

Translation - Kalidasa's "Abhijnanasakuntalam" Explores the Technique during Colonial and Nationalist Period

Dr.R.Rajeswari

Asst.Prof & Head, PG & Research Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College, Erode.

Abstract: According to David Gordon, Translation theory is necessary for pastors and teachers to know everything about translation theory for two reasons. First, it will affect the way we interpret the Bible for our people. If we are completely unaware of translation theory we may unwittingly mislead our brothers and sisters in our interpretation. Second, there are so many English translations available, that no contemporary pastor will be able to escape the inevitable questions about which translations are superior. In translating any work, communication plays a major role and it has its own style. Every act of communication has three dimensions: Speaker (author), Message, and Audience. The more we can know about the original author, and the Translation appears to be a simple act of linguistic substitution where words from one language are translated into another language, having a purpose of making the text comprehensible to those readers who cannot read it in original language. But turning from the Sanskrit version of the play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* by Kalidasa to its English renditions, one comes across multiple translations of the play that have occurred at different times, which makes us to think it as an inter-cultural act. In this paper, I analyze the multiple translations of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* in English during colonial and nationalist periods with special emphasis on exploring the cultural politics, ideology and role of context behind the translations.

I. Introduction

According to David Gordon, Translation theory is necessary for pastors and teachers to know everything about translation theory for two reasons. First, it will affect the way we interpret the Bible for our people. If we are completely unaware of translation theory we may unwittingly mislead our brothers and sisters in our interpretation. Second, there are so many English translations available, that no contemporary pastor will be able to escape the inevitable questions about which translations are superior. In translating any work, communication plays a major role and it has its own style. Every act of communication has three dimensions: Speaker (author), Message, and Audience. The more we can know about the original author, and the actual message produced by that author, and the original audience, the better acquainted we will be with that particular act of communication. These three dimension coverage makes the efficient. There are the two other components of author and audience, the interpreter attempts to uncover as much information as possible about the author and audience.

Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* was one among the first major literary works to be translated into English, a tale of love and romance, the name literally meaning 'Of Sakuntala who is recognized by a token. It was first translated in 1789 by Sir William Jones partly to satisfy his own intellectual curiosity, and partly to carry forward the latent agenda of Orientalism. Long ago, the powerful sage Viswamitra, who lived a life of strong austerities, was drawn in a deep meditation. Fearing that he might gain more power than the gods, Lord Indra sent one of his most gorgeous heavenly damsels, Menaka to earth to disturb the sage's devotion. She succeeded in seducing him and together they begot a beautiful daughter. Infuriated at the loss of his chastity, Viswamitra turned down Menaka and her daughter. Menaka can't take her daughter to the heaven, so she left her new born infant in the forest. Sage Kanava happened to pass by that forest where he spotted the new born child, surrounded by Shakunta birds. He decided to take the child home and named her 'Sakuntala' which means one fed by Shakunta birds. She became a beautiful lady like her mother Meaka, and secretly married the king Dushyant. As a king, he has duties to perform in his kingdom, he leat her with promises and return soon to take his beloved. As a token of love, he gives her a signet ring and promises to send an envoy to escort her to palace. Due to the curse of the sage Durvasa, Sakuntala lost the signet ring, which was given by the King. The king had forgotten Shakuntala and at last he recalled her by the ring from the stomach of a fish given by the angler. There they reunite and later Sakuntala gave birth to a son, Bharath. The version, of *Abhijnanasakuntalm* in the famous epic of Mahabharata is slightly different from the original version. The play has thereafter enjoyed unprecedented after-life in the form of its multiple translations. In the absence of any robust tradition of translation, the phenomenon of multiple translations of one text calls for serious cultural analysis. The present paper would be an attempt to understand the compelling reasons that necessitate repeated translations of one chosen text. As cultures undergo process of revision, expansion and self-reflexivity, the

practices of translations undergo corresponding changes. The texts that acquire canonical status and often paraded as master pieces need to be re-translated so that they can be accessed by contemporary generations. Engaging with these issues and by tracing the history of these various translations during colonial and nationalist period, one can infer that translation is not just an act of word transference from one language to another but is surcharged with politics, power and ideology. With shifting linguistic and cultural trends the existing translation becomes dated. Therefore the translator re-translates it within new cultural idiom thus making it more appealing to his contemporary readers. In this way each translation comes as a critique of the previous translation and becomes intrinsically an exercise of hyper- textuality.

