and read it for us from the story?

Student: "There was this time once when many flames of unfulfilled desire and demented lust had teemed and flared inside that palace. Every block of stone within it is still hungry, still athirst from the curse of that anguish and frustrated longing. Whenever they find a living human being within their grasp, they seek to devour him like ravening demons. Of all the people who had spent three nights in that place, Meher Ali was the only one who had emerged alive, although he too had lost his reason. No one else has ever been able to elude this grasp."

Professor: Okay. So, as you were reading this passage, I was thinking about how this palace becomes a representation perhaps of the colonized population themselves. The palace itself could represent the nation, how it is caged and exploited. Under the clutches of a colonizer, it could also work, if you want to see it that way. So, it is very problematic. It is very problematic if you just give one very simple explanation of these figures as exotica.

There are different ways you can even kind of interpret the meaning. So, the Marble Palace is very interesting in that regard, it could it could stand for all these colonized people, it could

stand for all these exploited women, it could also stand for the idea that Shah Muhammed's fall lay in the fact that he kind of emphasized pleasure over any kind of reasonable administration. So it can represent multiple ideas in this story, isn't it?

So, if I go back to Tejaswini's quote, such methods were of course a part of a larger scheme of categorizing the Orient as other, in order to justify the colonial enterprise of the West. Yes, it may be true, it may be true in several occasions, in Shah Muhammed the Two's reign or in Niizam's reign or any ruler's reign in India, be it Hindu, Muslim or any other religious leader's rule could be categorized as the other, so that the western inroads could be made into this particular nation.

You just have to refashion them in a particular way in order to demonize them, turn them into monsters, and you come into the country and invade it. So these narratives become ideological constructs, which gives you legitimacy to contain, to oppress the other. So, I think it is very useful to look at concepts related to translation in the pre-colonial, in the colonial period, and kind of apply these theories to various texts and see the results. The results will be heterogeneous and I think therein lies the benefit of such exercises. There is no one homogenous truth or core translation principle.

So thank you for your attention. Thank you Mridula for your thoughts. We will catch up with you in the next session.