

ANOTHER IDEA OF INDIA. INDIA LITERATURES IN THE *BHASHAS*

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to discuss the translation of Indian narratives in the *bhashas*, the vernacular languages of the Indian subcontinent into English through a politics and poetics of translation that gives voice and visibility to cultures that, otherwise, would be restricted to a very close range of dissemination. In this way, not only the Indian literatures of the front yard, i.e., Indian narratives written in the English of the diaspora become visible, but also the narratives of the backyard of the Indian literary tradition written in the vernacular languages. In the process the term *vernacular* comes under erasure in the sense that what is actually *vernacularized* is the English language as it becomes a vehicle through which these *bhasha* literatures gain visibility. To illustrate this process, the article also brings a critical reading of the short story “Thayyaal”, written in Tamil, one of the languages from the South of India.

Keywords: translation as hospitality, vernacularization, backyard literatures.

1. Cultural, Linguistic and Literary Plurality in India

India is a millenary, complex and exuberant culture that has entwined the rest of the world forever. Travelers in Medieval times, colonizers in the Renaissance, tourists in the global present. For all, India is some object of desire to be reached either through travelling or through narratives. But India is not just one India but

many *Indias*. The term “Indian”, as Dharmarajan (1991:xii) points out, “... is so deliciously vague and comprises so many regions, so many varied cultures, so many styles and traditions of writing”, that it would be impossible even for the most adventurous traveler to know it at one go or for the most voracious of readers to know it through its many narratives.

Lately India has become even more familiar in other corners of the world, mainly, through English, one of its national languages that, paradoxically, was taken to the subcontinent, as is well known, by the British through its process of colonization. But to have access to the different Indian cultures that make up India, the avid reader, like the intrepid traveler, should be able to transit the many other languages spoken and written on the subcontinent.

In India, English, or better, Indian-English, after its indigenization during and after the process of colonization, should be regarded as part of a linguistic triangle together with Sanskrit, the sophisticated language of Indian traditional Hindu culture, and the *bhashas* or vernacular languages through which the many local cultures of the subcontinent articulate their own narratives: Bangla, Telugu, Kannada, Assamese, Marathi, Hindi, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Gujarati, among many others.

A fourth angle to this counterpoint is English as spoken by Indians living in the diaspora and of great circulation in the West. In turn, the relation among all of them is dialogic, always in a dynamic process of change, and conflictive as their cohabitation is far from being pacific. The stories narrated through each one of them reconstruct alternative Indias that, like a palimpsest, repeat and modify each other. Many times, it is very difficult for the people of the different communities, within India, to have access to that rich treasures of their own national neighbours. As Dharmarajan (1991: xii) points out, “The tradition that a writer in Urdu instinctively knows is most probably unknown to her counterpart in Karnataka who weaves her stories in Kannada and vice versa”. What to say then of the readers in the rest of the world.

Paranjape (2010: 91) problematizes and redefines the meaning of *vernacular* when he observes that, as traditionally employed, it has “pejorative etymological connotations, touched with a whiff of inferiority. Instead of the noun *vernacular* with its implication of being fixed and closed, Paranjape prefers the participial form *vernacularizing* because through its implication of movement and change, it can be understood as “...an enabling way of righting the asymmetrical balances of power between English and the other Indian languages”. This new meaning of the word, however, is not applied to the *bhashas* but to the English language itself, as it refers to the way in which it has been appropriated by the different cultures where it is spoken: “Vernacularization is not just a return to native or indigenous texts, but involves the nativization and indigenization of English itself” (Paranjape, 2010: 100). Understood in this way, English is no longer the language of an elite but one of the *bhashas*, a channel through which the multilingual and, by extension, multicultural quality of India can gain visibility. As Paranjape (2010: 92) explains, problematizing the *status quo* of the English language in this way goes beyond the linguistic arena and “...opens up radical spaces for criticism and social change that have the potential not just of redefining curricula, but redrawing cultural maps” and, in this way, deconstructing the relationship of domination and subordination that has always been associated with English. This process of vernacularization is enabled by the translation “...of English texts into Indian languages, of course, but more importantly, of Indian texts into English so as to vernacularize English itself and its contexts in India” (Paranjape, 2010: 91).

