*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495)*
*JANUARY 2018*
*(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668 )*

# Cultural Translation and the Transformation of Cultures

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**Abstract**

My presentation will take a comprehensive and critical look at the concept of cultural translation. It will argue that thinking of it as Talal Asad did in his 1986 essay, "The Concept of Cultural Translation" when he used it to indicate how anthropologists necessarily translate the language of "primitive" cultures for use in academia is too restrictive. It will suggest that to have the term conceptualized as Homi Bhabha did in discussing *The Satanic Verses* to privilege hybridity as the inevitable and not undesirable condition of diasporic people is also to be too restrictive. My paper will suggest instead that the concept of cultural translation can be most useful when conceived in terms of the root meaning of the word "translation", that is to say, as the movement of ideas borne in languages from one part of the world to another in paradigmatic moments of history when we witness the phenomenon of cultural transformation. I intend to show how the concept can benefit from Walter Benjamin's idea about the transformation of the target language through literary translation, Edward Said's notion of "travelling theory" and James Clifford's take on "travelling cultures". Ultimately, cultural translation, I hope to show, is the way in which the world has been redressing itself again and again after the fallout it has been enduring after Babel.

***Keywords:*** *translation, culture, interlingual*

## I

One of the funniest moments of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the scene in the third act when the weaver Bully Bottom re-enters the stage, amazingly and grotesquely transformed into an ass. Peter Quince, a fellow "mechanical", and part of the group that has gathered in the forest to rehearse the "lamentable comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe", is bewildered by what he sees and exclaims: "Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated" (II. i. 112-13). Although Quince is not amused by what he comes across, the spectators present in performances in Shakespeare's period surely were. But would all the spectators of the Elizabethan age react to Bottom's "translation" and laugh at what had happened to him in the same way? To be more precise, would the groundlings in the audience have reacted to Quince's use of the word to describe Bottom's state in the same manner as the courtly members of the audience did?

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The word "translate" has been defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in at least three ways. Firstly, to translate is "to bear, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another." Secondly, to do this activity is "to turn from one language into another". Finally, to translate, we learn, can be "to change in form, appearance, or substance; to transmute; to transform; alter." Once alerted to these three ways in which the word can be used, we can see that Shakespeare was probably intending to make his spectators laugh by invoking all three of its meanings when he brought the ass-headed Bottom to the stage. For the shocked Quince Bottom is no longer the person he was and has become "translated" in appearance in the most grievous manner possible; he is clearly no longer the person he was! For most members of the audience, the word itself has been comically misused. Knowing full well by this time that Quince is prone to malapropisms, they would thus have shown their amusement at Quince's abuse of a word normally associated with the way words and phrases are turned from one language to another, that is to say, "interlingual" translation. [i]. But the courtly members of the audience would have also smiled at the usage because they would consider Bottom's "translation" as an inter-textual invocation by Shakespeare of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and an ironic reference to Arthur Golding's translation of the Roman text.[ii] To them Ovid has been transformed in an English context delightfully by the dramatist. The sophisticated section of the spectators would thus probably have enjoyed the scene in a way ordinary ones could not have because of cultural transformations taking place in the renaissance that would enable them to tap into a vein that ran deep in western literature by this time. It is a vein that would allow them to relish the Ovidian implications of the scene as well as delight in the linguistic wordplay and the grotesquerie evoked by the weaver's appearance.

It was of course the activity of translation, carried out on a scale in Renaissance Europe that was truly unimaginable previously, as well as developments in printing technology, that led to the kind of cultural transformation that Shakespeare would be tapping in conceiving and staging his comedy for the spectators of his age. Translation activity, carried out on an extensive scale and developments in printing technology had transformed Elizabethan perceptions of the world and had enriched literature in the process. Knowledge of the transformative power of translation, whether defined strictly or loosely, is something that scholars of translation studies, theorists writing about representation of cultures, and anthropologists and sociologists doing field work in recent decades have been discussing again and again. They have also been drawing on the also expanded notion of culture pioneered by Raymond Williams where it is viewed as a way of life of any group of people and not something reserved for the elite that had been so liberating for people in the social sciences as well as the humanities. What follows in this presentation is an attempt to draw on some of these discussions and come to some conclusions about the concept of cultural translation and its transformative potential for the world we live in.

