

Voicing the Voids: The Burdens of Translation

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Abstract

Using a diverse array of translation theory, this essay re-presents the task of a South Asian translator in terms of their presence, absence, and existence within the voids of translation and untranslatability of languages. In its exploration of translation theory, the essay uses Nawab Faizunnesa's *Rupjalal* and Neelima Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, and examines how the translator addressed the issues of creative obligation and translative/academic autonomy in translating these two iconic texts.

Keywords: Translation theory, postcolonial translation theory, South Asian translation, role of a woman translator, feminist translation theory, Nawab Faizunnesa, Neelima Ibrahim

The burdensome task

Translation transports a text from one linguistic-cultural system to another. Language and cultural difference will always impede translation. Translation is a confrontation of two cultures, and a translator should not be tempted to destroy and/or manipulate either of them.ⁱ In translation, meanings are formed within the vacuity that exists between two languages. The agency of a translator is dependent on that empty space, the emptiness that exists between languages. The translator evolves around and enters within the non-existent centre of that void; needless to say, this vacuum is both within and outside language. The translator wants to understand this void—if not fill it—with her rhetoricity and historicity. If a writer is written by her language, as Spivak (1993, 2000) says, then a translator is written twice—once by her own language, and once, by the language of the source text. There is in fact no such thing as a single language. A language is always multilingual in nature and a translation process always works in plurality because it involves more than two (kinds of) languages. A translator's self is fragmented, precarious, and always in a formation process to be completed by her imagined and actual audience, and therefore, conveys indeterminacy. A translator is lost between being (a translator of a source text) and becoming (a mirror, a murderer, or a martyr of two texts and the many languages and cultures of the source and the target texts). In this essayⁱⁱ I do not propose a solid statement about a translator's dilemma, because there cannot be any; instead, using some of my own translation works as a mode of textual reference, I will explore—not the role—but the presence and absence of a translator and her enigmatic existence within the voids of languages and their meanings. In doing so, I will use my translations of Nawab Faizunnesa's *Rupjalal* (Hasanat, 2009) and Neelima Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchi*ⁱⁱⁱ (Hasanat, 1998/2017).

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A translator's indeterminacy—be it Kantian, Nietzschean, or Derridean—enriches her with an ability to exist simultaneously within and outside the worlds created through languages. Such ability invokes elements of dilemma and betrayal. Translation is indeed an act of betrayal. There comes a point when the translator has to betray one meaning over another in order to retain cultural or historical coherence to bridge the two texts. The dilemma of the translator acts as both the impetus to and impedance of that betrayal. A translator has to juggle with too many 'truths' and too many betrayals. As a result, the boundaries between loyalty (to the original text, to her own cultural identity, to the readers of the original text and those of the translated text), negotiation, defiance, resistance, assertion, and submission get distorted.

A text/word is both translatable and untranslatable at the same time, as Derrida has argued (1992). Relevance is a word that is used in translation in context of the translator's ability to convey and contextualize the most possible and all the possible meanings of the original text without mutilating the original and without disrupting the transmutation of meanings of the translated languages. A relevant translation is a good translation, "a translation that does what one expects of it", says Derrida (1992, p. 180). It "performs its mission, honors its debt, and does its job or its duty while inscribing in the receiving language the most relevant equivalent for an original, the language that is the most right, appropriate, pertinent, adequate, opportune, pointed, univocal, idiomatic, and so on (p.181)." In short, a relevant translation generates the most possible and effective meaning of the original text. This meaning that makes a translation relevant is dependent on a process of taking an oath to create relevance, keeping up/breaking away from that oath in order to stay loyal, and surrendering unconditionally to the otherness of the original text. It is a process of self-doubt and betrayal; the former invokes dilemma, and the latter, guilt. A translator is therefore never a satisfied soul.

