Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation

Harish Trivedi

It is widely agreed to be the case that translation and translation studies have never had it so good. Over the last two or three decades, translation has become a more prolific, more visible and more respectable activity than perhaps ever before. And alongside translation itself, a new field of academic study has come into existence, initially called Translatology (but not for long, thank God!) and now Translation Studies, and it has gathered remarkable academic momentum. There has of course always been translation, for almost as long as there has been literature. But the historical reasons for the present boom are probably traceable back to three distinct moments across the span of the twentieth century.

The first of these was the concerted movement of translating Russian fiction into English which began in the 1890s and went on until the 1930s, which revealed to readers in English a body of imaginative work from an area outside Western Europe which was so new and exciting as to be shocking and indeed to induce a state of what was then called the "Russian fever," with writers as diverse as Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence not only enthusing about the newly discovered nineteenth-century masters of Russian fiction but actually helping to translate them in collaboration with the Russian emigre S. S. Koteliansky. The other two moments belong to the other end of the twentieth century, occurring as they did in the 1970s and the 1980s when two other bodies of literature from hitherto unregarded parts of the world were translated into English and caused a comparable sensation: from Latin America, and from the East European countries lying behind the Iron Curtain.

Unlike with Russian literature, these latter literatures when made available in translation helped to transform globally our very expectations of what literature looks like or should look like. If I may digress for a moment to touch native ground, perhaps the first instance when readers in English and in other European languages were similarly shocked and exhilarated by the discovery of an alien literature was in the last two decades of the eighteenth century when Charles Wilkins, Sir William Jones and other orientalists began translating from Sanskrit, and caused in Europe what Raymond Schwab has called *The Oriental Renaissance* and J. J. Clarke *The Oriental Enlightenment*. But those were different times, and what that discovery through translation led to was not any enhanced interest in translation but rather the founding of the discipline of comparative philology, and of course, if we are to believe Edward Said, further and more effective colonization.

As comparative philology and colonialism are by now both areas of human endeavour which may be regarded as exhausted, the three newer flashes of translational revelation have given rise instead to a worthy impulse to look more closely at the process and effect of translation itself. Though translators themselves and some rare literary critics too had for a long time been reflecting on the practice of translation, such activity was, as we say now, theorized into an autonomous field of academic enquiry only about two decades ago, in or about the year 1980. In England and in many other parts of the Anglophone world, the birth of Translation Studies was signalled, insomuch as such gradual consolidation is signaled by any single event, by the publication of a book under the very title *Translation Studies* by Susan Bassnett-McGuire (now Susan Bassnett) in 1980. This short introductory handbook has had remarkable circulation and influence, being reprinted in a second edition in 1991 and in an updated third edition in 2002.

But a new field of study is seen in our times to have become well and truly established when not only monographs but Readers (or anthologies of primary and critical materials) and Encyclopedias of the subject begin coming out, and this has been happening steadily in Translation Studies over the last few years: for example, the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* edited by Mona Baker (1998), the *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English* edited by Olive Classe (2000), the *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* edited by Peter France (2000), and the five-volume "History of Literary Translation into English" projected by the Oxford University Press, as well as a seven-volume Encyclopedia now in progress for some years in Germany. To these one may add anthologies of theoretical and critical statements such as *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* edited by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (1992), *The Translation Studies Reader* edited by Lawrence Venuti (2000), *Western Translation Theory: from Herodotus to Nietzsche* by Douglas Robinson (2001) and critical surveys of such materials, such as *Contemporary Translation Theories* by Edwin Gentzler (1993; updated edition 2001), not to mention a *Dictionary of Translation Studies* by Mark Shuttleworth and Moira Cowie (1997). New journals exclusively devoted to the subject such as *The Translator* have been founded, publishers big and small such as Routledge and Multilingual Matters have launched their Translation Studies series, and a whole new publishing house exclusively devoted to the subject, St Jerome, has not been doing too badly.

My assiduous citation of this select bibliography (such as is generally relegated to the end of a paper) is intended to show not only the new embarrassment of riches available in the field but also a tendency to push the range of the discipline as wide and retrospectively as far back as possible (to Dryden and to Herodotus, for example), so as to give it a more respectable scholarly lineage. It is all reminiscent of the ways in which Postcolonial Studies emerged as an area of study just a few years before Translation Studies and, in fact, the resemblance here is not only incidental but interactive, for at least four studies have been published in recent years making an explicit connection between these two newly burgeoning areas: *Siting Translation: History, Poststructuralism and the Colonial Context* (1992) by Tejaswini Niranjana, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (1997) by Eric Cheyfitz, *Translation and Empire: Postcolonial Theories Explained* (1997) by Douglas Robinson, and *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999), a collection of essays edited by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. Altogether, the newly won pre-eminence of translation and translators is itself reflected, wittingly or unwittingly, in the titles of two recent books, *The Translator's Turn* (by Douglas Robinson, 1991), which it now seems to be, and *The Translator's Invisibility* (by Lawrence Venuti, 1995), which now seems to have been replaced by a foregrounded, lime-lit visibility.

