

Cross-Cultural Translation and Untranslatability: A Critical Study of *The Infinite* as a Translation of Dhruv Bhatt's *Akoopar*

Parth Joshi

Final Year PG Student, Department of English & CLS

Saurashtra University, Rajkot, India

Email: parthdhjoshi@rediffmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century is undoubtedly a century of knowledge and translation of knowledge for its better transmission. The first two decades of the century have witnessed a plethora of works, not only from the regional literatures but also world literature, being translated from English into regional languages and vice versa. This paper aims at critically evaluating the translation of Dhruv Bhatt's Gujarati travelogue-cum-novel *Akoopar*, translated into English as *Akoopar – The Infinite* by Piyush Joshi and Suresh Gadhavi. Evaluating the translation of this work is significant because of three reasons: 1) The text, being an extensive anthropological study of Gir region of Saurashtra (Gujarat), is highly culture-specific therefore the translation becomes an instance of Cross-cultural translation; 2) The text itself is a blend of Gujarati and Kathiawadi dialect and so how this colloquial language has been handled becomes a matter of study; and 3) The text highlights the issue of 'untranslatability' at many places and consequently, the evaluation of the translated work would throw some light upon the question of loss in translation and untranslatability.

KEYWORDS

Translation; Cross-cultural translation; Untranslatability; Loss in translation; Ecology

Introduction

"Words travel across worlds. Translators do the driving", writes Italian translator Anna Rusconi. (Qtd in O'Shea 90) Be it the English word 'translation' made up from Latin *trans* (meaning 'across') and *latus* (roughly meaning 'to bring'), its German equivalent *uber-setzen* (which would mean 'to carry something from one side of the river to the other) or the Sanskrit terms like

'*bhasantar*' or '*anuvad*', translation, in its most fundamental sense, is generally taken as rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) in order to convey in the latter that which is said in the former. Nonetheless, the whole activity of translation and its evaluation appears to be oscillating between the dipoles of 'loyalty' and 'beauty' – a translation can either be faithful or beautiful but, as they say, seldom both.

The problem becomes acute when the translation is not merely literal but literary. Translation is not merely an interaction of two languages but an interface between two cultures. Words in a language are inherently rooted in the culture of the place from where the language emerges. Susan Bassnett remarks: "Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture... In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril." (23) From the 1980s, translation activity is seen as significantly instrumental in cross-cultural communication; no longer is translation viewed as a mere linguistic phenomenon but a cultural phenomenon. Rainer Schulte writes:

We, as translators, are always involved in carrying something across the river, whether it is from here to there or from there to here... We know that translation is not the translation of words, even though the final product of our translations appears in the form of words or sentences... In our multicultural context, the translator, therefore, must become the most indispensable mediator if indeed true communication between people of different languages were to happen." (Schulte)

Mary Snell-Hornby called translation as "an interaction between two cultures" (Qtd in Jayaraju 220). A translator, in this context then, certainly faces not only linguistic but also cultural problems in translation. Many a time, they are more cultural than linguistic because of the lack of direct social, anthropological, psychological and emotional one-to-one correspondence between the Source Culture and the Target Culture. Similar is the case with Gujarati writer Dhruv Bhatt's travelogue cum novel *Akoopar* which has been translated by

Dr Piyush Joshi and Dr Suresh Gadhavi and titled as *Akoopar: The Infinite*.

Written in 2010, *Akoopar* describes the socio-cultural and aesthetic experience of an urban painter-protagonist who happens to visit the interior areas of Gir forest and spend time with the local inhabitants for a project. It is here that he comes across a world entirely different from his own – humble, selfless rustics living a life which is woven around and in perfect synchrony with nature. *Gayr*, as they call it, and its flora and fauna, and Saavaj (for which 'lion' would be an imperfect translation), the emblem of Gir pride – all these are treated no inferior to humans by the local residents and there is a strong mutual emotional attachment. The protagonist gets fascinated by all this and feels strangely at home as Gir gradually unfolds her mysteries to him. Being a highly culture-specific text, *Akoopar* would certainly pose strong challenges to its translators. The paper tries to analyse these challenges and how they have been handled by the translators.

