

Negotiating Cultural (Un) translatability in Devkota's *Pagal* and The Lunatic

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ABSTRACT

The translation of Devkota's *Pagal* into *The Lunatic* by himself is an equivalent linguistic transfer from source to the target language. The paper observes the literary gaps in the course of linguistic transfer between the *Pagal* and its English translation. The transfer of its cultural, emotional, religious and spiritual uniqueness has created a negotiating space to the target reader. Therefore, the English version of *Pagal* struggles to carry the essence of the poet's experience in its fullest form. The paper adopts translation approaches, methods and theories as a conceptual frame under a qualitative approach. Clifford E. Lander's view in literary translation, Jiri Levi's 'On the Poetics of Translation', and Anthony Appiah's theory of 'Thick Translation' serve as the major conceptual gateway to assess Devkota poem and its translated equivalence. The study unfolds the compromise presented in the target text, contending the cultural, religious, emotional and spirituals nuances which remain partially transferable. The English version of 'Pagal' proves as a creative reimagination of its original, not merely a linguistic transfer of Pagal. The representation of linguistic richness, religious annotations, and emotional dynamics is under- question and carves a new space in translation. Interestingly, even in auto-translation, the target text fails to capture the multilayered meaning, linguistic/literary nuances; therefore, a complete literary translation is impossible.

Keywords: cultural, domestication, foreignization, religion, translation

INTRODUCTION

The resistance in translation from a source language to target language is always under question on its completeness. Only the linguistic transfer does not carry the emotional, cultural and religious essence of original text to the target audiences. The semiotic meaning of 'Pagal' in reference to the Hindu religion and the socio-political context of Devkota's time is partially translatable to the new reader. The translation not only carries an inadequate meaning but also the prospect of misinterpretation which can distort the meaning and context of its creation, pushing the text into controversy and defame to new readers. The meaning and cultural peculiarity are continuously negotiated in translation. Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959), a poet laureate of Nepali literature, contributed in diverse literary genres such

as play and essay, deeply influenced by the English Romantic literary movement pioneered by Wordsworth, Coleridge and company. As a result, he accessed Nepali literature to commoners not only in terms of its content but also on the level of its syntactic structure. In this regard, K. Phuyal (2024) claims "Devkota worldview is grounded in the intersection of self, society, and nation" (p.47). It means that he constructs a triangular connection among an individual, the social consciousness embedded in it and the national identity in general. The *Muna Madan*, a groundbreaking folk epic, famously quotes, "Man is great by heart, not by caste" (Devkota, 1996, p. 38). It benefactors humanism, compassion and equality in the contemporary Nepali society. His deep inclination in the Eastern philosophy makes him believe that literature and

creative art is a way of enlightenment and eternal satisfaction. Regarding the aesthetic asset of translation, Michael Hutt in *La. Lit: A Literary Magazine* (2014) acclaims

... writing in Nepali is that it is still written on the assumption that the people who are reading it are all Nepali and understand the context. If you think about successful Indian writers who write in English, many are clearly writing for an international readership. Therefore, I think their writing becomes progressively less Indian. (p. 187)

His experience clearly speaks that Nepali literature is culturally rooted by local and regional aesthetics. The writer is less commercialized and remains indifferent on the prospects of global readership. It is culturally specific and locally grounded. Therefore, Nepali texts face the menace of cultural negotiation and misunderstanding and misrepresentation to global readers. The competency and cultural sensitivity of local context is crucial to a translator. In pursuit of global recognition, Nepali writers have an increased translation of Nepali culture, history, literature to the global readership. Devkota, heavily influenced by English Romanticism, translated his own poem, *Pagal*, into 'Lunatic' to disseminate globally. Abhi Subedi remarks the translation method of Devkota, "The poems selected have been published side by side with their English renderings, in which, as far as possible, the original has been strictly followed within the Limits set by the difference in the genius of the two different languages (p.208). Devkota, too, believes in adaptation of linguistic structure, idiomatic expression and contextual uniqueness. It means translation requires a strategic negotiation of cultural, aesthetic, and emotional essence of source text to the target audience.

The illustration poetic nuances through language are always problematic in literary translation. Literature is also a reflection of anecdotes and social-cultural experiences in one context, which captures mood, non-verbal aspects, and psychological impacts, shaping the writer's imagination and appealing to the reader the way the writer does. The paper puts a critical eye on the translation process of 'Pagal' into 'The Lunatic'. Can religious context, historical background and Eastern spiritual cosmology be translated merely by shifting language? Or does it require literary mediation? Devkota's literary images complicatedly rooted in nature, cosmos, emotion and spirituality, warrants a specific

annotation to reveal its literary significance. It is not entirely possible via. rendering from one language to another; its conceptual assets remain intact. So, literary translation creates a space for negotiation in case of culture-specific context and historical experience. To navigate the challenges, different translation approaches are pertinent. Domestication transforms the language so that the target reader finds it accessible, whereas foreignization puts the original words as it is aiming to preserve cultural identity. The thick translation and hybrid approaches have allied in Devkota's poem. Thus, the challenges of (un)translatability is not solved by elimination, rather by careful application of translation methods and strategies to make it near to equivalence.