I

Before these new developments took place, any study of translation was subsumed under either of two different subjects or disciplines: Linguistics and Comparative Literature. Traditionally, translation was seen as a segment or sub-field of Linguistics, on the basic premise that translation was a transaction between two languages. J. C. Catford's book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics* (1965) was perhaps the last major work written on this assumption, in which he defined translation as comprising a "substitution of TL [i.e., Target Language] meanings for SL [i.e., Source Language] meanings" (quoted in Bassnett:2000, 15)

But shortly afterwards, it began to be noticed that literary texts were constituted not primarily of language but in fact of culture, language being in effect a vehicle of the culture. In traditional discussions, the cruxes of translation, i.e., the items which proved particularly

intractable in translation, were often described as being "culture-specific" – for example, *kurta*, *dhoti*, *roti, loochi*, *dharma*, *karma* or *maya*, all items peculiarly Indian and not really like the Western shirt, trousers, bread, religion, deeds both past and present, or illusion. But then the realization grew that not only were such particular items culture-specific but indeed the whole language was specific to the particular culture it belonged or came from, to some degree or the other. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, to the effect that a language defined and delimited the particular world-view of its speakers, in the sense that what they could not say in their language was what they could not even conceive of, seemed to support the view that the specificity of a culture was coextensive with the specificity of its language. The increased valorization of diversity and plurality in cultural matters also lent strength to this new understanding of language and culture in a way that earlier ideas or ideals of universalism had not.

Thus, in a paradigmatic departure, the translation of a literary text became a transaction not between two languages, or a somewhat mechanical sounding act of linguistic "substitution" as Catford had put it, but rather a more complex negotiation between two cultures. The unit of translation was no longer a word or a sentence or a paragraph or a page or even a text, but indeed the whole language and culture in which that text was constituted. This new awareness was aptly described as "The Cultural Turn in Translation Studies" in the title of a chapter jointly written by Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere in their book *Translation, History and Culture* (1990). It was precisely the formulation and recognition of this cultural turn in Translation Studies that served to extend and revitalize the discipline and to liberate it from the relatively mechanical tools of analysis available in Linguistics.

As it happened, it was about the same time that Translation Studies achieved a similar liberation from subservience to another discipline of which it was for long considered a subsidiary and merely instrumental part, Comparative Literature. But this had as much to do with the decline of Comparative Literature itself, especially in the United States where the energising impulse and vision of multilingual European emigres from before and during the Second World War, such as Rene Wellek, had spent itself out, as with the rise of Translation Studies. It was Susan Bassnett again, who had for many years headed virtually the only full-fledged Comparative Literature department in the U.K., at Warwick University, who in her book titled *Comparative Literature* (1993) declared, "Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead" and "Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day" (pp. 47, 161), going on to explain that while the rise of Postcolonial Studies had stolen the thunder of its thematological concerns, the rise of Translation Studies had left it bereft of much of its methodological preoccupations. Increasingly now, comparative studies of literature across languages have become the concern of Translation Studies; it is the translational tail now that wags the comparative dog.

Through the 1990s, alongside the rise of Translation Studies, we also saw interestingly the rise of a larger and more influential field of study, Cultural Studies, without however any perceptible overlap or interaction between the two. This lack of convergence or imbrication was again taken note of by Bassnett and Lefevere in their next book, *Constructing Cultures* (1998), in which they now had a final chapter titled, "The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies." They noted that these "interdisciplines," as they called them, had moved beyond their "Eurocentric beginnings" to enter "a new internationalist phase," and they identified a four-point common agenda that Translation Studies and Cultural Studies could together address, including an investigation of "the way in which different cultures construct their images of writers and texts," a tracking of "the ways in which texts become cultural capital across cultural boundaries," and an exploration of the politics of translation (Bassnett and Lefevere 138). Finally, they pleaded for a "pooling of resources," and stressed again the

commonality of the disciplinary method and thrust between Translation Studies and Cultural Studies:

> . . .in these multifaceted interdisciplines, isolation is counter-productive. . . .The study of translation, like the study of culture, needs a plurality of voices. And similarly, the study of culture always involves an examination of the processes of encoding and decoding that comprise translation. (Bassnett and Lefevere 138-39)

