Week: 07. Module: C - Language and Shakespeare Translations

Unit: 17: Shakespeare Translations

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Speaking about Shakespeare and translations, one helpful way to begin is by historicizing both Shakespeare and translation. Shakespeare and the very idea of translations both arrived in India with the British. Before the British obviously, there was no Shakespeare in India. But also, there was no translation in India in the sense that we understand it today. We had many retellings. For example, of the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas*. But our expectations of those retellings were radically different from those that are now concerned with the business of translation.

Shakespeare came to India together with the British; but not simultaneously. He came only after the British who had been in India since the days of the East India Company had asserted in India. He was still living in the year 1600 when the East India Company was founded. But the Company did not make much of an impact in India until much later.

It was only after the death of Tipu Sultan at the hands of the British in at the battle in Srirangapatna (1799), the battle of Patparganj in Delhi when the Mughals were defeated by the British (11 September 1803), and the British treaty with the Rajputs states (1818-1819) that the British asserted their presence in India. It was only around that time did Shakespeare begin to be known and taught in India in some select colleges.

Shakespeare Translations

The question of translations and Shakespeare translations is also intriguing. Who needs to read Shakespeare in translation? There is some confusion about that. Translations are very often reviewed and judged by people who know the original. They then read the translation matching it against the original. But this is perhaps not the fairest of the procedures because translations are meant for a person who does not know the original.

One of the theoretical questions regarding translations is this: how does a monolingual person—someone who does not know the original but reads only the target text—judge translation? How does he make out whether it is a good translation or not? It was in the latter half of nineteenth-century that many of the Shakespeare translations in Indian languages began to be done. In the twentieth century, there were so many elite and educated people who were already reading Shakespeare in English and did not need translations. So who read these translations? Very, very few people. Because anyone who wanted to and needed to read Shakespeare had heard of him and had acquired enough English to read him in the original.

Another general question about translations is how faithful is a translation? Faithful is a very deceptive word and also an inaccurate word in this context. All translations even the most faithful of translations are departures from the original texts because the connotation of each language is different. You say 'God' in English. But, 'Bhagwan' or 'Ishwar' or 'Allah' will not mean the same thing at all because they have different histories and different genealogies.

One interesting thing about Shakespeare translations in India is that most of the translations are free translations. They are adaptations and localized translations. This was so in almost all Indian languages until about the year 1910 or 1920. It is certainly true in the case of Hindi. After that period, in Hindi at

least, there is a decline in the total number in Shakespeare translations in the 1930s and '40s. Maybe one of the reasons is that during those decades there was a general feeling against the British. The period was dominated by the nationalist struggle, and even those who knew English and those who even "loved" Shakespeare were perhaps not in the best positions to transfer Shakespeare into local languages.

Then, after the Independence, Shakespeare translations pick up again in the 1950s and 1960s. But it was on our terms, on more confident terms in terms of culture. For example, Harivansh Rai Bachchan said in the preface to one of his translations of Shakespeare's tragedies that a language which does not have the translations of Shakespeare in it cannot be called a developed language. It is one of the indications of the richness of a language that it should have enough resources to be able to translate Shakespeare adequately. It is a good benchmark.

Shakespeare Translation into Indian Languages

When we talk about translations of Shakespeare into any of the Indian languages, especially in the nineteenth century when it begins, those who translated Shakespeare had more than Shakespeare in their minds. Most of our 19th century writes knew Sanskrit equally well and they knew Sanskrit perhaps even better and already before they learned Shakespeare in the colleges and schools. They grew up with Sanskrit all around them. They also had Shakespeare on top of that. This gets manifested in many ways.

One of the earliest translations, in fact, the first major translation of Shakespeare into Hindi, is by Bharatendu Harishchandra. This inaugurator and father figure of modern literature in Hindi was a poet and grammatist who lived in Banaras. He translated *The Merchant of Venice* under the title *Durlabh* Bandhu, a phrase that comes from *The Panchatantra*.

