

From Anantajeevanam to Awakened Soil: An Instance of Self-Translation

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Abstract

This paper takes Anantajeevanam and its English translation Awakened Soil, a novel written and translated by Sahitya Akademi Award winner Kolakaluri Enoch, as a unique instance of 'self-translation'. The paper takes in to consideration the various issues related to self-translation and the implications of such a process. One of the primary enabling factors of self-translation is the autonomy with which the author can take decisions about the means and modes of translation. While keeping this in mind, the paper will analyse the various strategies undertaken by the author-translator Kolakaluri, studying in the process the structures of narration and the language deployed. In the process, this paper engages with commercial aspects of translation and its relationship to the 'original', especially in the conditions of the author translating his own work.

Keywords: Linguistic and Extra Linguistic, Seminal text, Dalit literature, Analysis, Self-translation

Introduction

This paper takes Anantajeevanam and its English translation Awakened Soil, a novel written and translated by Sahitya Akademi Award winner Kolakaluri Enoch, as a unique instance of 'self-translation'. The paper takes in to consideration the various issues related to self-translation and the implications of such a process. One of the primary enabling factors of self-translation is the autonomy with which the author can take decisions about the means and modes of translation. While keeping this in mind, the paper will analyse the various strategies undertaken by the author-translator Kolakaluri, studying in the process the structures of narration and the language deployed. In the process, this paper engages with commercial aspects of translation and its relationship to the 'original', especially in the conditions of the author translating his own work.

The translated text, contains an introductory note by the author and his decision to translation and the ways in which it has afforded him freedom of interpretation and language, which may have otherwise been a more extended process if an external translator was involved. He also writes

perfunctorily on how he has chosen to explain certain terminology for better communication and expression to an English readership and instances in which he has retained the original terminology, as it exists in Telugu. Before we directly engage with different instances in the translated text, where it is evident that explanatory strategies have been used by the author, and in other places where he chooses to retain the original, we will discuss a few general questions in relation to self-translation.

One of the things that we need to understand as scholars of translation is how the process does not involve only a communication of language but also that of social, historical and cultural contexts. I have mentioned earlier that many of us who are able to read both the source and the target text often complain that the translated text is not able to capture the true essence of the meanings generated in the source text. Such an understanding is largely part of a commercial-industrial logic where a text and its meanings are expected to circulate and be both legible and profitable in multiple contexts of culture and marketability. Most of us read a translated text to access the content and in some ways the form of the 'original'. However, one element is

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clear that to be able to understand or access the 'original', one has to be not only proficient in the language but the cultural specificity within which a text is produced and the historical and social elements that an author deploys to produce her text. Depending on the variabilities of familiarity and proficiency there are innumerable ways in which readers engage with literary writings. Therefore, for those who are not familiar with the language or the cultural linkages, the expectation to be able to 'read' the original through another language is rather misplaced.

This paper then attempts to establish that a work of translation has to necessarily be understood as an autonomous work that can only to a limited extent be able to convey the content and structure of the 'original'. This issue needs to be explicated with a specific example from the novel in question. For instance, Anantajeevanam deploys the issue of caste that has historically been a problem specific to Indian history and society. Even within the Indian social context, caste and untouchability have been deployed and formulated differently across the country. Dalit communities are not homogeneously or similarly identified in Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh or in any of the North Indian states. Enoch writes about characters from the Madiga sub-caste, whose specific history of oppression and struggle may not be familiar to people from other states. Therefore, when he writes the stories of Madiga people in English without further annotating their social, cultural and historical location, readers will only have a limited understanding and identification of what or who he is talking about. And this is specifically in the case of Indian readers, who still through local and regional media may have some knowledge of the historical specificities of caste. We should therefore try to imagine the extent of unfamiliarity through which a non-Indian, globally located readership will access the narrative themes and topics of a translated text. Also, the specific example that we have discussed only takes in to account the issue of thematic specificities. Elements of style, aesthetic disposition etc. are also aspects of literary works that readers need to be familiar with. Many of these things cannot be conveyed through translation. How will then non-Indian readers engage with the questions of power and social relationships and the ways in which they specifically manifest through inter-caste dynamics? Readers of the translated text will be able to draw parallels with their own experiences and cultural contexts but will not necessarily be able to grasp the sensitivity of the issues depicted. This paper has therefore made some general explorations towards studying the translated text as an autonomous work of literature but also one that involves significant skills that negotiate with the 'original'.

