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Translations of *Lajja*: a Comparative Study

Abstract:
Translations have always created great controversies. A new translation of Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* in 2014, after an interval of twenty years of the first translation in 1994 raises the question: Why is one more translation required when there is already one available by the same publication house? It cannot simply be the politics of money. Surely, there must have been certain issues which remained unresolved in the first translation. The availability of two translations poses serious problems to the reader as to which one to be considered more authentic, which one is to be a voice similar to that of the original author. For a scholar of Translation Studies, it is a matter of great interest and he/she approaches such texts in the light of existing as well as new theories of translation. Hence, the present paper aims at ascertaining the relevance of the new translation in the present socio-political scenario keeping in perspective the boom in translated literature as a cosmic phenomenon transcending all barriers. The present study also intends to bring out the gaps in the translations by accessing them from various approaches of Translation Theory and comparing the various translated texts from thematic, linguistic as well as rhetorical points of view.

Keywords: Translation, authenticity, relevance, comparison, theories of translation, gaps.

Translation has different meanings to different scholars. G J V Prasad calls translation "a basic human activity, one that conceptualizes the world for us" (11). For Franz Kafka, "All language is but a poor translation." Underlining the significance of translation in a multilingual country like India, Sujit Mukherjee goes on to claim that it is only in translation that we may even realize that India exists. For Homi K. Bhabha, "Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication" (*In Translation: Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*228). In her essay "Translation as Culture", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says, "In every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible" (*In Translation: Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*238).

From the above definitions, it becomes quite clear that translation itself is a highly contestable genre and to attempt a critique of a translated work involves all the related complexities. Translation as a genre of studies has a recent history. Earlier, it was treated as a branch of either Comparative Literature or Linguistics. Dominguez, Saussy and Villanueva claim:

> Translating is always an act of comparative literary judgement. To choose a word, a sentence pattern, a tone, a genre, and so forth is to offer an analogy between two fields of culture and meaning. Like any analogy, it is bound to fail in some respects. But the worth of an analogy is what it succeeds in suggesting. (81)

As mentioned in the introduction to *In Translation: Reflections, Refractions, Transformations* (2005), Paul St-Pierre says:

> Traditionally, and even within translation studies itself, the operation of translation has often been described in terms of loss, and of course betrayal, and forces have been marshalled to minimize its 'negative' effects: translation is reduced to a mere reproduction (or reflection)—of an effect, of an intention, of a message. Paradoxically, however, what is being minimized in such attempts is exactly what is specific to translation, what translation brings that is new, that constitutes growth—an interaction in a new context, a new reading, a new writing. (xiv)

Narrating her experience of a viva voce, Raji Narsimhan recalls defining translation as "a sustained exercise in transiting from one language to another, and back, and back again *ad infinitum.* This unceasing motion to and fro, fro and to, is the essence of translation" (ix). She goes on to explain further, "it is *dvaitic* (dualist) in spirit. It is not *advaitic* (non-dualist). It must reflect its *dvaitic swabhav*" (x). She further comments, "A translation is product of Difference,…the Difference of two cultures, the Difference of two traditions of thinking and thought: the pre-existence of Difference is what gives character, meaning and validity to the genre of translation" (x).

All these theoretical concepts related to translation, and certain gaps in translations that posed the problem of untranslatability, further led to the coinage of new terms as substitutes like *Transliteration*, *Transcreation*, *Transduction*, etc. Hence, translation has opened up a vast arena for research, especially, in literary areas where the subject is politically and socially controversial. To analyse the gaps in the various translations of *Lajja*

under the probe, the various theories of translation given by authoritative theorists will be applied to attain the desired objectives.

Born in Bangladesh in 1962 and banished in 1994, Taslima Nasreen has been a controversial writer for her writings—fictional as well as autobiographical, narrative as well as poetic. Her popularity increased with a boom with the publication of *Lajja* (1993), though she had been writing for a pretty long time. From the very beginning, her texts have been vociferous in tone. She says, she did not whimper, she shouted, because that was needed. However, since the publication of *Lajja*, and its ensuing translations (in more than 30 languages across the globe), she has been acclaimed or denounced for reasons not always literary. There has been a lot of controversy over her writings that raise the issues of religious fundamentalism culminating in the victimization of the minorities and molestation of their women. *Lajja* was written immediately after the Babri Mosque demolition. As the incident had repercussions all over the world, the countries where Hindu population was in minority became highly volatile. In Bangladesh, the motherland of Taslima Nasreen, riots broke out and hundreds of temples were demolished, people were turned out of their homes, Hindu women were abducted, raped and murdered. A conscientious gynaecologist and sensitive writer like Taslima Nasreen could not remain a silent witness. She could observe that the victims that came to her hospital were Hindus only. Riots happen where the two communities are equally involved in violence. But being the minority communities it were Hindus only that had to suffer. Taslima Nasreen considered it the responsibility of the government machinery to provide security to Hindus as they are the citizens of that country and it is their constitutional right to have safety and security in their homeland. She expressed her anger in the form of a fictional story with a Hindu family at the centre of the plot. She depicts how a secular, progressive minded young man Suranjan, who was an asset to the nation, gradually converts into a fanatic after his house is ransacked and his sister Maya is abducted. The whole family is shattered and ultimately they leave for India as refugees, where they are not welcome.