> durlabhah guino surah datarasceti durlabhabh
> mitrarthe tyakta sarvasvabandhu sarvais sa durlabhah

"Virtuous and saitly people are difficult to get, donors too difficult to get
A friend giving up everything for the sake of a friend is difficult to ger for all", which is exactly appropriate to what happens in the play.

Now already we see a confluence of what Bharatendu already has like his cultural upbringing and applying it to Shakespeare. He also changes the locale and the names of the characters:

> Venice ..... Vanshpur,
> Portia ..... Purashree,
> Shylock .... Shailaksh

Translators in those times thought that they could do these in their retelling of not only Shakespeare but anything that they translated. But, he runs into one problem. This kind of adaptation can go perhaps a little too far.

There is a problem with the Jew Shylock. This is the heart of the play *The Merchant of Venice*. One finds at that heart of the play, not the Jew himself, but the Christian prejudice against Jews which Shakespeare deconstructs and interrogates in it. In Hindi-speaking India, hardly anyone had heard of a Jew at that time. The Jews were not part of North Indian cultural currency. So, what Bharatendu does is that he makes Christians Hindus and replaces Jews with Jains.

The representation of the Jains in South India is quite different from that one finds in North India. It is very minor and is subsumed within Hinduism. The two things that distinguish the North Indian Jains from the South Indians ones is that they are very *sattvic*. They believe in sacrifice and austerity in a way which is greater than more Hindus do and more nonviolent. The other is that many of them despite all these good qualities and perhaps because of these are also very rich. So, this is perhaps what Bharatendu had in mind. But the antagonism that plays out in Shakespeare between the Christians and the Jews is not at all replicable in cultural terms between the Hindus and the Jains.

Another translation from about that time shows another kind of adaptability on the part of the translator is the *Comedy of Errors* and is by Munshi Ratan Chand, a minor character. He is not known for having done anything else there might be some minor works and he translates *The Comedy of Errors* under the title *Brahmajalak Natak* (1882) which is again adaptation and very accurate, in terms of conveying the essence of the play.

In that play, there is the minor scene in which Dromio of Syracuse talks about Nell, a female character, and he says that she is so ample and so plump that she is spherical. She is like a globe on whose body different countries can be located. This is a comical speech. So, the character to whom he is describing this asks where England was, and also where was the Netherlands. 'Netherlands' literally means the lower countries. Dromio replies saying Netherlands was somewhere in her lower parts where I did not look. Now in Hindi, Ratan Chand turns it around.

The Comedy of Errors does not mention India, although it mentions the Indies. During Shakespeare's time, the West Indies and the East Indies were, thought to be the same thing. As he describes the ugly features of the kitchen maid's anatomy in geographical terms, Dromio of Syracuse mentions the Indies as if it is on her nose in the shape of little pimples or carbuncles. This is Shakespeare's only direct reference to America:

Antipholus of Syracuse:	Where America, the Indies?
Dromio of Syracuse:	Oh, sir, upon her nose all o'er embellished with rubies, carbuncles, sapphires, declining their rich aspect to the hot breath of Spain; who sent whole armadoes of caracks to be ballast at her nose.
Antipholus of Syracuse:	Where stood Belgia, the Netherlands?
Dromio of Syracuse:	Oh, sir, I did not look so low.

Ratan Chand says he begins by the question where India, which is not there in Shakespeare at all, was and Dromio answers it was in her face. Just as the face is the best part of the body India is the best of all countries. This is entirely Ratan Chand's contribution nothing in Shakespeare.

Then when he is asked where England was, Dromio says, England is such a tiny country that I looked all over for it and I could not find it anywhere at all perhaps it was in those parts where I did not look. It was the same kind of joke Shakespeare had applied to the Netherlands.

So this is translation as subversion a happy political subversion at the height of British rule. At the peak of the Raj a translator in Hindi, sitting in his small-town Mathura, is poking fun at the British through using a British author.

Post-Independence translation

So far as the Indian translation of Shakespeare is concerned, the question of faithfulness can be turned around. One could ask how faithful is the translator but to British Raj. Is it being a colonial or is it being a post-colonial? In later times, what is the degree of subservience or independence with which he looks not only at Shakespeare but the culture that Shakespeare represents the western British culture.

