

Othello Thou art Translated: Examining Equivalence in *Othello* in the Folk culture of Uttarakhand

Sonali Lakhera^{1*} and Manoj S. Rana²

¹Visiting Faculty, NGA SCE, Mumbai, India

²Research Scholar, IIT Gandhinagar, India

Corresponding Author: Sonali Lakhera, E-mail: sonalilakhera@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Translation as an activity involving two languages and two cultures poses severe challenges for a translator aiming to produce a cultural equivalent of the source text. This negotiation between the source and the target texts consumes most of the time dedicated to the translation activity. This study makes a contribution to the exposure of local culture of Uttarakhand (India) into the larger field of translation studies. Though much study has been conducted in the field of equivalence in translation with respect to known languages, the concept needs to be explored in the regional and vernacular translations. This paper aims to examine a stage adaptation of *Othello*- the landmark tragedy of Elizabethan age, aiming to understand the use of equivalence to mitigate the cultural difference between ST and TT. The study undertakes a close reading of *Othello* by Shakespeare and its Garhwali version *Rumelo*, critical works based on translation studies, and the recordings of stage performances of the play in Garhwali. An interview with the translator (Bijalwan) and director (Dobhal) aided in understanding the significance of cultural and linguistic elements introduced by the translator and the dramatist for the target audience. The study involving domestication of a text of global significance asserts the universal value of Shakespeare's plays transcending time, culture and geographical boundaries, and furthermore emphasizes the importance of translation, and equivalence in translation, in making the source text more audience-friendly and comprehensible.

1. Introduction

It is inconceivable to think of translation without embedding it in the context of linguistics, anthropology, aesthetics and culture. Translation serves as the indispensable tool for transporting a piece of literary merit beyond its territorial, linguistic and cultural borders. The translator's responsibility towards retaining the essence of the source text must be balanced with the concern for embedding it in the target culture. Maintaining this fine balance usually leads to some sort of compromise in translating certain areas of the source text which are often referred to as 'the untranslatable' in the corpora. One prominent reason for this untranslatability is the structural dissimilarity between the two languages or two cultures involved in the process of translation. As George Steiner points out

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The words in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (236)

Therefore, complete translatability of the source text seems an unattainable goal. Failing to take into account the cultural and contextual significance of situations and dialogues may lead to mistranslations resulting in the production of a text, which may be regarded linguistically and culturally infidel to the source. The difficulty of translating culturally rooted words, proper nouns, cultural events and occasions further cumulate the translator's predicament.



2. Equivalence

Subscribing to the fact that no two languages are identical with reference to signs and syntax, and denotative and connotative meanings, perfect correspondence between languages is factually inconceivable. Roman Jakobson observes that “each unit language contains within itself a set of non-transferable associations and connotations” thus making “complete equivalence a myth.” (*Translation Studies Reader*, p 22) Eventually, the translation activity ends up producing a target text, which may be a close reflection of the source in terms of form or content or both. A translator is often, if not always, blamed for bending/ diffusing/ spoiling the source text and sometimes the meaning of source text gets compromised. The problem is further confounded when the source author acquires an unquestionable cult status in the field of literature, making the translator even more vulnerable to criticism. A major problem faced by the translators in translating the text is that if they aim to produce a ‘word-for-word’ translation the sense, structure and beauty of the source gets compromised. On the other hand, their aim to render a purely ‘sense-for-sense’ translation, may often result in bargaining with the form. To explain this the translation theorists, align with various schools of thoughts ranging from foreignization to domestication. Theorists like Nida and Toury have propounded the theory of equivalence in translation to understand the relationship between ST and TT. Toury regards equivalence as a universal feature of all translation, “simply because they were thought to be translations, no matter what their linguistic or aesthetic quality.” (Pym,64)

Literally the term equivalence means “of equal value”. On a surface level one may assume that the process of translation involves encoding the signs in the SL and substituting them with the equivalent signs in the TL. However, it must be taken into consideration that language is not a standalone entity and “no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture exists which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language. (Lotman, 211) Therefore mere substitution of linguistic signs may often lead to mistranslations or bad translations. Nida talks about the three main reasons for the discrepancy in the source and target texts

- a. The nature of the text
- b. The purpose or purposes of the author and, by proxy, of the translator, and
- c. The type of audience (Nida In Venuti, 2000, p.127)

