

Translating Mizo Folklore

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Abstract: This article shall attempt to situate the significance of religion and power and its centrality in the process of translating Mizo folklore. The term folklore encompasses both the tales as well as the song tradition. It shall determine an exploration of the translation of Mizo folklore -from the Mizo to English- and trace the underlying aspects that are located in the process of translation of the same.

Keywords: Mizoram, folklore, tradition, translation.

As indicated in the title, it shall explore the cultural dynamics that are inherent in a society, where translation does not take place for its own sake alone but rather in terms of a paradigm where it exists in a dynamics where a semblance of 'censorship' is a prerequisite. This aspect of 'censorship' has been seen significantly as a product of religion. In the process it has created a cultural complexity towards situating folklore within the Mizo paradigm. For a more coherent understanding of the argument, one must delve into a critique of the background of the Mizo sensibility, from the colonial period itself. Mizoram is a predominantly Christian state and even after a hundred years of the advent of the colonial mission namely, (that of the Welsh mission in 1894), there are myriad instances that attest to the power dynamics that are present in the form of religion. The colonial encounter in the Lushai hills made a significant mark not merely in terms of the acquisition of greater geographical domains, but significantly in terms of religious conquest as well. Post colonial writing including the oft quoted question posed by Spivak 'can the subaltern speak?' have stressed upon the notion of speaking not merely about a post colonial ethic but also in the aspects concerning post colonial 'creativity' in the ambit of literature and identity. As with most cultures, translation has had myriad functions to play in this context, as almost all literature, both oral as well as written, for the Mizos have been 'inherited' in translation from the Welsh missionaries. Thus, it is in this perspective that translation plays a key role. Colonisation brought about the advent of the Welsh missionaries in what was then predominantly referred to as the Lushai Hills, and the advent of Christian missionaries have been central to the Mizo ethos, predominantly as the receiving culture was decidedly tribal, and bereft of literacy. Within the ambit of this domain, the dynamics of a recreation and a reordering, of what was ostensibly a culture with little or no established mores, became the mainstay prerogative of the Welsh mission. However, what must be taken into consideration here is that, it would be decidedly wrong to perceive of the Mizos as a tribal community that was either savage or alien to the concept of both administration and religion. As in most cultures,

where orality has had a marked significance, Mizos too had their own precepts of religion and forms of administration. The Welsh missionaries were keen on the transformation of the Mizo ethos from orality to writing, and this aspect was achieved only through the nuances of translation. Translation was foremost in priority and it has been instrumental in creating a semblance of identity formulation amongst the community. What is significant to note here is that the power dynamics have been located inherently in aspects that were related to the aspect of religion and power. Within the confines of the Mizo sensibility, the Bible and select Christian hymns were first rendered in translation from the English to the Mizo. Other aspects of creative endeavour such as folk narratives either in prose or song, were regarded by the colonials to be disruptive to the identity parameter. In this regard, folklore in translation has taken a decided backseat. Having translated folklore from the Mizo to English, I realise that there are certain aspects where the dynamics between the folk and the lore are predominantly 'censored' due to the power that religion has over the Mizo mindset.

The translated narratives have sought to locate the Foucauldian argument, where Foucault stresses that 'power is everywhere because it comes from everywhere'. In deliberating upon the same, concentrated effort has been made to dwell upon the censorship that is prevalent in the translation and interpretation of folklore, where translation has not been rendered 'for its own sake'. In the translation of Mizo folklore; translation by itself is a power seeking action that transcends literary boundaries, and religion becomes the determining power in translation, and this aspect has gradually been enhanced in everyday ethos. The Foucauldian notion of truth that each society has its regime of truth is particularly pertinent in this perspective. The complicated establishment of the interrelation between truth and power and translation in folklore, is central in this domain. The aspect of power in the art of translation remains significant and as Michael Cronin has observed, much in tandem with Foucault, 'power is everywhere in the definition, context, and practise of interpreting, yet there has often been a reluctance to reflect on the consequences of power in interpretation studies.' Edwin Gentzler has denoted that 'contemporary theories of translation challenge privileged concepts of the sanity of the source text and the originality of the author.' In this context Foucault's essay 'What is an Author?' must be taken into consideration. This article also assumes the premise that every act of writing is already a translation or a translation of a translation. In this context Spivak's has raised the notion of how the 'third world' subject is represented in Western discourse including in translation. In her seminal 1988 essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' she posits the question of whether or not it is possible for the subalterns to speak for themselves especially in the light of the colonisation that they have undergone. This question is applicable to the subaltern context of the Mizos too who have increasingly rendered identity in translation. The image of the hill dweller