One of the examples here is that of Lala Sitaram, a provincial civil servant like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. He was not ICS, but in the rung below that, in Uttar Pradesh. He also was, like Bankim, one of the early graduates of Calcutta University. Very well read and also translated Kalidasa into Hindi, just as he translated Shakespeare. He translated a very large number of Shakespeare's plays. The second-largest by any translator in Hindi thirteen or fourteen. He translated five to six also into Urdu. This all-round versatile man is also independent in the sense that he takes some, not cultural liberties, but makes cultural departures. His overall attitude is that of reverence towards Shakespeare, and therefore, towards British rule.

He has a preface which is in English. It is printed in each one of his Hindi translations. In this, he asks people to take the fullest advantage of learning through Shakespeare's texts some of the highest moral virtues that our rulers represent. And he says that our rulers are those whom providence in its infinite mercy has pleased to place over us.

This is not only Sitaram's sentiment alone. Many others have also done so either out of gratitude for getting opportunities that the government has granted them to go up in the world or because of what they believed was authentic in their eyes. The belief in the superiority of the British, because colonial indoctrination, can work in wonderful ways.

A contrast to this would be the works Harivansh Rai Bachchan, the most eminent translator. Shortly after independence, in the late 1950s and the early 1960's he translated Shakespeare's four great tragedies. Harivansh Rai Bachchan was an extremely popular romantic poet in his own right in the 1930s. He made a reputation for himself in the 1930s and '40s. He taught English at the University of Allahabad and then he came across to Delhi in an official capacity because Jawaharlal Nehru wanted him here. He then went to Cambridge. He was one of the first Indians to get a PhD in English from Cambridge on W.B. Yeats. So he knows English extremely well indeed. Then he translates Shakespeare.

In his translations of Shakespeare certain small cultural issues arise. These are of great interest. One example that is an eye-opener, is his translation of *to be or not to be that is the question*. The sentence comes across as an ungrammatical one: *to be* what? Is "be" a transitive verb or an intransitive one? Unless we have an object, how can we figure out what *to mean*--to be good, to be bad, to be alive, to be dead? What does it mean? Of course, that makes this ungrammatical usage one of the immortal lines of Shakespeare. Without that aberration, it would be forgotten. I did not even realize in my student days what this line meant. From the notes, I could see what it was supposed to mean. But it was the translation of Harivansh Rai Bachchan that revealed to me how it means.

He translates it as *Ab jeena hai ya marna hai, thai karna hai* (I have now to decide whether I should live on or whether I should die). In Shakespeare's line, both *live* and *die* are absent. Both are implied. So, the function of a good translation is to serve as explication. Translation theory calls it exploitation. Without brackets or footnotes, a good translation does it as it goes along. It incorporates that kind of explanation and commentary in the very translation itself.

Another example is from Macbeth

Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'
Like the poor cat i' the adage?
(I would do this but I dare not do this is like the cat in the proverb).

Unless you look up the notes no Indian would know what the cat does in that proverb. In Bachchan's translation without any fuss, it is explained.

Billi Machali kayegi par pav na beeghe
(the cat wants to eat fish without wetting its feet)

These two examples are that of exploitation. But the third example is about cultural adaptation. In a way, it is extremely effective. In *Othello,* Desdemona has just eloped and the news has to be broken to Desdemona's father in a very inciting and provocative manner. The phrase used is

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise;

Tupping is fornicating, the white ewe is little female lamb, an old black ram is fornicating with her. The phraseology is provocative by intent so that the father is roused and takes some action and stops Othello if possible. In Bachchan's translation, Bachchan says,

Abhi is ghadi kahi tumhari ujali bacchia si kanya par kala mota saal chada hai,
(a big fat bull is now riding your little white innocent tender she calf)

Now, this is emotive for us Indians, cow and bull in the same sense, as the lamb is because of its Christian connotations in the west. I think Bachchan gets it just right by replacing one loaded event and metaphor with an equally loaded one in our context.

