CALIBAN AS THE PROTOTYPE OF THE POSTCOLONIAL TRANSLATOR

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como foco a implicação mútua entre poscolonialidade e tradução. Chama-se a atenção para o fato de que, em última análise, tanto a poscolonialidade quanto a tentativa de tradução perfeita estão fadadas à recuperação de significados perdidos. Contudo, em outro sentido, ambos conseguem dar voz àqueles que até então têm sido sistematicamente postos de lado. Ambos ressaltam o derradeiro triunfo de Caliban, o personagem de A Tempestade, de William Shakespeare. Escravizado por Próspero, Caliban aprende com ele a língua da “civilização”; porém, ao aprender a língua de seu mestre, encontra o caminho para a liberdade e o auto-empoderamento, que o levam à subversão final da própria ordem das coisas que havia instituído, em primeiro lugar, a relação de poder desigual entre eles.

Palavras-Chave: Poscolonialidade, tradução, Caliban, auto-empoderamento.

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the mutual implication between postcoloniality and translation. It is pointed out that, in the ultimate analysis, both postcoloniality and the attempt at perfect translation are fated to fail in their relentless quest for the recovery of lost meanings. Yet, in another sense, they both succeed in giving voice to the ones that were systematically sidelined until then. They both underscore the ultimate triumph of Caliban, the character from William Shakespeare’s play The Tempest, who is taught the language of “civilization” by Prospero who enslaved him, but in learning the language of his Master, finds the road to liberty and self-empowerment, leading to the ultimate subversion of the very order of things that instituted the unequal power relation between them in the first place.

Keywords: Postcoloniality, translation, Caliban, self-empowerment.
Scholars and researchers have for some time paid special attention to the growing perception that postcoloniality and translation have a lot to do with each other; so much so that the two are, one might say, mutually implicated in each other in ways that may escape the attention of anyone who would rather look at postcoloniality as an exclusively political matter and translation as primarily linguistic.

Indeed, postcolonial writing is in a deep sense writing that is best described as translation in action, that is to say, of resistance and reconfiguration of the terms of engagement that marked a turbulent colonial past which put together both the coloniser and the colonised in a tryst with destiny, twisting and turning their respective histories once and for all. Postcoloniality is like translation in that both constitute attempts to recover lost meanings, to preserve and at the same time revise memories—in short, to realise the impossible.

The following observation by Bhabha (1990) is particularly relevant here:

Translation represents only an extreme instance of the figurative fate of writing that repeatedly generates a movement of equivalence between representation and reference, but never gets beyond the equivocation of the sign. The ‘foreignness’ of language is the nucleus of the untranslatable that goes beyond the transparency of the subject matter. The transfer of meaning can never be total between differential systems of meaning, or within them.

Recall, for instance, Salman Rushdie’s frequently remembered characterisation of British Indians as “translated men” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 17). On closer inspection, one might say that Rushdie’s interesting turn of phrase applies to all postcolonial peoples, tout court.

Translation is the only way postcolonial subjects can live out their lives. The colonial heritage is there as part of the very making of their potcolonial subjectivity, as what they, as postcolonial subjects, are destined to carry for the rest of their lives. It is in their newly acquired language—or, what Homi Bhabha (1990) once described as an uncanny ability to speak a language that is not, or was not until then, theirs—the most visible mark of their lost innocence, be it linguistic, cultural or whatever. In a newspaper article written in an unmistakably facetious tone (yet, all the same, making a point of utmost significance to the constitution of the postcolonial self), India’s leading journalist and novelist Khushwant Singh writes:

I am entirely in favour of making English an Indian language on our terms. Maul it, misuse it, mangle it out of shape but make it our own bhasha. The English may not recognise it as their language; they can stew in their own juice. It is not their baap ki jaidaad — ancestral property. (SINGH, 2001)
So it is just not only a matter of attaining an uncanny ability to use someone else’s language. It is also a carefully studied and well-calculated move to appropriate it, to deliberately “maul, misuse, and mangle” it out of shape and recognition. If his former master doesn’t recognise his/her voice any more, well, that is very much part of the plan. From now on, it is the tail that is going to wag the dog. Like Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the postcolonial subject has learned to talk back to Prospero.

Caliban: You taught me language; and my profit on’t
Is, I know how to curse; the red plague rid you,
For learning me your language!

Prospero: Hag-seed, hence!

Fetch us in fuel; and be quick, thou wert best,
To answer other business. Shug’st thou,

malice?

If thou neglect’st, or dost unwillingly
What I command, I’ll rack thee with old cramps;
Fill all thy bones with aches; make thee roar,
That beasts shall tremble at thy din.

Caliban: No, pray thee!—

I must obey; his art is of such power, [Aside.
It would control my dam’s god, Setebos,
And make a vassal of him.

Prospero: So, slave; hence!

As a matter of fact, postcolonial recalcitrance and “wouldn’t-care-two-hoots” attitude come to the fore even in the very choice of the genre the majority of postcolonial writers typically resort to in order to express themselves—the novel. For, after all, as scholars such as Ian Watt (1957, 1996) have made it amply clear, the novel as an art form is implicated in the very rise of European colonialism, so that when contemporary postcolonial writers appropriate that genre to their own purposes, that in itself is a gesture suffused with all sorts of additional connotations and overlays of meaning. The novel’s very reputation as quintessentially European in origin and spirit, makes it so very attractive to the postcolonial writers to appropriate it as a medium, to talk back to their erstwhile masters, to use it for their own purposes. It is, to put it bluntly, in and of itself, a political gesture of utmost significance. (Rajagopalan, forthcoming).