as projected through translation has in turn been translated with varying cultural contexts in the folk narratives, in terms of an identity formation. Spivak's position is well situated in the Mizo paradigm especially where she denotes that in order for the 'subaltern mute to speak', it is necessary 'to unlearn and to mark our position' before being able to learn again. The demands that are made upon the translator as mediator are correspondingly high because 'the translator must be familiar with the history of the language, the history of the author's moment, the history of the language-in-translation', all of which have been little researched upon by the translators in the colonial past and this ethos has been maintained even in the post colonial era.

Translation dynamics across cultures and particularly for the Mizo sensibility demands a critique as well as a coherent comprehension of the religious ethos pertaining to the same. Foucault's concept of the belief that 'relations of power are not in themselves forms of repression... But what happens is that, in society, in most societies, organizations are created to freeze the relations of power, hold those relations in a state of asymmetry, so that a certain number of persons get an advantage, socially, economically, politically, institutionally' are central in the application of the Church as a religious instrument that determines the levels of translation. Canonical law, the Christian pastoral and civil law contribute to aspects of repression. Foucault attributes a fundamental role to censorship and taboos regarding speaking and thinking and this has been central to the Mizo ethos as well. In terms of the individualisation of ideas pertaining to ideas such as, 'What is an author?' where Foucault questions the notions of the authorial status, he further elaborates:

“What is a work? Of what elements is it composed? Is it not what an author has written? What is an author's name and how does it function?”
For each poetic or fictional text, we ask questions-from where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, beginning or design? (Rabinow, 109)

This paradigm may also be applicable to Mizo folklore in translation. In the Mizo dynamics of translation too the earlier Welsh mission translators as well as the Mizo translators of the post missionary era, have been translators in more than the literal sense, and thus the term translator cannot be confined to just the translation of a mere text or body of writing. Translators have thus been 'authors and translators' of something much more than a text. They have set the pace for subsequent theories and traditions and disciplines in which other books or authors in Mizo literature will find their place. However, while translation has been effective, the arena of censorship and power has been consistently maintained in the form of religious discourse. Much akin to the notion presumed in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1974) where Foucault denotes aspects that are related to the systematic control over the individual members of the society. The growth of disciplinary society

in the form of what has been rendered in translation has been consistent. Discipline and censorship, that are related to the exercise of power which may almost be comparable to Bentham's concept of panopticism: (the panopticon was a circular building with an observation tower in the centre of an open space surrounded by an outer wall. This wall would contain cells for occupants. This design would increase security by facilitating more effective surveillance) is central. This has largely been because, relevant cultural connotations have been often deleted and rendered defunct, while Western imagery and symbols have gradually found a place of acceptance in translation. Religion and the significance that it has in terms of translation, then is akin to the concept of surveillance which Foucault denotes from time to time in his works. The aspect of self-identity in relation to the problem of 'individualizing power' is a strategic case for consideration. Foucault also uses the term 'pastoral modality of power'. Perhaps this aspect could be referred to, to further explain as to why Christianity which was the decided colonial legacy, for the Mizos (and which has much of its origins from the Hebrew tradition), was so intense in its development of the pastoral theme. The concept of Christian thought and institutions, of God alone as the Shepherd and the people as their flock are central. Clearly in such an instance, the association of "pastoral technology" in the management of men has been a part of the perhaps disruptive discourses of society. In this regard, a semblance of political domination has occurred in Mizo translation dynamics too because, the Church has largely censored the translation and subsequent rendering of Mizo folk narratives. However, the prose tradition was less censored as compared to the song tradition because it was considered to be less of a threat in comparison to the song tradition and in fact the missionaries themselves helped in the translation and documentation of the prose narratives. Mrs E M Chapman, popularly known as Pi Zirtiri along with a lady called Pi Nuchhungi in fact, helped in the compilation of folk narratives in prose entitled 'Serkawn Graded Reader' which was prescribed for the primary schools (and is in fact studied till the present time of writing). Even then, the prose narratives were 'censored' and many aspects that were related to the cultural artifacts were often harshly left untranslated. Varying narratives that had been handed down from the Mizo folk tradition have been censored because the terms and the themes used, have been regarded to be detrimental to the precepts of Christianity. In this regard, though, this article shall stress largely upon the fact that the song lore was much affected and even perhaps 'lost' in translation. The narratives that were related to the song tradition were vastly censored in translation from the original Mizo, because folk songs were regarded to be more emotionally overpowering, as compared to the folktales. In this regard, religion has played a central predominance because, there is a distinct personal bond where the tie with the shepherd is an individual one and in the process, leads to a constitutive part of Christian self-identity, as earlier elucidated in terms of Foucault's

