

Mediation of 'Meaning' beyond Consumption and Production: Translating Identity in Marginalized Texts

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Abstract: As a mode of intercultural communication, the practice of translation is highly political in terms of the translocation of 'meaning' as a cultural artifact that it boldly undertakes. The present paper seeks to interrogate the strategies a translator of 'rooted' literary texts employ in post-colonial and post-global milieu. The primary contention here is that witting or unwitting subscription to either aesthetic or consumerist assumptions as to the production/control of the meaning of a marginalized/ subculture literary text seriously undermines the cultural identity and values of a given community. The most urgent obligation of a translator negotiating such texts is to protect and preserve the quintessential cultural superstructure underpinning the text against the sweeping tide of global, capitalist and consumerist hegemony. Against the backdrop of the experience of translating Nazir Mansuri's Gujarati short stories which are set in a typical rustic locale, around straggly villages on the sea shore of Diu and Daman and which give an unprecedented insight into the primitivistic and dark life as lived by fisherman community, the paper will also touch upon the issues of knowledge, motivation and skills required of a translator approaching such a text.

Keywords: Translation, Identity, hegemony, marginal literature, politics of publishing, Third world

Introduction: For the sake of practical convenience in problematizing the secondary status accorded to translation in academia in particular and 'culture industry', to borrow Adorno's coinage, in general, I would start off by recounting the proceedings of a meeting, which took place in the Department of English of an elite university of Gujarat, with the professedly noble aim of initiating the freshers into literary studies. Being the youngest, I was fidgeting in my position of privilege that had landed me amongst veteran scholars one of whom was my own university teacher. When it came to deciding a novel to be studied by first year students, I dared devilishly to propose an Indian fiction in English (or in translation which, I remember, I spoke under the breath) at which my esteemed teacher flew into a lion rage screaming "Why not have something English?" and by English, as she later clarified, she meant *Pride and Prejudice* and *Tom Jones*. This was when we had just finished celebrating the diamond jubilee of Indian independence and I couldn't help reflect upon the futility of the discursive spaces like 'Indian Literary Studies' or 'Indian Literature(s)' that we so passionately and rigorously seek to construct.

To my honorable teacher, as to many others who often fashionably suffer from delusions of decolonization, Indian Literature in English (translation, under the breath) signified a derivative, inferior, secondhand, unaesthetic (colored?) category which paled into pathetic insignificance when compared with the "original semantic unity" (Venuti, 1992) of the literature created by (dead?) white European males. John Docker wryly attributes this to the ruling anglocentric assumption, in the university teaching of English, consequent upon the total experience of colonialism and neocolonialism, that 'standards' can be set only by the study of great English Tradition of "matured cultural history". (Docker, 1978) As a postcolonial nation, we might justifiably implicate the colonial discourse which fixed such self-deprecating blinkers on our literary eye-span that we turned purblind to the rich heterogeneity of indigenous literary-cultural tradition, but as for the relegation of translation to secondary and derivative activity, coming well behind other more valued forms of cultural practice, the centrality of original vs. copy binary to the Western, Platonic-Christian metaphysics has to be held responsible. By shedding unsympathetic light on the Romantic-Mimetic assumptions embedded in this traditional approach to translation, Theo Hermans exposes it soft underbelly in unequivocal terms: "If the literary artist is viewed as a uniquely gifted creative genius endowed with profound insight and a mastery of his native language, the work he produces will naturally come to be regarded as exalted, untouchable, inimitable, hallowed." (Hermans, 1985) It should not, then, surprise one that Western theoretical perspectives on translation are woefully fixated on the glorification of the original and the valorization of notions of transparency, equivalence and fluency as positive attributes of translation. In obsequious deference to such essentialist and simplistic theoretical conceptualization of translation, the activity of translation in East as much as in West, despite its exponential proliferation, continues to be invisible and on that account undervalued.

