

# The Indefiniteness of Textuality

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**Abstract:** The ‘Interminability of Translation’ is evident in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the post-structuralist feminist author, who considers writing as the site where the interplay of language is forever at work. Since the act of translation re-aligns the book in another register, Derrida’s method of ‘reversal and displacement’ applies here, reiterating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality. This paper intends to study the politics of translation, both in the context of the hegemonic domination, and the subsequent defiance and subversion attempted by the subaltern. It is imperative that the focus shifts from the European perspective of translation, to include the viewpoint of the indigenous languages and cultures. The Western bias must give way to the norms and values of the local beliefs, releasing translation from the clutches of the Eurocentric practices. This endorses what Barthes has to say about all writing consisting of several indiscernible voices, and literature being the invention of these voices to which we cannot assign a specific origin. This paper strives to prove that the translator’s voice is equally, or perhaps, more important in this situation.

*Keywords:* Textuality, Eurocentric, hegemony, indigenous, reversal and displacement

Translation Studies has been under the scanner for quite some time. Some consider it a full-fledged discipline, albeit different from the other established ones like Psychology, Linguistics, Comparative Literature, and so on. Others see it as a wannabe, despite the decades that have given it the respectability of a recognized discipline. In the introduction of his book titled *In Translation: Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*, Paul St. Pierre says that between 1972, when James Holmes proposed translation as an authentic area of research, and 1987, when the Canadian Association of Translation Studies was instituted, the new discipline of Translation Studies gained recognition as a subject (1). Lewis argued that the concepts of source and target language were tied up with European histories and did not apply to linguistic situations in creoles, pidgins and other forms of non-standardized languages and dialects. Since cultures were not homogeneous, it was imperative that the focus shifts from the European perspective of things, to include the viewpoint of the indigenous languages and cultures (ibid 3). The Western bias had to give way to the norms and values of the local beliefs, releasing translation from the clutches of the Eurocentric practices.

The interminability of translation is evident in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the post-structuralist feminist author, who considers writing as the site where the interplay of language is forever at work. In the preface to her translation of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* [(1967) 1997], Spivak maintains that “by daring to repeat the book and reconstitute it in another register, one re-enacts, hence a book’s repetitions are always other than the book” (xii). She reiterates that there was, in fact, no “book” other than these ever-different repetitions: the “book” in other words, was always already a “text,” constituted by the play of identity and difference. Spivak upholds that the text has “no stable identity, no stable origin and no stable end, since each act of reading the “text” is a preface to the next” (ibid).

Spivak considers deconstruction through translation as a means of offering an exit or a way out of the closure of knowledge, as by inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness

of textuality, it shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom (*Of Grammatology* lxxviii). She notes that ultimately it is about “deconstruction, deconstructing deconstruction, both as the search for a foundation, and as the pleasure of the bottomless” (ibid). Spivak points out that our desire is the tool for any deconstruction. She says that desire itself is a “deconstructive and grammatological structure that forever differs from and defers the text of our selves” (ibid). According to Spivak, Derrida’s method was ‘reversal and displacement’. It was not enough “simply to neutralize the binary oppositions of metaphysics (lxxvii),” as to deconstruct the opposition was first to overthrow the hierarchy and to fight violence with violence. Quoting Derrida, Spivak reiterates that the critic must make room for “the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept which no longer allows itself to be understood in terms of the previous regime or system of oppositions (ibid)”. She observes that deconstruction entails “locating the promising marginal text, disclosing the undecidable moment, prying it loose with the positive lever of the signifier, reversing the resident hierarchy, only to displace it, to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is already inscribed” (ibid). The idea is to re-appropriate the text by undoing and redoing it, to show the text what it “does not know” (lxxviii).