In his preface to *Speaking of Shiva*, A.K. Ramanujan (1973) once called a translator "an artist on oath" (p.13). And I say a translator is a rebellious artist who has taken an oath to surrender and negotiate. She may rebel against the original text by omitting or editing or suppressing; she may challenge herself by letting her immerse into the history of the original and by surrendering herself to the power of a text that is not her own and yet will give her a new life as its 'writer'; she will betray the readers of the original text by revealing their secrets, by translating their world for some strangers—the other readers; and she will challenge the readers of the translated text with her "glorious hybridization" and "heterogeneous language" (Borges, 2000, pp. 34-50).

Of dilemma and betrayal

Now, let me examine the elements of relevance, dilemma, and betrayal that I experienced as a translator of the two historically significant texts of Bengali literature: Nawab Faizunnesa's *Rupjalal* (1876) and Neelima Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (1994/1998; *A War Heroine, I Speak*, 2017). These two texts are totally different in structure, nature, and subject matter. And yet, at the same time, they are phenomenal texts in their own right from their own historico-political perspectives. Nawab Faizunnesa's *Rupjalal* is the first text known to be written by a Bengali Muslim woman, while Neelima Ibrahim's is the most known narrative on the raped women of our liberation war of 1971. As a

feminist translator of Bangladeshi origin working from a western platform, while trying to bridge the gap between the translatable and untranslatable elements of these texts, I found myself lost in the vortex of meanings.

It would not be an overstatement to say that in nineteenth-century Bengal, women writers did serve as the translators of the nationalist ideology. The burden of a Muslim woman writer was heavier because of her seclusion and other religious limitations. “She was torn between her double consciousness– the conscious new woman, equipped to keep the balance of the master’s house of discourse, and a gender conscious individual, who was aware of being trapped in that world of men” (Hasanat, 2009, p.14). For a woman like Nawab Faizunnesa, writing was not only a tool of expression but also a record of betrayal. She traced the emergence of a self-conscious female voice by reacting and adapting to the process that recast Muslim women’s sexuality on the negotiated ground of religious and national culture of colonial Bengal. *Rupjalal* is also a product of Faizunnesa’s translative knowledge. She borrowed from at least four different languages, various genres, and writing techniques. She followed the Bengali tradition of lyrical poetry, along with the Islamic tradition of writing in mixed language. She alluded to the non-Bengali sources (Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu), borrowed materials from the hybrid traditions, and wrote a poetic tale, loosely based on her unhappy marital life.

Rupjalal does not belong to any specific genre. Part of it is written in “sing-song verse” intermingled with prose. The verses are written in rhyming couplets (known as *payar* in Bengali), in four-lined rhyming verse known as *choupadi*, or in three-lined verse (known as *tripadi*). The *payar* verses are end-rhymed while the *tripadi* verses are long couplets with two caesuras. I attempted to recreate the poetic form of the text in English as closely as possible, and at the same time, I tried to keep the lexical sense of the poem untarnished. The various rhyming patterns of the text also added a challenge to my effort. Faizunnesa did not consistently follow one specific rhyme scheme in her text. She wrote most of the verse in rhyming couplets. She also used three-lined verse, with two rhyming half lines followed by a third line that rhymes with the sixth line. A part of such verse pattern is transcribed below to show the structural patterns in Bengali along with its recreated form in my translation:

হায় হায় প্রিয়তমা কোথা রলে প্রাণসমা
কোথা রলে এ জীব-জীবন ?

হায় হায় কেন এসে ভঙ্গিতে আমাকে নেশে
নিদয় হলি রে প্রাণ ধন !” (Chowdhury, 1876, p.87)

“Where are you, my dearest, the beating of my heart?
Why have you captured my soul?

Why did you come hence, to kill me with a glance?