METHODOLOGY

The paper employs comparative textual analysis applying theoretical insights from translation study. The method explores how the translation techniques in context of its literary meaning is localized, foreignized, reduced, or even lost. The interpretation grounds on the presentation of cultural nuances which affect readability and understanding to the target reader in its translated form. The assess seeks attention to metaphors, allegories, imageries from Eastern philosophy, and its attendance in target text. It simultaneously pays attention to an emotional intensity of the text and its socio-philosophical reading in both source and target. The paper is scrutinized on various translation standpoints and methods under a qualitative approach. Venuti's 'The Translator's Invisibility', Jacobson's 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation' and Appiah's 'Thick Translation' serve as the major conceptual gateway to assess the poem and its rendering gaps. Secondary sources, such as books, journal articles, translated texts, literary criticism, and scholarly contributions on Devkota's work, will serve in analysis in foremost way.

LITERARY EQUIVALENCE: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

The translation process becomes difficult when it faces thresholds of translatability. Translation remains in case of clear-cut dichotomy whereas translation equivalence demands on the interchangeability of SL and TL. The grim in literary translation lies on "those who have never seriously attempted it, 'how' one day something can be more

important than 'what' one says" (Landers, 7). Landers central focus on 'how' instead of 'what'. He means literary translation carries tone, emotion, style, semiotics, cultural nuances and word choice side by side. A translator's duty is to convey the aesthetics of SL and its expression in TL. Therefore, literary translation is not just about the information but also the artistic presentation to the target audiences. When the TL fails to replace parallel words and expressions, untranslatability occurs.

In order to carry the context of literary translation, which is a crucial task, it is no longer about transferring one language to another. Language is not explicitly get separated from the culture where it emerged. Bassnett, in the chapter entitled *Culture and Translation*, views language is "embedded in culture, linguistic acts take place in a context and texts are created in a continuum not in a vacuum" (p.23). A writer, therefore, produces linguistic codes and cultural pretexts at the same time. Therefore, a translator finds it hard to capture the essence of the expression's particular time and context. It means both are inseparable.

Translated literature should be a dynamic part of the literary system. The role of transliteration demonstrates the value of literary works over time period. Itamar Even-Zohar further writes, "whether translated literature becomes central or peripheral, and whether this position is connected with innovatory ("primary") or conservatory ("secondary") repertoires, depends on the specific constellation of the poly-system under study" (p.192). The transcreation is often characterized by innovative style, strong emotion, contextual theme, and multiple literary modes by adopting a primary repertoire. Therefore, the status and influence of translation in literature remain unequal across time and context.

Emphasizing the aesthetic quality, Levy, in the book chapter '*On the Poetics of Translation*', claims that translation is not merely a mechanical shift; it must maintain the creative aspect of SL. It entails maintaining tone, rhyme and the contextual annotation of SL to TL. Producing a similar ambiance to the target audience, as it remains the source audience, is the most stimulating task to maintain. "Even if the translation contains no out and out linguistic errors or awkward use of language, its stylistic expression may be pale, colorless and grey . . . These conditions can be achieved experimentally by resorting to back translation" (p.107). Literary translation encompasses tone, emotion, and cultural flavor in relation to rhyme and rhythm. He

recommends that a better way to check the validity and proximity of the task is to translate it back to the SL by another translator, which makes the source reader realize the degree of distortion of its original aesthetics. He further writes the confusion of transliteration and copy is the real challenge, whether to preserve the meter of the original. Poetic rhythm is based entirely on the phonetic characteristics of a given language and its meaninglessness is not conceptual in nature. "The goal of translation is to transfer the acoustic value of the verse to another language, not to copy the metric pattern" (p.87). The poetry translation guide highlights the value of sound patterns, including syllables, intonation, and rhythmic patterns, which are not possible to translate into TL. Therefore, the translator should innovatively create a new pattern so that the target reader feels it in a distinctive way.

