Translating Poetry (With Special Reference to Punjabi Poetry): Challenges and Possibilities

Abstract

Translating literary works has always been more problematic than translating other types of text because literary works have specific values namely the aesthetic and expressive values. The aesthetic values emphasize diction, figurative language, metaphors, etc. Whereas the expressive delineates the thought, process of thought, emotion of the writer etc. Hence the translator has to try his best to transfer these specific values into the target language (TL). As one genre of literature, poetry has something special compared to the others. In a poem, the essence of beauty is not only achieved with the selection of words and figurative language but also with the creation of rhythm, rhyme, meter, and some other specific expressions and structures. In short, the translation of poetry needs 'something more' than translating other genres of literature. This paper will focus on the challenges which a translator faces while translating poetry with special reference to Punjabi Poetry (the findings are that Punjabi syntax is very much different from English. It is an accented language,has no capitals or lower cases, sentence structure is very loose and extremely flexible heavily accented than English)and the theories of translation given by J.C. Catford, Eugene A. Nida and Peter Newmark.The linguistic problems include the collocation and obscured syntactic structure. The aesthetic and literary problems are related with poetic structure, metaphorical expressions, and sounds.Whereasthe socio-cultural issues arise when the translator translates expressions containing the four major cultural categories i.e. ideas,ecology, behavior, and products. However the final analysis will prove that though translating poetry is empirically possibleand logically impossible yet it is challenging and fascinating.

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Introduction

Translation is an important activity in life which is as old as the history of literary civilization. It is inherent in all human acts. In the twenty-first century with thousands of languages in the world, translation has become an immensely crucial activity and it has acquired added significance in the present age of glocalization by cutting short the distance and differences between countries and cultures. Along with the oral interpretations, literary translation has also assumed more and more significance. At one point of time, literary translation was considered a marginal and mechanical activity, rather than creative or of critical contemplation. But since the past century, literary translation has drawn a great scholastic attention. The introduction of comparative literature studies and modem language theories in the university curriculum shows the vital importance of translation in the present context. It is because of Translation that the languages and literatures that were looked down as inferior and unimportant have gained worldwide recognition.

Translation, in fact, is an activity of replacing a text in one language with a text in another. In short, it begins from one language i.e. the source language (SL) and gets transferred to the second or target language (TL). As Chakraborty states, "The purpose of translation is primarily to carry the theme and the metatheme of a SL text into a text written in another language i.e. TL"[1] (2002: 41). At its simplest, translation is a transference of meaning from the Source Language (SL) text to the

Target Language (TL) text. However, translation as an activity is not so easy or simple as the word may convey.

Aim of the Study

In the present times with the thousands of languages in the world, translation has become an immensely crucial and significant activity for cutting short the cultural distances. The introduction of comparative literature studies in the Universities proves that the literary translation has drawn a great scholastic attention in the twenty first century. It is because of translation that languages and literatures of less importance have started gaining recognition in the world

Meaning is the main goal in translation hence there is not much difficulty in non-literary translation. But the translation of literature poses a lot of problems as it involves, not only the transference of meaning but also a host of associations charged with meaning to be translated from the SL into the TL. As far as poetry is concerned, the problem is compounded. Robert Frost, the great American poet, once remarked that 'poetry itself is that which is lost intranslation'. In fact, Poetry resists translation due to linguistic and cultural constraints. A translator of poetry faces the twin problems of transferring as well as translating. JayantaMahapatra, a practicing poet and a translator observes in this regard: "It is generally believed that a verse translation is itself poetry or not is a questionable matter. Any poem will not move fluently into translation, my own experience reveals the many hazards and difficulties encountered in the process"[2]. Hence a translation of creative literature entails on the translator an intricate exercise of comprehending and examining the message in the SL, decodifying the codified message and then recodifying it again in the target language.