Heartless you are, my life’s jewel.” (Hasanat, 2009, p.77)

Another pattern that Faizunnesa used is a four lined rhymed verse, which has two rhyming half lines, with the second line rhyming with the fourth. The pattern gets even more complicated as each half line hardly has more than three words. An example of the

verse pattern is transcribed below:

“ক্রোধান্বিত মন	করিল গমন,
রাক্ষস ভবন,	প্রবেশে ভূপ
হয়ে খেদান্বিত	বাহির অন্দর
হেরে ঘরে ঘর	সে অপক্লপ।” (Chowdhury, 1876, p. 138)

My translation of the above-mentioned lines is as follows:

“Blinded with rage	the King ravaged
The demon’s palace,	With a wrathful heart,
He looked everywhere	for his daughter,
And every corner	of the fort he searched.” (Hasanat, 2009, p. 126)

As the above-cited examples show, I have used straightforward and unpretentious vocabulary in my translation in order to retain the candid simplicity of the original text in the most possible way. While translating a text of historical importance, written by a Bengali Muslim woman, at a time when creative writing was not deemed a ‘womanly’ task in a Muslim household, I found myself lost between too many worlds—of languages, cultures, and histories—intercepted in and entrapped by gender and religion. As a result, my dilemma as an ‘informed’ and ‘privileged’ reader provoked me to doubt my translative authority in every step of the way.

In her preface, Faizunnesa mentioned that the text resulted from her frustration over a failed marriage and the betrayal of a polygamous husband. As the plot unfolds, the readers become aware of the similarities between the lives of the author and the heroine of her text. However, unlike the author, the heroine surrenders to social restrictions and accepts polygamy. The apparently happy ending of *Rupjalal* becomes a tragic tale of Muslim women’s subordination to her social culture. *Rupjalal* builds a magical world full of fantasies for men, where women encounter problems that are too real. Recurrent themes in *Rupjalal* are polygamy, mercy killing, sexual anxiety, and male hysteria to protect their women from the foreign invaders.

Take, for example, the story of the king of my above example, who waged a war with a ‘foreign’ ruler (a demon named Fortas) who abducted the king’s daughter. After rescuing the daughter from the demon’s palace, King Zamzam murdered her in the name of mercy killing. He then went home to kill his second daughter Hurbanu in order to save her from future disgrace. Hurbanu begged for his mercy and reminded him of his duty as a father and as a King:

I don’t regret that I,
 So young and innocent, have to die
 With a shame that is not even my own.
 Think of Mother who will have no child left;
 Think of my sister whom you have killed

For a crime she did not commit;
 So, think, dear father, before you now act.
 Don't punish me for a sin I haven't committed.

Hasanat (2009, p.87)

Being thus challenged by his daughter, King Zamzam spared her life and assured her sexual safety by marrying her to Jalal, the protagonist of the text.

Jalal's second wife, Rup spoke harshly against polygamy and infidelity when she found out about her husband's first wife. Rup acknowledged her position as the passive victim of Jalal's ploy but refuses to be tamed in the name of religion or social custom. She chided her husband the following way:

It is not you; it's in man's nature.
 When he attains one woman, he desires another.
 He worships a woman until he wins her.
 Because I love you, I will accept my fate,
 But I refuse to be a part of your guilt.
 I trusted you, as I trust God.
 But I refuse to disregard
 Ethics and truth, for I am true to my God.

Hasanat (2009, p.182)

In Derrida (1992), translation is seen through the lens of the superlatives. "Translation," Derrida says, "is always an attempt at appropriation that aims to transport home in its language, in the most appropriate way possible" (p.189). Nothing can ever be either untranslatable or translatable, says Derrida. While translating *Rupjalal*, I realized that even though there might be no chances of interpolation between the translated and the untranslated (texts), the multiplicity and indeterminate possibilities of languages were too strong a factor to let me forget my sense of dilemma and betrayal.

