

The Isaac Sequeira Memorial Lecture Adaptation and Translation: Reversing a Hierarchy

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I do not know if I deserve the honour you have done for me by inviting me to deliver the Isaac Sequeira Memorial Lecture this year, but now that I am here it may be in my best interest not to express such doubts. In fact, after the elaborate, flattering, fulsome and therefore immensely gratifying – introduction that I have been given by the Chair of this session, Professor Unni Krishnan, I may be forgiven for feeling that a memorial lecture has already been delivered – for me! This feeling is not mitigated but only enhanced by my recalling, and now publicly disclosing, the fact that Professor Krishnan is an old student of mine. May all of us teachers have such worthy and appreciative students.

Isaac Sequeira, the Multiethnic, and the American Moment

Professor Isaac Sequeira (1930-2006) was, to invent a phrase, a legend in his own lifetime while remaining fully and affably grounded and therefore immensely popular. I met him only a few times but he was the kind of person who, once met, is never forgotten. He lived in Hyderabad; I lived in Delhi. Our paths crossed only occasionally, for he visited Delhi seldom and I went to Hyderabad only infrequently, so it was wholly to his credit that we promptly got on first-name terms. Over the last week or two, I have spoken about Isaac with some common friends who knew him well for they had lived and worked with him in Hyderabad, notably Professors Mohan Ramanan, Sukhbir Singh, Sachidanand Mohanty and Sumanyu Satpathy. And if there is one striking thing about Isaac, it is that even now, nobody mentions his name without warmth suffusing their memories and their hearts. While I regret not having known him better, I feel fortunate to have known him at all.

He was, among other things, one of the pioneers of the study of Popular Culture in India. In those pre-postcolonial days, the Popular Culture that we could study as an academic subject came to us from abroad; *their* Popular Culture was *our* Popular Culture. Similarly, when British Popular Culture

entered the scene, it arrived through writers such as Agatha Christie — who was as unfamiliar and as “foreign” to many of us as Shakespeare. The contradictions of the “popular” in Anglophone circles in India are many, and one of the first scholars to negotiate these complexities with home-grown assurance was Isaac.

In fact, his abiding reputation in this regard rests on his equal mastery of American and Indian popular cultures, which was something he displayed constantly in his teaching and writings. What many remember with the greatest affection about Isaac is the delightful way he demonstrated the influence of Hollywood music on Bollywood songs. He would first sing a Hollywood number, and then the Bollywood song that had borrowed — or stolen — its tune, and as he sang, he would sway gently to both. Sometimes, when he didn’t feel like singing, he would simply whistle. Have you ever known a professor — of English, Hindi, Telugu, anything — who whistles in class? Try it yourself and you may be thrown out. But Isaac carried it off naturally, with great aplomb. Apart from American Popular Culture, Isaac had a deep love for the local cultural forms which were popular in Hyderabad, and would regularly go to *mushairas* and *qawaali* performances in the city. He could sing those verse forms too equally well, and would relish the local equally with the global.

There was another important aspect to Isaac’s achievement: his foundational association with American Literature and with MELUS/MELOW. Subsequently, Professor Manju Jaidka has stepped forward to do sterling work in running MELUS and then MELOW all these years. This is the 26th annual conference now — what an achievement! Everyone who has attended these conferences knows how much she personally contributes, how she leads from the front and inspires her team. I have helped run a couple of associations myself over two decades (including the Indian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies and the Comparative Literature Association of India) so I know and can fully appreciate the labour and the human skills involved in sustaining such conferences year after year.

This association began as the study of Multi-ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) and has grown into the study of Multi-ethnic Literatures of the World (MELOW). In the expanded

agenda read out today by the Vice-Chancellor in his inaugural speech (from a script most probably provided by Manju!), “multiethnic” can become meaningful only when it is also multicultural, and it is of course not fully multicultural until it is multilingual. Isaac was a living example of this. His ancestors were Saraswat Brahmins from the Konkan region in Goa who converted under Portuguese rule, and Isaac thus grew up as a Roman Catholic. Later, when he was a boy, his family moved to Hyderabad, and Isaac imbibed Hyderabadi culture as if he had been born into it. If there was a person who embodied the “multi-ethnic” in the full, liberal sense of the term, it was Isaac Sequeira. It is only apt thus that this association honours him through this annual lecture.