In translating poetry, the linguistic constraints pertain to the stylistic, structural, lexical and situational level. Rhythm, alliteration, onomatopoeia are intrinsic merits of any good piece of poetry. It is integral to poetic form. But some poems by their versification are not amendable to translation as:

ੳ ਅ ੲ ਸ ਹ ਬੋਲਣਾ, ਕਦੇ ਨਾ ਡੋਲਣਾ

(By uttering these words one never gets confused in ones thoughts)

Such poems where there is verbal play on the alphabets of a particular language cannot be rendered into any other language. Again, there are poems with a special internal rhyme scheme which poses an insurmountable hurdle in translation. A rhyme is a case in point:

ਮੇਰੀ ਛਿਪੇ ਰਹਿਣ ਦੀ ਚਾਹ ਤੇ ਛਿਪ ਟੁਰ ਜਾਣ ਦੀ
ਹਾਂ। ਪੂਰੀ ਹੁੰਦੀਨਾਂਮੈਂ ਤਰਲੇ ਲੈ ਰਿਹਾ
(ਬਿਨਫਸ਼ਾਦਾ ਫੁੱਲ, ਭਾਈਵੀਰਸਿੰਘ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 6)

(The flower wants to die without coming into the eyes of the beholder but alas! this wish gets never fulfilled as the fragrance tells everyone the locale of the flower)

Written in an internal rhyme scheme, the word `Chah of first line with `Nah' in the second line is almost impossible to translate as it is in English. A personal or language based poem allows no translation.

Translation is a linguistic as well as a cultural activity and deals not only with the lexical equivalents of words of one language into another, but also with the communication of meaning. Each word of SL vibrates with memory, feelings, associations and literary echoes so it is hard to find an exact equivalence, of a SL word in the TL. This is the reason that absolute or complete translation is difficult. All languages are to some an extent culture-orientated and the absence of the exact words between the two languages create complication of translating culture-based words .Hence the translation of colloquial utterances, culture words, slangs and proverbs becomes quite difficult:

ਛੱਡਤ੍ਰਿੰਝਣ
ਕਰ ਸੁੰਞਾਵਿਹੜਾ
ਤੁਰ ਤੁਰ ਜਾਵਨ ਸਈਆਂ
ਇੱਕਗਈਆਂਇੱਕਡੋਲੇ ਚੜੀਆ
ਇੱਕਦਾਜ ਸਮੇਟਣ ਪਈਆਂ
ਅਸਾਭਿਜਾਣਾ
ਚੋਲਣਆਇਆ
ਪਰਚਰਖਾਕਿਉਂ ਚਾਈਏ?
ਉਨੀਆਂਤੰਦਾਂਆਪਣੀਆਂ ਨੇ
ਜਿੰਨੀਆਂਕੱਤੀਆਂਗਈਆਂ।
(ਧਨੀਰਾਮਚੁਾਤ੍ਰਿਕ, ਦੋਹੜੇ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 11)

(The young girls leave the courtyard deserted when get married, some have already gone to in-laws, some are collecting dowry and the poet says even he has to go as his owner has also reached but he could not weave enough. Metaphorically, each one carries only that which is in his lot.)

The words like Trinjan, Sunja, dola, Daaj, Dolan, chaiya, tandan, katian are cultural words. The last couplet is a 'Rubaee' by Dhani Ram Chatrik which is a proverb, an aphorism of Punjabi cultural and social background. The rhyme scheme of the first, second and the fourth line i.e. , ਸਈਆਂ, ਪਈਆਂਗਈਆਂ (ਤੁਖਕਜ਼ਅ,ਬੁਖਕਜ਼ਅ,ਪੁਖਕਜ਼ਅ) is difficult to frame in English in the same order.

ਆਖ ਸੁ ਨੀਖਾਲਏ ਟੁੱਕ,
ਹਿਜਰਾਂਦਾਪੱਕਿਆ,
ਲੇਖਾ ਦੇ ਨੀ ਪੁੱਠੜੇ ਤਵੇ।
ਚੱਟਲਏ ਤਰੇਲ ਲੂਭੀ
ਗਮਾਂ ਦੇ ਗੁਲਾਬਤੋਂਨੀ,
ਕਾਲਜੇ ਨੂੰ ਹੌਸਲਾਰਵੇ।
(ਬਿਰਹੋ ਦੀ ਰੜਕ, ਸ਼ਿਵ ਕੁਮਾਰ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 81

(The poet tells the listener that he should convey to his beloved that she should eat the food cooked out of the pangs of their separation as their fates are reverted so she should lick the salt from the rose of his pain so that his heart should get some consolation)

Word like Su, tuk, puthrey, kalja is a slang of majha region and the literal translation of these words in English is difficult