Writing as Rewriting: In the middle of such stultifying and suffocating academic-literary climate, more so for the readers than the translators, poststructuralist discourse flowed in like a current of fresh air. Radical and avant-garde perspectives like deconstruction and intertextuality have remarkably problematized the very conceptions of originality and superiority, both of writer and his work, by foregrounding notions of textual openness, heterogeneity and intrinsically derivative nature of all texts, irrespective of the original or the translation. Forwarding a counter-argument to the corpus approach, the non-essentialist approach to translation disclaims the idea of literature as a self-governing, autonomous category and views it as functioning in a more expansive socio-cultural frame, as influencing and being influenced by multifarious socio-politico-economic "signifying practices" maneuvering within that framework. Semiotician Julia Kristeva looks upon any signifying system as already consisting of other modes of cultural signification. (Kristeva, 1988) Thus, the formulation that a text is a locus of not only other literary texts but also other modes of

signification like myths, fashion, indigenous medicinal systems, food, metaphysical structures, literary genres and devices and other symbolic structures contends that all writing is derivative and thus a form of rewriting. The discipline of Translation Studies experienced a much-needed paradigm shift around mid-1970s in the seminal theoretical formulations of Andre Lefevere, Gideon Toury, Theo Hermans and Itamar Evan-Zohar. Polysystems theorists, as they were called, viewed literature as a complex and dynamic system and further advocated an approach to literary translation which is descriptive, target-oriented, functional and systematic. They drew the problematic of translation away from the obsessive idea of finding equivalents to a systematic concern with the critical examination of “the norms and constraints that govern the production and reception of translations...in the place and role of translations both within a given literature and in the interaction between literatures.” (Hermans, 1985) They were interested more in describing the status, function and reception of a translated text in the target culture as well as the power of culture on the decisions that a translator makes than in explicating the process of translation. In a radical formulation, Andre Lefevere posits that the quest for *the* meaning of / in a text is overambitious at best and futile at worst because meaning(s) is derived under a set of strict controls and definite regulations which, more often than not, seek to adapt a work of art to a specific ideology or to a certain poetics or to both. He extends this problematization of the process of arriving at meaning in a literary work to all those activities which are directly or indirectly involved in generating or imparting meanings like criticism, translation, anthologization, literary historiography etc and covers them under an umbrella term 'refractions'. Refractions, to Lefevere, “are made to influence the way in which readers read a text; as such they are powerful instruments in ensuring the 'right' reading of works of literature and in perpetuating 'right readings'” (Lefevere, 1984) In other words, refractions rewrite a text to validate, valorize or redefine the value structures of a canon.

These important discursive notions of essential referentiality of literary texts or “interliterariness” and the political motivations behind even random acts of refractions provide interlocking grounds for the investigation of the translation of a marginalized text from a non-canonical, erstwhile colonized language like Gujarati into a globally hegemonic language like English. The qualification marginalized here primarily designates a text grounded in marginalized subculture as distinct from mainstream culture though in case of Nazir Mansuri, whose short fiction I'll discuss in this paper, the epithet refers to the non-canonical and thwarted status of the writer and his work as well. My primary contention is that the back-of-the-beyond and extremely indigenous culture as well as subtly unfamiliar poetics that these texts intertextually and metonymically evoke make them fall out of favor with publishers and even editors who are too scared to transgress the line of Western literary canon even at the risk of self-gagging their subalterneity.