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## II

As the distinguished anthropologist Talal Asad has shown in "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology", a paper he published in a volume called *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, the concept of cultural translation current in anthropology in the 1980s could actually be traced back to Godfrey Lienhardt's 1954 paper "Modes of Thought". Lienhardt had suggested that it is the task of the anthropologist to convey the thought processes of a remote tribe to his or her peers in the west in a process that combines close reading and empathy[iii] in a manner that is essentially analogous to the work of the linguistic translator. Asad notes that Edmund Leach too had observed in a 1973 paper that social anthropologists could learn from linguistic translators who are only too aware of the pitfalls of translating from one language to another, but who also believe in their hearts that a satisfactory translation is not an impossibility and can be carried out through experience as well as commitment to the work of making other cultures known to their own ones. All these anthropologists feel that their discipline could benefit from the practice of linguistic translators who re-present texts from one language into another through skills developed in the process of translating. Asad implies that the social anthropologist should thus learn to hone his or her skills in representing people of a less accessible culture by entering into a kind of dialogic relationship with them as translators do with foreign texts. He is aware that there is always the danger of misrepresenting a text culturally when the anthropologist is from a more developed society or "is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power—professional, national, intentional." (Asad, 165). But once conscious of "asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the language of dominated and dominant societies" (ibid, 164) and willing to explore the possibilities of cultural translation divested of prejudices and a priori assumptions, the social anthropologist, like the linguistic translator, can do a job that is well-worth doing.

What is noteworthy here is that these British anthropologists pioneered the idea of "the translation of cultures" by drawing on their acquaintance with the art and craft of interlingual translation. In the process they emphasized the possibility of "cultural translation" for their own discipline, which in this context means conveying another culture for people in their home culture. One more concept that Asad found in a classic work of translation theory is particularly worth emphasizing in this context. This derives from a passage in Walter Benjamin's brilliant and thought-provoking 1923 essay, "The Task of the Translator" where the German theorist suggests that "the language of a translation can—in fact must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio"* (Quoted by Asad, 156). The task of interlingual translation, Benjamin implies in these lines, is to create an inspired version of a text of another language which will

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create a new text that will have a life of its own in the target language. This is to say, interlingual translation done imaginatively can have an impact on the recipient culture that is lasting and that may be potentially transformative. Asad clearly thinks that this insight can be extended for the kind of "cultural translation" work that social anthropologists do professionally.

Benjamin also suggests in his essay that a text is chosen by the interlingual translators because of its "translatability[iv];" it has a "specific significance" manifested in its "afterlife" that makes it worth translating. Indeed, the translation of such texts "marks their stage of continued life" (Benjamin, 16). This is no doubt why certain texts are chosen for translation again and again and why they have a long-lasting impact on another culture. That is also why in good translations "the life of the originals attains in them its ever-renewed and most abundant flowering" (Benjamin, 17). Good translations in their afterlife, Benjamin goes on to say, are "a transformation and renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change" (ibid.) To go back to Shakespeare and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* once more, that is why Goldsmith's anglicizing of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* flowered in the hands of the great Elizabethan dramatist who saw its comic potential. Here, for sure, was a case where translation from one language to another of a classic text had led to cultural transformation because of an eminently translatable text! Moving beyond mere "transmittal of subject matter" (ibid, 19), great interlingual translations fertilize other cultures in unpredictable and even permanent ways through such texts. As Benjamin puts it, the able translator knows that by translating creatively a resonant work from another culture, he is "allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (22).

In "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign", another classic essay of translation studies, the French translation theorist Antoine Berman observes that any work of interlingual translation has a two-fold impact: it opens up a work from another language and culture to its readers "in its utter foreignness" but it is "a trial *for the Foreign as well*" since the foreign work is "uprooted" and in exile, so to speak, reveals itself in a manner that can do violence to another language, and by extension its culture, altering it in some way or the other or affecting its language in the process" (Berman, 284, emphasis in the original). Berman goes on to quote Michel Foucault on this point, for in commenting on Pierre Klossowski's translation of the *Aeneid* into French, Foucault had felt that while some translations try to stick to the original as closely as possible and make no attempt to change anything, others "use the translated language to derail the translating language" (ibid, 285). Following Foucault, Berman seems to be suggesting that the second type of translation is particularly remarkable, for what it does is enable "the play of hypertextual transformations" ((ibid, 286). Berman is not unsympathetic to interlingual translations that try to adhere to the meaning of the original to the extent that is possible, but he is convinced that this form of translation is limited

