Translating the Implicit: Reading a Disability Text

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Abstract

Disability Studies is a recent development that seeks to extricate the idea of ‘disability’ or ‘impairment’ from the existing cultural myths, ideologies and stigmas that heavily influence socio-cultural interaction, policies and movement. I therefore attempt to reconsider the idea of ‘ability’ or ‘normalcy’ within the socio-cultural construct through Banaphool’s short story Boba which I have translated into ‘The Mute’. The text narrates the story of a mute and partially deaf orphan named Minu who survives at the mercy of her distant uncle. Minu does all the household chores silently without any resistance and has an immensely active imagination. Through her fantasies about the sky, the cloud, the yellow bird, the furnace, the chunk of coal she breaks each morning, the fire, and the jackfruit tree, she invariably creates a world of her own which is very much different from the ‘usual’, ‘abled’ world which tags people like Minu as ‘disabled’. Translation as a process has always been very baffling but very fascinating at the same time. And translating a disabled text undoubtedly calls for further considerations because a disabled text usually chronicles the personal ordeal or experiences of a disabled person whose usual system of process of connecting to the rest of the world is somehow altered if not totally hindered.

Keywords: disability, ability, power, politics, normal, discipline

The practice of translation in India is older than the discipline of Disability Studies. While translation is among the fundamental activities of human kind, Disability Studies is a rather recent development. The former is a challenging act in rendering a text from one language system or domain to another, and the latter seeks to extricate the idea of ‘disability’ or ‘impairment’ from the existing cultural myths, ideologies and stigmas that heavily influence socio-cultural interaction, policies and movement. I therefore attempt to reconsider the idea of ‘ability’ or ‘normalcy’ within the socio-cultural construct.

Translation itself is a threat to the pre-existing source language text (SLT) as there are chances of deviation; likewise the discipline of Disability Studies also threatens the conventional perspective towards disability which regards it as ‘abnormal’ or the ‘other’. Translating disability texts, therefore, becomes all the more interesting because there always remains a challenge as to whether the target language text (TLT) is successful in delivering the intended message of
the SLT as much of it has to be assumed by the translator whose task is to capture the unsaid meaning of the text through proper insight and reproduce it in the subsequent translation. Before starting off with an elaborate discussion on disability studies we should have a clear idea of what ‘disability’ and being ‘normal’ are all about.

Disability as a social edifice results in the stereotyped perceptions of qualities inherent in people with disabilities. The disability concept often directs a society to create and enforce its standards, which invariably are accomplished by imposing vindictive qualities onto disabled people. The disabled bodies are therefore deprived of their own voices and power. The disabled, as conventionally understood, manifest differences, but they are in no way radically the ‘other’. It is different, not the other, it is quite articulable as anything else if articulated in the right way. Disability studies in fact contend for ability and disability as merely relative positions on a spectrum. All of us are born into a condition of vulnerability and dependence; all of us rely throughout our lives on technological interventions to amplify physical abilities and compensate for physical limitations; all of us experience illnesses; most of us grow old and face increasing losses of physical and mental power. “Ability” then is both relative and temporary. We are a part of a world which is constituted of a set of norms. There is a particular framework, a structure which is regarded as ‘normal’. This concept of ‘normal’ has different interpretations. The overall idea of norm, unlike that of ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm. Therefore normalization refers to a socially certified standard through which ideas and actions are tagged as ‘normal’ and become ‘usual’ or ‘natural’ in everyday life. The concept of normalization is detailed by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*, where he used the term associated with the construction of an idealized norm of conduct and then rewarding or punishing individuals for conforming to or deviating from that idealized standard.

Idea of norm must have existed earlier as the idea of mimesis suggests that real world is a representation of the ideal world which also echoes the basic idea of translation. The real world has a tendency to conform to the ideal world, that is, to satisfy the conditions of being normal. Therefore it is clear that it is a general affinity to be normal and to comply with the accepted standard and it is not desired to be anything other than that. The benchmark of pre-assumed normalcy is accepted widely and anything other than this constructed normalcy is somehow unacceptable.

Surprisingly in the Indian context the philosophy of Karma is also irrelevantly associated with the perception of disability. Karma, an inseparable part of Indian religious faith is regarded as the accumulation of our past actions which control or influence our present and future. It is very much related to the Western philosophy of Destiny or fate. Within the Indian cultural space
karma is often associated with other things as well. For instance, the idea of disability or physical and mental deformity is believed to be the consequences of Karma. That is disability or physical and mental deformity is like the punishment of Karma, i.e. penalty for the misdeeds of the previous life. People with disabilities are often viewed as inferior and shunned. They are even pitied and considered to be supported by charity and sympathy which calls for a power play between the abled and the disabled.