Let me conclude this remembrance and tribute by sharing with you a poem written for Isaac by his admirer and friend Professor Mohan Ramanan who was a younger colleague of his in Hyderabad. Few people have poems written *to* them — and fewer still by accomplished poets.

For Isaac Sequeira

I knew you Isaac

Through the confessional--

No, not the chaplain's privileged box,

But with the articulated angst of Sylvia and Robert and John:

And I longed to hijack you, Isaac,

To have you all to myself alone --

But you are the King of the Carnavalesque --

You are the people who demand your attention –

You become them;

Thank you Isaac for your Johnsonian

Clubbish love.

For being there when we needed you, your unignorable presence.

A presence which was a fullness of Being;

Can we ever forget the baritone of your voice,

Your cheery laughter, your affectionate wink,
And nudge—
Your wit and your witnessing of wit?
You will always remain our own –
Our Bishma, our Pitamaha.
The only begetter of all of us in love with America,
And the idea of America.

This poem was written many decades ago, of course. Our intellectual and cultural romance with “the idea of America,” and our being “in love with” America and their “confessional” poets who were once in vogue and are familiarly named in this poem by first names (identifiable as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell and John Berryman), marked a historical phase in our intellectual life that lasted broadly from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1980s. That was a period when we fed on shiploads after shiploads of wheat imported from America against payment in rupees, and out of that Rupee Mountain the Americans built and set up what was probably the best facility for American studies outside America, the American Studies Research Center (ASRC) in Hyderabad -- which then they summarily wound up not long after the USSR disintegrated in 1989 and the Cold War came to an end. That American Indian Summer, so to call it, has long passed, but it represents a significant moment in the evolution of English Studies in India, and Isaac exemplified that moment as aptly as any other professor of English in India.

Adaptation vs Translation

And now to the theme of my lecture, which is centred round two related propositions and arguments. The first of these is that in my understanding, Adaptation (and let me capitalize the terms for the sake of clarity) is not the younger, footloose, disreputable sister of Translation, which in contrast is seen as being faithful, virtuous, and so close to the original as to be its double. Rather, I argue that in terms of lineage and chronology, free-spirited Adaptation, with all the “liberties” it takes, is the elder sister

of the prim, proper, and often sterile practice of Translation. Here, a key question worth asking is: *When is a good translation not an adaptation?*

My second proposition is that from a broad survey of world literary cultures from antiquity to now, it becomes clear that classicism, imitation, retelling, and Adaptation have traditionally been valued higher than originality and uniqueness in a literary text and their “faithful” rendition through strict Translation. In this long view, originality in fact is a late entrant and a largely romantic obsession. Before the Romantics, hardly any English poet wanted to be “original.” Dr. Johnson proudly declared that his major poem, “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” was modelled on a Latin poem. This was for him not an embarrassment but a mark of poetic skill, virtuosity and maturity. The notion of originality began with the Romantics, and it remains an elusive and even impossible romantic concept. Anyone who claims originality is, to that extent, not in touch with reality and tradition.

Let me now move on to substantiate these propositions by offering illustrations from a wide range of literary works. The *Naadiya Sukta* in the *RigVeda* is the oldest and the finest Creation hymn that I know. It begins by saying that in the beginning there was neither non-existence nor existence. Perhaps the dark lay enveloped in the dark, and even the gods may not know what came first for they themselves were created only later. Possibly, then, there is someone up there watching it all who knows – and possibly even he does not know! This hymn thus speculates, with befitting humility, on the impossibility of knowing how the world began and what its origins were. If we are to speak of an “Indian Knowledge System,” as we now often seem obliged to do, let us begin here, with this poetic utterance of sublime speculation and the profound admission that knowledge cannot trace its own origins.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* — our earliest literary texts — also deny the idea of origins. Valmiki is often called the *Adikavi*, the first poet, but he is clearly not the first narrator of the *Ramayana* story. His own text shows that the story he goes on to narrate was already widely known and recited, and for Valmiki’s creative convenience, an executive summary of it (so to say) is recited

to him right at the beginning of his *Ramayana* by the sage Narada. Similarly, the author of the *Mahābhārata* is known as “Vyāsa,” which literally means “compiler.” This inordinately long and lose-limbed epic grew over centuries, negating the very idea of a single, original text.