The degree of untranslatability occurs via thick translation, emphasizing the context and culture-rich rendering of language. Appiah postulates, ". . . sentence will be surrounded and motivated by more than its literal intentions, while some utterances are clearly ironically intended . . ." (p.398). His straightforward claim is that interpreting a sentence requires the social and cultural meaning which goes beyond linguistics. The contextual reference makes the target reader feel and comprehend the text. It should dare to acquire the literary value of text. The reasoning behind the text has to be surfaced. It unfolds the intended meaning of the text, which is not presented directly by the author. E. A. Nida classifies three basic factors in translation, "(1) the nature of the message, (2) the purpose or purposes of the author and, by proxy, of the translator, and (3) the type of audience" (p.172). The nature of the text here refers to poetic, religious, social. A deep screening of the text is essential before translation. Likewise, the purpose is to inform or persuade, and to create a positive and a negative image. A translator should be aware of it. The background of audience, competency, interest and weight are crucial. Vladimir Ivir in *Procedures and Strategies for the Translation of Culture* requires a cultural balance and its difference in translation. A proper mapping of source and target culture makes a translation possible. The translator's strategy is determined by "understanding of the communicative function of the element of culture to be translated in that particular context of situation . . ." (p.117). A translator fixes his position familiar with the elements of source culture which generates glitches in finding procedure in translation

in unmatched cultural nuances. The transferring of culture specific elements such as idioms, tradition, social norms and humor goes beyond word-to-word translation. Thus, the real challenge lies on cultural equivalent unlike literal. Therefore, translator should deploy some strategies in the process such as “(a) borrowing, (b) definition and paraphrase, (c) literal translation, (d) substitution, (e) lexical creation, (f) addition (g) omission” (Ivir, p.116). The translator’s task is to trace out which strategy is best suit to translate maintaining the cultural value of the source and target language. In order to be impartial in translation, the selected strategy in the particular context should be able to achieve the communicative and literary function.

Taken together the perspectives of thinkers on translation study, the consensus affirms translation goes beyond the exchange of language, it simultaneously encompasses the cultural uniqueness, religious references balancing the source and target text. It encompasses poly-system, rewriting and negotiation, as well as a culture-rich interpretation in which meaning is not simply shifted, rather compromises and reconstructs across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Beyond Equivalence: Negotiating Literary Nuances in Devkota's *Pagal* and *The Lunatic*

Translation on Devkota is seriously a noble accomplishment. The deep-rooted references to Nepali society, culture, and, more prominently Hinduism are complex to the target audience to grasp the semantic complexities and the artistic aesthetic. The original version writes ‘Haal’ which is translated as “plight”. The “यस्तै छ मेरो हाल” (p.15) in Nepali is the situation which may be a suffering or ordinary experience. It is a commonly used expression in Nepali conversation, for granted a neutral expression, whereas the English translation denotes the painful and a series failure or something unfortunate. The poet, thus, creates a negotiated space in between two languages. The lexical shift has puzzled the gravity of its original word by underpinning its cultural nuances. The semiotic of the English word has limited its multiple prospects.

The poet seeks to create here is a mystical conversation that goes beyond physics.

म बोल्दछु तिनसँग, जस्तो बोल्दछन् ती मसँग,

एकभाषा, साथी!

जो लेखिन्, छापिन्, बोलिन्, बुझाईन्, सुनाईन् । (p.15)

I commune with them as they do with me. In such a language, friend, as is never written, nor even printed, nor even spoken (p. 161)

The quote from English and Nepali version goes beyond the linguistic transfer. The unwritten, unspoken or unpublished refers to the consciousness which is not acquired by surface communication or in printed papers. It is a holistic understanding of the human being in nature, deeply influenced by Eastern philosophy. It is about the realization of cosmic presence in our consciousness, which the above lines fail to encapsulate. The “Ganga” (p.162) river is evidence of transliteration, representing a spiritual flow which emerges from the high Himalayas and reaches to the infinite sea. If it is rendered in generic equivalence, it mislays its spiritual significance and contextual meaning.

तिमी पाँच इन्द्रियले काम गर्छौ, म छैटौँले!

तिम्रो गिदी छ साथी, मेरो मुटु! (p.16)

You work with your senses five, with the sixth I operate! Brain, you have my friend, But the heart is mine. (p.163)

Translation process carries effect and response simultaneously beyond the limits of words. “It is a translation, and as such must clearly reflect the meaning and intent of the source . . . the closest natural equivalent to the source- language message” (Nida, p.180). Here remains the portion of untranslatability. The poetic meaning depends on figures of speech representing a semantic content. The literal transmission fails to carry the essence of Devkota’s philosophical institution, a notion of the sixth sense of the Eastern episteme. The speaker finds himself aloof from the ordinary one. The abnormality is reflected in the divine consciousness with a spiritual trance. It is the realization of the inner self transcending the sense perceptions. Hence, the speaker is not mad in the medical sense; but rather, they possess pure rationality, creative emotion, or a super imaginative stance that can inspire the world in ways beyond the capacity of an ordinary person.