Kinship Words

According to Dr Jayaraju, the translator faces the greatest challenge while transferring kinship words from one language to another. And the problem multiplies if there is a great gap between the cultures of two languages as it would happen with English translation of *Akoopar*. This is because English has fewer words to express relations compared to Gujarati. The word 'uncle' in English, for instance, would be an all-covering term for *kaka, mama, masa, fua* etc. in Gujarati as 'aunt' would be for *kaki, mami, masi, foi* etc.

Thus, the translator would naturally find it difficult to find an English equivalent for Gujarati and dialectal kinship words like *Aima* (mother/grandmother), *Bapa* (father/elderly male figure), *Gaga* (informal address for 'son'), *sodi* (informal for 'daughter'), *Vira* (brother), *Madi* (mother), *fai* (aunty), *Vevai*

(father-in-law of son/daughter), *Vevan* (mother-in-law of son/daughter), *Gadhavi* (fiancé) etc. which occur frequently in the source text. For most of such words, the translator has retained the original words, since translating them would mar the beauty of the work, and has given the meaning beside the word within parenthesis. However, the researcher thinks that providing the English translation along with the original word on such occasions sometimes makes the address look too formal and disturbs the flow of reading and flavour of the passage. The researcher humbly suggests the use of footnotes/endnotes for such a purpose.

Culture-specific Words

Culture-specific words are those which refer to objects/aspects (viz. dressing style, food, rituals) specifically belonging to a particular cultural or ethnic group, not found elsewhere in any other cultural or ethnic group. The source text under scrutiny contains several dozens of such words which are exclusively a part of Gujarati and specially Kathiawadi culture. *Jhok, Nes, Beedi, Kundhi, Datan, Kediya, Jimi, Odhani, Shiraman, Penda, Gathiya, Kariyatu, Chauk, Bhavai, Viradi, Indhoni, Khatlo, Dholiyo* etc. are among a few examples.

These are words whose English equivalent cannot be found from the dictionary because they are not a part of English culture. Most of the aforementioned words have been retained and their explanation provided in parenthesis alongside. However, the researcher is again of the opinion that providing an appropriate explanation regarding such culture-specific terms as a part of the endnotes serves the purpose better rather than briefly and superficially explaining them in the parenthesis alongside in a word or two. In fact, a translator, at such occasion, can take up the role of a tourist guide and become a

cultural ambassador to Gir by providing interesting insights about the region in his/her endnote. For instance, along with retaining the word *bhavai* while translating, a brief paragraph, as an endnote, about the origin of the dramatic form and its cultural richness in the context of Gujarat would definitely have added to the significance of the translation.

In addition to this, there are certain expressions specific to the culture of Gir whose translation needs to be examined. For instance, "*KhammaGayrne*" (Bhatt 3) from the source text has been translated as "May the Gir be blessed" (Joshi 7) which is debatable because the expression, rooted in Kathiawadi culture, comes from the verb *khamavu* (i.e. To bear the pain) and is used by Aima in a very comprehensive manner such as "May Gir get the strength to bear the pain." In the expression "*Aa badhi Gayr chhe. Gaandi Gayr*" (19) translated as "This is all Gayr, crazy Gayr." (23), *Gaandi Gayr* would mean 'vulnerable' and life-threatening to anyone who doesn't follow its unwritten laws and decorum. Therefore, "vulnerable" could have been a closer adjective in place of 'crazy'.

Similarly, the expression "*...Hammesa jivati, sadasohagan, sadamohak gir*" (119) translated as "ever-alive, ever-enchanted, ever-sohagan, ever-alluring Gir" (130) or "*Aa Gayr chhe. Bapa nu ghar nathi. Faave tya khodai no javai.*" (31) translated as "This is Gayr. It is not one's father's home..." (35) or "*Gayr na chudi-chandlo nandvaa reva dyo*" (251) translated as "Don't take away the good fortune of Gayr" (276), "*Gir ni gauravpurna ragni*" (211) translated as "the royal queen" (229) and "*teni khaandaani*" (211) translated as "his nobility" (229) are all highly culture-specific whose translation seems unnatural and there is loss of both beauty and sense.

