## *FROM POLITICS OF TRANSLATION TO CULTURAL POLITICS*

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***Abstract****: My project studies the concept of translation in post-colonial literary discourse as theorized by Homi Bhabha, Tejaswini Niranjana and Gayatri Spivak. I take up the site of translation as practice that shapes the relations of power as well as one's identity. To exemplify the performative nature of translation I introduce short episodes from the reception of Shakespeare in Indian context as great literary transformation as well as the reception of Ibsen's* A Doll House *as translation of the "new woman" into 1920s Chinese society.*
***Keywords*****:** *Translation, Post-structuralism, Post-colonialism.*

One of the most influential post-structuralist ideas proposes the replacement of the Western canon with the metaphor of the library which dissolves hierarchies. This suggestion is closer to the point of view, recently adopted in the field of post-colonial literary studies that the canon is not a body of texts *per se* but a set of reading practices. Although the Canon implies the very idea of immortality and societal memory, the process of literary canonization remains essentially open. But it is not a simple annexation in turn: in Bloom's view it is a textual struggle for survival, a choice by dominant groups, institutions, or critical traditions. As long as the issue is the mortality or immortality of literary works, the Western canon is defined in the terms of the struggle between texts - inside the reader, the classroom or within a society.

What such a method of practical criticism, i.e. to trace the imaginative anxieties in literary formation, brings to post-colonial theory is a new mode of reading beyond the history of ideas or literary history. Bearing out post-structuralist idea of misprision as a reading method that transforms an existing knowledge into revisionary insight post-colonial literary theory reaches a point of conjuncture with post-structuralism. As Leela Gandhi points out, post-colonial criticism tries to present the colonial encounter as a "textual contest", "bibliographic battle, between oppressive and subversive books" (Gandhi, 1998). In her analysis Gandhi goes further to suggest a resemblance between Harold Bloom's speculations on oedipal struggle into literary theory and the post-colonial debate of politico-literary formations. The young poet (ephebe) rebels against the influence of his literary precursors which takes the form of deliberate and creative misprision. Under the auspices of incomprehension the young poet swerves in a new direction which, in Gandhi's words, illustrates the "inability to read as required" in post-colonial context.

Far from being a reduction of the world to a book, post-colonial discourse is a body of texts and is best conceived of as a reading practice. My main objective will be, ***first***, to present the strong impact post-structuralism made on post-colonial literary discourse; ***second***, to comment on the idea that translation is a form of reading practice against the colonial discourse; and ***finally***, to articulate some of these practices through two alternative readings in the reconstitution of two canonical texts.



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In beginning to describe the post-colonial I refer to its literary usages in order to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization. Starting with the period around the 70s, the post-structuralist influence on post-colonial literary discourse shows a keen interest in colonial discursive power and its oppositional form of "reading practice". According to the definition of Aschroft et al. post-colonial reading is a way of reading and re-reading texts "to draw deliberate attention to the profound and inescapable effects of colonization on literary production" (Aschroft et al., 1998). It is also a form of "deconstructive reading" which demonstrates a text's underlying contradictions and absences. While Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, from the late 70s to the early 80s, had proposed to re-think the nature of reading itself, the English studies were seen as unable to account for the production of colonial subjects (Gikandi, 2006). According to Homi Bhabha the history of colonialism takes the subject as a knowable, monolithic entity which has been re-thought by post-structuralist theory in its critique of representation. Moreover, in Bhabha's œuvres "post-colonial" ceases to be a historical or periodizing term but a critique of "cultural difference", "cultural representation" or "social authority" where Derrida's key term "difference" constitutes "a form of theoretical knowledge" (Bhabha, 1994). For post-colonial critics Derrida's major contribution to the field of post-colonial literary studies consists in its critique of reality and representation as something "out there" and transparent. Such unproblematic notion of reality forms the basis of Western metaphysics along with notions like "presence", "truth", "Eurocentricity", "man" and original. Today the notion of translation is seen as critique of this metaphysical model beyond the narrow definition of "faithfulness", "secondary communication" or "source language equivalence".

Since, it became clear that the practice of subjection in the colonial conquest resides not only in state apparatus but also in discourse of philosophy, philology or history, the colonial subject is brought into being within multiple sites. The problem of translation is seen by post-colonial critics as an important site for re-examining the questions of power and representation. Following Lawson and Tiffin the post-colonial is concerned with the power that operates in textuality and "its resistance, then…takes place in…the domain of textuality, in…motivated acts of reading" (Lawson and Tiffin, 1994: 10). But the European philosophical discourse is not only a matrix that inscribes the practice of translation in the heart of colonial domination. In Niranjana's suggestive remark, translation *itself* produces a "conceptual economy" into Western thinking to function as a "philosopheme".