Nida suggests that the best possible way to translate a text is “to find the closest possible equivalent” (129). He discusses formal equivalence as the one focusing “attention on the message itself, in both form and content” resulting in a translation in which all the elements would correspond closely to those of the source text. Such a translation would require an extensive glossary to explain the cultural and linguistic concepts of the source text. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, aims at producing a text relating to the target audience and “complete naturalness of expression” (129). It intends to produce the effect equivalent to that produced by the source text in the source culture. This study examines a Garhwali version (more appropriately classified as a stage adaptation) of Shakespeare’s landmark tragedy *Othello*, to discern the problems faced by the translator in translating the literary giant and the use of equivalence to mitigate the cultural difference between ST and TT.

3. Source Text and Target Text

The paper undertakes a close reading of *Othello* by Shakespeare and its Garhwali version *Rumelo* by the avid translator and playwright of the region, Dinesh Bijalwan. Critical works based on translation studies, and the recordings of stage performances of the play in Garhwali by the popular thespian of NSD fame - Shrish Dobhal. An interview with the Translator (Bijalwan) and director (Dobhal) aided in understanding the significance of cultural and linguistic elements introduced by the translator and the dramatist for the target audience.

The need to translate Shakespeare into simpler English did not arise in the colonized India for two simple reasons. Firstly, people who knew the language of the master, wished to read it in the original, unadulterated version. Secondly, those with no acquaintance with the language of the colonizer had no use of the Bard’s plays translated into simple English in prosaic forms. The only way to introduce the Bard’s merit to the Indian audience was through the domestic translations of his plays. A consequence of this prolific activity was the birth of various vernacular forms of Shakespeare. *Othello*, on the grounds of universal themes of black/white dichotomy, jealousy and silencing of women becomes the most popular of Shakespeare’s tragedies fitting well in every culture, thus resulting in profuse translations of the play. Raj Bisaria an eminent figure to have translated the play in the Nautanki form confesses:

The Tragedy of Othello is the tragedy of all men because they are all jealous and suspicious... I also don’t know how many times I must have been Othello myself and how many mistakes I must have made. When we love, do we really understand the nature of love. (qtd. in Chopra 20)

4. Translating the linguistic elements

Taking into consideration the language of the target text *Rumelo*, the translator has paid more attention to domesticate the original *Othello* rather than preserving the pristine beauty of the ingenious use of blank verse by Shakespeare. Translated in Garhwali, the script lends a folk form to the sublime tragedy. It must be noted here that derived from the Indo-Aryan Script; different dialects of Garhwali are spoken in different districts of Uttarakhand. Although, the base language remains the same, the language spoken in Pauri, Tehri, Chamoli, Uttarkashi, Rudraprayag and Dehradun differ in dialects (*Chaundkoti, Tehriyali, Gangadi, Jaunpuri, Nagpuriya, Rathi*). The translator has used the simplest dialect – a blend of Pauri and Tehri, thus making the play viable for a wider audience. The play seems to have been written exclusively for the purpose of performance rather than for reading. It has been performed in National School of Drama, Delhi(India), Dehradun and in the vales of Uttarkashi. The language used by the characters exhibits the undertones of abuses and curses similar to those used in *Othello*, the difference being in the subdued nature of it. The translation of “You’ll have your nephews neigh to you. You’ll have coursers for cousins and gennets for germans” as *Bhol naati hola ta kan lagan woon adhbhuren* (Bijalwan) “When his grandchildren will be born tomorrow, how will they look like half-brown!), is evident of such cultural adaptation. In the similar form of cultural adjustment, the adjectives used for Rumelo (Othello) are “*Kusajju, Jangli, adhbudhya*” (“useless, beastly, middle-aged man”) instead of “thicklips” (1.1.65) “Old black ram” (1.1.87) “devil” (1.1.96), and “Barbary horse” (1.1.110). Lengthy speeches have been transformed into short exchange of dialogues to retain the interest of the audience. These steps taken by the translator meet the requirement of “having a natural and easy form of expression” (Nida, p. 134) in a translation. The translation is quite far from the word-for-word translation to be called a loose translation, but utmost care has been taken to preserve the central theme of the play. The equivalence of the form is observed to the extent of merely translating play into play, not paying much attention to the individual words and sentences. The translation under study more aptly identifies as the script written for stage performance rather than the full-length translation holding a literary merit. The skopos is to entertain the mass audience (mostly Shakespeare-illiterate) using Shakespeare’s most popular tragedy. Therefore, the cultural aspect of the translation has been exploited more than the linguistic aspect as that supports the objective of this translation