The issue of translation becomes more challenging in poetry because of the quality of `concreteness, vividness and exuberance' as opposed to informative literature. Poetry echoes 'emotional,psychological and imaginative' experiences which are expressed in figures of speech such as

metaphor, simile, images, symbols, etc. In poetry, the poet uses language dialectically in the form of features like irony, paradox, conceit, etc. Together, these two things lead to infinite suggestiveness. Then, there is the integrated quality of music in poetry that finds utterance in the `phonetic sounds and matrix of poetry'. The translator of poetry thus does not have to translatejust the word but the 'import of the word in a certain milieu'. He does not have to give a line of a poem but the sense that emerges from the whole of it.

ਮੈਂਅੱਗ ਤੁਰੀ ਪਰਦੇਸ

ਨੀ ਸਈਓ

ਅੱਗ ਤੁਰੀ ਪਰਦੇਸ।

(ਲੂਣਾ, ਸ਼ਿਵ ਕੁਮਾਰ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 72)

(Shiv Kumar- the poet is the mouthpiece of young queen Luna who has been married to an old king Salwan.She is symbolically the fire and this fire is going to another place now)

The repetition and the music of the word 'aggturipardes'intensify the state of mind of the interlocutor, the same music and emotional outburst cannot be expressed in translation.

ਕੀਕੋਈਮਾਣਕਰੇ ਜੀਵਨ ਤੇ,

ਕੀਕੋਈਗੱਲਮਕਾਵੇ,

ਪਿਆਰ ਤੇਰਾ ਜੀਵਨਵਿੱਚਮੈਨੂੰ

ਕੁੱਲ ਏਨਾਂ ਚਿਰਮਿਲਿਆ।

ਜੇਹਾੜ ਦੀ ਰੁੱਤੇ,

ਜਿਉਂ ਥੱਲ ਭੁਜਦੇ ਸਿਖਰ ਦੁਪਹਿਰੇ,

ਇੱਕਕਿ�konਕੇ ਦੇ ਉਤਖ

ਅੱਕ-ਕਕੜੀਦਾਫੰਡਾ ਉਡਦਾ

ਪੱਲ- ਛਿਣਛਾਕਰਜਾਵੇ।

(ਕੀਕੋਈਮਾਣਕਰੇ ਜੀਵਨ ਤੇ, ਤਾਰਾਸਿੰਘ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 69)

(one should not be proud of one's life .I got your love only for the short period of time .It was like when the desert gets hot during two months of Jeth and Haar)

This is a Homeric simile and the theme is the short lived life of love. ਅੱਕ-ਕਕੜੀਦਾਫੰਡਾ ਉਡਦਾਪੱਲ- ਛਿਣ ਨਾ ਕਰਜਾਵੇ [The momentary love of the beloved was like the flock of caltropis plant which created shadow in the deserted life of the lover. An expression of ਅੱਕ-ਕਕੜੀਦਾਫੰਡਾ and the flock of caltrops plant does not justify the poetic essence.

It is hard to arrest the music of some of the verses of poets like Bhai Veer Singh's "Kailon de gal lagi vail" the music created by the repetition of the initial (Hai) sound found.

ਹਾਇ, ਨਾ ਧਰੀਕ ਸਾਨੂੰ,

ਹਾਇ, ਵੇ ਨਾ ਮਾਰਖਿੱਚਾਂ,

ਹਾਇ, ਨਾ ਵਿਛੋੜ

ਗਲਲੱਗਿਆ ਨੂੰ ਪਾਪੀਆਂ।

(ਭਾਈਵੀਰਸਿੰਘ, ਕੇਲੋਂ ਦੇ ਗਲਲੱਗੀ ਵੇਲ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 3)

(The creeper plant requests that it should not be forcibly separated from its support)

Similarly Surjit Pattar's "Khat" in which the word-music is created by rhymes and the repetition of the word "khat" is difficult to recapture in English. Likewise, in