Derrida’s pedagogy, said Spivak, informed the reader that there was “nothing outside of the text, but that within it, in its interstices, in its white spaces and unspokennesses, the reserve of the origin reigned” (ibid). Spivak observed that the act of reading was besieged by the precariousness of intertextuality. Since translation was one version of intertextuality, within the limits of its possibility, it practices the difference between signified and signifier. Spivak noted that it was unprecedented to deal with some “transfer” of pure signified that the signifying instrument or “vehicle” would leave virgin and intact, from one language to another, or within one and the same language, as there might be as many translations of a text as readings, for a text was infinitely translatable (ibid). Derrida summarized it thus: “It was not necessary to search elsewhere, for exactly here, to be sure not in the words, but in words as erasures, in their grill, “the meaning of being” spoke itself, giving to the voice of the teacher that unlimited sovereignty which permitted him to read the text indefinitely” (ibid lxxviii). This holds true of the *Ur-Mahabharata*, a text that has lent itself to several versions, translations and revisionist retellings. Extensively translated in several Indian languages, the text has been mined for myths by the extended diaspora in countries of south-east Asia and Africa. The derivative literature based on *The Mahabharata* has a significant presence in the corpus of Indic texts. Liberty has been taken in terms of storyline of the original, new characters have been added, old ones dropped, till it becomes a tale of contemporaneity, new wine in an old bottle. And perhaps there lies the secret of the longevity of a text which has remained popular for more than 3000 years.

As Spivak notes in her translation of *Of Grammatology*, the task is to dismantle the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work in the text, not in order to reject or discard them, but to re-inscribe them in another way, making the relationship between the re-inscribed text and the so-called original text the relationship between two palimpsests (Ixxv). The re-reading of the Indic myths, especially those in the palimpsest that is *The Mahabharata*, has to be done keeping in mind that the signifiers are ‘not to be used as a transcendental key that will unlock the way to truth, but as a bricoleur’s tool’. The same myths that report abuse and aggression also, in a very subtle manner, share the story of resistance. The need is to think about the Derridean question in the interpretation of our text: How to perceive what is outside of a text? What is a text’s own, appropriate margin? Those who have been on the margin have found a voice in the translated stories of male to female trans-sexual transformations, whether it is to experience, as Lacan said in *The Psychoses*, “the prospect of jouissance beyond the phallus that must be attractive to ‘normal’ men and mystics alike, or the Otherness of Woman’s place in the Symbolic Order which

holds the promise of knowledge, full presence, and most compellingly, absence of the lack that dogs the ostensible possessor of the phallus”(145).

This endorses what Barthes has to say about all writing consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature being the invention of these voices, to which we cannot assign a specific origin. In his essay titled *The Death of the Author* [(1967) 1977], Barthes argues that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing the “message” of the Author-God, but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, not one of which is original (145). The text instead is a tissue of citations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing, says Barthes (ibid). He posits that the true locus of writing is reading, as a text may consist of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, but the reader (ibid). Barthes insists that the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of. The unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination as the birth of the reader which must be ransomed by the death of the Author (ibid). The revisionist re-writing based on *The Mahabharata* also involves a reading, reinterpretation and reviewing of the Ur-text, deconstructing it in the process. The aim is to restore the equilibrium by questioning the parent narrative which has chosen to ‘privilege’ some at the cost of the others, as happened in the case of the gendered subaltern in *The Mahabharata*. The issues of representation, agency and power inform the marginalisation of the women and the queer whose voices have found an outlet in the retellings.

The review of literature on the topic shows that there is a lot of scope for the construction of our cultural history from below through proper translation, and for new interpretations which on one hand question the colonial interpretation of Indic myths and legends, and on the other, support the idea of the exploration of a subaltern consciousness. The portrayal of an ‘other’ in the translations of our myths has never been given the kind of attention it deserves till very recently, when authors like Sukumari Bhattacharji, Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty, Pratibha Ray, Irawati Karve, Ruth Vanita, Madhu Kishwar, Saoli Mitra, Sashi Deshpande, Chitra Lekha Banerjee Divakaruni and other revisionist writers took up the case and the cause. As Madhu Kishwar says:

The confusion is not theirs alone; these common misrepresentations are an unfortunate by product of our colonial education which we slavishly cling to, even though it is more than five decades since we declared our Independence. We keep defending or attacking the same hackneyed quotations from the shastras and the epics which, incidentally, colonisers used for the purpose of creating a new discourse about these writings. Their inaccurate and biased interpretations have continued to inspire major mis-readings of our religious tenets. (*From Manusmriti to Madhusmriti: Flagellating a Mythical Enemy* 1)