In the following sections, this paper cites sections from Enoch's work and studies the ways in which the author chooses certain strategies of translation, for this is an

instance of self-translation. Before engaging with specific references, we would explore some of the general strategies of translation deployed by Enoch and their implications. He makes it clear in the translator's note that his translation is not only literal but is also meant to engage the visual imagination of the reader. He explains that words and descriptions in the original have both literal and metaphorical significance. In doing so he also draws attention to the English language in which he translates the 'original', where it is not possible for him to deploy the same kind of metaphorical strategies as is in the case of his mother language i.e. Telugu. Enoch chooses to translate certain locally specific terms through the methodology of definition and description. In some instances, he chooses to elaborate on contexts and meanings. In other instances, he chooses to retain Telugu words as it is without further explication. There may be a couple of reasons for this. One may be the difficulty of translation and the other may be informed by a deliberate choice to retain the 'essence' of the 'origin'. Enoch also does something that often third party translators are not able to do i.e. directly refer to the relationship between the work and the author, or what the work means to the author. In one way, the translation therefore also functions as a kind of afterthought to the 'original', where the author as well as the translator have the occasion to look back, interpret and transmit, each according to their locations. The work of translation is therefore a work of interpretation as well. In most cases, translations and originals do not appear in the market at the same time, until or unless the work belongs to a popular author and a relatively big publishing house is involved. The particular instance of self-translation offers certain freedoms to the author. However, these freedoms themselves can become limitations on the creative potentials of the translation as a literary text on its own. For instance, the author, who is now also a translator can choose to make certain alterations to the plot and the narrative. These choices maybe determined by several factors, and the specificity of the new language may be one of them. For the author-translator, the work of translation often functions as an afterthought. In the case of adaptations, especially to a different form or even genre, the author or the adaptor has to make 'alterations' according to the specificities of the form being adapted to. Similarly, the language that a text is being altered to presents its own kinds of norms that the author-translator will have to take in to account during the process of translation. We also have to remember that self-translations are necessarily about the linguistic prowess and proficiency of the author-translator. When we read *Awakened Soil*, it gives us a sense of the extent to which Enoch can comfortably express himself and craft his narrative in two different languages. It also shows his understanding of what an English readership expects as he is able to formulate the structure and content of the translation accordingly. *Awakened Soil* is replete with historical details and descriptions specific to the town

of Anantapur. In any literary work, descriptions play an important role. They enable the reader to imagine the mis-en-scene within which the narrative is taking place. They complicate the emotional dimensions of the characters. Descriptions are a means through which historical, social, political and cultural contexts are constructed for the reader. In the specific instance of translations, descriptions have an additional explicatory function. While in the 'original', certain elements may not require descriptions or explanations, because readers will already be expected to be familiar with some of these things. Descriptions in translations may have the function of explanation. Nevertheless, they become part of the literary quality of a given text.

In the following sections, this chapter will refer to specific sections of the novel *Awakened Soil* and study the ways in which the author has deployed certain strategies of translation. Before the start of the novel, he includes a translator's note where he briefly explains certain translation strategies he has had to necessarily deploy. In the section quoted below he talks about the meanings he wishes his novel, including its title to signify, especially for his new readership, those that will read *Anantajeevanam* as *Awakened Soil* in English.

Enoch Writes

I would be pleased, if you the "Anantajeevanam" means one, the life of 'Anantapur' and two, the endless journey of life. I would also be glad if you visualize it to be a reference to abundant water in Anantapur.⁽⁴⁾

Here, Enoch directly addresses his readers with his intent. It is as if he speaks to them about the desires and thoughts that have gone into the writing of *Anantajeevanam* and the translation *Awakened Soil*. He sets the premise of some of the themes that the novel will deal with; firstly, that it would be about the life of Anantapur and secondly, that it would be about life itself and how it progresses in a cyclical fashion through birth and death, regeneration and decay, youth and age etc. He also wants his readers to think about the abundance of water that appears in Anantapur when the floods happen. The translated title, "*Awakened Soil*" clearly is not able to contain the rich signification that Enoch produced through "*Anantajeevanam*". Consequently, he directed his readers towards the intended meanings. This section shows that there are a number of significant implications when a writer, such as in the instance of Enoch, decides to translate his own work. We understand that due to varied practices of reception, a work may undergo multiple interpretations, where the diverse locations and the agencies of the readers have a major role to play. Once, a work of literature, or for that matter a work of art is in circulation, it is practically impossible to control the dissemination of what may have been the original