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in its effects in comparison to the second type. As he observes in his conclusion, "translation stimulated the fashioning and refashioning of the great western languages only because it labored on the letter and profoundly modified the translating language. As simple restitution of meaning, translation could never have played this formative role" (ibid, 297). To conclude this section of my presentation then, it can be said that translation from one language to another, and by extension of the concept, from one culture to another as well, in the sense that Asad has in mind, if carried out with sensitivity and competence, can have a transformative effect on the target language and/or the reader of a recipient culture. Or to put it in the words of the Canadian scholar Kyle Conway, such translation has "the potential to open up a space for cultural Others." (Conway). Major interlingual translations of important works, it can be said, impacted on recipient cultures significantly, often transforming them in innumerable ways. Can one imagine the Shakespeare oeuvre to be what it is if he did not have access to Plutarch or Ovid? For that matter, can one imagine the European Renaissance without the massive translation undertakings of the Bible and the Greek and Latin classics? Would anthropology be the same if anthropologists had not learned from the linguistic translation of texts of other cultures to discern the cultural nuances of remote cultures and "translate" them for their circles with sensitivity and without prejudice?

## III

In his 1982 essay, "Imaginary Homelands", Salman Rushdie reminds us that etymologically "translation" means "bearing across" and then makes use of this meaning of the word in a manner that takes it out of the sphere of interlingual translation altogether and applies it to the condition of people like himself who have moved from one country and continent to another. Rushdie's claim is that "having been borne across the world we are translated men" (17). Refusing to concede that he has lost anything in the process of such cultural translation, he declares that, on the contrary, he clings "to the notion that something can also be gained" from such movement (ibid). In other words, not only the transference of a text from one linguistic sphere to another or the attempt to convey one culture to another but also migratory movements of people initiate cultural translations that can have transformative effects on them as well as the countries and languages they traverse.

In "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation", the concluding chapter of his important work, *The Location of Theory*, Homi Bhabha makes use of Salman Rushdie's essay and his novel, *Satanic Verses*, as well as Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", to take the concept of "cultural translation" out of the context created

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by anthropologists such as Asad and far, far away from interlingual translation activity. Bhabha endeavors in this chapter of his book on situating theory in a postmodern/postcolonial world to offer a take on cultural translation as something that has "transformative, postcolonial" aspects (Bhabha, 213), instancing Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verse* as an example of such occurrences. Obsessed here as elsewhere with notions such as difference, ambivalence, liminality, in-betweenness, subversion, transnationalism and hybridity in a world of increasingly dispersing subjects, he thus takes "translation" away from one of its core meanings altogether to concentrate on the conception that to translate is to convey migratory people into "a new interstitial space" and "interstitial passages" (ibid, 217). This is a space where cultural differences take place and for "diasporic identity" formations (ibid, 225). But there can be a transformative effect on the people of the recipient culture as well. This is because "the subject-matter or the content of a cultural tradition" can be "overwhelmed or alienated in the act of translation" (ibid). To Bhabha, such transformations constitute the essence of cultural translation. Endorsing Rushdie's *Satanic Version* as an embodiment of all these qualities, he finds it an excellent contemporary fictional example of the phenomenon.

At one point, Bhabha even declares that Rushdie's fictionalization of cultural translation in his novel was taken straight out of Walter Benjamin as interpreted by Derrida, and that the German theorist's lines on the "after-life" of translated texts nuanced by the French one had had a formative influence on *The Satanic Verses*. Totally indifferent to the fact that Benjamin's comments were made only with an eye to interlingual translation, Bhabha declares, and I will now quote him at length:

> Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication. It is language *in actu (* Actionality, positionality) rather than language *in situ* (*enonce,* or positionality). And the signs of translation continually tell, or "tolls" the different times and spaces between cultural authority and its performative practices. The "time" of translation contains in that *movement* of meaning… (Bhabha, 228).

Here is as radical a use of the concept of translation as can be imagined, for even if one meaning of the word is to be borne across, who would have imagined such a drastically rethought application of the word?