There are situations when the marginal strikes back, especially in the re-tellings based on the translations. Creative liberty is taken with the storyline, and the tale is re-written from the point of view of the subaltern, whose voice gets centre-stage, to question the colonial or gender-based or caste or class-based agenda of the hegemonic forces. In a translation of Bhyrappa’s ‘Parva’, Bhima wonders what Hidimba would have done if put in Draupadi’s situation in the Sabha Parva. Perhaps she would have pulled her oppressor’s intestines out and draped it around his neck, thereby giving a new template of empowerment to women who have cowered in fear in our androcentric world. Divakaruni’s Draupadi feels the leering Keechak’s eyes measuring her up and understands what common women undergo on a daily basis. The violence of the emotional trauma that bursts through in the words of ‘Dopdi’ in Mahashweta Devi’s *Breast Stories*’ (1997)

has no parallel in Vyasa's textual universe. At the height of the Naxalite movement, when Dopdi Mehjen is 'made' (raped, assaulted) by the state machinery, she refuses to cower like Draupadi in the dominant discourse. Instead, she stands tall, unashamed of her nudity and thrusts her bloodied, ravaged breasts towards the police officer, proclaiming that she need not be clothed, as there wasn't a man that she should be ashamed of (Devi 33). The defiance of the tribal Dopdi Mehjen is in sharp contrast to the prayers and supplications of the Draupadi of the dominant discourse, who needs a Krishna to save her modesty.

This phenomenon applies to the colonial literature elsewhere also, as the aim behind many a translation was furthering the cause of the Mother Country at the cost of the colony. When the British began the task of translating the Indian Dharma Shastras (Law Books), the reason was far from altruistic. It definitely was easier to govern a nation through its own Law Books, and the essence of diversity, inclusion and liberal ethos were the first values to be sacrificed. India, which has never been an essentialist culture, was bound by a common set of laws, supposedly 'ours', hence applicable to all. The interest of the colonialist was facilitated through the translation, making it a political act rather than literal. Madhu Kishwar says that this left us flagellating an imaginary enemy, in this case the supposed Lawgiver 'Manu', the 'Author' of Manu Smriti, who never said what was put in his mouth. Indian Laws have a tradition of evolving to suit the time and place, yet one single Law Code was imposed to ensure unanimity and smooth governance. This was 'murder' of a living tradition by translation, and the deliberate sowing of the seeds of hatred that we are still harvesting. The responsibility of the translators grows multi-fold when political connotations are involved, when agendas are set by the powers that be, and when the interest of the marginal is sacrificed.

The phenomena of domination by the hegemonic powers and subsequent defiance was true of the colonized satellite countries of erstwhile Soviet Union as well. In his work titled "From Dissidents to Bestsellers: Polish Literature in English Translation", Piotr Kuliwczak (5, 138) speaks of the 'Velvet Revolutions' that marked the end of an era, and the impact it had on translation. Between the time of the Cold War and these revolutions, though Russia was opening up and restructuring was taking place, the state apparatus still controlled the selection of texts to be translated, for fear of giving out too much. He gives the example of Poland, where poetry as a genre was replaced by other genres of literature. This was facilitated by encouraging the translation of prose and drama, which automatically reduced the importance of the poetry, which, according to the handlers, was more volatile. The politics of translation was evident in the case of Polish literature which awaited a revolution to be made available to the world in its true form.

In his article "Translating the Untranslatable: Septuagint Renderings of Hebrew Idioms", J. Joosten says that it is impossible to translate a text without changing the discourse, because the grammar and syntax of one language is different from another. He points out that translation also changes the unique 'situational context' of the narrative, thereby relocating it in a new context, and hence imparting a different meaning on it. Joosten agrees with the Italian proverb which calls the translator a 'traitor' who is not faithful with the meaning of the original text. This is because the changed context does take away the flavour of the original, adding something of its own in the process. Calling translation at best, 'feasible', Joosten says that in the context of religious texts, any miscommunication in terms of translation will result in sacrilege. Quoting Rabbi Judah, Joosten says that the person who says that he/she has indulged in a literal translation of a work is a liar, and "he who adds to it is a blasphemer". Also, when it comes to idioms, it is impossible to attempt a perfect translation, as the literal meaning belies the intent, opines Joosten. Hence, a 'dark horse' may not be either 'dark' or a 'horse', and to cry wolf may not involve a real 'wolf' at all, making it extremely challenging to keep the metaphorical meaning intact and the spirit alive.

In “Alice in Denmark” (*Voices in Translation: Bridging Cultural Divides*), V.H. Pedersen and K.N. Andersen speak of the Danish translation of ‘Alice in Wonderland’, and the inevitability of lost puns, making the translation poorer than the original. They make a convincing case of literary translation as an act of negotiation between two literary systems rather than just a linguistic operation. The cultural correspondence that happens between texts is exposed in the six translations of the iconic book, highlighting the ‘dubious territory of the limits of translation’.