Along with *Lajja*, her other fictional writings like *Shodh* (1992), *Phera* (1993) and *French Lover* (2002) have been received well by the academia. Her *Selected Columns* (1992), for which she received the prestigious Ananda Award is also a powerful assertion against religion and orthodoxy. Here, it is pertinent to mention that Taslima Nasreen originally writes in Bengali and most of the writings are approached by a large readership through translation. If the case of *Lajja* is considered, it has been translated in almost all the languages of India

and the major languages of the world, Hindi and English being the most popular. It has been translated twice in India, both the times by Penguin Books, though the versions differ substantially as they have been translated by different writers—the 1994 version has been translated from Bengali into English by Tutul Gupta while the 2014 version has been translated by Anchita Ghatak, again from the original Bengali into English. The popular version available in Hindi has been translated by Munmun Sarkar. The present paper uses the 2007 print of the version for the references. As is quite obvious, there is significant variation in the three versions.

These translated versions available in India and elsewhere, where the two languages are the means of communication or research, the texts of translated versions are taken to be *Lajja* as created by Taslima Nasreen. However, if the voices behind these texts are taken into consideration, they are different from the author. Hence, the question of the originality of the creative art and the author's perspective becomes a significant research problematic.

The very name of the protagonist has been spelt differently in the two English versions (Suranjan in *Lajja* (1994) and Suronjon in *Lajja* (2014)). The Hindi version, too, spells the name as Suranjan. Even the original version does not add any 'o' vowel to the Bengali spelling. It is another matter that the localites pronounce even the neutral vowels with rounded lips. So, the question arises: Does an English reader need to articulate the sounds in an unfamiliar manner for experiencing a foreign environment? However, it may be one of the strategies of the translator to sound more original and authentic than others. Again, in the 1994 translation, the names like Kironmoyee and Sudhamoy have been spelt with 'o' letter. Thus, the 2014 translation seems more symmetrical regarding the spellings of the characters.

Further, considering the important events of the novel, the headline in the newspaper regarding the incident of December 6, 1992 has been described in the translated versions in the following manner:

Lajja (1994): BABRI MASJID DEMOLISHED (2)

Lajja (2014): BABRI MASJID DESTROYED, DEVASTATED (5)

Lajja (2007): Babri Masjid ka dhvans, vidhvast.

The three versions vary in the very citation of the most important incident that provoked the riots and provided the plot for the narrative of the story of a Hindu family. The equivalent expressions used in the 2014 and 2007 versions (destroyed, devastated/dhvans, vidhvast) suggest the probability of two expressions in the original version. The original Bengali version confirms the guess. However, the question arises: Which one of the English translations is more appropriate? 'Demolition' seems to express the severity of action more

appropriately than 'destroyed' or 'devastated'. Cambridge dictionary gives the meaning of 'demolished' as "to completely destroy a building, especially in order to use the land for something else". But neither Cambridge nor Oxford nor Merriam Webster dictionary describes' devastated' with regard to a building. 'Devastated' is a term associated with a state, not the description of a building, etc. The translator, perhaps, wished to create an impact of authenticity in translation by keeping the same number of expressions in the target language as there are in the source language.

Somak Ghashal justifies one more translation of *Lajja* in the following terms:

> *Lajja* is not only an invaluable historical document but also a text whose relevance has—unfortunately—not been diminished in the two decades it was published. The novel's concern—the evil of communalism—continues to plague the subcontinent, erupting from time to time like a dormant volcano. "Lingering Shame"

Lajja remains relevant even after twenty years of its first publication in English because it is appreciated for its content and not for its form. Nasreen herself says in the preface to the translation by Anchita Ghatak, "It is primarily a testament to the savagery of religions in the Indian subcontinent….*Lajja* will remain relevant as long as the incidents described in it continue to happen and as long as there is conflict between people of one religion and another. (ix-x).In her own words, "This is like a documentary novel. There are fictional characters but is based on facts." "After 20 years, Taslima's *Lajja* translated afresh" the hindu.com 15th Sep. 2014.