If the genre chosen for self-expression already bears the mark of the desire to turn the tables on the erstwhile masters, the language used is also clearly one that has been appropriated and deliberately made barely recognisable (and on the verge of be-
Caliban as the prototype of the postcolonial translator

coming altogether unrecognisable) by its former “owners”. Clearly, this is done with a view to making things not easy for them. As Prasad (1999, p. 41) notes, the very choice of the language bespeaks ongoing internal struggles. Speaking specifically of contemporary Indian writers, he goes on to observe: “A bilingual writer of English (and this category includes almost all Indian writers in English) walks the tightrope of choices carefully and consciously”.

In his work *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie (1991, p. 17) stresses “the need to remake the language for our own purposes”. Singh’s use of *bhasha* and *baap ki jaidaad* testify to that yearning. Note that the latter expression comes with an English gloss, but not so the former; the “foreign” reader—that is to say, the reader who is by now made to feel a foreigner in his/her own language—is being asked to infer its meaning from the context. Surely this must be an unusual experience for anyone who has been brought up to believe that one’s native language is precisely that in which one is not required to go through “roundabout” procedures to guess the meaning of words. Isn’t one’s native language the one where one is least aware of translation at work?

Here we have the other side of the phenomenon Lawrence Venuti (1995) refers to as the translator’s desire to remain invisible. For Venuti, the translator’s proverbial “desire” to remain invisible, to efface him/herself, has nothing to do with the nature of translation *per se*. Rather, it has to do with a strategic, ideologically motivated decision on their part – a decision whose genealogy the author traces back to 17th-century England. So too, Venuti goes to insist, is the decision to make oneself visible by retaining the “foreignness” of the foreign text, by refusing to nativise it even at the cost of stretching the limits of the language.

If invisibility is tied to assimilation (the “foreign” work of art is depleted of all its “foreignness”), the attempt to foreignise is an attempt to keep it unmistakably foreign (read “exotic”) for the native gaze to feast upon and marvel at. Clearly, then, postcolonial writing is powered by the same political impulse to create the jarring effect on the foreign reader. Except that the rules of the game are now different. And so are the players in the game. In the case of postcolonial writing, the foreignising gesture comes no longer from a political desire to *preserve* the “foreignness” of “foreign” text or, at the very least, to keep it only “eerily familiar” to native sensibility, but from (again, a political) desire to *assert* the foreignness of the “native” text—or what may appear to be a text in the native language of the former colonial master’s (now deliberately being rendered foreign). If the former gesture ultimately succeeds in preserving the foreign text
as a museum piece, the latter—the postcolonial text—does its job by reminding the reader that the foreign element is there to stay and that, from now on, it is Prospero who will need to learn to live with the language that his former slave has “Calibanised/cannibalised”.

Yet their continued existence as postcolonial selves is premised on the condition that they have somehow reconstituted and redefined themselves and are thus, as persons, different from their earlier selves. Translation is but another name for this intricate process of self-reconstitution or redefinition. Old meanings, old significances, are reconstituted and repackaged so as to create a new sense of self-identity. Post-colonial identity is, in other words, the outcome of what one may best describe as a most elaborate kind of politics of identity aimed at survival in the face of a new external environment and a substantially reshaped psychic interior.

No one survives the colonial experience completely unscathed. This applies to both the coloniser and the colonised. The scars of the colonial past taint both sides of the divide for years—for all you know, for ever—after the colonial rule is officially declared a thing of the past. The coloniser is condemned to live for years to come with a guilt complex, in spite of all the rhetoric of sacrifice and civilising mission, often mobilised to cover up the traces of violence and destruction. It is, in other words, a constant effort to come to terms with their conscience. But, from the point of those on the seamy side of the colonial encounter, the aftermath of that experience is permanent struggle for self-identification. The colonised, even after being officially emancipated from their colonial status, is burdened by the thought of a lost identity and the realization that they can never reclaim that identity, nor delete the whole experience from their living memory which would be inevitable first step in order to pull such a feat through.

The colonial experience is fundamentally one of what might aptly describe as a crisis of identity. It has to do with the ways and means by which the individual who has been through the traumatizing experience of colonialism desperately tries to recollect, or rather, re-collect his/her old identity (and inevitably fails in that endeavour). As Giddens (1991, p. 53) put it,

> Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent (italics from the original).

Three component features of self-identity may be highlighted from the above quotation. First, the notion of identity still rests on some idea of continuity or perma-
nence over a certain period of time. Second, it is identity, not as it presents itself to us or is found, as it were, “in natura”, but as it is comprehended or made sense of through reflexive thought.

Third, the ingredients that are mobilised as one seeks to comprehend one’s self-identity are all tiny nuggets from one’s personal history or biography. The post-colonial self endeavouring to comprehend itself is, in the last resort, seeking to re-collect and piece together a number of strands, or “traits” as Giddens calls them, which were neither part of that individual (in the sense of “possessed” by the individual) to begin with, nor imposed from the outside. The “traits” have no owners, properly speaking; they are simply there, up for grabs. It is for the individual to claim them and, in the process, fashion his/her own identity. Uzma Aslam Khan, Pakistani novelist and the author of the best-seller Trespassing, had this to say apropos of her novel:

I cannot sum up what ‘Trespassing’ is about. And since I wrote it, it is obviously not a ‘mere’ novel to me, and it certainly couldn’t be set anywhere but in all the places it is set. The many strands of the book interweave and evolve the way they do because of these settings — geographical, historical, political, social. Nor did I write it to comment on Pakistani society. I am not a social or political commentator.

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REFERENCES


