Problems of Equivalence in Ashokamitran’s *Star-Crossed*

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**A R T I C L E  I N F O**

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Translation was once considered to be a marginal activity, now it has become a fundamental act of human exchange. Twentieth century translations emphasize on the cultural context. In the long history of translation studies in India, it has undergone various changes in the hands of doyens of Indian literature. However translation is possible only at the textual level not in the sense of wholesome of literary text. Ashokamitran’s *Karaindha Nizhalgal* was translated by V. Ramnarayan with the title *Star-Crossed*. The literal translation should have been the ‘dissolved shadows,’ but it is translated as “Star-Crossed.” Why it is translated so? In this research article, the question is justified and elaborates on the problems in translation and analysis of the text.

Edward Sapir, a famous American anthropologist and linguist, claims that language is a guide to social reality and human beings are at the mercy of language that has become the medium of expression. No two languages can share similar culture and society and translation is only an adequate interpretation of an alien code and equivalence is impossible as the culture is difficult to translate.

The 1980s was a decade of consolidation of Translation studies. The next decade set the stage for globalization and translation which was once considered to be a marginal activity, have become a fundamental act of human exchange. It has renewed the interest in cultural origins and explored the questions of identity. Twentieth century translations emphasize on the cultural context.

In India during the post-colonial period translation studies operated as an instrument of colonial domination by depriving the colonized people of their voices. For in the post colonial period, one culture is dominated by the other which means the superior culture taking over the inferior one. From the time of Raja Rao, bilingual writers existed in Indian English writing, the very act of writing becomes a kind of translation. In his foreword to *Kanthapura* he says: “One has to convey in a language not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own”(5). In saying so he adopted an English different from British style. In Meenakshi Mukherjee’s words “…this is ‘double complication’ as it was written in a language that in most cases is not the first language of the writer nor is it the language of writing” (24).

On the other hand, Mulk Raj Anand conveyed a Punjabi flavor through his English. R.K. Narayan depicted the customs and manners of Tamil people accurately with the skillful way of using English which Meenakshi Mukherjee terms as ‘transmutation’. Khushwant Singh used a style called ‘Indish’ which had an Anglo Indian accent. In all the Indian English writers we can infer that they used English suitable for the task at hand to convey the particularities of the situation and region portrayed.

A famous Indian linguist Ganesh N Devy has said in his text *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* that “Much of Indian Critical talent has been wasted in pursuit of theory, much of which has been totally irrelevant to literature in India”(7). He accused the vernacular literary professors and scholars who either follow or borrow Western literary models of analysis which is irrelevant for the real 'BHASHA HERITAGE.' The interesting thing as Indian literature is its multiplicity of histories and traditions which may break it down by adopting ‘theoretical’

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approach to the literature of India.

G.N. Devy further argues that the Colonial expansion in India has given the false images of the West as Superior culture and induced a state of cultural amnesia and mistaken modes of literary criticism. The regular method of adopting the product-process translation which deals with the SL text and the linguistic analysis and the process of arriving at the TL the relationship/similarities in bridging the gap is insufficient. Susan Bassnett in commenting on this traditional style of translating metaphors, idioms, puns and images says that they are culture bound:

They are specific to the location and language of the SL and hence becomes startling unless the context is specific. Since a metaphor in the SL is, by definition, a new piece of performance, a semantic novelty, it can clearly have no existing ‘equivalence’ in the TL. What is unique can have no counterpart. (31)

Ashokamithran, the doyen of Tamil literature worked in Gemini Studios as an assistant to the famous film producer S.S. Vasan for 14 years. He has been writing short stories which were published in some of the weekly magazines. When his boss came to know of it, he asked him to take up the writing skill seriously and wanted him to record his experiences in the film industry. Ashokamithran then compiled his short stories in 1966 and in 1969 his first novel was published titled Karaindha Nizhalgal. This novel was translated by V.Rammraran with the title Star-Crossed. This novel was written by him out of his experience in the film industry on the trials and tribulations of people involved in making of movies. He says in his blog: “All my stories are woven around either personal or well known experiences”

When Ashokamithran was questioned about why he switched over to writing in Tamil from being an English writer he said:

Though Tamil literature has wonderful Classical pieces, I felt it was lacking the contemporary character. Most Tamil writings of those days were rhetorical and full of exaggerations. Hence I wanted to write something, which would reflect the reality of contemporary society. (Surya)

He adopted to oral register unselfconsciously. The mid-century Anti-Hindi agitations succeeded in marginalizing the dominance of Hindi in Tamil Nadu. He tried to accommodate many spoken forms called ‘Koottai Thamizh’ which meant the language of the crude/ordinary. Today’s Tamil is not what one can find in textbooks as it sounds like a new and secret tongue. Tamil has its own dialectical differences. The Brahmin Tamil, Street Lingo, Madras Tamil, Thirunelveli Tamil, etc has its own nuances. Not only the dialect, even the idioms are also specific to the language. Ashokamithran presents a paradox in using modern Tamil in objectivity and dives into subjectivity of contemporary use.

Translation according to Ashokamithran is for those who cannot read the original. He considers the act of translation as an approximation of truth. The translator should not hurry the reader in an airplane or slow you down in an auto rickshaw but will get on with the reader.