When regarded in this way, English becomes a “vehicular” language (Gibson, 1991: xii) that helps in the transit and communication among the *bhashas*, deconstructing any pre-established hierarchy that favours monolingualism and monoculturalism with its effect of erasing cultural and linguistic difference. Mainly because these different cultural and linguistic traditions are not mutually exclusive but are deeply intertwined. As Paranjape (2010: 98) suggests, they

act as *con-texts* to each other: the narratives in each one of the languages act as "...con or con-trary portrayals of India in juxtaposition". Do away with one of them and the concepts of linguistic and literary complexity in India become seriously simplified.

2. The Politics and Poetics of Translation

The question to be posed at this point, then, is what the role of translation should be in such a complex panorama. Almeida (2011: 2-2) points to the fact that the contemporary world should be understood as an act of translation. I understand that this is due to the fact that nowadays cultures that in the past were far apart are becoming much closer and, thus, linguistic and cultural translation have become foremost. However, Almeida (2011: 3) suggests that the metaphors used to represent translation need to be rewritten.

She explains that translation should be understood not necessarily as a bridge that shortens linguistic and cultural distances but, rather, as an act that many times hides and hinders understanding. For example, many times the lack of linguistic equivalence can lead to not only linguistic but also cultural violence. She goes on to argue that this "...becomes even more marked when translation involves the passage from a vernacular language to a language like English" (2011: 3), as in the case of the *bhashas*. However, she adds that if a certain impossibility inheres to the act of translation, its condition is inevitable when it is understood not only as a linguistic but as a political act, in the sense that, through it, many cultures that, otherwise, would be restricted to a very close range of dissemination, will gain visibility. So, the author concludes that translation is paradoxical: it is impossible but necessary (Almeida, 2011: 3-6). As Paranjape (2010: 100) explains in the case of India, the act of translation "completes the *bhashas* because ...if they remain only within the domains of their own linguistic community, [they] are limited and incomplete. Only

through translation can they acquire the kind of attention or understanding that they deserve”.

This relationship between both languages already points to a concept of translation that is based on a double-standard. For example, many times authors of narratives in the *bhashas* translate their own narratives into English and make a point of leaving the marks of their vernacular languages both in the vocabulary and the syntax of the new text. The English in which the translation is done is then closer to Indo-English, one of the *bhashas*. These new renderings, as Almeida (2011: 8) explains, lead to a “textual multiplicity” in which the new text acts as a trans-text or con-text of the original and neither version surpasses the other. Rather, as already hinted at, they complement each other. Hence, the act of translation becomes a conflictive but also a highly productive space shaped by the play between the translatable and the untranslatable.

The metaphor that best depicts this approach to translation is that of knitting: “an invisible act of scheming, repairing, copying and pasting the narratives that make up the substance of a culture” (Almeida, 2011: 8). Again, this is directly related to the translation of the *bhashas* into English since it demands a great deal of respect, particularly if the culture is considered as being subaltern.

According to Almeida (2011: 11), Spivak points to two aspects to be considered in the act of translation: a political one and an aesthetic one. The first one has to do with the translator’s attention to the ideological aspects of the culture, particularly because it will be translated into English. The second one has to do with the familiarity with its literary genres and concepts of aesthetics, so that the translation will not be a reduction to foreign or Western literary and aesthetic standards in order to make it more accessible to a foreign audience. Instead, the movement of forms and meanings from the *bhashas* to English should be informed.

It is only this knowledge, this understanding of the cultural, literary and aesthetic difference that will enable the *seduction* (Spivak in Almeida, 2011: 11) that is foremost in a respectful act

of translation. In a way, this attitude of letting oneself being taken in by the text is what helps deal with the impossibility implied in the act of translation. If we do not know the aesthetic system of the culture being translated, we run the risk of misunderstanding it completely and reducing it to an opaque version of literary forms familiar to us.

At this point, the poetics of translation becomes deeply political because it does become a path to get in contact with the cultural other. In a very effective turn of phrase, Almeida (2011: 11) defines the process of translation, thus understood, as the *politics and poetics of hospitality* in translation. As she points out, “it implies the act of being with the other, of assuming responsibility for the other, an unconditional acceptance of the other and his difference, through an ethics of hospitality”. It is, through this politics and poetics of translation that the subaltern actually speaks because the cadences of his language as well as the rhetorical traits of his narrative will be respected.

This concept of translation is enabling because as Spivak (in Almeida, 2011: 11) points out, it is impossible to learn all the languages of the world. At the same time, it broadens the Indian literary panorama because it will not be reduced to the so called *front yard literatures*, or canonical literatures in English, but will include the *backyard literatures* or regional literatures, our next topic of discussion.