Across India, the great Ramayanas in Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese and other languages all openly acknowledge their debt to Valmiki before striking out in new adaptive directions. Kamban’s humility — “Valmiki is milk; I am only a cat lapping it up” — is charming and at the same time a declaration of creative freedom.

The opening verses in Tulsi Das’s Hindi *Ramayana* are even humbler and more widely intertextual. He acknowledges a whole range of sources -- the Puranas, the various Agamas and the Nigamas, the *Ramayana* by Valmiki, and then he slips in modestly the admission that he has taken “something also from elsewhere” — *kvachidanyatopi* —this “something” being his own creative and adaptive genius. None of these many Ramayanas has in our literary tradition ever been regarded as a mere translation; they are all treated as original texts and even independent scriptures in their own right. Incidentally, the Thai Ramayana, titled the *Ramakien*, is regarded as a national epic, even though the country is largely Buddhist. So much for the idea of a single and unique Original.

In Sanskrit poetics too, the idea of literary originality is firmly put in its place. There are two kinds of stories, we are told: those that a particular writer invents, which are called *katha*, and those that are already known and prevalent and which a writer re-tells, which are called *aakhayika*. It is the latter which involve a truer test of a writer’s inventiveness and creativity – or, if you like, his “originality” -- for his task here is to make the familiar new.

Abroad too, until about 200 years ago, i.e. the advent of Romanticism, no one had any use for claiming to be original rather than adaptive, as seen above in the case of Dr Johnson. In her highly erudite and enlightening keynote lecture here this morning from which we have all benefitted, Professor Iffat Maqbool noted, among other things, how Shakespeare seldom invented any new plots but picked them up from either Roman and British history and legend or from preceding writers.

When I taught Shakespeare for many years, I often invited the students to compare the plots that Shakespeare borrowed or stole as they were with the far richer versions that he transformed them into in his own plays, for therein lay his supreme genius. My favourite example here was the Spanish writer Matteo Bandello who died two years before Shakespeare was born and who provided Shakespeare with the plots of as many as four of his plays. And Bandello's highly popular digest of 214 stories and novellas was, in turn, not his original work either but a compilation and adaptation of the various literary and oral sources that he had collected. The search for a pristine Original is an ever-receding horizon while Adaptation is the very ground beneath our feet.

Modes of Adaptation: Imitation and Incommensurability

Adaptation as a form of secondary creation is radically different from Translation, for it manifests itself in many forms that are anathema to the stricter practice of Translation. To "imitate" a classic author or text used to be a widespread and notably flexible practice, as seen in the case of numerous English poets of the Neo-Classical Age. Dr Johnson, mentioned above, had "imitated" Juvenal, Alexander Pope and the Earl of Rochester imitated Horace, and the shape-shifting Ovid was widely imitated too by poets who in turn shifted the original Ovidian shapes. What imitation meant in nearly all such cases was that the English poets took over broadly the form and the tone of the Latin texts, but packed the content with topical British references to update and contemporize their own works. The bottle was old but the wine new.

In India, naturally enough, imitation worked very differently. Because of the lack of the printing press and definitively determined poetic corpuses, and the lack equally of the characteristically Western affirmation of each author's individuality, admirers and followers of poets like Kabir Das and Sur Das felt free to add poems of their own composition to those composed by their favourite poets, not as egotistical fakery but as humble submissions. In the verses that they so added, they did not omit to include the authenticating signature phrase "Kahat Kabir..." (Kabir says...) or "Surdas kahi..." (Surdas says...), to make their imitation credible and complete.

Modern editors and translators of the works of these poets feel obliged first to decide how many of the Kabir couplets which ostensibly bear his signature are really his, and the number varies from about 400 to 800. In the case of Surdas, the figures range from about 250 to about 900. An Indian scholar, Purushottam Agarwal, speaks of an “upa-Kabir” (a sub-Kabir or deputy Kabir), and a Western scholar, John Stratton Hawley, speaks of a “Sur Tradition.” In all such cases, it was an admirer of Kabir or Surdas deferentially imitating the poet he admired and merging his ego and creative self seamlessly and tracelessly into his admired poet’s.