Poetics of Nazir Mansuri's Fiction: Nazir Mansuri's short fiction,

though rewarded by Katha Foundation (1997) and Sanskruti Pratisthan (1999), has remained at the threshold of mega-publishing houses whose not-so-manifest credo is to print for Anglo-American readership. The translations of his work have been rejected by a variety of refractors on the grounds of their unreadability and stiffness caused specifically by his rigid insistence on protecting and preserving the quintessential cultural superstructure underpinning his work even in translation. Nazir's work stands as a seminal milestone in the hoary tradition of Gujarati Literature because it brings to light the typical dialect, myths, life-styles and socio-political dimensions of a hitherto-neglected, vibrant sub-culture. Laid against a typical rustic locale, around straggly villages on the sea shore of Diu, India, *Dhal Kachbo*, Nazir's first collection of short stories which can be roughly translated as *Shielded Tortoise*, gives an unprecedented insight into the primitivistic and dark life lived by fisherman community in Gujarat. Away from the hustle-bustle of dehumanized urban life, Nazir's plots unfold in back-of-the-beyond, seaside, gigantic ranches where elements of nature, both meek and ferocious, co-exist and fight for survival. Eerie ranches sprawling in hundreds of acres, chock-a-block with palms and indigenous fruit-trees become a theatre of ceaseless struggle for survival amidst cocks and hens, ferocious wolves, birds of prey like sea hawks and kites, tom-cats, human beings and "the nature red in tooth and claw". The book has unearthed a brave new world before Gujarati readership; a densely-packed primal world where strapping fishermen go out fishing and engage in bloody feud either with gargantuan sharks and whales or with whirling sea itself; where voluptuous fertile women and serfs slave untiringly in ranches, gorge away a lot of food, down vast quantities of liquor and indulge boisterously in carnal desires. Largely untouched by the winds of alleged development, this neolithic world seems to celebrate primal instincts over sophistication, id over superego and primordality over civilization. Simultaneously, this world throbs with black magic, talismans, magical threads, sorcerers, witches, ghosts, possessed women, witch-doctors and above all an unpredictable sinister fate. This society has its exclusive cultural superstructure underpinned by largely uninstitutionalized systems of worship, rituals, medicine, lifestyle, beliefs, and behavior; it projects standards of love, sex, marriage and family constitution that are far too liberal and progressive as compared to those of the ossified, 'civilized' society. For example, in respect of the binary of love and sex, this primitive society privileges the sentiment love over sex which is manifested in the social approval of the kind of relationships which are rejected as unholy, incestuous and abnormal by civilized Indian society. Nazir's characters celebrate quintessential love that transcends the constraints of caste, creed and pseudo-propriety. This world of the subaltern might fly in the face of logic, rationality and prudery, but it is transparent, pure, passionate and miles (& eons) away from dirty, political hypocrisy of the respectable.

Problematics of Translating a Marginalized Text: Fundamentally, the problem with translation and reception of a literary text stems from issues related to the interpretation of material and social culture (including law, economics, and so forth), history, values, and world view;

serious problems with the transference of literary features such as genre, characters, plotting, symbols and literary allusions; as well as the inevitable questions of linguistic interface. (Tymoczko, 1995). In general, translators have to grapple with the metonymic aspects of a literary text which unfold in terms of content, generic features, intertextuality and culture at large. These metonymies collectively constitute a literary system in which a text like that of Nazir's is ensconced. If the source and target language systems are related to each other, as for example English and French, the target readership and literary canon will have little problem in comprehending the source text's metonymies in the translation and accommodating the translation into its literary hall of fame respectively. Thus, a text like Nazir's in English translation becomes opaque to non-native readership because the unusual abundance of cultural-specific signifiers makes the information load of his stories too heavy to execute even a fairly smooth reading, let alone comprehending the intricate web of motifs and symbols running through the narrative. To make the matters even worse for the future of a marginalized text in translation, there is substantial evidence in cognitive science for the human tendency to adapt and assimilate new information to the informatory patterns always-already available in brain. (Mitter, 1987) In the face of such self-reflexive doubts about the effective accomplishment of the mission that inspires the taxing activity of translating marginalized text, the now-proverbial task of the translator is flung into a serious, tearing limbo. In such a situation, a translator makes a conscious decision as to choosing the definite norms that would govern his translation strategy. Depending upon the selection of strategic norms, in Gideon Toury's (1980) words, a translator ends up making either an "adequate translation", i.e. one that transmigrates the metonymies of original text as much as possible, or an "acceptable translation" i.e. one that either readily compromises / erases the metonymic specificities of the original in the interest of readability and comprehension or radically supplants them with the metonymies of target culture and literary system to ensure that the translation becomes popular and widely accepted in target readership and literary canon. Needless to say, adequate translations come with a package deal of introductions, glossaries, footnotes, appendices, commentaries and other paratextual devices which serve to decode the metonymies of source text to a considerable extent. It is understandable that not all the information serving metonymic functions in a text from a foreign literary system can be realized in translation. Thus, for effective management of information load, a translator has to be extremely selective in his choice of the aspects of the source text i.e. linguistic, generic, cultural, historical or ideological that he wishes to valorize or downplay in the target text with a vengeance. Now, the strategy of selection and omission that a translator of a marginalized text chalks out is largely governed by, what Lefevere calls, a "control factor" which operates from within and outside the literary system of the target language. The dominant poetics of target literary system constitutes the inside factor "which can be said to consist of two components: one is an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, symbols; the other a concept of