intent of the author. What Enoch has attempted to do however through the above quoted passage is harness his own meaning and intent in the text. The question here is what difference would it have made if he did not offer this explanation? An equally important question then is, what difference does it make that he has included the above-quoted passage? One may argue that without the passage, the reader would have been able to interpret the title and the contents of the novel with complete freedom except the limitations of literary norms, conventions and other contextual elements. However, the inclusion of the passage functions as a provocation towards a particular kind of reading.

In the following quoted lines, Enoch firmly locates himself in the narrative and the context of the novel.

The novel "*Anantajeevanam*" '*Awakened Soil*' - is the roar of my soul, the distress of my heart and the throne of my hope.⁽²⁾

He tells us what this novel means to him. In a way, he undertakes a significant effort against his own erasure i.e. the author. Roland Barthes, in 1967, published the seminal essay "*The death of the Author*" where he criticised the norms of traditional literary criticism that attempted to incorporate the intentions and the biographical context of the author in the process of interpreting the text. In the process, Barthes (1967) was seeking to decenter the role of the author in literary production. He instead placed her amidst the complex of elements that contribute in the production and signification of a work of literature. Most authors are now aware that they cannot really control the process of interpretation and signification since the reader, editor and other factors deploy their agency on the form and content of writing. However, authors still deploy certain strategies such as extra-textual commentaries that seek to harness the meaning of a given literary work. In contemporary times, the release of a new book is accompanied by media discussions that pretty much replicate the mediated energy created around a popular film release. Prior to the book release, posters will be circulated through social media, newspapers etc. The author, who still in popular imagination occupies a certain centrality with respect to her writing acquires immense visibility through interviews on television, news, the internet etc. Authors respond to questions about their new work, what it means to them and in what context it has been produced. These events continue well in to the release of the book, thereby generating an advertising buzz meant to entice readers to purchase the book. These mediated events constitute a part of the circulation of a book, and also give the author the opportunity to guide her readers towards contexts, meanings and interpretations. They allow the author to communicate to her readers directly in some ways. In Enoch's case, the introductory note on translation appears

to carry out a similar function, of communication with the readers. It also displays the kind of anxiety an author may have towards translation. It shows the awareness that translations are capable of taking on a life of their own and can completely take the work out of the control of the author. Such an anxiety, surprisingly works even when the author himself has the occasion to translate their own work. Enoch may have complete control over the language (English) (or so we imagine), and knows how to maneuver the language in such a way that he is able to communicate and express to a satisfactory extent what he hopes to. However, he cannot predict the ways in which readers will interpret his work or to what extent he will be able to communicate his ideas.

In the following passage, we explore how Enoch has retained the term “Morava”.

The river ‘Pandameru’ on the head of ‘Anantapur’, the river ‘Tadikaleru’ under its feet and the tank called “BukkarayaSamudram” in the centre of the town with its ‘moravas’ to release excess water and the canals to channelize it, if filled with silt and the flow is obstructed, it would dishearten you.⁽⁵⁾

Here the word ‘morava’ appears to refer to a technology that releases water from dams. Enoch, instead of using the word dam, retains the more locally validated reference Morava. This should be understood in the context of the historicity he reproduces, for instance in the passage itself. He talks about the river Pandameru flowing at one end of the town Anantapur and the river Tadikaleru that is flowing at the other end. He talks about the BukkarayaSamudram tank that is located at the centre of the town and its design comprising of moravas and canals to channel excess water. He describes their current condition because of modernity and the human habit of waste and destruction because of which the canals have been blocked. We have to understand the nature of literary strategies that he has deployed here. This is a novel at whose center is a devastating flood and the town that it ravages. The rivers that get flooded are therefore central characters in the narrative. Through this passage then, Enoch is introducing the characters to the readers. Since, the novel is based on historical facts, it is necessary that the actual names of characters be retained (at least of historical figures) and their personalities be described with some semblance of authenticity. By retaining the word Morava, on the one hand, Enoch displays his intimate knowledge of not only the town but its people and the language they use. He is someone who has lived in Anantapur, and is therefore aware of the word Morava. On the other hand, it could also mean that Enoch has done his research well and is deeply aware of the historical and cultural specificities of Anantapur. Either way, it is through such strategies that Enoch locates himself in an intimate relationship with the subject of his novel. Additionally, it is a means to bring the readers close to the locatedness of