In her article titled “Mind the Gap: Translating the Untranslatable”, Margaret Jull Costa finds a cloud of negativity hanging over the issue of translation. She refers to the sourness of the expression that a work sounds like a translation. She points out that translators are a much-reviled lot, and the idea of the untranslatability of cultural concepts take this negativity one step further. Yet as a full time Spanish to Portuguese translator she believes that if texts lose some in translation, they also gain some. Giving example from four of her own translations, she studies the ‘cultural aura’ around words, phrases and references (111), and how she deals with it. Richard Jacquemond brings out the context in the following words:

Translation is not only the intellectual, creative process by which a text written in a given language is transferred into another. Rather, like any human activity, it takes place in a specific social and historical context that informs and structures it. In the case of translation, the operation becomes doubly complicated since, by definition, two languages and thus two cultures and societies are involved. (1992: 139)

Culture is an ongoing performative exercise rather than a concrete structure frozen in time. Multiple contextual responsiveness ensures that the translated texts retain their ground as individual entities, yet keeping intact the core of the original. The voices that echo or ventriloquise the spirit of the original text are re-inventing themselves as corollaries, at times keeping close to the ur-text, and at other times taking the liberty to retell to an extent, resulting in a different version altogether. The fairy-tales with a twist – the ones which are ‘politically correct’ – may in form be a literal translation, but in essence are liberating to people with modern sensitivities. “The child who is fed tales such as Snow White is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple, and the Wicked Queen (her mother/teacher), having herself been drugged by the same deadly diet throughout her lifetime (death-time), is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot”, says Daly (*Gyn/Ecology* 34). The tale of Snow White has been translated in almost every language of the world, yet the variations may want her to respond locally, like in Southern India where apples are not known the fruit may become a mango, as has happened in the case of folk tales based on the timeless story, loosely termed a ‘translation’, yet taking liberties by a wide margin. In ‘Speaking the World: Drama in Scots Translation’, John Corbett says that as translations of ‘Moliere’ were attempted by Scottish dramatists, the spoken idiom on which the drama was based became urban in its setting from the original rural ambience. “MacMillan grew up, not in rural Aberdeenshire, but in the East end of Glasgow”, says Corbett, showing the creative liberty taken by poets and translators. This was not betraying the original, but creating new versions and worlds, making the translator an author in his own right. And thus, the creative process continues, setting the eternal chain in motion, for no text in any case is ‘original’, each being a product of the maze of words created earlier (37).

So, the question arises: Is the translator a second creator? When we take into account the fact that the original text does get a new lease through translation, we are compelled to agree. Though the author of the original may have his signature imprint on the language and the style of the book, the translator, in an attempt to take the text to a new set of readers belonging to a new culture, facilitates the imparting a new flavour to the project, thereby enriching it and widening its reach. The translator acts as a bridge which connects the world of the author and the foreign reader, whose distinct culture and limited vocabulary



of the original may not have allowed him/her to appreciate the original. For the limited loss that the original work suffers in translation, it gains in terms of reach and readability.

In his article titled “On psychological aspects of translation”, Bruno Osimo says that Translation science is undergoing an introductory phase of self-definition. He links the study of translation to other disciplines, like linguistics and semiotics. He refers to the advancement in the semiotics of translation, specially Torop’s theory of total translation and “inter-semiotic translation or transmutation” (607). He outlines the contributions of Peirce and Torop to the field of translation, and connects it to the unique and evolving field of psychology. According to Bruno Osimo, Torop’s totalistic method of translation provided could be utilised better by the concept of “interpretant” as mental sign.

Hence translation studies may question the cognitive confinement of not just academic disciplines and Western cultures, but also other paradigms that are essentialist and totalitarian in approach. It takes an activist role in interrogating the dominant narrative, using the large framework to situate the ‘other’ in the discourse. The indiscernibility of the process of translation which negotiates between structures, scripts and cultures, languages and dialects proves that ‘translation is transformation’. In the given situation, we must enable translation studies to acquire a distinct role of mediation in the charged social, political, and emotional milieu. One must, of course, be wary of the omniscience of the translator-god, who, in the very attempt to bridge the gap, sometimes also ends up appropriating the other language culture.

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