what the role of literature is, or should be, in the society at large.” (Lefevere, 1988) As stringent as the inside regulatory mechanism is the outside control factor of patronage represented by royal court, political/religious institutions and last but not the least the publishers with or without monopoly over the book/magazine publishing trade. These apparently innocuous factors exert enormous political influence over the refractors to undertake refractions in such a manner that they fit perfectly into poetological and ideological frames of the receptor language and society respectively.

Politics of Book Publishing in Third World: Case of Nazir

Mansuri: The insidious power of these inner-outer control factors upon the strategy of translation adopted by a translator is nowhere felt so perceptibly and significantly as in the Third World. Philip Altabach (1975) contextualizes the problematic surrounding the publication of Third World literature by examining the uneven relationship between Third world nations and industrialized countries who dominate the international intellectual system through their control of the means of knowledge production. He draws on the bleak socio-economics of book publishing in developing countries to aver that issues of economic viability, required technology, low literacy rates, low per capita purchasing power, distribution bottlenecks and market size make it incumbent upon the Third world nations to depend hopelessly upon the developed nations for knowledge production and consumption. This dependency for cultural production is aggravated by political and trade relationships that two worlds share. First world export streamlined technology, publication grant, subsidized books and most importantly branches of giant multinational publishing houses to the developing countries. Altabach says, “Commercial arrangements built up over years of colonialism persist in many developing countries. Branches of British and French publishers continue to operate in Third World... The advantages of foreign firms—expertise, the backing of foreign capital, and a worldwide distribution network—have made the emergence of indigenous publishers even more difficult...” Such a complex web of economic and intellectual relationships and traditions reaffirms and deepens the pattern of uneven, imperial relationship obtaining between the colonized and the colonizer.

Though much of what Altabach says holds true even today, in the period of more than three decades following Altabach's analysis, things have changed substantially, if not radically. With globalization, India has accomplished considerable feats in the domains of infrastructure, literacy rates, technology and even market size. The *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* confirms that five percent of the total Indian population speaks fluent English. However, in spite of these improved material conditions, the production of books reflecting the needs and concerns of the indigenous authors and readership has not automatically come about primarily because the unaltered and reactionary psychological conditions. Not only do the subsidiaries of British and French publishers dictate terms about who and how to publish/translate, a whole new breed of metropolitan, neocolonial centers of power pose a considerable psychological barrier to

