Chapter 1
Rewriting the “Vanishing Present”: Translation, Mediation, and Cultural Evolution

Afrinul Haque Khan
Ranchi University, India

ABSTRACT

The present paper explores how the translators mediate between languages and cultures to rewrite the classical texts, tucked away in the margins and peripheries, and being incomprehensible and inaccessible to the western world on account of their language and location. The present study also examines how the translator’s act of “rewriting” empowers the translated text and also the culture it performs, promotes an understanding of other cultures and eventually enables the evolution of a “universal culture.”

INTRODUCTION

I do not want to stay in a house with all its windows and doors shut. I want a house with all its windows and doors open where the cultural breezes of all lands and nations blow through my house.

Mahatma Gandhi (as cited in Varma, 2010, p. v)

In his Introduction to Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook, Lefevere (2003, p.1) refers to Petrus Danielus Huetius’ definition of translation as “a text written in a well-known language which refers to and represents a text in a language which is not as well known”. This, according to Lefevere (2003, p. 1), is the “most productive definition of a translation”. He goes on to say, “if you produce a text that “refers to” another text, rather than producing your own, you are most likely to do so because you think the other text enjoys a prestige far greater than the prestige your own text might possibly aspire to. In other words, you invoke the authority of the text you represent. It may be a sobering thought that some
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of the masterpieces of world literature, such as Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, profess to be translations of lost originals, i.e. that they refer to non-existent texts in order to derive some kind of legitimacy which, it is felt, would otherwise not be present to the same extent […] Translation has to do with authority and legitimacy and, ultimately, with power” (Lefevere, 2003, pp. 1-2).

Lefevere’s assertion regarding authority, legitimacy and power being invoked by translation cannot be overlooked as it points to and explains an even greater and an overtly political enterprise of the third world nations to achieve cultural authority and legitimacy. “The real aim of colonialism,” says Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986, p. 16) in his important work *Decolonising The Mind*, “was to control people’s wealth […] But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world”.

So the colonizers, Thiong’o asserts, deliberately denigrated the native’s culture and to achieve this aim, they used their language, for according to Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2002, p. 7) language is “the medium through which a hierarchical structure is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established”. Language being used as a means of establishing hierarchy or as “the primary channel of cultural production” (Christou, 2006, p. 27), it is imperative that language also be used to subvert that hierarchy and assert cultural authority and power.

This explains the recent surge in the number of translations from third world nations, especially India where, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2002, p. 29), “the bulk of literature is written in indigenous Indian languages”, some of which have been canonized as classics in the native Indian literary tradition. These texts written in the indigenous languages document the native culture and its history, especially those unwritten, unheard and forgotten moments of Indian history which according to Devi (2003, p. 12), are “going away” and “vanishing”. The translator “rewrites” those texts in a well known language and relocates them from their circumscribed discursive space to the “loci of power” ¹. Bassnett & Lefevere (1992, p. vii) explain the whole process in the following words:

Translation is, of course a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and poetics and as such manipulative literature to function in given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of literature and society.

The ultimate aim of translation, then, is the acquisition of power which is, according to Venuti (2004, p. 20), “contingent on the current target-language situation”. So, for a people whose culture has been devalued and denigrated, this acquisition of power implies an exercise in the re-visioning/re-evaluation/recuperation of their culture. This obviously necessitates a performance of the hitherto devalued culture which, through the means of translation is enacted in all its “otherness” but in a language which is well-known and occupies a prestigious status, and hence, the choice of English, the “Hegemonic International Language” (Jeremy, 2008, p. 139).

Mahasweta Devi’s *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* and Kalidasa’s *The Loom of Time* are translations of writers, to quote Bhabha (2004, p.xi), “who were off-center; literary texts that had been passed by; themes and topics that had lain dormant or unread in great works of literature”.

Being rewritten/translated into English, “the complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 37) which these texts represent and which Terry Eagleton terms as culture, is performed in its “otherness” and rendered legible/intelligible to the western readers. The present study endeavors to examine how the English translation of indigenous Indian texts like Mahasweta Devi’s