Idioms, Proverbs and Phrases

In his article '*Problems of Cross-Cultural Translation and the Translator's Role*', Dr

Jayaraju notes: "Translating idioms and proverbs is the most challenging work of the translator of fiction." (223) Most of the times, a literal / word-to-word translation of these cultural items results into a blunder, the reason being, as Baker puts it, idioms, fixed expressions and proverbs "are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form." (63)

In *Akoopar*, one finds expressions like "Tu to jaane marad nu faadiyu" (Bhatt 26), "Kala akshar kuvade marya" (58), "Thakar taru abhare bhare"(127) etc. which are rooted in the history, customs, religion, geography and local conditions of a region. Their literal translation looks unnatural. Instead, the translator has to extract the figurative meaning in them and if unable to find a parallel in the target language, has to work with multiple strategies. In this case, the translators have adopted one of the following strategies:-

- (i) Finding an expression in the target language similar in form and meaning – For example, "Tu to jane marad nu fadiyu" (Bhatt 26) has been translated as "... as if you were a real man." (Joshi 30)
- (ii) Omission, if the expression has no close match in target language and is omissible – For example, the proverb "Kala akshar kuvade marya" (58) has been omitted while translating, explaining it in other words
- (iii) Paraphrasing, where the translation is reduced to literal level and translation loss occurs – For example, "Thakar taru abhare bhare, bhai. So varas no tha" (127) has been translated as "May the Lord fill your store! May you live to be a hundred!" (139). The phrase "...Ene to bakhiyathaijai"(45) has been translated as "... is a blessed one" (49). Similarly, the beauty of the alliteration has to be compromised with when

"Gayr ma gar ma ne gar to dar ma" (74) is translated as "Don't enter the Gayr and if you enter then don't be scared." (81)

Poetry Translation

Robert Frost has famously defined poetry as that "which gets lost in translation" (Qtd in Hovhannisyan). Roman Jakobson, in his article "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" says that poetry is "by definition untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible." (Qtd in Hovhannisyan). This is because the translation of poetry involves numerous factors to be handled – phonemic, syntactic, semantic, figurative, metrical and aesthetic – each being equally challenging. Ezra Pound, defining the role of a translator writes: "Much depends on the translator. He can show where the treasure lies." (Qtd in Hovhannisyan) A simple thumb rule, however, lies in Matiu's conclusion, "The translator of poetry must become the voice of the original poet and thus he should be able to produce a poem that sounds as if it were written by that particular author directly in the target language." (133)

Akoopar, set up in a rural background, contains several pieces of *doohas* and *chhandas* – poetical forms belonging to folk literature. The challenge of the translator multiplies because these have a complex metrical pattern and their language is majorly dialectal. For instance:

"Ghantalo payane ghantali ne, ne anavar vaanhaadhor

Hiral, Meghal jaanadiyu ne Gayr ma zaakamzol" (Bhatt 33)

This is how the translation goes:-

"Ghantalo weds Ghantali. The Best man is Vanhadhor,

Hiran and Meghal are present in the marriage ceremony

And there is a great pomp in the Gir." (Joshi 37)

While the above translation successfully retains the denotative meaning of the couplet, there is a considerable loss in translation for the following reasons: (i) In this case, the translator has opted for a literal phrase-by-phrase translation. (ii) The syntax has been changed from poetic to prosaic because of which the naturalness of poetry suffers. (iii) The translation of *Anvar* as “the best man” and *Hiral, Meghal jaanadiyu* as “Hiral and Meghal are present in the marriage ceremony” is questionable.

Another quatrain describing the beauty of flowing Hiran river:-

*“Dungar thi dalati ghaat utarati padti
na padti aakhadati
Aave uchhalanti jara na darati dagalaa
bharati madazarati
Kilkaraa karati jaai garajati ghoraali
Hiran halakari jobanwaali nadi rupaali
nakharaali”* (Bhatt 245)

The quatrain has been translated as:

Rolling down the hills, descending the
pass,
Leaping down fearlessly, lunging
forward, intoxicated,
Giving out cries of joy, Roaring –
Hiran ever youthful vivacious river –
beautiful and bewitching treads in
style.” (Joshi 268)

The above translation suffers less loss of sense because the translator has skilfully used the nearest equivalents for expressions in the TL viz. “Rolling down the hills” (*Dungar thi dalati*), “Leaping down fearlessly” (*Ave uchhalanti jara na darati*), “Lunging forward, intoxicated” (*Dagala bharati madazarati*) etc. However, typo-error in the word “decending” (268) and the punctuation error in the last line of the quatrain is immediately eye-catching.