Proverbs and idioms forming an integral part of any language are culturally rooted. The translator has exploited the local phraseology to add a greater degree of domestication for the target audience. Rukma’s (Desdemona) elopement with Rumelo (Othello) attracts the comment like “*Rukma ki nikhani hue gi*”. (Rukma is as good as dead). When Jotra (Bianca) extends help to Mayaalu (Cassio) by offering him to live with her after he has been abandoned by Rumelo, Mayaalu uses the phrase “*Meru to bhaag hi damye ge*” (Connotative: “*My fortune has come to an end*”; Denotative: “*My fortune has been burnt down by tinder.*”). This again has traditional connotation as it is the practice used in the villages of Uttarakhand to put an end to the growth of things forever. Usually it is used to stub calf’s horns by smothering them carefully at a tender age. Idioms like “*Bajr pad gi*” (Connotative: “has been rendered useless”; Denotative: “has been struck by thunderstorms”), “*Tanni raula chup jan apda goru ka marya*” (“We will have to bear everything silently as if we’ve been kicked by our own cow”); and other such idioms have been used by the translator to render a cultural flavour to the translation. This has evidently increased the popularity of the play within the local boundaries of the state as the story becomes more interesting when told in the language of the region consisting of all the peculiarities, idioms, proverbs and anecdotes and literary devices. Shurbano best defines the practice of proverbs in translation as:

The best practice of proverb rendition illustrates one of the basic rules of translation: its two complementary principles of familiarity and novelty should always operate in conjunction, so that the final product is both intelligible and refreshing for the audience” (p 59).

5. Translating the plot and the setting

The translator has tried to adapt the plot and setting to the taste and understanding of the local audience. The story is set in a prosperous village in Uttarakhand, continuously at war with the Hunas, a rival clan. Rumelo (Othello) is the chief of the local royal army. The play opens in the goldsmith’s shop where Bighni (Iago) and two other artisans are discussing the intricacies of ornament they are working at by relating their act of beating the gold in order to give it a desired shape, to the worldly wisdom of how horses and women can be controlled by a whip. They learn of Rukma’s (Desdemona) elopement with Rumelo Bhad (Othello). The start of the play ideates the main theme of the plot – the caste and class difference and the patriarchal system prevalent in the society. Rukma, the beautiful and young daughter of Kaldar Shah (Brabantio) belongs to the family of a royal goldsmith. Rumelo – a warrior belonging to the royal *Panwar* clan – is a middle-aged, dark skinned army chief and is apparently no match to the beautiful and rich Rukma. Bighni (Iago) is a close aide of Rumelo and Bichcha (Roderigo) is the owner of ten villages and wants to marry Rukma. The reason for Bighni’s feelings of hatred and revenge towards Rumelo stems from the fact that Rumelo has given away the fertile fields to Mayaalu (Cassio) who has recently joined Rumelo’s regiment despite Bighni’s loyalty towards Rumelo. The expensive or dear things in the translation have been compared to

"Bhabhar ka maal (Bhabhar's produce)". Bhabhar is the topographical area in Uttarakhand known for the most fertile regions of Uttarakhand, as well as for its beauties. When Shah's attempts to convince Rukma to return to the family fail, his forewarning to Rumelo "the girl, who is not loyal towards her father, cannot be expected to be loyal towards anybody" echoes Brabantio's "Look to her Moor if thou has't eyes to see, / She has deceived her father and may thee" (1.3.290-91) sowing the first seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind feeding his tragic flaw.