3. Multiple Indias: Front yard and Backyard Literatures

Literary traditions imply a hierarchy of some sort. The Indian critic Ananthamurthy (2010: 150) already points to this distinction when he classifies Indian narratives through two Sanskrit terms: *Marga* to refer to the classics in Sanskrit, and *Desi* for the narratives in the *bhashas*. In turn, they are redefined as *front yard literatures*, in the case of the Sanskrit narratives, and *backyard narratives* for the ones in the *bhashas*.

Marga and *Desi*, however, as Ananthamurthy (2011: 150) goes on to say, are not separated but deeply intertwined. On the one hand, the values articulated through Sanskrit are given “a local habitation and name” in the *bhashas*, thus “cohabiting with the folk imagination”. On the other hand, the backyard is inexhaustible: “As literacy spreads, more and more people emerge into the front yard of our civilization and they bring their own richness, as memories, and desire to integrate with the mainstream of world literature” (151).

Both traditions thus give rise to the creation of many new narratives that cross cultural, linguistic and literary barriers. But, for Ananthamurthy (2011: 151) the energy definitely comes from the backyard because it is “the world of women, shudras, the secret therapeutic herbs” and, therefore it is an inexhaustible well of themes for narratives: “Sanskrit, as a language, has no backyard of its own; it has to yield its place to the *bhashas* in the backyards for the continuity of its spiritual substance”.

For Ananthamurthy (2011: 151) one of the reasons why the *bhashas* should have a more prominent place among the different Indian literary traditions is because they come to revitalize the front yard particularly at a moment of cultural crisis when the literatures in a higher position in the national literary arena have become “too pompous, loud and artificially rhetorical” and have lost “the flexibility, truthfulness and earthiness of common speech”. He is referring to the status Indian narratives written in English in the diaspora have lately acquired, hindering the literatures in the *bhashas* from entering the front yard of the national tradition. This does not mean that the Indian literatures written in the diaspora have not literary value. Just the opposite. Their literary merit has been widely recognized both at home and abroad. What he means is that the literary game should also be opened to the *bhashas* admitting their place of relevance in their tradition as repositories of themes and styles.

Again, as in the case of Sanskrit and the *bhashas*, the policy should not be one of estrangement and exclusion but of relation and

inclusion that, as we have already suggested in the previous section, can become feasible through a process of translation that shortens the distance between both, vernacularizing English and making it a vehicle through which the narratives in the *bhashas* can reach a wider audience. At another level, this comes to show that “no one can talk about literature in the Indian *bhashas* without recognizing its intimate relationship with larger political and cultural questions” (Anathamurthy, 2011: 151) fact that, again, takes us back to the politics and poetics of translation as hospitality outlined before.

This movement of recognition of the vernacular narratives is a highly empowering political move because unlike “Sanskritization or Westernization it implies a downward and not an upward mobility” (Paranjape, 2011: 100), that is to say, it means reconnecting the culture with the backyard, not to close upon itself, but to actually signify in the plural. The idea, then, is not to see which tradition is more authentic or better, since such categories do not apply in literature or in aesthetics, but to signify through a productive contrast and conflict that recognizes a multiplicity of Indias, languages and, therefore, narratives.

It is to one such narrative among the *bhashas* that I now turn to.

4. Stories from the Backyard by Unknown Women Writers

“Thayyaal” is a short story translated from the Tamil by Geeta Dharmarajan, both translator and editor of the anthology in which it was published: *Separate Journeys. Short Stories by Contemporary Indian Women* (1991). Starting from the Indian backyard, the different short stories anthologized bring to the front yard very moving narratives about women and their day-to-day struggle that, as it reads in the Introduction, “cross the divide of language, religion, gender and social class” (Gibson, 1991: x). In turn, each one of the women authors has chosen to tell some particular journey through a different Indian landscape articulated in a local language

and translated into vernacular English, in some cases even by the authors themselves.

In the particular case of “Thayyaal”, apart from the quality of the narrative, what calls the reader’s attention is Dharmajaran’s bionote of its author, Rupavati: “Despite our best efforts we have not been able to locate any information about the author of the story “Thayyaal” (1991: 126). Thus, the story presents itself as being truly part of the backyard because the fact that little is known about the author seems to convey the idea that the narrative being told is much more important than the figure of the author. It is as if the community itself were talking.