There are many shades of translation of Shakespeare into most of our languages. Each language is different in its way. Some of our best writers who have a wonderful body of achievement in their own right have undertaken to translate Shakespeare as a kind of creative challenge to themselves. One such was the poet Raghuveer Sahay who is one of the finest subtlest poets of the post-colonial generation in Hindi.

He translated *Macbeth*. The very title that he chooses shows the complexity he sought to bring out in Shakespeare's play and into his translation. He called it *Barnam Van*, "Birnam Wood". Birnam wood plays a minor role in *Macbeth*. But it comes to Dunsinane when no wood should move. That is only a device in the plot in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. How Raghuveer Sahay chooses to read it endows it with a kind of psychological complexity. The wood and the trees in it represent a kind of trap in which Macbeth is caught by that point. The trap set by the witches about believing in fate, wanting to believe in fate and yet realizing that his end may not be far is the key. That is why the psychological complexity is represented by the metaphor of a wood. Whether it moves or not is hardly material. It comes to meet Macbeth; Macbeth doesn't have to go to it. It exists not only on the ground, it exists in his mind. A creative writer from another language might come across many other ways of reading more into Shakespeare if he is and independent enough to offer. Such enrichment, traditional or otherwise, makes Shakespeare mean for the target audience.

Indian Shakespeare?

An interesting act about Shakespeare's presence in India is that for many decades Indians have not disputed at all the fact, as given to them by the British, that Shakespeare is the greatest writer in the world. Many rich, complex, and old literary cultures will not readily grant this assumption.

It depends on who tells you who the greatest is. In France, for example, they do not have much time for Shakespeare because in the 17th century they had three major playwrights—Racine, Moliere, Corneille who they regarded as the three greatest playwrights of the 17th century. They are very big in all the Franco-phone world, in France and in all the French colonies where the French ruled. The Francophone world acclaimed them and not Shakespeare, as the greatest in the world. We need to be aware of the fact that one's reputation as the greatest poet in the world is a matter of cultural and political relativity.

Sir William Jones, perhaps the first Britisher to read *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* by Kalidasa and translate it as *Shakuntala* (1785) was quite bowled over in many ways. Still, he had some niggling objections. He didn't find it right that play had seven acts as he had been brought up to believe that a play should have only five acts. He thought that had its seven acts been collapsed into five, *Shakuntala* would be a better play. That was a prejudice.

Jones also says that Kalidasa is a great enough writer to justify being called the 'Shakespeare of India' as he is regarded in India as the greatest playwright in the language. Now, this is very high praise coming from a Britisher. But in the 1920s and the 1930s, some Indian critics objected to it. They claimed that Kalidasa was born earlier, one thousand years before Shakespeare, and therefore, Shakespeare should be called the Kalidasa of England, and not the other way.

This is absurd at one level because we cannot tell the British what they should call their writers. We did not rule over them; they did. Had we ruled over them for two hundred years, we might have been able to teach them to call Shakespeare the Kalidasa of England. But that is counter-historical. What happened was that they taught us when they were being extremely liberal, and then called Kalidsa the Shakespeare of India. It shows the impact of cultural relativity in our perception of the greatness of writers in different languages. This depends, not entirely but to a large extent, on the political relationships between the two countries and two languages.

In the case of translation, many people wrongly assume that the language from which a translation is made is the greater and richer language and that the language into which a translation is made is lower and poorer. This is not true. There are translations between languages that have equal standing. Some examples are the translations between French and German, and between German and English. For a very long time, the German had the upper hand. So also did the French. The French were centre of the literary and cultural world till the 19th century. Before that, it was Italy in Europe.

There is a larger point of cultural relativity. It involves the colonial and postcolonial power equation between India and England. The greatness of Shakespeare is to be located first in the colonial and then in the postcolonial power equation. This is not to deny that Shakespeare is indeed one of the greatest writers in the world. We should also look at the historical circumstances in which we have read Shakespeare.