6. Translating the cultural elements

Calque/Loan technique and literal translation could not be applied here owing to the great degree of disjointedness between the SL and Source culture and TL and target culture. The translation in the case study majorly rests on correspondence, specifically in case of proverbs and cultural elements. *Chandראהaar* in target culture holds the significance as held by handkerchief with magical powers in the TT. A piece of precious bridal jewelry - a rarity only rich could possess, and a family heirloom holds an inordinate symbolic and cultural significance. The loss of something so expensive in terms of cultural significance and richness leaves the audience in awe. Substitution of kerchief by *chandראהaar* is similar to the exercise conducted by Venuti in substituting Lamb of God by Seal of God while translating the Bible for Inuits. Venuti justifies that the seal holds similar iconic significance and is more prevalent in the target culture as lamb is in source culture. The intricate plot after various twists comes to the slope of denouement through the confessions of wounded Bichcha (Roderigo). The play ends with Rumelo's last words to Bighni "*tero lakshya pooru hue gi ... katga reetu hue jaan tin bhol bitin*" ("Now that you have achieved your aim ... what would be the motive of your life now".) (Bijalwan) These words echo in Bighni's ears as he jumps from the hilltop thus putting an end to his evil life. The tragedy thus finds its equivalent in the culture of Uttarakhand.

In the stage directions and description, the translator has described the traditional jewelry worn by Rukma, the cultural carnivals, and the local festivals and dances. In one such instance, the translator has added a cultural ingredient of a *mangal geet* ("wedding song"): "*Hey babaji de dyawa kanya ko dana*" ("Dear father! Do hand over your daughter to her husband") which is typical of a Garhwali wedding. When Rukma leaves her paternal house, she is gifted the traditional snacks *arsa*, which is made of rice and jaggery. Set in the villages and pastures of Uttarakhand fertile land holds a special significance. So much so that the reason for Bighni's jealousy erupts from a piece of land which he feels is unjustly given away to Mayalu (Cassio). The characters are given the names symbolic of their traits. For instance, Bighni (Iago) literally means an agency for creating obstruction, which goes well with his role of obstructing the smooth relationship between Rumelo and Rukma; Bichcha (Roderigo) means one responsible for separation, and Mayalu (Cassio) in local language means the one who is loved by all. This translation exudes Venuti's idea:

A translation always communicates an interpretation, a foreign text that is partial and altered, supplemented with features peculiar to the translating language, no longer inscrutably foreign but made comprehensible in a distinctively domestic style. Translations, in other words, inevitably perform a work of domestication. (Venuti, *The Scandals of Translations* 5)

The play has been adapted for stage by Shirish Dobhal and Dinesh Bijalwan. Dobhal, a thespian by profession and practice and an alumnus of National School of Drama, has done an extensive and commendable work in the field of Modern Garhwali Folk Theatre. In an interview, the theatre personality confesses of making certain changes to make it closer to Shakespeare's text while retaining the folk essence of the adaptation. Discussing various folk forms of Garhwali theatre like *Bhadauli* (stories of brave people), *Bagdwali*, *Pandwani* (enactment of important episodes of Mahabharata) and *Thoda*, Dobhal says that he did not stick to any of these specific theatrical forms but incorporated the essential elements of folk theatre to cater to the rural as well as urban audiences. Folk is explained by Poonam Trivedi as "cognate with the German *volk* meaning 'of the people'" as she discusses the Shakespeare who "according to Indian aesthetics would be termed *desi* as opposed to *margi* or classical." (Trivedi, 2006, p. 152)

For one of the stage adaptations, Dobhal changed the names of main characters to Aunsiallo and Darshna instead of Rumello and Rukma. Aunsiallo rhyming with Othello and Darshana with Desdemona hold a kind of stylistic similarity with those in the source text besides holding a cultural significance. In the target culture *Aunsiallo* is a person born on the new-moon night (*aunsi*) and is considered inauspicious and dark. People with very dark complexion are also referred to as *Aunsiallo* in the region. The act of naming Othello as *Aunsiallo*, justifies the tragic fate of Othello and his dark complexion contrasted against the beautiful Darshana (Desdemona). Darshana – meaning someone who is beautiful – justifies the most important character trait and the combination of Aunsiallo-Darshana make the black-white dichotomy of *Othello* more pronounced. The theme of race is explored through dynamics of colourism in the target culture. It must be noted here that people in Uttarakhand are obsessed with light skin and fairness holds one of the major beauty standards. Roderigo is named as Rudra, which has undertones of the angry incarnation of Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology. Rudra has all reasons to be angry and duly becomes an

important agency in the destruction of Aunsiallo. The reason for adapting *Othello* to Garhwali stage as stated by the adaptor Shirish Dobhal are prominently the universal theme of women's subjugation in the patriarchal society and the caste and class distinction prevalent in every society. The endogamy dictated through race in *Othello* is recreated in *Rumelo* with the implied endogamy of caste. Dobhal says that these themes are universal and form the structure of the social fabric in every society and therefore can be adapted to any social background.

