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# Comparative Literature and Translation: The Changing Contours of Relationship

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Peter Brooks opens his essay “Must We Apologize?” with rather an existential quandary of comparatists: Although I hold a Ph.D in Comparative literature, I have never been sure I deserved it, since I’ve never been sure what the field, or the discipline, is and never sure that I could really claim to be teaching it or working in it.<sup>1</sup>

He discusses at length about the “undisciplined discipline” of Comparative Literature and what exactly do we mean by ‘Comparative’ Literature. According to him we “don’t *compare* anything. [We] simply worked in more than one literature, studying literature without regard to national boundaries and definitions.” Charles Bernheimer in “The Anxieties of Comparison” avers that Brooks’ quandary is not unwarranted and he himself admits that “Comparative literature is anxiogenic”.

Comparative Literature with its origin in the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup> is in the process of transformation informed largely by globalization with its purported ‘international integration’ and ‘multiculturalism’ which approves a society with greater permissiveness where people could “express their own identity in the manner they see fit.”<sup>3</sup> These rather clashing phenomena address the questions of the relevance of Comparative literature and its relationship with translation in discrete ways. This paper attempts to probe the changing contours of the relationship between Comparative literature and translation in both global and Indian contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brooks, “Must We Apologize?” *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer. (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995) p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> “What was Comparative Literature?” from the website of Department of Comparative Literature, University of Wisconsin-Madison <http://complit.lss.wisc.edu/?q=node/3>

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Bloor, Chapter Ten, “Multiculturalism”, *The Definitive Guide to Political Ideologies* cited in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiculturalism#cite\\_note-Bloor2010-2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiculturalism#cite_note-Bloor2010-2)

## I

It has been argued that translation is “one of the traditional areas of comparatism”,<sup>4</sup> while the reverse has also been contended mainly by Susan Bassnett:

The field of Comparative Literature has always claimed the studies on translation as a subfield, but now, when the last ones are establishing themselves, for their part, firmly as a discipline based on the intellectual study, offering as well a methodology of a certain rigor, both in connection with the theoretical work and with the descriptive one, the moment has come in which comparative literature has not such an appearance to be a discipline of its own, but rather to constitute a branch of something else.<sup>5</sup>

As Santiago Venturini observes what is important to underline is the existence of this consolidated link between the two disciplines.<sup>6</sup>

An appraisal of the three reports (First or Levin Report, 1965, Second or Greene Report, 1975 and Bernheimer Report, 1993) submitted to American Comparative Literature Association (ALA) could reveal the trajectory of transformation in the perspectives of the comparatists towards the role of translation in the discipline of Comparative literature. In his report, Levin states that “courses and programs in Comparative Literature are not designed to compete with those in other departments of language and literatures, but rather to augment and bridge them.”<sup>7</sup> He goes on to say that “Comparative Literature must always be embodied in a kind of interdepartment.”<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding this gesture of amity towards other

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<sup>4</sup> Cited by Santiago Venturini in “Comparative Literature and Translation: Two Argentinian Versions of the Baudelairean Spleen”, 452<sup>0</sup>F. *Electronic Journal of Theory Literature and Comparative Literature* <http://www.452f.com/index.php/en/santiago-venturini.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> First or Levin Report, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

departments/disciplines, with hindsight we could note that the notion of ‘internationalism’ professed in the report was still hidebound.

It is an exceptional undergraduate who can be expected to read works from more than one or two foreign languages in the original, albeit we should do as much as we can to cultivate such exceptions. Yet is it too much to expect that the teacher of literature, while not professing to be an expert in everything he teaches, should have some access to all the original languages involved? We need not be too much concerned with the problem of foreign literature in translation, if we distinguish clearly between such courses and courses in Comparative Literature; and if the latter courses include a substantial proportion of work with the originals, it would be unduly puristic to exclude some reading from more remote languages in translation.<sup>9</sup>

The Second or Greene Report (1975) finds what he feels as “the most disturbing recent trend” at the undergraduate level which is “the association of Comparative Literature with literature in translation.” The Report further explains the issue:

The college lecturer who is truly a Comparatist should at the very least have read the text he is teaching in the original, and should use this experience to advantage in the classroom. He should also draw on the insights of those members of the class who are able to dispense with translations. Indeed, by his frequent references to the original, he should make the remaining students aware of the incompleteness of their own reading experience.<sup>10</sup>

The Greene Report finds the solution to this issue in the First Report and also quotes from the latter:

Whenever possible, majors in Comparative Literature should be separated for instructional purposes from students who read exclusively in translation. When such separation is not possible,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Second or Greene Report, 1975.

measures should be taken to insure reading in original texts by majors in Comparative Literature.<sup>11</sup>