Right next to the Delhi University campus, there is a little hill—popularly known as the ridge. It was there that the English were camped for four long months from May to September 1857, during the 'Mutiny', when they were driven out of the city of Delhi. The Mughal emperor, backed by Hindu,

Muslim and other forces, was supreme again. The British seemed to be driven not only out of Delhi but also out of India. Many of them were killed the rest were driven out and dispersed. It was uncertain whether the British rule would continue. Had the British not been able to take Delhi back in September 1857, Indian political and cultural history would have been different. Since then, along with political nationalism, cultural nationalism was also on the rise in India.

Postcolonial English

One of the most interesting things about a writer like Shakespeare who has been known all over the world—initially in England, then Europe, then many other parts of the world where the British ruled—is how he has been read differently for centuries in Britain, and shorter periods elsewhere. Postcolonial readings of Shakespeare, certainly his *The Tempest*, was majorly reinterpreted.

There were already inklings of it even before the word postcolonial became current in the 1950s and the 1960s. In the 19th century, critics like Dowden divided Shakespeare's career into four phases. They looked upon the last phase of tragic-comedies as a serene phase in which Shakespeare had arrived at some kind of a peaceful equilibrium and read it as the plays of his great maturity and ripeness. The other plays from that period were also taken up and reread in a different kind of theoretical light. But *The Tempest* benefited the most from postcolonial reading and has been so radically reread that it does not remain the same play at all. Now our perception of it is as if it were a different play.

The Tempest is now by and large interpreted as the story of Prospero colonizing on reaching a desert island the local population which is not very large. Its rebellious Caliban resists Prospero at every step and compliant Ariel cooperates with him and carries out every command believing in Prospero's promise of freeing him within a very short time.

These are two kinds of natives that are found in every colony. Some cheerfully collaborate like Ariel and some open rebel like Caliban. When independence is not fought for but granted as a favour, then as one of the early critics wrote, the Ariel kind of figure will become Prime Minister and the Caliban kind of figure would be shot down.

Now that is not how it plays out, but this is how it has been read, much too eagerly. It is not quite like that there are many parts in play which do not fit this reading. For example, Prospero himself is exiled. He is deposed and exiled because he was reading too many books on magic and not governing his territory very well. That does not fit in with the colonial paradigm. Let us leave that alone.

One another interesting point is the conduct of Caliban. Caliban is openly rebellious, but not from the start. When Prospero comes Caliban shows him around the island and shows him how to survive best, what the natural endowment of the island is, and how to fit into the environment of the island. Then suddenly Caliban is accused that at one point he tried to rape Prospero's young daughter Miranda.

The trope of the rape is dominant in all post-colonial literature. It is there in *A Passage to India*, and there in *The Raj Quartet* (*The Jewel in the Crown* (1966), *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971), and *A Division of the Spoils* (1975)). It is to be found as a figure and event that represents the rebellion. The token is symbolic. It is the rebellion of a subject race who cannot throw out the rulers but resorts to symbolic revenge by raping one stray woman, making the act of rape a kind of counter colonization of at least one female. Caliban denies it saying nothing like that has happened. Then he also says, turning the allegation around to his advantage, that

O ho, O ho! would't had been done!
Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
This isle with Calibans. (*Tmp*. 1.1)

The last point here which is of interest is that Prospero endow'd his purposes with words that made them known, implying that he taught him the language. It is as if the language that Caliban had been speaking and which Prospero understood perfectly, in the beginning, is not a 'language'. Now that Prospero taught him his language, Caliban's use on it is that he can curse Prospero in his language:

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. (*Tmp* 1.1)

Caliban turns the language that Prospero has taught him around against Prospero. Now that Caliban knows Prospero's language there is one thing Caliban can very effectively do which is to curse Prospero for dispossessing him and for treating him badly.

This applies to the dominance of English in India, to our cultural situation in colonial and post-colonial times. Even though Gandhi and Nehru did not quite curse the British, they did use their competence, extremely high competence in English, to train their moral and rhetorical guns against the British rule and to help dislodge it. That was their profit on being taught the language.

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