valorization of native cultures and literary tradition through translation. In the post-global marketplace, publishing budgets of the even neoliberal native publishers are governed by authors, famous and canonical, by Western standards, as well as by the power of the absent 'center'. This center is largely constituted by university hierarchy (the god-professor),...the system of recruitment of staff (appointing people, English, American or Australian, whose primary teaching interests are expected to lie in English literature); and by the use of tenure to enforce anglocentric stability and continuity." (Docker, 1978) Docker's definition of the literary "transcendental signified" acutely overlaps with Lefevere's identification of the control mechanism within the literary system represented by critics, reviewers, teachers of literature, translators and other rewriters who adapt literary texts to the poetics and the ideology of their time. It is unfortunate that irrespective of space and time Lefevere's expansive category of refractors shrinks quite often into a singular undifferentiated university hierarchy which undertakes criticism, anthologization and translation of literature apart from teaching it. This putative center of Third world queerly subscribes to the post- World War II, anti-ideological western view that great (Anglo-American) literature delineates universal human feelings and dilemmas, while the inferior literatures of the colonized cultures are morbidly strident and "too simply concerned with the local and temporary, the political and national" (ibid) Third World subscribers to such a metropolitan view of literature owes obsequious allegiance to dynamic western critical tools and apply them to literatures produced in postcolonial societies in order to otherize them. Thus, at a time when the post-colonial literatures were dexterously examining history, national, ethnic and communitarian identities, various ideologies and traditions, the West beat an alarmed retreat in the form of Frederic Jameson's theory of national allegory. Jameson's theory is grounded in the hypothesis that capitalistic cultural production is determined by a radical split between the private and the public realms and that the delineation of private realm of lived experience is always culturally superior to the political dynamics of the Third World. He says, "Even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory." (Jameson, 1986) Jameson's theory is parochial at best and colonial at worst because most of the First World critics, like Jameson himself, base their aesthetic pronouncements on works mediated by establishments linked to the First World, often handpicked for their allegorical, political content, for these works are not marketed as fictions, but as fictions of India, Africa, Brazil and the like. (Palakeel, 1996) In reality, much of the Third World literature that transmigrates into First World languages is selected just for its political, ethnographic and anthropological character rather than for any intrinsic literary merit. Thus what has remained static in the shifting dynamics of colonial and postcolonial relations between the east and the west is the idea of "western fantasies" of Third World literature. While the Orientalist translators necessarily exoticized it, the postcolonial First world academia allegorized it and the motivation behind both these exercises remains proverbially political. Naturally, the post-Holocaust

“cultural cringe” of Western literary academia that penetrated the critical values of neocolonial power-centers serves as a stick to beat translator's mode of refraction into conformity or catastrophe.

Blind Man's Buff: The Quest for Identity: The image of a talented, blindfolded postcolonial writer hunting desperately for a publisher, apart from its huge comic value, is particularly catchy because the writer gropes to catch hold of someone in a place where there is nobody at all and the fault lies with none but the writer who is scared stiff of opening his eyes. Concomitantly, untying the blindfold enables the writer-translator to realize and assert the quintessential identity of the culture he foregrounds through the text. The reason behind the rejection of the translations of a Third World marginalized text, like that of Nazir, by publishers and academia is twofold in nature. First, Nazir doesn't feed, even remotely, the allegorical fantasies of the Anglo-American academia-literati. In fact, the primitive society and bizarre subculture that unfold in Nazir's work are unlikely to find analogues in surrounding communities and locality of Gujarat, let alone their national counterparts. Paradoxically, as the writer scratches beneath the primitive skin of his characters, the reader confronts a masterful delineation of concerns and topos which are typically modernist and even post-modernist in essence. The theme of love and its corollaries like sex, loneliness, anxiety, pining and death become a vital connecting link between 'the vulture' and 'the culture' in Nazir's stories. Almost all the stories in *Dhal Kachbo* are built around the human hunger for intense love and the overwhelming need for emotional anchor in life, the absence of which results in searing pangs of alienation, emptiness and inner void. Issues, which are considered social and literary taboos in Gujarat and India, like roots of sexuality, measure of development and alternation of sexual orientation, homosexual, lesbian and allegedly incestuous relations, intercaste and crosscreed associations etc. receive a candid, psychoanalytical articulation in Nazir's stories. What makes Nazir's exploration remarkable is the fact that sex and sexuality are undergirded by the singular sentiment of love; love is the only precondition of sex; it doesn't need to achieve approval certificates from institutions of marriage, caste, religion and respectability. Moreover, Nazir's work exceptionally examines the existentialism of sexuality i.e. it proffers moving narratives of the feelings of angst, anguish, exuberance, aspirations, trepidations and frustrations as experienced by people pitted against love, death and erratic fate. Nazir seems to reject the theory that existential angst, loneliness and emptiness are exclusively urban or metropolitan concerns; people located on the opposite extreme experience them with greater intensity and force in all probability. Thus Jameson's theoretical musings encounter a perfect foil in Nazir's work.