The Third or Bernheimer Report, 1993 is at loggerheads with both the Levin and Greene Report due to its identifying a hegemony of European national literatures in the ‘internationalist notions’ of the earlier reports:

This...illustrates the extent to which the traditional internationalist notion of Comparative Literature paradoxically sustains the dominance of a few European national literatures. Europe is the home of the canonical originals, the proper object of comparative study; so-called “remote” cultures are peripheral to the discipline and thence can be studied in translation.<sup>12</sup>

Bernheimer report recommends a more flexible approach towards the position of translation in the discipline of Comparative Literature:

While the necessity and unique benefits of a deep knowledge of foreign languages must continue to be stressed, the old hostilities toward translation should be mitigated. In fact, translation can well be seen as a paradigm for larger problems of understanding and interpretation across different discursive traditions. Comparative Literature, it could be said, aims to explain both what is lost and what is gained in translations between the distinct value systems of different cultures, media, disciplines and institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Bernheimer extends this perspective<sup>14</sup> and notes:

Comparative Literature should play an active role in furthering the multicultural recontextualization of Anglo-American and European perspectives. This does not mean abandoning those perspectives but

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in the Second or Greene Report, 1975.

<sup>12</sup> Bernheimer Report, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Bernheimer, however, also makes it clear that “whenever they have knowledge of the original language, teachers in Comparative Literature courses should refer frequently to the original text of a work they assign in translation. Moreover, they should make discussion of the theory and practice of translation an integral part of these courses.”

rather questioning and resisting their dominance... It may be better, for instance, to teach a work in translation, even if you don't have access to the original language than to neglect marginal voices because of their mediated transmission.<sup>15</sup>

While tracing the trajectories of the comparatists' thoughts on translation, Gayatri Spivak's remark that "The verbal text is jealous of its linguistic signature but impatient of national identity. Translation flourishes by virtue of that paradox"<sup>16</sup> could perhaps be recalled. The "original" text's yearning to protect its "linguistic signature" could be permanently attained only at the peril of restraining itself within its "national identity". This might also be the drift of Allen Tate's 'ambivalent' declaration, "translation is forever impossible and forever necessary."<sup>17</sup>

## II

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Seventh Edition) gives three definitions of the word 'translation':

1. the process of changing something that is written or spoken into another language
2. text or work that has been changed from one language to another
3. the process of changing something into a different form

Among these definitions of 'translation', the third definition has been attached particular significance in the contemporary 'digital' world. That's why Erin Schlumpf, drawing on Werner Wolf's declaration that the humanities and the study of literature have witnessed the 'intermedial turn', notes that "a written, critical response to film translates that work's material into a printed one".<sup>18</sup> However, the predominant notion of translation is still weighted towards interliterary translations.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gayatri Spivak, Chapter I, "Crossing Borders", *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p.9.

<sup>17</sup> Cited by K. Satichandan in "The State of Translation". *Indian Literature Positions and Propositions* (Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999) p. 171.

<sup>18</sup> Erin Schlumpf "Intermediality, Translation, Comparative Literature, and World Literature" CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 13.3 (2011): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/5>>

India with its multilingualism has always depended on translations. K. Satchidanandan in his brilliant essay “The State of Translation” meticulously teases out the genealogy and transformations of translation in India. He points out:

In India we keep translating every moment of our active life: we are always bilingual if not multi-lingual, and often mix languages almost unconsciously in our everyday speech.<sup>19</sup>

Any discussion of the activity of translation seems to be inevitably tied up with the question of ‘fidelity’ or faithfulness to the “original”. Addressing this question Bijay Kumar Das identifies “sexualization of the translation terminology” and cites Lori Chamberlain who points out that it appears:

...perhaps most familiarly in the tag ‘les belles infideles’ like women, the adage goes, translations should be either beautiful or faithful. The tag is made possible both by the rhyme in French and by the fact the word ‘traduction’ is a feminine one, thus making ‘les beaux infideles’ impossible. This tag owns its longevity...to more than phonetic similarity; what gives it the appearance of truth is that it has captured a cultural complicity between the issues of fidelity in translation and marriage....[This attitude of the relationship between translation and the original] mimics the patrilineal kinship system where paternity – not maternity – legitimizes an offspring.<sup>20</sup>

K. Satchidanandan observes that the Indian context tells quite a different story. He puts it well when he declares that our literature (too) is founded on translations. Although it’s after 1980s that the Western thinkers like Derrida began to treat translations on an equal footing with its original, it has been held the same in India since ancient times. K. Satchidanandan instantiates this point by referring to the fact that the *Ramayana* written in different Indian languages were not taken to be neither translations nor

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<sup>19</sup> K. Satchidanandan in “The State of Translation”. *Indian Literature Positions and Propositions* (Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999) p. 172.