Instance of Aporia

Aporia in language, according to Derrida, is the ultimate stage of undecidability or indeterminacy of meaning resulting due to

differance – the endless play of signification that goes on in language, where, “any attempt to define or interpret the signification of a sign or chain of signs consists in nothing more than the interpreter’s putting in its place another sign or chain of signs, sign-substitutions” (Abrams 441) Due to this incessant play, no sign or chain of signs can have a determinate meaning. This he calls a limitation of language.

In *Akoopar*, when the protagonist realizes that Gir is much more than merely a forest, he attempts what Roman Jakobson would call ‘a paradigmatic substitution’ for the word ‘forest’. In the process of signification, he uses a train of signifiers, each a step higher than the previous, for describing the beauty and greatness of Gir viz. *Aranya, Atavi, Van, Vipin, Gahan, Guhin, Kanan, Bhiruk, Vikt, Praantar . . .* (Joshi 119). Here, each of the word-signs seeks recourse to the following one to complete the process of signification, the meaning is differed and deferred but the ultimate signified is never achieved. The translator has preserved and well-described this state of Aporia through the protagonist, who finally says: “The language has several words which are synonyms for Van-forest, but none of them can fully describe it in its total meaning.” (Joshi 119)

Akoopar and Untranslatability

The debate concerning issues like Equivalence, Loss in translation and Untranslatability has been long-persistent in translation. In keeping with the source text, the researcher thinks that translation is above all a transfer of experience into language/words. Translation happens first of all at an experiential level. An artist ‘translates’ his lived experience into a work of art. For an author, he ‘translates’ his experience on the pages through language.

Thus, the very act of creation is an act of translation. While untranslatability might be deemed as a myth in textual translation (i.e.

translation of a text from one language to another), untranslatability cannot be completely discarded as a myth in the translation of lived experience into language. There are certainly problems of equivalence that prevail in translation at experiential level and *Akoopar*, where the painter-protagonist struggling to 'translate' his experience into works of painting often fails to do so, provides strong examples of such untranslatability. From the very moment the protagonist enters Gir and thinks of painting it, he admits: "I am not sure at present whether I'll succeed in capturing the understanding coming out of my search, in my writing or in painting." (Joshi 32) Further, in an incident, he says: "I also realised that if I cannot capture that truth in my paintings, it was no use to make an attempt to paint them." (39) He comes across people and events that change his entire perception viz. Aima telling *Khama Gayrne*, Incident of Lajo, the girl seeing Goddess incarnate in a stone which he is never able to bring down in his pictures. Finally, as if he admits the untranslatability, the author writes: "I left the picture unfinished which I had been planning to draw since I stepped into the Gir." (296). Thus, *Akoopar* opens up new avenues for discussion of untranslatability.

Conclusion

The researcher, from the aforesaid instances, concludes that loss in translation is inevitable, especially in a culturally rich text like *Akoopar*. However, the quality of any translation is to be mapped not always by what is lost but by what is gained. With all its prevailing theories, Translation is ultimately *praxis*. Translation is performance. The translator, by undertaking the translation of such a text, has contributed substantially to transferring the cultural richness of Gir to English-knowing community of readers.

However, one has to remember that translator has to be, on many occasions, a critic and interpret things on behalf of his target readers. His language, therefore, ought to be "critical language". "In our multicultural context, the translator must become the most indispensable mediator, if indeed true communication between people of different languages were to happen... Translators are always between two places: the reality of source language and possibilities of the target language. Through the act of translation, the translator opens the door for dialogue." (Schulte 4)

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Parth Joshi is currently a final year student of MA English at the Department of English & CLS, Saurashtra University, Rajkot (Gujarat). He is also serving as an English Teacher at St Mary's High School, Rajkot. He has presented papers at several international and national conferences and has published two research papers. He can be reached at parthdhjoshi@rediffmail.com