The title of the novel in translation poses a question in the mind of the readers. The literal translation should have been the ‘dissolved shadows’ from the original title in Tamil Karaindha Nizhalgal. But the translated title poses an illusory world of cinema the shadows which are unreal as “Star-Crossed”. The phrase ‘Star-crossed’ was originally used by Shakespeare in his Prologue to the play Romeo and Juliet referring to them as ‘star-crossed lovers’ whose affection for each other is doomed to end in Tragedy. Star – crossed which means frustrated by the stars, for those who believe in astrology would claim that the stars control human destiny.

Many classical scholars of Tamil literature have made a clear distinction between derivative and authentic Tamil. But the style of Ashokamithran is one of the “aesthetics of the ordinary” who uses gentle and polite words from the language and has the tendency to tell the story and leave things as an unsaid word. According to the writer Cho Dharman, Ashokamithran’s subject is ‘Man’ from the lowest levels of city life, unfulfilled desires, transforming the reality into art. He considers that it is his kind of magic to write simply.

The novel presents a jaw-dropping creation of a ‘maya bazaar’ of the film world. It presents the pathetic lives of those who are working in cinema. The structure of the novel is woven like short stories with different characters as titles. They are film producers, studio owners, distributors, production managers, assistant directors, script writers, cameraman, light boys and drivers who work for their film companies. They are hardworking and dedicated to their trivial jobs of coordinating with the other members of the unit. Natarajan, the first character of the novel is a multi-tasking production manager, who takes care of the conveyance for actors, cameraman, dance girls, and provides money for drivers. One can understand the extravagance of the film world in spending lavishly for dresses, cosmetics, food, and travel. It is evident from the descriptions that he is from a poor background along with his friend Sampath were struggling to establish themselves in this uncertain world of film industry.

The producers and studio owners of the novel, Reddiar and Rama Iyengar were portrayed with richness in every detail and Ashokamithran shows the fall of these characters from great heights of wealth when they meet with loss. This symbolizes the inconstancy of wealth and reputation. The minor characters of the novel such as Rajagopal and Manickaraj were presented as fringes of the entertainment world. They end up with tragedies to the extent of becoming beggars. We hear Rajagopal in the novel: “There are no permanent or temporary jobs in cinema. Every job is permanent and temporary” (55). Towards the end of the chapter Rajagopal loses his job after his boss Reddiar became bankrupt and absconded. He tried all means to get a job but of no avail. He comes to his mother and cries that he was ruined. His mother firmly replies that “What is the use of knocking your head against the wrong walls?” which means
that the film world is world of uncertainties.

Scholars and critics often compare Ashokamitran to Anton Chekhov who does not impose a structure on the reality he describes. If he does, it becomes a statement of life. He brings out the philosophy of the impermanence of life when he makes the character undergo remarkable changes. The production manager becomes a beggar, the studio owner becomes a pauper, the producer into a debtor and the jobless assistant marries the rich heroine. Such changes affirm the nature of the film industry that it is an illusory tinsel town devoid of trust and truth.

The novelist in commenting on his character Reddiar says that Reddiar was a straightforward man but he became bankrupt before completing his project. He said that there are thousands of films that are incomplete and thousand others who complete it. Ashokamitran believes that there is so much that goes behind the scene. This gives a sharp contrast on the readers that the novelist is rich in giving not only the external world but at the same time traverses into the ‘interior landscape’ to use the phrase of A.K. Ramanujan.

Ashokamitran brings out the locale of the novel when he brings in the character of Rama Iyengar, an affluent man in the film circle, was hit hard during the Anti-Hindi protests in Tamil Nadu. He was quoted saying to his son Pacha:

> I can’t release the film in the Bombay Circuit. There is an agitation almost throughout the state against the release of films from Madras. If the agitation spreads to other parts of the country, then we’ll have to change our line of business (119).

The novel presents of the tinsel town such as Kodambakkam, Vadapalani, Chitra Studios, Old Mahabalipuram, Woodlands, Mount Road, Pallavan, Aalangatha temple are not just the names of places of the city of Madras. They carry more than the literal meaning. It is connected to the culture and tradition of the ancient city of Madras. The places mentioned above have significant meanings behind it which cannot be translated in another language adequately. For example the name ‘Pallavan’ refers to the dynasty that ruled Tamil Nadu but the commonly understood meaning of the local people is the state owned bus used by the people of Madras. These are the cultural idioms specific to the region and language. Hence equivalence could not be achieved even in the best of translations.

The theme of the novel slides into identity and friendship and spins towards the uncertainties of life. Sa. Kandasaamy a famous Tamil writer in a statement on the style of Ashokamitran said: “Ashokamitran’s stories are not case histories, and its psychology and sociology doesn’t fit everyone in society or their situation like Bata-shoe sizes. All his words can be falling into 750-1000 words with no single dirty word” (Surya).

Ashokamitran’s aesthetic universe is unique that it cannot be easily submitted to English literary parlance. His graceful style and intensity of feeling has its own problems with finding equivalence in translation. Ashokamitran’s unique register requires a courageous hand in translating certain colloquialisms.

References