ਖਤਾਂ ਦੀ ਉਡੀਕ

ਇਸ ਨਗਰੀ ਤੇਰਾਂਜੀਨਹੀਲਗਦਾ।

ਇੱਕਚੜੂਦੀਇਕਲਹਿੰਦੀ ਹੈ

ਤੈਨੂੰ ਰੋਜ ਉਡੀਕਖਤਾਂ ਦੀ

ਸਿਖਰ ਦੁਪਹਿਰੇ ਰਹਿੰਦੀ ਹੈ।

ਖਤਆਵੇਗਾਬਹੁਤ ਕੁਵੇਲੇ

ਧਰਤੀਆਂਲੰਮੀਛਾਦਾਖਤ

ਚੁਪ ਦੇ ਸਫਿਆਂ ਉਤੇ ਲਿਖਿਆ

ਉਜੜੀ ਸੰਨ ਸਰਾਂਦਾਖਤ

ਇਕ ਬੇਨਕਸ਼ਖਿਆਲਦਾਲਿਖਿਆ

ਤੇਰੇ ਅਸਲੀ ਨਾਂ ਦਾਖਤ

ਲੋਕਕਹਿਣਗੇ ਕਬਰਦਾਖਤ ਹੈ

ਤੂੰ ਆਖੇਂਗਾ ਮਾਦਾਖਤ

(ਸੁਰਜੀਤਪਾਤਰ, ਖਤਾਂ ਦੀ ਉਡੀਕ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 91)

(The poet doesn't want to live in that town where he is waiting for his letter. The letter is sometimes like his beloved, sometimes like his mother and sometimes like his death)

It is in the wake of such difficulties faced by the translators that different theories were put forward to tackle them. There are three major names in the theory of translation namely, J.C. Catford, Eugene A. Nida and Peter Newmark.

Catford (b. 1917) in his A Linguistic Theory of Translation (1965), defines 'translation as the substitution of source language text material by the comparable target language material'. He defines translation as an 'equivalence relation'. He (1965: 21) states that "the central problem of translation practice is that of finding TL translation equivalents. The core of translation theory isthat of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence"3 Catford's theory of translation is a theory of 'meaning'. He thinks of meaning as 'the property of language', that is to say, a source language text has a source language meaning and a target language text has a target language meaning. His theory also brings out the distinction between 'translation and transference'. He clearly states that source language texts are neither absolutely translatable nor absolutely untranslatable. Detailing the point, he mentions two kinds of untranslatability: a) Linguistic untranslatability and b) cultural untranslatability. Linguistic untranslatability occurs when there is 'no formal correspondence between the source language and the target language'. This occurs due to oligosemy i.e., an item having a restricted sense, for example the word `Gidha' in Punjabi refers to a peculiar dance activity executed by female folk on special social occasions, and it has no lexical parallel in English. Similarly, 'cultural untranslatability arises when a situational trait peculiar to the source language text is missing from the culture of the target language text', for example, the expression 'Maouli' that is to tie a piece of thread on the wrist of someone on an auspicious occasion is absent from the culturally different language like English.

Second significant theorist is Eugene A. Nida (b. 1914), who talks about the 'descriptive approach of translation process'. His theory focuses on 'the receptor'. He considers the `pragmatic or emotive meaning as the most important facet in transferring the message from one language to another'. His theory brings out two sets of equivalence i.e. 'formal and dynamic'. Formal equivalence 'concentrates on the message', while 'dynamic equivalence is receptor

oriented'. He is of the view that the 'eventual purpose of translation should be to make it as original as possible'.

The third important theorist is Peter Newmark (b.1916). His contribution is his detailed categorization in his 'Approaches to Translation' (1981) between 'semantic vs. communicative' translation. Semantic translation according to him focuses 'primarily on the semantic context of the source text' and the 'communicative translation makes the comprehension and response of receptors as its focal point'. This theory provides a frame of principles for translating and criticizing translations. He (1988: 20) talks about three functions of language: 1) Expressive function, which is author centered. 2) Vocative function, which is reader centered. 3) Informative function, which gives the extra linguistic information, context of the text. Newmark's theory seems best for the translation of any sort of text as all translators are to some extent both communicative and semantic.

In the light of these theories it can be concluded that translation is not only a mechanical activity but a creative and cultural one also. It is true that there are many challenges while dealing with poetry as it evokes not only a visual image in the mind of the reader ' but delineates the sounds, rhythms, words, images, symbols also. All of these together produce a meaning but it is also a fact that no two languages function alike. The New Critics state that 'text' is an 'autonomous unit' and no 'two readings are identical', in the same manner no translator can claim that he has perceived the poet's meaning 'completely and accurately'.

