

## Sneha Khound Lecture:

### What is translation? Who is the translator?

Translation can be simply understood as a movement or transfer from one language to another. It is a fact of life in a global, multicultural world. Many of us speak more than one language and we switch back and forth mentally as well while speaking. The influence of linguistic diversity can be seen in mixed vernaculars like Spanglish(Spanish and English)or Hinglish(Hindi and English) where languages are constantly in a state of the translation. Apps like Google translate facilitate quick, practical translations.

### Literary translation, history, and humanity:

Translation has been crucial for epochal turns like the Renaissance which is considered to be the beginning of the modern period after the middle ages. The Renaissance was facilitated by the intense translation of literary, historical, philosophical, and scientific texts between Arabic, Greek, and Latin. This transfer and consolidation of knowledge were imperfect in enabling a secular conception of modern man. The translation was important for colonial rulers to gain knowledge of local languages and for colonial rule and administration. Colonial philologists like William Jones in India played a key role in Orientalism and the standardization of local languages through translation. Colonial missionary translates of the Bible or texts like The Pilgrim's Progress were instrumental in Christian conversions in Africa. Translation, therefore, has historically played a decisive role in establishing the European man as the ideal human being/the self and the colonized subjects as the other.

### Translation and World Literature:

Presenting world literature not as a canon of texts but as a mode of **circulation** and of reading, David Damrosch argues that **world literature is work that gains in translation**. (What is World Literature,2003). Pascale Casanova argued that literature from marginalized areas or peripheries of the world, they have to be translated into **dominate languages** such as English or French in order to gain global reputation or entry into the 'World Republic of Letters. (The World Republic of Letters,2004). Scholars like Aamir Mufti(Forget English! 2016) has pointed out that translation in world literature is biased towards English. Since English is the language of the global capitalist market, literature from any other language can only gain credit by being translated into English. This demonstrates the Anglophone dominance of translation. Emily Apter points out that World Literature theory assumes that everything is translatable across regions, cultures and languages. She argues that we have to factor in, the Untranslatable as a way of practicing World Literature that takes into account practicing constraints' and 'truth

conditions' that determine the relationship between texts, languages and political circumstances.(Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability,2013).

### **Translation Zone**

In fastening the term “Zone” as a theoretical mainstay the intention has been to imagine a broad intellectual topography that is neither the property of a single nation, nor an amorphous condition associated with post nationalism, but rather a zone of critical engagement that connects the “l” and the “n” or transLation and transNation. The common root “trans” operates as a connecting port of translational transnationalism (a term I [Emily Apter] use to emphasize translation among small nations or minority language communities),as well as the point of debarkation to a cultural caesura—a trans—action where transmissions failure is marked.’

Emily Apter,The Translation Zone:A New Comparative Literature,2005.Page 5

‘While the book focuses in several sections on how theories of semantic zoning have been used to keep languages separate, enclosed in their own worlds and untranslatable, for the most part, the zone, in my ascription, has designated sites that are “in translation”, that is to say, belonging to no single, discrete language or single medium of communication. Broadly conceived in these terms, the translation zones applies to diasporic language communities, print and media public spheres, institutions of governmentally and language policy-making, theaters of war, and literary theories with particular relevance to the history and future of comparative literature.’

Emily Apter, The Translation Zone:A New Comparative Literature,2005.Page 6

### **Translation zone and being human:**

‘Cast as an act of love and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and history; a means of rendering self- knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual and pre-given domestic arrangements. It is a truism that the knowledge of becoming proficient in another tongue delivers a salubrious blow to narcissism, both national and individual. Translation failure demarcates intersubjective limits, even as it highlights that “eureka” spot where consciousness crosses over to a rough zone of equivalency or crystallizes around an idea that belongs to no one language or nation in particular. The translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change.’

Emily Apter, The Translation Zone:A New Comparative Literature,2005.Page 6

The story we are reading this week is from the anthology *Crossing Borders: Stories and Essays About Translation* edited by Lynne Sharon Schwartz. Schwartz's et in a conflict zone highlight the political role of translation. The story focuses on the figure of the translator and give us the opportunity to consider how the translator negotiates their position between languages and contested regions. The story helps us understand that translation is not a simple transfer from one language to another but a complex process determined by historical and political conditions. It throws light on multilingual spaces as well as untranslatability.