However, this plea for a joining of forces has apparently fallen on deaf ears. The clearly larger and certainly more theoretically undergirded juggernaut of Cultural Studies continues to rumble along its way, unmindful of the overture made by Translation Studies to be taken on board. One possible reason may be that for all the commonality of ground and direction pointed out by Bassnett and Lefevere, one crucial difference between the two interdisciplines is that Cultural Studies, even when concerned with popular or subaltern culture, nearly always operate in just the one language, English, and often in that high and abstruse variety of it called Theory, while Translation Studies, however theoretical they may get from time to time, must sully their hands in at least two languages only one of which can be English. In any case, while the Cultural Turn in Translation Studies had proved to be an act of transformative redefinition, the Translation Turn in Cultural Studies still remains an unfulfilled desideratum, a consummation yet only wished for.

II

Meanwhile, instead of a cultural turn in Translation studies, we have on our hands a beast of similar name but very different fur and fibre – something called Cultural Translation. This is a new collocation and in its specific new connotation is not to be confused with a stray earlier use of it in the old-fashioned sense of translation oriented towards the target culture, what may be called a reader-oriented or “domesticating” translation. In fact, the term Cultural Translation in its new and current meaning does not find an entry or even mention in any of the recent encyclopedias and anthologies of translation listed above.

It would thus seem to be the case that while wishing for the practitioners of Cultural Studies to come and join hands with them, those engaged in Translation Studies have not even noticed that something called Cultural Translation has already come into existence, especially in the domain of postcolonial and postmodernist discourse, and represents something that could not be further from their hearts’ desire. For, if there is one thing that Cultural Translation is not, it is the translation of culture. In fact, it spells, as I shall go on to argue, the very extinction and erasure of translation as we have always known and practised it.

The most comprehensive, sophisticated and influential formulation of the concept of Cultural Translation occurs in the work of probably the foremost postcolonial-postmodernist theorist of our times, Homi Bhabha, in the last chapter (bar the “Conclusion”) of his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), titled “How newness enters the world: Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation.” In Bhabha’s discussion, the literary text treated as the pre-eminent example of cultural translation is Salman Rushdie’s novel *Satanic Verses*, a novel written originally in English and read in that language by Bhabha. A clue to the new sense in which the term translation is here being used is suggested by a remark made by Rushdie himself (which Bhabha incidentally does not cite) in which he said of himself and other diasporic postcolonial writers: “we are translated men” (Rushdie 16). Rushdie was here exploiting the etymology of the word “translation,” which means to carry or bear across, and what he meant, therefore, was that because he had been borne across,

presumably by an aeroplane, from India and Pakistan to the United Kingdom, he was therefore a translated man. He neglected to tell us as to whether, before he became a translated man, he was at any stage also an original man.

But a second and overriding sense in which too Rushdie claimed to be a translated man is precisely what is expounded by Homi Bhabha in his essay, with specific reference to *The Satanic Verses*. Bhabha begins with an epigraph from Walter Benjamin's classic essay on translation: "'Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity and similarity'" (qted. in Bhabha 212). Later, in a key passage, Bhabha brings in Derrida's deconstruction of Benjamin's concept of translation as an after-life or survival, in order to deploy it in a wholly new context unintended by either Benjamin or Derrida, i.e., the context of Rushdean migrancy and hybridity. To quote Bhabha:

> If hybridity is heresy, then to blaspheme is to dream. . . . it is the dream of translation as "survival" as Derrida translated the "time" of Benjamin's concept of the after-life of translation, as *sur-vivre*, the act of living on borderlines. Rushdie translates this into the migrant's dream of survival; an *initiatory* interstices; an empowering condition of hybridity (Bhabha 226-27).

A little later Bhabha says: "Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication" (Bhabha 228), and he goes on, in another new figurative equation, to speak of the residual cultural unassimilability of the migrant as an instance of what Benjamin called "untranslatability."

Here, as indeed at numerous other places, one may get the feeling that one is still trying to catch Bhabha's shadow while already living in it. What is nevertheless clear and indisputable in Bhabha's formulations of what he calls cultural translation is, firstly, that he does not at all by this term mean literary translation involving two texts from two different languages and cultures, and secondly, that what he means by translation instead is the process and condition of human migrancy. To evoke an irresistibly alliterative and beguiling, mantra-like phrase that Bhabha elsewhere uses more than once, what he is talking about is the "translational transnational" (Bhabha 173) i.e., the condition of Western multiculturalism brought about by Third World migrancy.