This theory raises a problem as how to get at the poet's meaning and put the same to translation. Even Jakobson says that rendering a poem into another language becomes an act of 'creative transposition,' rather than translation. Language is the basis of translation and poetry is a special kind of language with ornamental words based on lyricism, puns, equivocations, idioms and other items that operate at the lexical level. These are the areas where a literary translator is `beset with insurmountable' difficulties. 'Lexical gaps' that exist between languages owing to cultural, social and historical background and the problem of finding one-to-one equivalents makes translation of poetry a difficult and complicated exercise. Even if one-to-one equivalents in SL and TL are available, translation of poetry becomes difficult when it is done by 'precision without any imagination and context'.

ਸ਼ਾਇਦਪਿਆਰ –ਦੀਪ ਦੀ ਬੁਨਿਆਦ ਉਹ ਬਣੇ,
ਟੁੱਟਜੇ ਮੇਰੇ ਅਰਸ਼ ਚੋ ਤਾਰਾਕਿਸੇ ਨੂੰ ਕੀ?
(ਤੇਰਾਇੱਕਹੀਦਿਲ ਹੈ ਜਾਂ ਦੋ?ਬਾਵਾਬਲਵੰਤਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀਪੰਨਾ 49)

Pun on the word, "piyar-deep" which means 'candle' of love' or an 'island of love' cannot be substituted in the same manner in English.

ਕਿਤਨਾਫਿਕਰ ਹੈ ਇਹਨਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਗੁਆਂਢੀ ਦੀ ਧੀਦਾ, ਹਮਸਾਏ ਦੇ ਪੁਤ ਦਾ,
ਕਿੰਝਰਖਦੇ ਨੇ ਧਿਆਨ, ਆਪਣੇ ਕੰਮਾ ਦੇ ਵੇਲਾਵੀਕਿੰਝ ਖਰਚ ਜਾਨ
ਰਖਵਾਲੀਆਂਨਿਬਾਹਨ
(ਰਾਖੇ, ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਾਪ੍ਰੀਤਮ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 39)

It is satire in which the poetess has hit upon the neighbours who always keep a vigil on the daughters and sons of others. Though their time is wasted yet they do this security job voluntarily. Such an act cannot be understood in English culture.

`SaidaTeSabjan is a ballad in Punjabi folk history which has no recognition in English)

ਮਲਬਨੇਰਾ ਸਬਜ਼ਾਂਬੈਠੀ,
ਰਾਹ ਸੈਦੇ ਦਾ ਵੇਖੇ।
ਕੰਨਘੋੜੇ ਦੀਆਂਟਾਪਾਂਵੇਖੇ,
ਦਿਲਵਿੱਚਕਰਦੀ ਲੇਖੇ।
(ਸੈਦਾਂ ਤੇ ਸਬਜ਼ਾਂ, ਮੋਹਨਸਿੰਘ, ਕਾਵਿਕੀਰਤੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 30)

In the context of the above observations it can be said that all languages develop through its interaction with culture on the 'planes of time and space'. Society and culture nurture it. Hence no two languages can be so similar as to represent the same social reality. This difference and distinction between the two languages poses major problems for the translator. Words in SL language embody a set of 'associations and connotations' which are simply 'non-transferable' in TL language. Some critics have the opinion that poetic art is technically 'untransferable and linguistically untranslatable' to a large extent.

Though translation of poetry poses certain problems yet it does not mean that poetry is untranslatable. A translator of poetry must note that translation is an open-ended process. No translation is final and that there can only be a good translation or a bad translation' but never the 'best translation'. Further, a translator of poetry should have the 'feel' of the poem and must `grasp' the message it conveys. He should also understand the form of poetry—the meter, the rhyme scheme, alliteration and organization of lines. Moreover, he has to be true to the invariant core of the text i.e. the theme and the tone so as to transfer the 'crux' of the poem from the SL to the TL. On the top he must be 'well-versed in the nuances' of both the language systems.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that the translation of poetry is 'empirically possible' but 'logically impossible'. The 'style and sense' in good poetry are so well blended that at the surface level it appears almost untranslatable but this is what makes the translation of poetry really challenging and fascinating.

Primary Source

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Notes

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