To return to English poetry in this audience almost wholly comprising teachers of English literature, one may look at a vital example of a work intended to be a translation which was dismissed on good authority, however, as a poor imitation. This was Alexander Pope’s translation of Homer, which proved immensely popular and sold very well among the newly emergent reading public who revered Homer on hearsay but did not know Greek. Emboldened by their acclaim, Pope had the temerity to ask one of the greatest classical scholars of his times, Dr Richard Bentley, who was Master of the Trinity College in Cambridge, how he liked the translation, only to receive the crushing reply: “It is a very pretty poem, Mr Pope, but you mustn’t call it Homer!” The moral to be drawn from this admonitory tale is that what is accepted by many monolingual readers as an excellent translation may still, by a bilingual expert’s standards, be merely a divergent adaptation. To be regarded as an adaptation is perhaps the ultimate fate of all would-be translations.

To illustrate the cultural incommensurabilities inherent in the act of translation, we may wish to look at a couple of works from the Indian languages recently translated into English to great international acclaim, through each being awarded the International Booker Prize, given for a work of fiction translated into English. The difficulties in translation begin in each of these cases with the very titles. The Hindi title of the novel by Geetanjali Shri, *Ret Samadhi*, has been translated as *Tomb of Sand*, which is perhaps even more evocative than the original title, except that it may evoke associations which are perhaps more relevant to English usage than to the work being translated.

Thus, *Tomb of Sand* may put some readers in mind of a castle of sand, which is child's play and no sooner made than destroyed. It may also remind some rather more literary readers of Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," which too is about sand being all that remains after the mightiest of buildings have crumbled over time. As if to acknowledge the difficulty of her task, the translator Daisy Rockwell has prefaced her translation with three dictionary definitions in English of the word "*samadhi*," the first two of which do not mention the word "tomb" at all and thus do not help her cause. One may mirror this paratextual device by looking in turn at the dictionary meanings of the word "tomb." Most of these do not mention "*samadhi*", but all of these offer the words "qabr" and "maqbara" -- which are widely inappropriate in the cultural context of this novel.

Heart Lamp, Banu Mushtaq's collection of short stories which won the International Booker, similarly seems to cling close to the Kannada title of this work, *Edeya Hanate*, and similarly seems to disregard two factors: one, that *Heart Lamp* sounds odd and unidiomatic in English, because unlike in the accepted formations in English like "safety lamp" or "oil lamp" or "table lamp," *Heart Lamp* seeks to be metaphorical and not just a physical description.

Such compound words as used in this translation by Deepa Bhashti are common enough in the Indian languages, where the title would readily signify a heart which burns like a lamp. By sticking close to such a local collocation, Bhashti's literal rendering here paradoxically seems to function as an adaptation for the English reader. Similar is the case with a phrase that occurs later in this book: "Her heart fell." This seems literally faithful, but for the reader of this book abroad, this will have to be aligned with an already prevalent phrase such as "her face fell" to make any sense (We may recall that translations of foreign works can qualify to be considered for the International Booker prize only if they were published in the U.K. or Ireland). If the translator with her literal faithfulness to the original will not adapt to the accepted usage in the target language, possibly to show that her decolonial nativist *heart* is in the right place, her target reader must make the necessary idiomatic adaptation for the translation to work.

Conclusion: Copyright, Survival, Articulation

Thus, one way or another, all translations seem to be compromised into functioning as adaptations, either subconsciously and willy nilly on the part of the translator, or in their liberal (or condescending) reception of the exotic by the alien reader. Either way, adaptation seems to be a necessary condition of a translated text's creation, transmission and reception. Indeed, adaptation would seem to be the natural state of all things as they exist and move forward in time. Darwin's theory of biological evolution was said by him to be based on the principle of the survival of the fittest but it can perhaps be more aptly described – and was so described by his collaborators and successors -- as survival of the species that proved the most adaptable to the changing circumstances. Many species that were fitter than human beings seem to have perished, and though demonstrably weaker, we humans survived because we adapted better.

Notwithstanding, adaptations are still regarded as lacking the proximity, the integrity, and indeed the fidelity that marks a translation and its relationship to the original text. The key term here that is used to distinguish a translation from an adaptation is that it is “faithful” to the original. On the other hand, an adaptation is often said to have taken “liberties” with the original.