### **"The Wizard of Khao-I-Dang" by Sharon May:**

Sharon May researched the Khmer Rouge regime for Colombia University's center for the study of Human Rights and co-edited in the shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writing from Cambodia (University of Hawaii Press). "In 1863, Cambodia become a protectorate of France; it gained independence I. 1953,only to become inadvertently caught up in the American war in Vietnam. The US heavily bombed Cambodia in the 1960sa d 70s, before the Khmer Rouge [a communist group]took over in 1975."(Sharon May-*Words Without Borders*.p.3).During the Khmer New Year of April 1975,the Khmer Rouge "evacuated the city [of Phnom Penh],sending it's inhabitants on foot to work and starve in labor camps in the countryside...The ability to read and write, knowledge of a foreign language, even the wearing of eyeglasses, could get one killed.[Darith's English dictionary nearly gets him killed.]During the regime, between 1975 and 79, nearly two million people-out of a population of only seven million-died of starvation ,disease, torture and execution."(Sharon May,p.2)

### **Khao-I-Dang Holding Center**

The refugee camp was a few miles north of the city of Aranyaprathet in Thailand, near the Cambodian border. It was established late in 1979,after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, and was administered by the Thai interior Ministry and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It was designed to hold 300,000 people. In March,1980 it held 160,000 people. Some refugees were sent back to Cambodia, but many were sent to third countries. Those unable to be repatriated or sent to third countries were sent to another camp, and the camp closed in March 1993.

### **Rough Translation/Failure of transmission:**

-“When you are born? “asks Tom, the newly arrived Australian official. “I’m a Rat, “the man answers. The translator, seeing that the man is about fifty, calculates the most likely year of the Rat on the Chinese-Cambodian zodiac.[p.107]

-“Why did you leave Cambodia? “asks Tom. The applicant can’t answer the question

directly. The translator knows that Tom wants to know if the man left Cambodia for economic or political reasons, but Tom appears to know nothing of the conditions in Cambodia from which the man fled.[pp.108-110]

### **Cultural Translation:**

Richard, a more experienced and kinder Australian official, asks another applicant: "What is your brother's name?" The translator knows that "Cambodians don't call their relatives by their given names," but often by nicknames. Also people might have used other names during the Khmer Rouge occupation, to save their family's lives or their own. Richard suspects that the applicant's reticence means that he is lying and rejects his application.[p.112]

### **Darth: The translator as 'in-between':**

'It is my job to solve these problems. To calculate. To resolve inconsistencies.' 'All the while in my heart I am thinking, hoping, I can quit now. I can leave this place. It's time to go home.'

-Darith was a refugee himself and although he wants to go back to Cambodia he can't do so. In this situation, the notion of home is complicated as it shows that nobody absolutely belongs anywhere. As such, if language is tied to geography/nationality, it is difficult to determine whether a language 'belongs' to anybody or who is a native speaker.

### **Fidelity vs fiction and the power dynamic of translation:**

-Although a translation is usually judged on the basis of its accuracy to the 'original', Darth has to lie to be ethical and faithful to the truth/political reality: "I can tell you, this is a story many people face, not just these two. They don't intend to lie, but because of the circumstances they must do it, believe me. Think of your own daughter, if you were separated." And then I add, "Of course it's up to you, not me."

-Translation is determined by power relations and those in the dominant language group are in the more powerful neo-colonial position; 'I tell myself that they are just worn down, but the new arrivals have the same assumed superiority, the unquestioned belief that they know everything: what is wrong, what is right-that they are somehow more human.'

### **Intersubjectivity in the Translation zone:**

-Sandra at first says: "Well, they can't do that,..." She lied. The law is the law." [p.121] Note Sandra's change of heart.[p.124] The two male Australian officials show an ethnocentric refusal to engage with the other, but Sandra changes her mind and accepts

the application of the woman who lied about her mother.

-Darith helps the applicants as much as possible and manipulates the truth to negotiate the unjust immigration system. This represents the translator's resistance.

The translation is a complex linguistic process that has the potential to question history and political units such as nation-states. The figure of the translator is a productive space to examine the tensions of theater anybody can claim to be a native speaker, whether language belongs to anyone and the relationships between land and language or home and tongue. Translation can be the mode of justice.