In my Translator's Preface to *A War Heroine, I Speak*, I explained my translation method in the following way:

In her effort to bridge the gap between meanings, the translator sometimes crosses the boundary that separates the two texts. Needless to say, this task is difficult because the writer and the translator do not share the same history of writing style. As a feminist translator, I take language as my clue to understand the mechanisms of gendered agency. In the original text, Dr Ibrahim writes about gendered agency in a way that might not be translatable unless I transgress the boundaries between the writer and the translator. Translation is nothing but the shadow of the original text, and the translator's job is to make sure that the shadow does not supersede the originality of the text. As a translator I always surrender to the original; I facilitate a synchronized communication between the original and its translated shadow by conceding to the rhetoricity of the original text, and by using language as a tool to mend the rupture between the identities of the writer and the translator. (pp. xi-xii)

From 1972 to 1985, Neelima Ibrahim interviewed about twenty-six raped women of war and transcribed these tales of betrayal in her own words, planning to publish all the testimonials in a few volumes. But she discarded the plan after publishing the unabridged volume of *Ami Biarangona Bolchi* in 1998, saying that the project was too traumatizing for her. The rape survivors in her book offer scathing criticism of the post war Bangladeshi society's inability to accept them. In the retellings of their experiences, these women do not emphasize on their identities as victims of a war that destroyed their lives. Instead, they recount the tales in terms of violation and betrayal. They felt betrayed by their nation – a nation that treated their existence as a symbol of national shame, and rebranded their body as a byproduct of the war. For a translator, the multiplicity of narratives of this book opens a plethora of untranslatability. No linguistic expressions would be pertinent enough to relate and relay the true meanings of the sufferings of these women. As a translator, I only made an attempt to reproduce all the multifaceted narratives of this text in my own language, in the most humane way possible.

In the first chapter of Ibrahim's book, a Hindu woman named Tara narrates her story of wartime rape and her ultimate decision to leave the country that failed to accept her as a freedom fighter. After the war, when her family refused to take her back, Tara aborted her child and left for Copenhagen with a group of volunteering medical doctors from Denmark. In Denmark, she finished her nursing school and married a renowned Danish journalist. In the late 1970s, she visited Bangladesh as Mrs. Tara Nielsen – a new woman – with a new identity. In her interview with Neelima Ibrahim, Tara says:

When I went to visit my family, do you think they were happy to see me – the raped victim of the war? Of course not! They were happy to see a stranger, who was married to a white journalist named Nielsen and had a white son named Thomas – and they felt proud to be related to that stranger! They did not care about the real me, the Tara inside Mrs. Nielsen! I was dead to them. I had been always dead. It is as if I never existed for them! What a shame! What a shame to have lived a life of nothingness! What a shame to be a nothing to your family and to your country! (Hasanat, 2009, p. 30)

In the second chapter, Meher Jan shares her experience with Neelima Ibrahim. Meher Jan was only fourteen when she was taken to the rape camp. She told Ibrahim about their inhuman living condition and jeeringly commented on the hypocrisy of the Pakistani army regarding the religious sanctity of their prey. "Our food was *roti* and mixed vegetables or *daal*," Meher Jan told Ibrahim. "They could not give us any meat because there were some Hindu women among us; they would not insult their religion by serving them beef. But it was okay to rape a Hindu woman. After all, honouring religion was more important than respecting human dignity" (p. 35-36).

For the raped women of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, betrayal was the only truth. Men betrayed them, their religious code of honour betrayed them, and their nation betrayed them. Amidst all these stories of betrayal, I stood with the burdens of untranslatability of trauma and violence. Translating such a text became doubly traumatizing for me because, as a translator, I have had to experience their trauma in two languages (the original and the target language).

