

Moe Hein (Myanmar)

Lost and Found in Translation

Fortunately—or unfortunately—I have been assigned to speak on a broad topic titled, “Lost and Found in Translation.” Imagine the aspects I had to consider for this topic: the pleasures and challenges, the politics of writing and reading, global English. Wow! What a thing to scan in some 25 minutes or so. It was as if I had to measure Mount Everest with a 12” ruler. Anyhow, given the time frame, the most I can do is to put translation in a nutshell, and speak about it generally.

Translation, to me, is the most challenging art of writing. During the presentation of the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism, in the introduction of the winner, Geoffrey Hartman, a statement was quoted: “Language illuminates literature, rather than literature illuminating theory.” If that is the case, may I add: translation illuminates language? And to go further, translation (if good) blesses language. Now, I am obliged to mention the great American novel, *Gone with the Wind*, which was penned by Margaret Mitchell, and translated into Burmese by the writer, Mya Than Tint. The translation was so well received that many fellow writers and critics praised Mya Than Tint, saying, “If Margaret Mitchell were alive today and understood Burmese, she would have definitely said, ‘Hey, this reads better.’” Such can be the blessing of translation. It can be a pleasure indeed. That is the bright side. On the other side, translation is a path full of hurdles—*challenges* we may say.

As you all know, the task of translation is to enable someone to know something previously unwritten in one’s own language. And the subjects—oh, they can be about anything from A to Z—they are very diverse. Translation takes a trio: the writer, the translator and the reader. People who have a good understanding of the original language can enjoy a text written in that language without much difficulty. But for someone who does not know the language the text is out of reach. So much depends on the skill of the translator, who will, of course, adopt, adapt or interpolate as according to each given case, offering many explanations. These explanations of the original come usually in the form of footnotes, provided so that the reader can understand very easily. The text’s settings, similar conditions (between the two cultures), environments, and similar thinking, all add to a greater understanding of the text. These are common characteristics of fellow beings that live in the same planet, and it is upon this that the translator capitalizes, making the reader entirely immersed in his work. The clearer the work; the better the reading. Credit should go to the translator for his painstaking work when the challenges are surmounted.

Now come the challenges. There are several matters that make translation very hard. Sometimes the original is so subtle and profound that it is hard to understand even in one’s own language, let alone in another language. As a poet, I find it almost impossible to translate some Burmese poems of the classical type. I have to admit, I am at a loss for the words to represent the original. To use the nearest equivalent English word would amount to lessening the impact of the tone and tempo, as well as the atmosphere reflected in the original piece. The work is lost.

And another thing, all the common pronouns: “you,” “I,” “he,” “she,” etc. used in English have no specific meaning other than to identify the person. But in Burmese, the pronouns

“you” and “I”, cannot be used in conversation or writing easily, in the way that “you” and “I” can be in English. We can’t talk to our parents, elders, and superiors, using “you” and “I.” This ethic has to be observed for polite address. So, when translating English into Burmese, we have to take into account a person’s age and social status. Needless to say, the pronunciations, syntax, semantics, etc. place hurdles in our path.

There are things, though possible, that should not be translated, especially from novels. The social framework of our country—largely influenced by our culture and our religion—has no room for obscenity in literature. Western novels of the day lavishly entertain the reader with explicit sex scenes and vulgarity. When these novels are translated into Burmese the sex scenes and vulgarity are entirely omitted or toned down. Literature is regarded as public education, especially for the youth as a source of mental and physical progress. Moreover, Buddhism encourages education to attain knowledge from the fields of art and science; this is simply stated in the “Mingala Sutra”, the “38 Blessings.” Thus, in Burma, literature’s importance is measured more as a means of education and enlightenment than as a means of entertainment.

Speaking of literature, I would also like to mention, with great pleasure and admiration, the writers who have translated American literature into Burmese. American literature is not alien to Burmese readers, but rather Burma is well-acquainted with the famous authors—to mention some: Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, Herman Melville, O. Henry, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemmingway, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Frost, Longfellow, and also the writers of the bestsellers of today. Since long ago, American works have caught the attention of our reading circles. The *International Magazine*, of which I am an advisor, has been featuring American authors and their works both in prose and poetry for many years. The Shwe Hin Thar publishing house has also translated a great number of American novels, publishing reinterpretations suitable for younger readers to study. This constant flow of translation enables the readers to know the background of American history and its society in general and all that shapes the America of today. Our Burmese works have also been translated into English. Here, as I am in America, please let me mention two books by my mother, Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay, which have been translated into English and published in America. The first is titled *Not Out of Hate*, translated by Margaret Aung-Thwin¹. It is known to be the first Burmese novel to be translated into English and published outside of Burma (Myanmar). This novel offers a remarkable series of insights into the social history of the late colonial period and into the conflict between Western and Burmese cultures. The second one is *Blood Bond*, translated by Than Than Win². This story is an indictment of war and what it does to individuals and societies. Never would I have dreamed that I would be in this country, America, where my mother’s work has become a subject for academic study.

Coming back to the topic of translation, the next thing one should discuss is the politics of translation. One famous Burmese writer and journalist named Bhamo Tin Aung wrote, “Men are political creatures living in society, which cannot be free from politics.”—true enough. Literature reflects, or even represents, politics in one way or another—concerning

¹ Edited by William H. Frederick and published in 1991 for the Center for International Studies by the Ohio University Press, Ohio University.

² Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawaii, 2004.

the individual, then the nation, then the region, and further to a global level. Some people attempt to classify politics as “party-politics” and “national politics.” But politics is politics, and once it enters the literary field the demarcation disappears, centering only on man as a political creature, whatsoever the values and interests may be. Politics is a product of society; just as a translation is the product of a language. It is no wonder they merge frequently. I should also say that in countries where there is full freedom of expression, politics is explicit and heard aloud in all the media, and the writer is at liberty to exercise his work as he wills. But where there is too much censorship and hyper-sensitivity, virtually, either the ink entirely dries up or the words are softened—shrinking, twisting, and losing effect.

As for global English, I have not much to say, only that although there is a great vogue for learning it, still “local English” will prevail for a long time, especially in the underdeveloped and developing countries if they cannot catch up with the “Information Technology Age,” I regret.