II. Translation Studies

Translation is a theological task. It has become increasingly clear that translation cannot really be performed in a theological emptiness. Theology is to be determined by the Bible, at least in part, by theological considerations, it is easy to see that there is something of a circle here. The first step of translation is interpretation. This step will influence all other steps, so it must be approached with the entire arsenal of theological tools.

Semantic Theory is related with the meaning of individual words, commonly called lexical semantics. A lexicon in the hands of an over-imaginative preacher may be the worst of all human instruments.

Semantic Field and Context:

Most words can mean a number of things, take the English word, "run". It can appear in the following contexts:

The athlete is running.

Her nose is running.

I have a run in my stocking.

My computer runs on windows.

Does your car run?

Most words can mean a number of different things. How do we know what a word means in a given circumstance? This shows clearly the two components of meaning, semantic field and semantic context. By semantic field, we mean the full range of ways the word has and can be used. By examining the field of possible meanings, we begin to narrow the options. The second one is semantic context. For example, run can refer to rapid, bipedal locomotion in some contexts. We can eliminate that option in contexts where there are no longer or feet. If 'run' can mean 'flow' or 'drip', it is a possible way of understanding it where noses and faucets appear, but not where liquids don't appear. In everyday speech, we do this kind of comparison to semantic context so rapidly and unreflectively that we are not normally aware of doing it.

Translation is not a marginal activity, but a primary and serious cultural act. In a multicultural situation, it is a process of inter-cultural and intra-cultural dialogue. It is given secondary position because of the restricted notion that it merely involves observing closely the surface structure only. With the advent of Cultural Turn in Translation Studies and Post-colonial view of translation, it is now viewed with a broader perspective. Theorists like Susan Bassnett, J.C Catford and Lefevere describes translation as an inter-cultural act. Translations are attempted with social purpose and are performed with suitable additions, deletions, explanations, summaries and innovations in style and technique. There are specific intentions, agendas, and strategies involved when translation is undertaken. The variations in translations are the outcome of historical, social and cultural contexts in which the translation is situated. Translator's subjectivity, competence, gender, caste and nationality impact the process of translation. Translation can be seen as negotiation between texts and between cultures in which translator acts as a mediator. Some choices which translators make may be random and ungrounded. Others, however, may be based on a socially shared system or systems of ideas, values, or beliefs. These can be termed as 'ideologies of translation'. They may convey translators' attitudes towards the source text and writer, towards the source and target culture and towards their own role as mediators.

III. Translations During Colonial Period

The East India Company has consolidated its power over India by 18th century. After political domination, the British turned to Indian literature to understand the culture of the colony they were ruling and this led to the process of translating texts into English. Orientalists perceived Indian culture as monolithic; ignoring the fact that unlike West there are other religions also and presented homogenized image of India based on Hinduism and the play came to be seen as an icon of Hindu culture. Sir William Jones was one of the many officers who were studying and translating texts from Sanskrit, Persian and other Indian languages into English. He read the Bengali version and first translated it into Latin and then re-translated it as *Sacountala* or *The Fatal Ring*. It was later translated by Monier Williams' *Sakountala*; or; *The Lost Ring: An Indian Drama by Kalidasa* in 1855, who translated the play into verse while William Jones' translation was in prose. The play was also translated by Iswarchandra Vidya Sagar with the title *Shakuntala* in 1854 and later on by M.R Kale, an Indian Sanskritist in 1898.