I agree with Derrida when he says that the philosophy of translation is the philosophy of word – a linguistics or ethics of the word. "At the beginning of translation

is the word,” Derrida says (p.189). At the beginning, there is the oath (to relevance, to meaning, to appropriateness); then there is the theme of economy (the transaction of meaning, the word play and the arrangement of meanings). Then there is the obligation (to the original text) and the debt to pay (to the original text); the correspondence and transaction between the two texts then follow. And the final stage is the conversion—and during this process of conversion, both the authors survive by losing their original self and yet retaining their individual entity. In translating Ibrahim’s *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, I grew through my translation. I rediscovered myself and saw myself being reborn in the words of Ibrahim’s text. As a translator, I remained incomplete and ambivalent: I stayed different and yet the same—as Bhabha (1994) would have said; because I can express my most intimate thoughts in the language of the original author, I was able to surrender myself to the original text, as Spivak (1993) would have said; and I was someone in search of a more densely textured understanding of an already translated existence, as Niranjana (1992) would have said; and most importantly, I was an ‘other’, inviting the other writer to open the windows of endless possibilities for me. In my effort to translate Ibrahim’s book, I realized that a translator is too many beings in one, and that she does speak in “wild tongues” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 53). A translator allows herself to be translatable while trying to measure the untranslatability of the original text. In her conversation with the original text, she is in a face-to-face encounter (Levinas, 1969) with the other writer, and together, they translate themselves, but not into one another (Benjamin, 1968). The task of a translator is to remain incomplete and ambivalent and carry the burden of her dilemma and ambivalence like her own shadow.

The uncanny

It may sound uncanny, but I interpret the relationship between the source and the target language (and the two authors) as somewhat *unheimlich* or “uncanny” (Freud, 1919). In the beginning, there was the source text, and its author—either living, or being dead for years, or dead but still living for years. Then comes the translator and disrupts that *heimlich* or homeliness (of the source text and its author) of a house (language of the source text). The translator’s act of resurrecting the text is what I call the *unheimlich*, or the uncanny: one text is turned into two separate yet inseparable entities, and in the process, both the source text and the translated text get new life as two new texts.

Meaning is a cultural construction. Meaning is indeterminate and always refers to multiplicity. In translation, meaning depends on reference (to a point of reality) and difference (between two languages in connection to that reality). There is no definite way to measure the adequacy of the meaning[s] generated through a translated text. Meaning could be only a doorway to unfathomable inadequacies of our linguistic expressions, or, it could indicate meaningful connection to the potential endless chains of signs, as Roman Jakobson (1969) has once said.

In a quaint philosophical way, translation captures us in the limbo between the being and nothingness of two texts. A translation makes the being of a text possible in context of a different language, and at the same time, points at the possibility of nothing close to the possibility of meanings expressed or hidden (in the source text) or conveyed (in the target text). Our every act of knowing, doing, and being is utopian in nature. We

seek a goal, envision a project, and pursue that project with a vision of perfection. All our lives, we try to know—ourselves, others, all the words and the worlds—and yet, we never fully succeed in knowing anything. We spend our lives in this world searching for meanings and we hope to resume that search in a world called ‘after life.’ The world becomes a mirror of a world that is not here; the book is a mirror of our lives and worlds, and a translation is a mirror of a book. A translation participates in the afterlife of a source text, offering a utopian vision of linguistic harmony. It tries to capture the exact/true meanings of the text. A translator will never perfectly decipher the exact meaning of every word and every linguistic expression, but she will never cease to explore the endless shapes of the meanings of wor[ld]ds. And that is the most immensely positive thought that helps me endure all my dilemmas as a translator.

ⁱ For a critical discussion on culture and translation, see Susan Bassnett and Andrew Lefevere (Eds.), *Translation, History, and Culture* (1990). Also see, Chaim Rabin’s (1988) “The Linguistics of Translation,” in A. H. Smith (Ed.), *Aspects of Translation: Studies in Communication* (pp. 123-145); see Douglas Robinson’s *The Translator’s Turn* (1991).

ⁱⁱ Part of this essay has been published in *The Bangla Academy Journal*, vol.1, December 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ The first edition of Ibrahim’s book came out in 1994 from Jagriti Prokashoni. Ibrahim later published an unabridged second edition in 1998 from the same publisher. The author’s translation is based on the unabridged version of the book.

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