Secondly, Nazir's adamantcy about preserving the essentially (sub)cultural texture of his work and rooted metonymies even in translation flies sharply in the face of the post-war “cultural cringe” of the west. No doubt, in the absence of metatranslation, Nazir's world would surely tickle the exotic fantasies of the western readership, but that's not usually the way a committed artist would have his work transmitted. Being exceptionally meticulous about the craft and aesthetics of the

genre of short fiction, Nazir gives immense importance to literary-stylistic aspects like imagery, symbolism, paragraph sequences and the overall structure of his stories. As a part of his multi-pronged narrative technique, he often gives vivid and, at times longish, descriptions of the natural surroundings which, far from being aesthetic for its scenic elegance, evokes a distinct sense of the uncanny and the sinister throughout the story. The mystery, thus enlivened in atmosphere, becomes instrumental in reflecting the mystery surrounding the fate, intentions, motivations and emotions of his characters. Though mythopoetic in nature, his stories are extremely realistic in their descriptive style with layers and layers of mythical, historical, and existential meanings. Rich and significant employment of dialect and noteworthy use of myths and archetypes, a complex semantic network of symbols and motifs and dense, lively descriptions, novel lexis and syntax emanating from this strange subculture weave together an intricate network of meanings and significations which often sound alien and bizarre even to mainstream Gujarati literati, let alone Anglo-American readership.

Agency of a Translator: The processes of patronage and control by which colonial and neo-colonial powerbases continue to intervene in selecting, licensing, publishing and distributing the text of the post-colonial world and the degree to which the inscriptive practices, choice of form, subject matter, genre etc is also subject to such control have received far less attention that they deserve. (Ashcorft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1995) The agency of the translator of a marginalized text is seriously undermined by these sociological, psychological and political dimensions of post-colonial textual studies. The capitalistic, consumerist factors, both local and global, compel the translator to toe the baseline expectations of the target readership by homogenizing the poetological, ideological and cultural differences that the source text so prominently manifests. Impelled by vested mercenary interests or otherwise, the absent center plays the colonizers' first cousin using translation as a significant technology for homogenization, subordination, otherization and oblique domination. In her seminal book *Siting Translation* (1995), Tejaswini Niranjana draws on Benjamin, Derrida, and de Man to identify the contexts of representation and power in intercultural transfer. She upholds, "In a post-colonial context the problematic of translation *becomes* a significant site for raising questions of representation, power, and historicity. The context is one of contesting and contested stories attempting to account for, to recount, the asymmetry and inequality of relations between peoples, races, languages." Niranjana's claim that the postcolonial theory and translation can "reinvent oppositional cultures in non-essentializing ways" is compatible with the poststructuralist call for the celebration of heterogeneity. Thus, the postcolonial translator should conscientiously tune his translatorial efforts to paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic level so that political tendencies of homogenizing and continuity can be resisted and a discursive space for the assertion of socio-cultural identities can be constructed. Critical of the communicative model of translation, Niranjana emphasizes that just as one can't aspire for

accuracy in translation, a complete denial of historicity and referentiality is impossible. The challenge of post-colonial translation lies not so much in doing a balancing act between the heavy demands made by the source and the target cultures as in promoting the political model over poetical or epistemological one. Unlike the literary-cultural transaction through languages between two European countries like France and England, the nature of transaction between an Indian regional language like Gujarati and the last yet unbelievably powerful vestige of colonial past i.e. English is inarguably underwritten by politics and subtext of power. The political agenda of postcolonial translation is to articulate a discourse wherein differences are not only rewritten and recognized but valorized. Thus, a post-colonial translator negotiating a marginalized text such as that of Nazir Mansuri has to be alert to the fact that witting or unwitting subscription to aesthetic or consumerist assumptions as to the production/control of the meaning of a marginalized/subculture literary text not only seriously undermines the socio-cultural identity and values of a given community being depicted in it but also becomes instrumental in erasing the already endangered heterogeneity of literary traditions that are indispensable for the survival of human civilization.

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