<sup>20</sup> Bijay Kumar Das, Chapter twelve, “Comparative Literature and Translation Studies: A Correlation”, *A Handbook of Translation Studies* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2008) pp. 127-128.

adaptations, but original works as they were “brilliant manifestations of the genius of the respective languages”.<sup>21</sup> He goes on to argue how the very idea of an ‘original’ text is foreign to us because of our strong oral traditions that had only perpetually changing texts:

Ours is traditionally a ‘translating consciousness’ unlike the monolingual literary cultures of Europe that are too self-conscious of the act. Again, we have never considered deviations from the original as sin, on the other hand we have admired the imaginative freedom of different translators of Ramayana whose difference are even more important than their commonalities since that was what established them as original poets in their languages and often the very founders of the language themselves. The West was always worried about the authenticity of the translation.<sup>22</sup>

Bijay Kumar Das also takes up the same instance of the translations of our epics *Mahabharatha* and *Ramayana* into our regional languages to state that:

It is through translation we transform one literature into another and the more we translate, the more we get the opportunity of comparing different literary texts.<sup>23</sup>

The implications of the activity of translation in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country like India are diverse. Using certain languages as “filter languages” for translations entails the question of power. When a work in an Indian language is translated into English, to quote K. Satchidanandan again, it “entails the representation of a regional culture for a still more powerful international culture; when made available outside India, it involves representing a national culture which today unfortunately means Western culture...The practice of translation in postcolonial

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<sup>21</sup> K. Satchidanandan in “The State of Translation”. *Indian Literature Positions and Propositions* (Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999) p. 172.

<sup>22</sup> K. Satchidanandan in “The State of Translation”. *Indian Literature Positions and Propositions* (Delhi: Pencraft International, 1999) p. 175.

<sup>23</sup> Bijay Kumar Das, Chapter twelve, “Comparative Literature and Translation Studies: A Correlation”, *A Handbook of Translation Studies* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2008) p. 129.

contexts has given form not only to discourses of domination, but also of resistance.”

### III

The role of translation in the development of national cultures is often overlooked. Renaissance, for instance, was a great period of translation activity in England.<sup>24</sup> As Susan Bassnett observes:

Reading Chaucer we come across Boccaccio, we can trace Shakespeare’s source materials through Latin, French, Spanish and Italian, ...[we can] consider how many English novelists learned from the great nineteenth century Russian writers (in translation, of course)...<sup>25</sup>

Although André Lefevere in his “Translation and Comparative Literature: The Search for the Center” affirms that “Translations need to be made, but translations also need to be studied” his answer for the question “Should “translation studies” constitute itself as a new, independent discipline” is “it should not”. One of the reasons he gives for this is:

...if you stay with texts and their translations only, without paying much attention to the part translations play in the evolution of a literature, or in the way one literature influences another, there does not appear to be much of another direction to go in.<sup>26</sup>

He also warns us about that while the “great books” belonging to the “canon” of “world literature” are increasingly taught in translation, “they are taught in excerpts usually collected in mammoth anthologies”.<sup>27</sup> He

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<sup>24</sup> Cited from Susan Bassnett’s *Comparative Literature* by Bijay Kumar Das, Chapter twelve, “Comparative Literature and Translation Studies: A Correlation”, *A Handbook of Translation Studies* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2008) p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Bassnett, “Introduction: What is Comparative Literature Today?” *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) pp. 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> André Lefevere, “Translation and Comparative Literature: The Search for the Center”, <http://www.erudit.org/revue/TTR/1991/v4/n1/037086ar.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

urges that the power wielded by this “packaging” needs to be analyzed because for example “When many of the students whose training in literature ends after they have taken their last required “world literature” course in their first year at university refer to “Goethe,” they most probably have in mind five or six poems in translation, supplemented by Faust's opening monologue in the play of that name.”<sup>28</sup>

Today no one gauges a translation as a mere “imitation” of the original. It is but “a compound act of reading and writing” simultaneously.<sup>29</sup> As Susan Bassnett noted “no study of comparative literature can take place without regard to translation.”<sup>30</sup> Acknowledging the inherent relationship between Comparative literature and translation, it is of necessity that we build a credible archive of Indian literature in translation by engaging ourselves in extensive translation activity that Comparative Literature in India could draw from.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Bijay Kumar Das, Chapter twelve, “Comparative Literature and Translation Studies: A Correlation” , *A Handbook of Translation Studies* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2008) p. 133.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.133.

<sup>31</sup> I'm indebted to the “Editor’s note” of *Sahitya* (A Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India), February 2011 for this point.

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