While adapting the play in the regional folk form, Dobhal has paid attention to its closeness to the source text. He claims to have added six regional songs possessing a cultural value and speaking about the tradition of the region to the play. The reason, he says, is that songs and dance are an integral part of any folk form and Garhwali folk form is no different from the folk prevalent in other regions of the country. Another important factor for adding songs is "to replace lengthy monologues and soliloquies and to add sublimity to the performance and entertainment value to the adaptation" (Dobhal, *interview*). Poonam Trivedi explains:

To look at folk Shakespeare then, is to examine something more deeply interfused, both low and high, both popular and classic, rustic and Sanskritised – an indigeneity in extremis almost – that reveals the extent and depth to which Shakespeare can speak to the people at large and how they speak back with him. (158)

Another reason for transforming the lengthy speeches with songs is to reduce the stage time of the play as the contemporary audience does not have much time to sit through the play performance for long duration. In a way, this technique provided brevity and sublimity to the act. An important reason given by the adaptor for adding the songs is "the expression of the complex inner conflict of the characters in a simplified manner" Dobhal explains that with consent of the translator- Dinesh Bijalwan, he decided upon an effective representation of spectacle to create a visual impact on the audiences. This was achieved by incorporating a subtle background music complementing the mood in various situations.

7. Conclusion

The arguments made in the study reveal the creation of a dynamic equivalent of *Othello* in Garhwali. The study reveals that the translated text shows stylistic equivalence to the source text to some extent but mostly the translator has made an effort to take the elite Shakespearean tragedy from proscenium to the steppes of Uttarakhand. Applying Werner Koller's theory of equivalence relations to *Rumelo* (TT), it seems to share a "pragmatic" (with respect to the receiver of the source text) and connotative rather than Denotative form of equivalent relation with the ST *Othello*. (Pym 18) Formal equivalence has been exercised to some extent as the TT shares the dramatical form of ST. However, on careful examination the individual linguistic elements- whether it is the structural division into acts and scenes; sentences, words, morphemes, or grammar; the translated version shows a reduction as is evident by the division of the translated version into 20 scenes as compared to five acts each comprising of multiple scenes in original Shakespearean play. In the translations of the kind used in this case study Danica Seleskovitch's theory of translation can be well applied, which suggests that a "translation can be natural if the translator succeeds in forgetting entirely about the form of the source text." She recommends "listening to the sense" or "deverbalizing" the source texts that one is only aware of the sense which can be expressed in all languages. This is the basis of what is known as the 'theory of sense' [Pym 19] (*theorie du Sens*, Seleskovich and Lederer, 1984) Largely all regional/folk translations and adaptations (especially drama) could be fitted under this category of translation.

The entire process involved a great extent of compromise with the textual and stylistic elements of the source text in an effort to adapt it for the comprehension of the target audience. The study is evident of the fact that no translation can take place without some degree/kind of equivalence as Pym observes "the relation between source text and translation is that of equivalence ("equal value") no matter the relation is at the level of form, function, or anything in between." (p 6)

While translation involves a lot of complexity and the problems faced by a translator which are multi-dimensional in nature, it is definitely a phenomenon to transport the literary works across linguistic and cultural barriers. The liberty of the process selected for translation lies entirely with the translator but the translator must be prepared for criticism. If the target text does not confine to the taste of the target audience, the translator invites the criticism from the target audience and in case of a basal rendition of the ST the lovers of the original text and translation theorists grill the translator. The hard labour invested by the translator to recreate a source text often attracts negative criticism than the constructive one. Derrida describes the fate of a translator:

But slaves we are, and labor in another man's plantation; we dress the vineyard, but the wine is the owner's: if the soil be sometimes barren, then we are sure of being scourged: if it be fruitful, and our care succeeds, we are not thanked, for the proud reader will only say, the poor drudge has done his duty. (Lefevere 24)

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