Both Bhabha and Niranjana take the site of translation as a useful strategy for grasping the colonial domination in creating transparent texts and subjects and break with the classical dichotomy fidelity-betrayal that assumes an unproblematic notion of representation. Most importantly, the act of translation in the field of post-colonial literary studies goes beyond its narrowing definition as interlingual process to designate an entire problematique. In 1990 André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett have already pointed to the "cultural turn" in translation studies. For 1990 is the time of the debate between globalization and nationalisms with its shift from the notion of equivalence to the questions of power relations in textual production. Here I refer to the collaborative approach between Translation and Cultural Studies that might be defined literary and institutionally. Institutionally and literary their target is the body of texts constituting the Western canon which most "distinctive" feature is that its authors were indubitably white, European and male (WEM). Although contemporary theorists are often tempted



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to add the adjective “dead” to this description (DWEM) I shall attempt to show along with Bloom that they are not in order ***to stipulate that post-colonial translation is not a simple break with the past but a radical re-writing of it***.

I propose to address the issue of this particular theoretical practice which consists in examining the features of substantial texts as they function within a society in the terms of translational practice (my usage of it is not incompatible with Lefever’s). This practice integrates the actual activity of translating into itself and accounts for its political and social implications that can be in use in literary teaching. Most importantly, it may be examined as one of the strategies culture devise for dealing with the Symbolic Other, i.e. the Imperial language in which the colonial subject has been brought into being (Aschcroft et al., 1998).

The drive to study the other employs classical notions of representation and reality and is criticized by contemporary post-colonial theory showing the way by which imperial discourse creates the colonized. Asking questions like “How the text is used and for what" contemporary criticism focuses on the way translation manifests history and on language as process of meaning construction. Because the speculations over translation could be found mostly in the form of prefaces, they could be regarded as the product of thinking about the translational process within a given society. The translation of Shakespeare began with the establishment of the English education through which he became a cultural icon for the elite. 1835 declare the founding of many schools for the Indians as well as the establishment of English as the official language of the colonial state. However, the real aim wasn’t to make bilingual the entire Indian population. Rather, “to form…a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste” (Macaulay, quoted by Niranjana, 1992: 30) whose secret ambition is to become more English than Hindus. In this context, the upper English-educated class did not require any translation of Shakespeare and translation was needed for the lower reading public (Kumar Das, 2005). As the English-educated Indian class was “the most zealous guardian of Shakespeare’s language” (Kumar Das, 2005) and ideas it is easy to see the classical Western metaphysical model which attributes to translation subordinate and referential function. Trapped in the Western idea of representation the notion of translation becomes a sign for one’s inferior status. As Kumar Das puts it - the most influential part of Indian upper class never read Shakespeare in translation given the fact that English was the language of political and cultural authority.

The second stage of Shakespeare’s reception in India is when his œuvres enter for translation into Indian languages but also into other artistic codes. This moment indicates Shakespeare's domestication which may be regarded as a social exercise, closely connected with the questions of caste, gender, conventions and social change. Still, the role of translation is highly influenced by the Western understanding of the act of translating as "carrying across" a certain meaning or idea. But sometimes, this process of "carrying across" foreign ideas and representations threats the local modes of existence which attributes to translation a highly “surveilling” mode of existence. The Bengali poet Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, in his translation of *Romeo and Juliet* omits the line "I will kiss thy lips" (quoted by Kumar Das, 2005) as extremely offensive because of the special place of marriage in Indian society where premarital love is a serious act against the social norm. In Niranjana's sense, such concrete translational decisions cover concrete political implications: far from being innocent literary



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question, the correction of the original implies deeper political act keeping the existing social codes out of reach.

The domesticated Shakespeare or Shakespeare in its Indian incarnations presents a special case of translating, namely adaptation. Although the concept of adaptation is marked by number of unclear points it is generally contrasted to the concept of equivalence. Susan Bassnett argues that the performability in the context of multicultural theater places translator in the liminal space between cultures. For "Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication" (Bhabha, 1994: 228), Indian adaptations in the form of story changes and indianization of characters' names, aim at the unveiling of Shakespearian texts as both readable and stageable. For instance, Kumar Das points at *The Merchant of Venice* as the most popular of all Shakespeare plays in India because of the easy replacement of the main character Shylock by Indian moneylenders. However, a problem arises. Indian context has no equivalent of the racial hostility between Christians and Jews, which forced the Indian translator to find a substitute. Thus, the paragraph:

> he has always laughed at my loss, criticized my gain, scorned my community, hindered my business, cooled my friends and warmed my enemies; and why this? Only because I am a Jew = Only because I am a *Jain*
>
> (Quoted by Kumar Das, 2005:59)

is famous with its translation of the leading play's motif into another context. Although this particular substitute was found weak, the number of similar translation decisions tried to capture text's performability in order to show that "the hegemony of the English text…can be challenged adequately only through performance" (Kumar Das, 2005:68).