Translations during late 18th and 19th centuries were target-oriented translations that took into consideration the fact that the target readers were not familiar with linguistic and cultural milieu. Sir William Jones domesticated the play to suit the morality of his target readership despite his praise for Kalidasa, Jones felt apologetic about the explicitness of the text. Monier Williams has a more condescending attitude to the play. His translation reflected colonizer's orientalist attitude and Victorian disapproval of sexuality. The reference to 'heavy hips' of Sakuntala in Act1 by Dushyanta was toned down to 'elegant limbs' by Jones and Monier Williams referred to the 'graceful undulation of her gait' and some omitted it altogether in an effort to make the translation more appropriate for the target culture. Translators, Indian as well as Western have not only accepted and adopted colonialist readings and interpretations of the text but have endorsed and reproduced the same projections. The impact on Indian translators can be easily seen in Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's translation of the play for college students which was toned and the erotic passages were removed in order to make it proper to be studied by students.

Although translations during the period are implicated in colonial orientalist politics but there are ideological shifts with every new translation. A comparative analysis of one sentence from Act1 from the translations by William Jones, Monier Williams and M.R Kale will help us to understand the shifting approaches of the translators. Here Dushyanta describes Shakuntala, holding her loosened hair with her one hand: Sir William Jones translates it as "her dishevelled locks, from which the string has dropped"; Sir Monier Williams translates it as "Loosed is the fillet of her hair". M. R. Kale translates it as "the knot of hair being loosened". It is interesting that both Jones and Monier-Williams think that Shakuntala must have used a string to tie up her hair. Jones says her locks are disheveled because 'the string has dropped' and Monier-Williams refers to the 'fillet' of her hair which indicates that she had some sort of band around her hair. Indians would know that this was unusual for women in Shakuntala's time. Kale refers to her 'knot. During colonial period, the translated Shakuntala became a symbol of the colonizer's attitude to native culture and literature.

IV. Translations In The Emerging Context Of Indian Nationalism

During nationalist period of Indian history, the translations served the purpose of constructing national identity. There was a tendency to portray ancient India as a template to chronicle the contemporary struggle of a colonised nation. The Indian nationalists found a cultural and historical mascot in Shakuntala and her love story which is about love, passion, rejection and final recognition at once found parallels in the condition of colonial India where the country was conquered, dispossessed and ruled by the British.

The myths of Aryan ancestors and a Hindu past helped to formulate a unified image of *Bharata* as a nation having a history of glorious past. The translations of classical works like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* performed the important act of creating national identity by acting as a catalyst, nationalistic in nature these helped in bridging the gap between diverse linguistic and cultural boundaries. Nation building has always been linked to national integration and the idea of national identity. The story of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* served the purpose of establishing a myth of strong Hindu nation having Aryan ancestors. These myths, whose nature is mainly nationalistic, were made available to the Indian population through translations without which it is unconceivable that the deeply entrenched cultural and linguistic boundaries within India could have been bridged.

Rabindranath Tagore in his interpretations of the play in his essay "*Sakuntala---Its Inner Meaning*" glorifies India's past and associates the curse motifs, ideals with nation and seems to preach self-conquest and self penance which reflects the contemporary nationalist zeal. He says "the poet has made the two lovers undergo a long and austere *tapasya* that they may gain each other eternally". The story of Shakuntala stands for the pain of separation between the lover and the beloved, or between mother India and its native people due to British rule. In their search for authentic native nationalism, Gandhi and his followers appropriated texts of that period. Thus there is shift in an attitude; the rustic Shakuntala of romantic period is now seen as an ideal for Indian womanhood. By invoking Shakuntala in the pious nationalist context, translators not only domesticate the 'rustic maiden' Shakuntala, but invent an Indian ideal of womanhood from Gandhian tradition. Shakuntala thus performs so many cultural functions. The translators during national period seek to present the narrative as a national literary text for the consumption of an incipient national audience.

V. Conclusion

Translation has been always a cultural and political project. It is inextricably linked to ideology, cultural identity of power structures that dominate the society. Translations transform a text into new and more relevant text for contemporary audience. Kalidasa's *shlokas* are not frozen events of history; they are renewed with each literary effort. Therefore, translations during colonial and nationalist periods are affected by the prevailing historical and cultural context. Thus the major concern of the translators is with reproducing 'period flavor'. There can be no ultimate translation and any assessment of translation can only be made by taking into account both the process of creating it and its function in a given context.

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