Since Bhabha first articulated it, the distinctly postmodernist idea of cultural translation in this non-textual non-linguistic sense has found an echo in much contemporary writing, both critical and creative. To cite a few select examples, the first of which is perhaps an ur-illustration or an analogue from a work which was written before Bhabha's essay was published, Tejaswini Niranjana in her book *Siting Translation* uses the term "translation" by and large to denote the colonial power-play between the British rulers and Indian subjects, and herself conscious of the fact this is not what translation normally means, she resorts early in her work to the Derridean deconstructive ruse of claiming that she has used the term translation "under erasure" (Niranjana 48 n.4) to suit her own chosen context and purpose.

As for creative writing, Hanif Kureishi seems to represent in his career a phase of cultural translation even more acute and advanced than that exemplified by Rushdie. Unlike Rushdie, Kureishi had one English parent, was born in England, and grew up in the "home county" of Kent, thinking of himself as quite and completely British rather than Indian/Pakistani or even hybrid. "I was brought up really as an English child," he has claimed; ". . . I wasn't influenced by Asian culture at all" (qtd. in Ranasinha 6). As he forthrightly put it in another interview, "I am not a Pakistani or an Indian writer, I'm a British writer" (qted. in Ranasinha 6). It is true that, unlike Rushdie's, Kureishi's work contains no reference to popular sub-continental culture such as Hindi films and film-songs; instead, Kureishi has co-edited *The Faber Book of Pop* (1995), meaning of course British and

American pop. Nearly all Kureishi's works are set in London or in the suburbia, and one of them, titled *Sleep with Me* (1999), has only white British characters.

The only difficulty with such demonstrable Britishness of Kureishi is that in the literary and cultural world of London in the 1970s, when Kureishi was beginning to come into his own as a writer, he was nevertheless slotted by commissioning editors for theatre and television into the role of an Asian cultural translator. As he recounts, "they required stories about the new [immigrant] British communities, by cultural translators, as it were, to interpret one side to the other," and though Kureishi knew that as a non-migrant true-born Britisher he was not by upbringing and sensibility "the sort of writer best-suited to this kind of work," he did it nevertheless because "I just knew I was being paid to write" (qted. in Ranasinha 12). In this version, cultural translation is not so much the need of the migrant, as Bhabha makes it out to be, but rather more a requirement of the society and culture to which the migrant has travelled; it is a hegemonic Western demand and necessity.

For an even more thoroughgoing and self-induced example of a cultural translator, we may look at Jhumpa Lahiri, whose first book of fiction, *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* (1999), made her the first Indian-born writer to win the Pulitzer prize for fiction. She was born of Bengali parents in London, grew up in America, became an American citizen at age 18, is by her own admission not really a bilingual though she would like to think she was, and has written fiction not only about Indians in America but also some stories about Indian still living in India. In answer to the criticism that her knowledge of India as reflected in these stories is demonstrably erroneous and defective, she has said, "I am the first person to admit that my knowledge of India is limited, the way in which all translations are" (Lahiri 118). This gratuitous trope is sustained and further highlighted by her going on to say that her representation of India is in fact her "translation of India" (Lahiri 118). It soon transpires that not only is Lahiri as author a translator but so are the fictional personages she translates into existence: "Almost all of my characters are translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign to survive" (Lahiri 120). This echoes, probably unwittingly, the Benjaminian-Derridean *sur-vivre*, in the sense seized upon by Bhabha, just as Lahiri's assertion that "translation is not only a finite linguistic act but an ongoing cultural one" (Lahiri 120) reiterates Bhabha's central premise. And at the conclusion of this essay which Lahiri clearly means to serve as her manifesto and apologia, she declares:

> And whether I write as an American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate, therefore I am (Lahiri 120).

And this from a writer who, like Kureishi, has never translated a word, and who admits that when one of her short stories was published in translation into Bengali, which is her parents' mother-tongue (even if it was not quite her own) and which was therefore the (other?) language of her childhood, she could not understand the translated version – or as she herself put it, seeming to shift the responsibility from herself on to the translation, it proved "inaccessible to me" (Lahiri 120).

If this is cultural translation, we perhaps need to worry about the very meaning of the word "translation." One wonders why "translation" should be the word of choice in a collocation such as "cultural translation" in this new sense when perfectly good and theoretically sanctioned words for this new phenomenon, such as migrancy, exile or diaspora are already available and current. But given the usurpation that has taken place, it may be time for all good men and true, and of course women, who have ever practised literary translation, or even read translation with any awareness of it being translation, to unite and take out a patent on the word "translation," if it is not already too late to do so.