Devkota compares rose not merely a flower. He privileges, “म उसमा हेलेन र पद्मिनी पाउँछु” (p.17) / “It embodies Helen and Padmini for me” (p.162). The quotes juxtapose two culturally different female archetypes adopted from Eastern and Greek philosophy in a single line. The foreignization reserves its original aesthetics. The intercultural mythic comparison involves myths, symbols, and

imagery from one culture to another. It is possible in the equivalence, a deep-rooted thick translation. The translator's effort to convey the meaning ultimately distorts the poem's aesthetic quality.

In order to refer to the nature of human understanding, the poet presents the dichotomy of solid and vapor. Literally “तिम्रो संसार ठोस छ । मेरो बाफ !” (p.18)/ “You have a world of solids, Mine is one of vapor” (p.162) resemble the two different forms of water, whether in Nepali or in the English language. However, the rationale behind it forecasts the rigidity vs. fluidity. The solid is in a fixed shape and size, meaning it adheres to fixed codes of knowledge, ethics, and understanding. It indicates a fixed source of knowledge and awakening of material logic backed by human sense perceptions aligned with human-devised discipline. In contrast, the poet's perception on society is flexible and multifaceted. It sustains on sentiment and goes beyond human doctrines, unlike an anarchist or lawlessness. The ‘vapor’ deconstructs territories and experiences a divinity in which consciousness floats in a super-realization.

The in-text, “मेरो एक नशा दिलो छ” (p.18)/ “a vane is loose in my brain” (p.162), faces an allegorical gap to the target language. Here again, as Nida says, meaning depends on the experience and competency of the target reader. Literally, it indicates the malfunction of a nervous system, causing symptoms that are completely misleading. However, the poet indicates the incongruity between the surface world and annihilating experience. It indicates the emergence of creative abnormalities in the speaker's mind. He realizes the world in a deep, mysterious and metaphysical level. The speaker is not suffered from psychosis, but rather experiences a divine sense. He feels alienated from society due to his visionary imagination covered by poetic institution. Likewise, the remark, “ठुलो माछाले सानो खान्छ” (p.19) / “the big fish chasing the smaller one” (p.165), requires a thick rendering of its meaning, which reflects the social structure of the society where the lower social strata are pushed into an epistemic discrimination projected to be silent. It reveals the bitter reality of Nepali social structure; only affluents are appropriate to survive. The narrative of the social and political strata of Nepali society cannot be realized solely by rendering it precisely. The technical shift in language completely fails to capture its deep socio-political dynamics and the historical formation of Nepali society. The foreignization of “दधीचि” (p.19) / “Dhadhichi” (p.165) preserves a mythic aura and

cultural opacity. It indicates a cultural sacrifice. Hindu mythology asserts *Dhadhichi*, the most altruistic who donates his own bone for the welfare of God, a symbol of fighting against the Evils; hence, the translation gap ascends, cannot be solved by foreignizing the word. The conversion lapses religious, cultural and spiritual inaccessibility to the target reader. As a consequence, it could pervert its true religious context. It is understood beyond lexical; a religious, symbolic and allegorical annotation.

In essence, Devkota's *Pagal* and its auto-translation claim that literary translation is an equivalence; negotiates cultural, religious, social, and philosophical differences. Translation creates a space between fidelity and transformation. A good translator should balance the limitations or postponements posed by cross-cultural boundaries. Therefore, literary equivalence is not replication of its linguistic codes, it should carry on the aesthetic and emotional essence of source text crossing the boundaries of context.

CONCLUSION

Collectively, the textual discussion and the theoretical catalyst connote Devkota's *Pagal* and its auto-translation create a contested space of cultural (un)translatability that goes beyond linguistic transfer. The deep cultural, emotional and spiritual insights require an annotation and gloss. The onomatopoeia and sound play present an untranslatable aspect in their phonetic patterns and cadences. The words from the Sanskrit root, too, lack English equivalent and gloss to the target reader. Devkota's cultural idioms, religious references, and many literary nuances are represented in equivalent ways struggles to preserve their meaning even in the auto-translation. Literary translation is a continuous process of reinterpretation. As a result, meaning is constantly negotiated due to cultural nuances, philosophical subtexts, and socio-historical context. Devkota's maximum endeavor is to reimagine the images, symbols, and context of its Nepali version. The real challenge is to preserve its aesthetic and emotional / philosophical asset for new reader. Translation is a creative and ever-interpretive task shaped by the source language and equally by the challenges of target audiences. It depends on the translator's own competency and a creative (re)interpretation of the reader, a negotiation between language and literature. The study concludes even in self-translation, like *Pagal* and *Lunatic*, of a literary

text negotiates aesthetic and philosophical nuances. The gravity of meaning and essence of target text depends on translator, source text and target audiences. Thus, literary translation is a form of creative reimagination rather than a linguistic transfer.

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