But it is not often noticed that this so-called faithfulness and liberty-taking come from another context which is charged with sexist patriarchal bias. It was traditionally with reference to the sexual conduct of women that the term “faithfulness” was used, and a close synonym for this highly prized feminine virtue was chastity. Women were required to be sexually chaste before they married, and after marriage to be faithful to their husbands. There was, of course, no such requirement or expectation from men.

As if to turn the knife in the wound, another related saying became current in the twentieth century to the effect that translation is like a woman; if it is beautiful, it cannot be faithful, and if it is faithful, it cannot be beautiful. The importation of such highly discriminatory terminology and comparisons into Translation Studies reinforces some of the most reprehensible patriarchal stereotypes, and it is high time we sensitized ourselves to its obnoxious implications and abandoned

the mind-set behind this metaphorical usage. A happy consequence of the devaluation of “faithful” translation would, of course, be an increased validation of the practice of adaptation.

Finally, one may consider yet another factor, from a very different but equally exploitative context, which serves to strengthen the expectation that translations will be “faithful” to the original and stick close to it. It is the law of copyright. It supports the practice of close translation because if the translation drifts far enough away from the original, it may complicate the enforceability of the copyright law, which is meant to ensure that the original text remains the private property of the author for a specified period and continues to yield an additional income through the fee chargeable for translation rights. This would seem a laudable measure if it only supported the author, but the copyright remains in force for a long period after the death of the author, which extends to 60 years in India and 70 years in the U.K., Europe and the U.S.A. It thus continues to benefit the successors and inheritors of the author for no talent or achievement of their own but for having been born in in the right genealogical circumstances.

Though some rudimentary provisions for copyright were instituted in a few Western countries from the eighteenth century onwards, it became an internationally prevalent legal obligation only with the Berne Convention in 1886. But even now in India, this rule is observed as often in the breach as it is in observance. Many publishers, especially in the Indian languages, are loath to pay royalties to their authors even during their life-time, and few translators of Indian or foreign literary works into Indian languages even think of going to the trouble – and expense – of obtaining copyright permission. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, they may be harking back to the good old days when literature was called *sahitya* and was a collective and freely participatory activity, as we saw above in the cases of Kabir and Surdas.^[1]

The notion of translation being a strictly controlled and regulated activity is thus supported by a deeply prejudiced patriarchal metaphor of fidelity on the one hand, and a brazenly capitalist commercial provision of copyright on the other hand which restricts the free circulation of an author’s work for decades after his life-span. Adaptation, in contrast, is a freer exercise, imaginatively

responsive to the original text and responsible to it, but also imitative of the creative practice that produces what are called original texts. There would, then seem to be every reason in the world for adopting Adaptation as the mainstream mode for transmitting literary texts to readers in other languages.

To the various arguments and considerations put forward above, one may in conclusion add one more. Just as human survival is necessarily a matter of adaptability, so is all human articulation through speech. We formulate something to say in our minds but the way it actually comes out in speech is not quite that but at best a close approximation of it. It all depends on our own expressive capability, the suitability of the occasion, and the potential receptivity of the person being addressed. All speech is thus an expedient adaptation of the abstract notion of what we set out to say. As the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad “Faiz” put it:

Dil se to har mua'mala, kar ke chale the saaf ham

Kahne men unke saamne, baat badal badal gayi.

In a rough translation – or ready adaptation -- this means:

I had sorted it all out in the privacy of my heart

But when I had to say it to her, it changed and changed again.

Something similar has happened to the present lecture too – inevitably.

Thank you.^[2]

Notes

1. While there are conscientious observers of copyright law, their efforts do not always meet with felicitous outcomes. In the 1980s, I wrote to King's College, Cambridge, seeking permission to translate E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* into Hindi, the copyright being held by the College. I received instead a curt response suggesting that I translate one of Forster's short stories—one unrelated to India. At the time, I had already earned a PhD from Britain on Virginia Woolf, a close friend of Forster, and had published an article in a birth-centenary volume honouring Forster (Macmillan, London, 1979). Ironically, I later

discovered that a professor of Hindi at the University of Allahabad had translated *A Passage to India* into Hindi as early as 1947—the year of India’s independence—without either Forster or King’s College, Cambridge, being any the wiser or wealthier. (Forster, incidentally, had predicted that India might not attain freedom for another five hundred years.)

2. This lecture was originally delivered as an unscripted talk and has been revised—or adapted—into its present form from a transcript kindly provided by Professor Manju Jaidka.

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