In his firm analysis Harold Bloom places Shakespeare at the center of the Western canon but today there is a shift from Shakespeare's high literary virtues to a Shakespeare utilized as a European center of power in order to oppose the legitimate cultural aspiration of various minorities. The apparent European identity of post-colonial discourse is associated with its post-structuralist roots but it was argued that in fact post-structuralism has been developed as an anti-Western strategy. In Robert Young's view the historical roots of post-structuralism may be found not in the European social and academic crisis from 1968, but ten years earlier in the Algerian struggle against French domination. Introducing post-structuralism into the field of post-colonialism he claims that:

> "the structure to which [poststructuralism] … is 'post' is the colonial apparatus, the imperial machine…the poststucturalist deconstruction of the idea of totality was born out of the experience and the forms of resistance to, the totalizing regimes of the late colonial state…"
>
> (Young quoted by Parry, 2006:78)

Post-structuralist theory arises as a reaction against European tradition of humanism and thus assures to post-colonial discourse a radical break with this tradition. Always in the terms of the "anxiety of influence" over their post-structuralist precursors post-colonial critics define language and literature as shaping one's identity. In my opinion, this may characterize the nature of a shift initiated by Spivak in post-structuralist discourse, when she considers language as production of (gendered) agency. In a text called "The Politics of Translation" written in 1992 Spivak points at the concept of translation as a



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specific linguistic agency. Through the work of language, one is making sense of himself and that is what produces identity. But since there is a gap between peoples' identities language is called to bridge it within the framework of translation. Although earlier (in "Feminism and Critical Theory") Spivak has suggested to examine the problem of human discourse in the play of language – world – consciousness, where the category of language embraces the others, this essay travels from the notion of language to the production of an agent (translator) who acts also "around" language, "beside" language precisely like an actor interprets a script.

The constitution of agency attending to the specificity of the translated language is indebted to post-structuralism in several aspects but I read it especially in the fusion between the language of literature and the language of philosophy. Firstly, when Spivak defines "translation-as-reading" she puts aside the classical reduction of translation to syntax, synonym or lexical nuance. Her next step is to stress on the concept of reading which depends on the rhetorical nature of language opposed to its logical systematicity. The victory of the rhetorical dimension of language over logic has been examined by Paul de Man in the domain of literature as a powerful strategy against the complicity between ideology and philosophy (De Man, 1997). This complicity is most evident when a philosophical text claims to possess a natural vocabulary like in Hegel where Indians or women are seen as "naturally" incapable of action and individuality. Niranjana reads De Man's preoccupation with the rhetoric of representation as warning towards post-colonial critics for the rhetorical structures in hegemonic discourses. Since post-structuralism considers literature as a kind of discourse beyond the final truth of a situation, post-colonial critics like Spivak or Niranjana make a move forward to suggest that translation acts the same way.

In that case the process of women writing in 1920s Chinese society, for example, may be seen as a form of cultural translation against Hegel's Western centricity. For instance, Hegel's denial of agency to the people of India and China attributes them the role of subjects to Europeans (Niranjana, 1992). Similarly, for Hegel women are not self-conscious individuals; in comparison to men they are incapable of education and artistic or intellectual work:

> "Women may be well educated, but they are not made for the higher sciences…Women may have insights, taste and delicacy, but they do not possess the ideal. The difference between man and woman is the difference between animal and plant…"
>
> (Hegel, 1991:166)

Toril Moi from feminist and Bao Yue from post-colonial positions read *A Doll House* against Hegel's theory which defines women only in generic terms: as mother, daughter, wife. According to Yue, after its translation into Chinese in a special issue of the May Forth Journal *New Youth* from 1918, *Nora* becomes a symbol for the struggling for emancipation. It was argued that without broader social change to support women's emancipation Nora's gesture would remain purely individualistic.

From feminist perspective Nora's claim that she is "first and foremost a human being" is refusal to be seen only as a wife and mother. Nora ends by discovering that she too is individual who has to participate actively in the society she lives: "I can't be satisfied anymore with what most people say and what's written in the books" (quoted by Moi, 2006:246). Finally, in Moi's analysis Nora leaves her children precisely because she is not ready to educate them as independent individuals. Thus as for Nora



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education is the prerequisite for access to universal, i.e. to art, learning and politics, marriage and motherhood are incompatible with women's existence as individuals and citizens. While education remained privilege of the upper Chinese class, transforming the young girls into emancipated women in resemblance to their Western protagonists, lower class women were educated as wives and mothers, guardians of the national identity. May Forth reformers frequently use the word "Ibsenism" to express their ideological revolt (Yue, 2000) under the guise of self-rediscovering as Ibsen's most distinctive feature of playwriting. Thus, the category of "new woman" enters the debates on cultural progress as part of the China's national building project and provokes a keen interest in women literature.

***Conclusion***

Ibsen's *Nora* reveals the complicity between ideology and philosophy against the Hegelian text tracing women's historical transition from family members to individuals and citizens. Similarly, Shakespeare in Indian context performs a strong critique of reality and representation as something immediately present and transparent. Both translations of these canonical texts resist the confusion of linguistic with natural reality and thus oppose the hegemonic West from within. Most importantly they both claim to be ***a literary work***, i.e. a work worth teaching in resemblance to their canonical doubles. If the Western Canon is still indissoluble from reading and pedagogy its translation into post-colonial context has to be of use in literary teaching. The act of translation implies the question of its pedagogical commitment to teach not a language of criticism but "language of influence", a dark ground where pure origin has already been contaminated.

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