Such abuse or, in theoretical euphemism, such catachrestic use, of the term translation is, as it happens, mirrored and magnified through a semantic explosion or dilution in popular, non-theoretical usage as well. Newspapers constantly speak of how threats could "translate" into action or popularity into votes; there is a book titled *Translating L. A.*, which apparently means no more than describing L.A., and Susan Bassnett herself has recently written that Edwin Gentzler's book *Contemporary Translation Theories* is not only a critical survey but "effectively also a translation, for the author transforms a whole range of complex theoretical material into accessible language" (in Gentzler vi). But it is of course the same language, English, in which such theoretical complexity and such accessibility both exist. Even when these are not instances of "cultural translation" in the sense expounded by Bhabha, these are still instances of a kind of translation which does not involve two texts, or even one text, and certainly not more than one language. These are still examples of what Bhabha, with his usual felicity, has in another context called "non-substantive translation" (in personal conversation). One could perhaps go a step further and, without any attempt at matching felicity, call it simply non-translation.

In conclusion, one may suggest that there is an urgent need perhaps to protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters through cultural translation, for some old and old-fashioned literary translation. For, if such bilingual bicultural ground is eroded away, we shall sooner than later end up with a wholly translated, monolingual, monocultural, monolithic world. And then those of us who are still bilingual, and who are still untranslated from our own native ground to an alien shore, will nevertheless have been translated against our will and against our grain. Further, translation itself would have been untranslated or detranslated, for it would have come under erasure in a sense rather less deconstructive than Derrida's but plainly more destructive. The postcolonial would have thoroughly colonized translation, for translation in the sense that we have known and cherished it, and the value it possessed as an instrument of discovery and exchange, would have ceased to exist. Rather than help us encounter and experience other cultures, translation would have been assimilated in just one monolingual global culture.

All the recent talk of multiculturalism relates, it may be noted, not to the many different cultures located all over the world, but merely to expedient social management of a small sample of migrants from some of these cultures who have actually dislocated themselves and arrived in the First World, and who now must be melted down in that pot, or tossed in that salad, or fitted as an odd little piece into that mosaic. These stray little flotsam and jetsam of world culture which have been washed up on their shores are quite enough for the taste of the First World. Migrancy, often upper-class elite migrancy as for example from India, has already provided the First World with as much newness as it needs and can cope with, and given it the illusion that this tiny fraction of the Third World has already made the First World the whole world, the only world there is. Those of us still located on our own home turf and in our own cultures and speaking our own languages can no longer be seen or heard. All the politically correct talk of ecodiversity and biodiversity concerns a harmless and less problematic level of species below the human; there is no corresponding desire that one can discern for cultural or linguistic diversity. Funds from all over the world are being poured in to preserve and propagate the Royal Bengal Tiger, for example, which is declared to be an endangered species, but no such support is forthcoming for the Indian languages, which seem to be equally endangered by the increasing decimation of world languages by the one all-devouring, multinational, global language, English. It occurs to me that no international agency might want to save the Royal Bengal Tiger if it actually roared in Bengali; there may be the little problem then of having to translate it into

English first. In any case, the World Wildlife Fund is committed to saving only wild life, not cultured life.

In this brave new dystopian world of cultural translation, translation ironically would have been translated back to its literal, etymological meaning, of human migration. In early Christian use of the term, in fact, translation in the sense of being borne across took place when a dead person was bodily transported to the next world, or on a rare occasion when his body was transferred from one grave to another, as happened famously in the case of Thomas a Beckett, who was actually murdered and initially buried near the crypt of the Canterbury Cathedral but then, about 150 years later, when the trickle of pilgrims had swollen into a mainstream, moved and buried again within the same cathedral in the grand new Trinity Chapel. In both these senses, of bodily removal to the next world or to the next grave, we are talking of someone who is truly dead and buried. The many indigenous languages of the world and the channel of exchange between them, translation, may seem headed for the same fate in the time of cultural translation: to be dead and buried.*

WORKS CITED

Bassnett, Susan. (1980) 2002. *Translation Studies*. London: Routledge.

Bassnett, Susan. 1993. *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bassnett, Susan and Andre Lefevere. 1998. *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Catford, J. C. 1965. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics* London: Oxford University Press.

Gentzler, Edwin. (1993) 2001. *Contemporary Translation Theories*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2000. "My Intimate Alien." *Outlook* (New Delhi), special annual issue on "Stree" [Woman], pp. 116-20.

Niranjana, Tejaswini. 1992. *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ranasinha, Ruvani. 2001. *Hanif Kureishi*. (Writers and their Work series). London: Northcote House.

Rushdie, Salman. 1991. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91*. London: Granta Books.

---

* Parts and versions of this essay were delivered at the universities of Iowa, Essex, Warwick and London, and I am grateful to my audiences for many helpful observations and suggestions.