The text that I am dealing with is a modern Bengali short story named Boba by Banaphool (Balai Chand Mukhopadhyay) which narrates the story of a mute and partially deaf orphan named Minu who survives at the mercy of her distant uncle. Minu does all the household chores silently without any resistance and has an immensely active imagination. Through her fantasies about the sky, the Shuktara, the cloud, the yellow bird, the furnace, the chunk of coal she breaks each morning, the fire, and the jackfruit tree, she invariably creates a world of her own which is very much different from the ‘usual’, ‘abled’ world which tags people like Minu as ‘disabled’.

The scientists might consider the Shuktara to be a huge solitary heavenly body of vapour or the poet might think it to be an indicator of the fading night but to Minu it means her dearest friend. She believes that her friend gets up early in the morning only to accompany her in breaking the chunks of coal for lighting up the furnace in her uncle’s house. When she sees patches of dark clouds round the Shuktara they appear to her as chunks of coal. She considers the coal to be her enemy and derives a pleasure in hitting them hard. The hammer she uses has been named as Gadai and the piece of stone on which she keeps the coal to hit is named as Shanu. Now the cow-dung cakes, in her imagination have become vegetable-curry. The furnace is named as Rakshasi. The idea is, the furnace as demon will consume the enemies, i.e. coal chunks with dung-cakes soaked in kerosene oil as vegetables. When the flame amplifies and burns rapidly Minu finds an unusual pleasure. She imagines the burning coal as blood-stained flesh and the reddish flame of the fire as the ever hungry tongue of the demon. She stares at it with wide open eyes. Then she runs back to the courtyard and looks at the sky to find out the reddish tinge of breaking dawn and when it is bright enough she comes to know that her friend’s furnace has got a wonderful flame that day! And when the sky remains covered with clouds, she thinks her friend might not have cleared the ashes to have a proper flame. This way she has built an imaginary world of her own which has no connection with the outer world whatsoever. She has her own friends and foes in that world. She has got another group of enemies as well- the hornets and the wasps.

Each and every utensil in the kitchen is her friend. She has named each one of them. The metal water-pot is named as Puti. One day the pot fell from her hand and got de-shaped and Minu cried her heart out. She runs her tender
fingers over the wounded spot and tries to comfort it. The four glasses of the kitchen are apparently similar but Minu can distinguish each one of them and named them separately. When she cleans the glasses it looks like she is bathing her little children. The meat-safe is her enemy. She named it as Gopgopa because it consumes or takes everything within its tummy.

One of Minu’s other concerns was that of with her father. She had been told that her father was abroad and he will be back someday. One day she saw a yellow little bird sitting on the tip of the jack-fruit tree and on that very moment her neighbour Tunu’s father returned. From that very day she started believing that when a yellow little bird would sit on the tip of the twig again, that day her father also will return.

Another day Minu found the black street-dog often licking his own sore wound on his left leg, thoroughly. After a few days she discovered to her astonishment that the dog’s wound has healed. Minu was taken aback by realizing that the dog had actually healed his own sore only by licking it. She started thinking that the sore might have tasted like aamsatwa, that is, why the dog could lick it so easily. She was surprised by the dog’s own way of medical treatment. One more thing got registered into her mind that perhaps sores taste like aamsatwa which can easily be licked.

It is not that she is unable to express her intentions it is only that there was no one to whom she could express herself. Her uncle as well as aunt never tried to understand or give vent to her feelings. For them she was a silent machine who is assigned to do certain functions. She, if treated like any other ‘normal’ person, probably would not have resided so much in her imaginary world. Not that being imaginative is harmful but the fact is, her escape into the imaginary world is not a luxury here but a necessity, a necessity to exchange her ideas and feelings which is otherwise discouraged in the real world.

Her physical disability heightens her misery in the sense, that she is unable to express her inner intentions and feelings verbally. She is completely nurtured and guided by her instincts and creates her own world where things function differently. Her fantasy with the sky, the cloud, the Shuktara, the coal, the furnace, the fire, only underlines her sense of active imagination. She creates a domain of her own where she is free to move, where she has got her friends and companion with whom she could share her feelings. Her obsession with her father’s return associated with the yellow bird sitting on the jack-fruit tree, her notion that licking wounds actually heal them- all these are constructs of her innocent mind which did not get any chance to be guided logically by anyone.

Minu’s physical activities may be restricted due to her physical or clinical disability but her active mind along with its imagination seems to have balanced that deficiency. Being dumb and partially deaf, she observes, perceives, and feels the beauty of the world through her vision and senses. Her intentions are never properly understood and she is used to it. In a society where gender issues are still a taboo, being ‘disabled’ added to that is the worst curse possible
and that is why she is doubly dominated here—first for her disability and second for her gender. Just as the concept of ability and disability is relative in the world her ability and disability too are manipulated according to the needs of the selfish people around her. Her abilities are utilized to the fullest but her disabilities are either ignored or misunderstood. Her noble intention of curing her aunt’s wound by licking it brings her doom. She is not only ignorant enough to compare human habits with those of dogs but innocent enough to apply it with humans. What happened next came to her as a shock. The tragedy is that no one tried to investigate into the reasons behind her ‘unusual’ actions or even feel the need to educate her accordingly but all of them came to their decisions quite easily that she is mad. Perhaps it was easier for them to tag her as mad rather than taking the pains of understanding her. The sensible readers can feel that the real reason behind her doom was her inevitable failure of connecting to or coping with both the worlds together. Can we therefore say that her silence is a metaphor here as it emerges as the symbol of her disability? She is inaudible to the normal world just like the supersonic sound which is beyond our sense perception. Just like our inability to hear the supersonic sound does not dismiss the existence of it likewise our incapacity to hear or perceive Minu’s world does not disqualify it. It is only a matter of relativity.