Ghoshal also affirms, "Yet, in spite of its sustained ethical complexity, *Lajja* is not a literary masterpiece…. Nasreen's plot is interrupted by long roll-calls of the damages and killings every few pages."

Quite obviously, the details which were written in 1994 version in separate font in a separate paragraph have been incorporated in the 2014 version.

Another important incident of the novel—the kidnapping of Maya, has been described in the following words:

> As the vehicles sped off, Kironmoyee ran after them weeping and screaming, 'They've taken my daughter…please save her….' At the corner of the street, exhausted and at the end of her strength, she stopped. Her hair was wild and dishevelled and her clothes were crushed and creased from her exertions. She noticed Moti Mian whom she knew and pleaded with him: 'Dada, they've abducted Maya. Please help me.'"(*Lajja* (1994) 148).

> She kept running behind the two vehicles as they drove away. 'They've taken my daughter away. Help me, my brother,' she pleaded with each and every passer-by.Kironmoyee stopped at the shopat the end of the road. Her hair had come loose, her feet were bare.(*Lajja* (2014) 214)

When the two translations are compared, the language of 1994 version seems more academic in comparison to 2014 version which is colloquial. Moreover, for abduction, the older version uses the expression 'taken', while the new version says, "they've taken Maya away." Here, 'take' means 'to get possession of'' while 'take something away' indicates removal of something. The first version makes a clear mention of abduction while the second one does not. The greatest difference between the two translations is that the translation by Anchita Ghatak is thoroughly literal, word by word translation, while Tutul Gupta takes some liberty and focuses more on fluency of language than the literal meaning of the source language.

Somak Ghoshal, in his review of Anchita Ghatak's translation writes:

> The new translation by Anchita Ghatak, an improvement on the previous one in its attempt to preserve the flavour of the original (including the title) is competent, though not without lapses. Some of the phrases stick out as uneasily colloquial or too literal—"I'm not feeling good" (for "I'm not feeling well"); "child of a pig"; "Does that mean she'll always need to find shade under the umbrella of Muslims," for instance. Apart from a couple of typos, the quote on page 265 from Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by United Nations is repeated twice. "Lingering Shame"

In the last section, too, when Sudhamoy suggests going to India, Tutul Gupta writes:

> And his voice cracked as the shame swept over him. But he had said it, he had forced it out, he had compelled himself to say that they would go; and he had realized that that was the way it would have to be because the strong mountain that he had built within himself was crumbling day by day. (216)

Anchita Ghatak writes, "Sudhamoy was ashamed to say it, his voice trembled, yet he spoke of going away because the strong mountain he had built inside him had gradually began to crumble" (320).

Comparing the two texts one can easily find out that Tutul Gupta's text is larger than Anchita Ghatak's. When the original Bengali text is taken into consideration, Ghatak's translation adheres more to the original. The clause, "But he had said it, he had forced it out, he had compelled himself to say that they would go" does not occur in the original version. Yet,

Gupta's version explains the psyche of Sudhamoy in clearer terms. And last but not the least, the expression 'shame' in Gupta's version relates to the title and subtitle of the novel while Ghatak's "ashamed' does not suggest any association with the title. Hence, it fails in its purpose.

What boils down ultimately is that even though Anchita Ghatak's translation is closer to the original text in literal translation, and may be a greater success in terms of popularity among general public, lacks in creating the academic flavour achieved by Tutul Gupta in 1994 when the novel earned great respectability and became a favourite not only of masses but of the whole academic world.

The argument may well be concluded with the following words of Susan Bassnett:

> Much time and ink has been wasted attempting to differentiate between translations, versions, adaptations and establishment of a hierarchy of 'correctness' between these categories. Yet the differentiation between them drives froma concept of the reader as the passive receiver of the text in which its Truth is enshrined. In other words, if the text is perceived as an object that should only produce a single invariant reading, any 'deviation' on the part of the reader/ translator will be judged as a transgression. Such a judgement might be made regarding scientific documents, for example, where facts are set out and presented in unqualifiedly objective terms for the reader of SL [Source Language] and TL [Target Language] text alike, but with literary texts the position is different. (84)

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