As discussed in the previous section, many of the nuances of the *bhashas* may be lost through translation. Holmstrom (1990: xvi in Gibson 1991, xi) points out that it is very hard to render in English the terseness of the Tamil language. In the same manner, some cultural and linguistic differences are impossible to convey, as for example the correct term to differentiate between a mother’s sister and a mother’s brother’s sister. Hence, to avoid the flattening of the narrative in its translation from Tamil into English, the translator has made it a point that Tamil words should stand out, like true gems, stud in the English syntax.

The theme of “Thayyaal” is central to Indian narratives and has to do with both the condition of women in Indian society and omnipresent economic difficulties: the dowry for a daughter’s marriage. As is well known, marriage is a recurrent theme in Indian literature and crosses frontiers of languages, places and times: from the story of Sita in the *Ramayana* to the many Bollywood movies today.

“Thayyaal” is an Indian romance with a happy ending and a clever twist in the organization of the main events that reveal the writer’s narrative skills. It starts in *medias res* in a way that goes against the stereotypical narrative of the marriage & dowry theme. A mysterious person offers to an anguished father a dowry for the marriage of his daughter: “*They want nothing. No jewels.*”

No gold. Nothing. They won't ask you to spend one paisa on your girl's marriage. What do you say?" (105). This beginning is very promissory and immediately attracts the reader's attention.

Genre is one of the main considerations in the reading of "Thayyaal" since, more than as a short story, this very well-crafted narrative reads like a play, organized in seven scenes juxtaposed one to the other, without the guiding voice of the narrator. However a pattern can be worked out. The first, fourth and seventh scenes revolve around the theme of marriage and dowry. The second and third, introduce a beautiful and innocent bride and the dangers she might suffer at the hands of the town drunkard. The fifth is the climax and dramatizes the actual assault. But, in the sixth, the gods show their hand in an unpredictable way and the girl is saved. In the seventh the enigma of the story is solved.

The performatic quality of the narrative is highly functional because, according to Indian aesthetics, drama is one of the supreme forms of art since it evokes different *rasas* or emotions among the audience. As Visuvalingam (2006: 9) explains, though the *rasas* can be evoked by all forms of art, only in the theater it is possible to express all human feelings in all its varieties and subtleties because it includes plot, acting, dancing, poetry, singing, and any form of human expression that produces emotional pleasure.

I understand that it is due to this performatic quality that the story, at times, as in the Indian epics, assumes the form of poetry, revealing the cadence of the Tamil language, hidden below the layers of the English language and evoking different *rasas*: despair, sensuality, lust, generosity.

In "Thayyaal", action takes place both in the present and in the past simultaneously. This supersposition of time is conveyed through the portrayal of the two main characters: Thayyaal, as a young woman, at the peak of her beauty and already as an old, rich woman; and Muthiah, the bride's father, as a good old man and a smart boy of eight. In spite of the time gap --more than sixty years have elapsed between Thayyaal's youth and old age-- the scene

is exactly the same: a nameless and timeless, pastoral village in some part of India; the village villain is also the same: a lascivious drunkard ready to pounce upon innocent beauty; beauty is also the same: Indian, ageless beauty; and the conflict too: how to raise money for a beloved daughter's dowry.

This unchanging scenario, which evokes what Paranjape (2009: 45) defines as "inner India" or *Desh* (the Indian community still untouched by the foreigner), is functional to the narrative because it leads to the misunderstanding around which the story revolves: Who is Thayyaal? Muthiah's daughter? Another woman? Only at the end of the narrative will her identity be revealed.

The performantic quality of the narrative is imprinted upon the narrative through the rapid succession of the different scenes that change perspective, juxtaposing one conflict upon the other, passing from Muthiah's worries and amazement at Thayyaal's offer, to the sensual scene of a beautiful woman crossing the countryside, "with screws of cane in the holes of her earlobes" in preparation for the "heavy thandatti, the earrings she would have to wear after she was married" (107). Already the presence of the word *thandatti* points not to some exotic aspect of Indian culture, attractive to a Western reader, but to a marriage ritual characteristic of this Southern Indian community. If translated into English, more than a word would be lost to the reader.

Immediately, the same scene is re-enacted from the perspective of a man, hidden in ambush, like an animal, ready to jump upon his prey. This is the climax of the story. Gibson (1993: xv) observes that many of the decisions made by the translator are lost upon those readers who cannot read these stories in the original languages. However, what can be perceived is that the texture of the Tamil is not lost in the English translation: both scenes have the quality of poetry and are organized in short and effective lines that read like verse.