model. The concept of the sacral has been under much debate and often it has been regarded that the secular has replaced the sacral and that the sacral has been dismissed at best as a myth and at worst a superstition. In the affirmation of identity and translation within a post colonialist perspective, the white man has decidedly played a significant role in the poetics of translation. Religion has been consistently the central power within this aspect because, the colonizers chose to translate only select aspects that were located from both song and prose folk narratives, this ostensibly because the mainstay was to promote and enhance their own agendas rather than anything else. It is evident that the missionaries recognized that music and song folk narrative, was central to the Mizo sensibility. Edwin Rowlands a Welsh missionary who came to the Lushai hills in the early nineteenth century, after the Arthington mission had left the Lushai Hills records thus:

“the Lushais seem to have a great love for singing, It is said that during one of the military expeditions, when the British soldiers were encamped at certain places ...the Lushais, who were shooting at the camp, stopped when the song began but fired again when the singing had ceased.” (Vanlalchhuanawma,46)

The politics of translation has further been problematised in this regard. It has been denoted by Mizo cultural historians too that Mizos would perhaps be a people who possessed the widest range in song narrative. This was much before the script was created for them. While disseminating Christian ideology, thus, music became one of the more significant tools of the missionaries. There was a growing awareness of the Western tunes of the English hymns that were rendered in translation. Song and the Christian ethos were thus significant, and it was a decided marker of a new social identity and this shift in the musical direction was a signifying aspect of power. The Mizos made little or no attempt to indigenize the aspect of Christianity and it ensured too that there was little or no attempt made to write back to the empire with little or no attempt made to fight against the missionaries. The Mizo concept of the song tradition was one that advocated for hope amidst turbulent beliefs. Song reinforced a sense of community identity. What remains significant in this regard is that while other cultures have aimed at a sense of emancipation from colonialism, Mizos themselves have not been too vehement in this regard. It appeared from the very outset that the pioneer missionaries recognised the Mizo instinct for music and singing. William Williams refers to his first two hour meeting with the Mizos to whom they sang several tunes. He denoted that the latter “listened with open mouths” and although he failed to persuade them to do the same, momentarily, they tried to sing one of the tunes while his party was leaving by boat. On the other hand Lorrain and Savidge found the Mizos extremely unmusical before they embraced Christianity. They in fact denoted that “the only time they were known to sing was when they were drunk.” Vanlalchhuanawma narrates that in order to further elucidate this

aspect there is a story that is told of an occasion where the first school boys were taught singing and certain Mizos working nearby came running in and asked, “where is the beer pot?”

Foucault's notion of 'how we have been trapped into our own history' becomes here a significant case in point. The element of translation and power has been intrinsically associated with the cultural relations between Britain and her colonies especially in the nineteenth century. The concept of colonization in terms of other countries was very different as compared to the Mizo scenario, for instance in terms of the European thought the aspect of culture in its colonial operation was regarded to be “hybridised, alienated and potentially threatening.” Translation had created in the Lushai hills, a people who were as Bhabha had denoted as a set of 'white but not quite' people. Even though Mizoram was amongst the furthest in terms of the Indian geographical locale, it must also be concluded that, for the Mizos the aspect of identity has been very much essentialised and significantly fixed in many ways through the perspective of translation.

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