the world described in this novel. The readers must also be made aware of Anantapur, its language and sociality. It has been argued that the English language has a way of erasing cultural and social specificities of another language. English is understood to be a colonizing language, in the sense that the history of contemporary globally accepted English as we know it has also developed through descriptions of the other, of cultures and histories that the Western English speaking world was colonizing. The language developed from colonization therefore is not able to engage with certain nuances. Enoch’s translation however appears to struggle with this tendency of erasure that English threatens to impose on the original. And one of the ways in which he does this is by retaining original Telugu terminology such as Morava. By doing so, he makes the work of translation, a mutually engaging process, where the readers are not just consuming through a language that they are familiar with but are also learning new culturally specific words. Also, by using the word Morava, he draws attention to the fact that technological terminology is not something that has solely been devised in English, as is generally understood, but that regional and othered languages have also produced their own technological terminology.

In the following passage, Enoch talks about his personal investment and the necessity to transform the framework of Anantajeevanam while translating to Awakened Soil in English. We learn that he has to delete a few sections and make a number of additions to facilitate the translation. It is therefore clear that the structures of the source text and the translated text are not the same, primarily due to the necessities of translation. Enoch says that “took liberty with its framework”, and from the passage quoted later we learn the kind of restructuring he had undertaken for the translation. As both the translator and the author, he embraces the freedoms of restructuring and interruption that a separate and distinct translator may not have had to have. He mentions in passing the “disadvantages” he “faced” in transforming the structure of his novel. However, he does not go in to the details of the kind of decisions he had to take. He does not talk about the negotiations he had to make with himself as both author and translator, the compromises and the creative choices to achieve the desirable effect. He also does not mention why he took the decision to translate the work himself, because in most instances, even when authors are proficient in the target language, the work of translation is done by someone else. One of the significant things we have to remember is that Awakened Soil is self-published, which means that in addition to being the author and the translator, he also has the additional responsibility of being the publisher. Enoch therefore functions with an immense amount of autonomy which is reflective of his skills and knowledge of not only literature but also the economics of the publishing industry. The passage quoted here also speaks of his endurance and courage to independently take on a multi-faceted task of writing, translating and publishing:

While translating my Telugu novel, Anantajeevanam, I took liberty with its framework. In doing so, I faced both advantages and disadvantages and I enjoyed both of them. I deleted some sections and incorporated few others to facilitate its English rendering.⁽⁹⁾

In the below-quoted passage, he briefly describes the nature of changes he made to the structure of the source text and why:

In view of its complexity, I divided each chapter into three sections for achieving a vivid presentation. To clarify the portrayal of a character or of an incident, I added a sentence or two. I enjoyed the unhindered freedom to include the changes I felt necessary to make it more clear for the English readers.⁽⁹⁾

Although not visibly clear, Enoch has formally divided his chapters into three sections each for a more “vivid presentation”. He clarifies that he has on occasion added sentences with the specific function of explanation and description of characters and incidents. He also reasserts the nature of freedom he had in making changes (i.e. unhindered). Enoch’s work is therefore also a celebration of artistic and entrepreneurial freedom, and we must recognize this as he recognizes it for himself. He also assures the readers that while freedom is one of the logics that has governed the changes, in that that he has been largely unencumbered by the commercial and normative logics of the publishing and literary worlds, he has also kept in mind the needs of his readers to understand what he has written. In the following quoted line, Enoch also claims that he has not made any compromises or compensations in sustaining the “spirit and the complex texture of the original work”.

Which doing so, I did not sacrifice the spirit and the complex texture of the original work.⁽⁹⁾

Conclusion

This paper has then studied the ways in which translations and contexts are intricately linked. It also engages with the extra-literary domain of a work of literature such as the commercial significance of translations, their functions in circulation and therefore, the translation as an ‘afterthought’ to the ‘original’, especially when it is a work of self-translation.

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