First, Thayyaal's description provokes in the reader a *rasa* of profound admiration for the simplicity of her beauty:

Thayyaal walked, a basket full of garbage resting lightly
 on her head.
 She had the heart-stopping loveliness of a sixteen year old.
 Height, taller than the average girl.
 Color, the burnished gold of young mango leaves (107)

The lines in English convey the majestic quality of her movements, in spite of the menial tasks she is performing: carrying a basket full of garbage on her lovely head. Her features reveal her as a superior being destined for another life. However, there is something amiss in the narrative that produces a new *rasa* on the part of the reader, fear for the young girl, as her movements are watched by a lustful observer:

Her sari rode jauntily over the tender softness of young-
 ankles to reveal feet
 good enough to be eaten (107)

The reference to the feet stands out as a reminder of the fact that we are confronted with a translated text. What is lost upon us is whether it is a mark of the Tamil culture and language or, perhaps, a not very happy choice on the translator's part. It remains unsolved but does not prevent the reader's delight in the text.

In the next scene the town villain is revealed as the owner of the lascivious gaze, when the narrative focus is placed upon him; his dark intentions are signaled in the text through unfinished verses. The *rasa* produced by the lines is one of rejection and condemnation of such a base character:

He had reached the spot before Thayyaal got there...
 Waiting for her to reach there...
 Walking swiftly along the path that abuts on the vil-
 lage, and then slinking
 under the spreading tamarind tree, to watch, to wait, to
 look...

As she came, closer...closer
Descending into the gentle slope to hide...
Burying himself into the lush undergrowth that
sprawled onto the slender
pathway...

The danger that had been suggested before is now fully revealed, but Evil is defeated by Good in the shape of an eight year old boy who is knocking down tamarind fruits. The *rasa* now evoked by the action of the boy, and the relief of the woman is one of joy and gratitude:

[Thayyaal] called on every god she knew.
And from above her head, a call from the branches of the
tamarind tree.
Chillambane...Karuppane...Bhumatha. I have knocked
down all the
tamarind fruits. Como pick them up!”
[...]

“Ah...hath...thu!” Vellaisami spat out a thick glob of saliva. Venom...The bastards had spoiled his game (110)

“Chillambane...Karuppane...Bhumatha”. The meaning of these words that the translator chose to leave in Tamil is, once again, lost upon us. Do they show surprise? Are they the name of gods? Are they ordinary names? Again, more than a mark of exoticism, they remind the reader of the Tamil language. They are a mark of the politics and poetics of hospitality in translation, as defined by Almeida (2011: 11). More than drawing us apart from the narrative, they help as shorten distances and be with the other.

It is only at this point of the story that Thayyaal's true identity is revealed. The girl depicted in the story is not Muthiah's

daughter, but Thayyaal herself who wants to reward her him with a rich husband and a dowry for his daughter. Her reasons? The boy knocking down tamarind fruits had been Muthiah, as a boy of eight. He had saved her from the claws of the town drunkard that hot summer day, when returning home after her duties in the field. Muthiah has forgotten, but she has not:

“Do you remember that day, many years ago?” she asks. “Of course, then you were a small boy, curly-haired, eight years old...”

What can Muthiah say?

“The very next month I got married. He was rich. I told my husband then that I wanted to give my share of the family money to you. A young lad may not know what to do with it, he said and, taking the money, he went that same day and put it in the bank. Let him marry, have a daughter, you can give it to him then, he said. That money has also grown and branched like me”, says the old woman, Thayyaal (111)

Though Muthiah’s daughter actually never appears in the story, she can be read in Thayyaal: one is a continuation of the other, the plight of one resolves itself in the generosity of the other, and the identity of one becomes fused in that of the other. It is the hand of one woman reaching out to another through time in an act of generosity and solidarity, a mark of the humanity of the backyard.

The backyard thus imprints its values upon the front yard. It reminds the reader of how the ethics of the culture should branch out and reproduce themselves on the cultural landscape through time. It is in this sense, as Anathamurthy (2010) points out, that the soil of the backyard and of the *bhashas* is highly fertile.

At another level, through a hospitable process of translation that negotiates syntax and semantics between Tamil and English, the values of the backyard in the *bhashas* enter the front yard in

Indian-English and move beyond to other foreign landscapes so that we, readers, can partake of the same cultural and literary experience. At this point, translation goes beyond the linguistic and poetic realm to become a cultural and political act.

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