As a translator I feel that there are certain words ad expressions which are culture-specific and I have deliberately kept them intact in the translated version in order to sustain the source-language cultural essence. Words like *Shuktara*, *aamsatwa*, *gamchha* are not translated and that is being done purposely because the Shuktara if translated into Venus will not be able to convey the same sense as that of the original name as, besides being a star in it has a cultural significance owing to its connection with the childhood. *Gamchha* is a special fabric woven in Bengal which is used to wipe our wet bodies. Translating it into towel might have indicated the intended sense but exclusiveness of *gamchha* was sure to be lost. *Aamsatwa* on the other hand is a very popular sweet food item in Bengal made of dried ripened mango pulp which if translated into anything else perhaps would not have tasted like *aamsatwa*!

It is therefore a story about how this ‘abled’ world mistranslates and misinterprets her noblest of intentions only to leave her dead. The story also chronicles how her aspirations and imaginative consciousness are thwarted by the apparently ‘sane’ world of people. This piece, I believe, adequately qualifies as a ‘disability text’ as it addresses the issue of disability in a very touching way. In fact the concept of ‘disability’, according to me, metaphorically functions at two levels here—firstly, there is the clinical or physical ‘disability’ suffered by the poor girl Minu being dumb and partially deaf, and secondly, the ‘disability’ of the apparently ‘normal’ world which is ‘blind’ enough to look deeper into reason and also ‘insensitive’ enough to feel or understand or even appreciate the inner workings of a dumb girl’s mind.
I have named my translated text as ‘The Mute’. Translating it into English was full of challenges due to the presence of certain expressions which seem to be almost untranslatable. The text being a third person narrative with no direct speech of the protagonist inserted, it becomes a real challenge for the translator to capture the true essence of the characters and situations as a large portion of the story deals with Minu's unspoken, creative imagination.

Translations like disabled texts call for same challenges to the conventional norm as disabled bodies do. They digress from monolingual textual expectations and are thus different. They threaten to blur, and therefore dismiss organizing binaries of social or textual or literary life. The translated texts therefore function as docile bodies that reinforce dominant cultural norms of gendered, raced, and classed bodily/textual function and appearance.

It is a matter of astonishment that a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country like India, where the practice of translation is most obvious, is indifferent enough to formulate a substantial body of translation theory. The political status of translation thus always has been a matter of concern. Translations are excluded from most publications, accolades, radical literary canons, and from most performances. Translation is often viewed as an impairment that is, lacking something essential and therefore can be compared to a ‘disabled text’. Where creative or original writing is always regarded as primary or fundamental art the status or position of a translated text remains as that of derogatory or secondary. Original writing is therefore believed to be more ‘normal’ or ‘usual’ or more spontaneously acceptable by society but translated text is impaired or disabled owing to the absence of ‘originality’. This compulsory able-bodiedness imposes a set of pre conceived regulations over the disabled body and the translated text also suffers from a sense of ‘borrowed originality’. This ‘borrowed originality’ of the process of translation instead of getting its due importance of bridging lingual gaps, is, unfortunately demeaned and often misunderstood. This ill-fated prospect of translation is a serious area of concern, I feel.

The question arises whether the translated version of the disabled text is successful in delivering the ‘unsaid’ message inherent within the text. A non-disability text is considered to be more comprehensible which therefore implies that it can also be translated with more ease than that of a disability text where there are more challenges of assuming thoughts which are not stated clearly.

Translation like language has a function, i.e. to communicate or connect the gaps between two or more individuals or languages or cultures. The success of the translated text therefore lies in the fact whether it is able to evoke the similar spontaneous response as that of the source language text. The original text being very sensitive, if my translated text is able to reproduce at least a portion of that impulsive response from the readers, then I would consider my translation to have served its purpose.

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Notes

1. Morning star
2. A female demon
3. Sound of eating something very fast
4. A sweet made of dried mango pulp
5. A hand-woven piece of cloth to wipe wet body, similar to towel

Works Cited

The article studies the incongruity of stylistic organization of an agreement as one of the types of legal discourse in English and Russian. The comparative analysis of certain stylistic differences (_lexical, grammatical, and syntactical) and the tips for translation suggested in this concise work are aimed at better understanding and interpreting the legal document of the given format.