It is not surprising that such a twist given to the concept of translation would raise quite a few eyebrows among critics and theorists, either working in translation studies or cultural theory. One of the earliest critics to register his reservation about the "migrant" turn Bhabha had given the notion is Harish Trivedi. In a caustic review of the evolution of the rise of cultural translation thus

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conceived in his 2007 paper, "Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation", Trivedi traces recent developments in theory that had been taking the idea of translation away from traditional usages at the postmodern/postcolonial juncture where critics such as Bhabha thrive. Trivedi observes that because of such developments translation is no longer being viewed by a new generation of theorists as a "transaction between two languages, or a somewhat mechanical sounding act of linguistic 'substitution' as [J.C.] Catford had put it," and was becoming "rather a more complex negotiation of cultures" (Trivedi, II). Implying that cultural translation thus conceived is a "stray" "beast" that has evolved like a deviant strain from what translation had meant over centuries, Trivedi falls only a little short of denouncing it and Bhabha's version of it totally. It is almost as if Trivedi feels that Bhabha is like Bacon's Pontius Pilate, who, we can all recall, asked "What is Truth?" and would not stay for an answer. Trivedi insinuates that Bhabha's radical swerve from what translation meant to most people over the ages and the deliberate imprecision of his notion of cultural translation have had a negative influence on subsequent theorists, for example, Tejaswini Niranjana in *Siting Translation*. In fact, as he comes to the conclusion of his critique, Trivedi notes how the word was being bandied about after Bhabha by novelists such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Hanif Kureishi in self-serving ways. Quite facetiously, Trivedi writes,

> One wonders why "translation" should be the first word of choice in a collocation such as "cultural translation" in this new sense when perfectly good and theoretically sanctioned words for this new phenomenon, such as migrancy, exile or diaspora are already available and current. But given the usurpation that has taken place, it may be time for all good men and true, who have ever practiced literary translation, or even read translation with any awareness of it being translation, to unite and take a patent on the word "translation," if it is not already too late to do so (IV).

But Trivedi is not alone in registering his disapproval about cultural translation thus conceived and its sudden trendiness. The Austrian scholar Birgit Wagner, for example, is even more abrasive than Trivedi in her critique, "Cultural Translation: a Value or a Tool: Let's Start with Gramsci", about what she calls sarcastically "the sometimes inflationary use of the t-word inside and outside of academia". She suggests explicitly that we view such "metaphorical uses of the term" suspiciously (1). Instead, she focuses on the translation theory and practice of Antonio Gramsci, finding it far more salutary where thinking about the relationship between culture and translation is concerned. She notes that the Italian Marxist wrote about the concept of translatability and worked on translations from Russian and German texts into Italian regularly while in prison. For him then some texts had to be translated as faithfully as possible while others had "to be 'culturally

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translated', that is, adapted to the horizon of a special community of readers" (Wagner, 4-5). Gramsci felt that in the case of some texts the translator has to anticipate the "reader's intellectual horizon and her possible reading habits" (5). This, to Wagner, is "an attitude that encourages cultural translation" (5) in the ideal manner but is far from the kind of ambivalent attitude disseminated by the likes of Bhabha. Wagner feels that Bhabha had taken the term across a "metaphorical threshold" and away from interlingual translation in a manner that suggests to her a "lack of conceptual clarity" (ibid) in his thinking. She notes regretfully that in recent decades the term was being applied to "linguistic and extra-linguistic phenomena like media-bound representation, values, patterns of thinking and modes of behaving; in other words, various kind of practices that travel from one cultural context to another and by doing so undergo processes of meaning-shifting, or rather: of an extension of meaning, insofar as they acquire a double meaning" (ibid, 6). Wagner would rather restrict the term to the way Gramsci conceived it when he considered the "translatability of texts" as a key factor in minimizing differences and bridging cultures, a procedure not unlike that advocated by Asad for cultural anthropologists. To Wagner, Gramsci's constructive approach to cultural translation amounts to "an attitude of sharing and *not*, as Homi K. Bhabha would have it for his understanding of cultural difference, a synonym for the staging of difference" (Wagner, 9). Adopting such a perspective requires in the cultural translator the quality of empathy, for without it cultural translators are vulnerable to vendors of "globalization" and can always be put at the "service of marketing strategies" (11).

Cultural translation in its essence for Wagner then is translation undertaken out of commitment to intercultural communication, as is also the case with Asad. She is willing to give the term more space than Trivedi who implies that he would like to have the word 'translation" to be limited to interlingual work, but like him she decries the intentional imprecision of the concept in Bhabha's use of it. Her paper is also valuable because of its warning about how the term can be used to further the project of globalization when used loosely and uncritically, that is to say, either with some amount of unintended slippage, or intentionally as a means of promoting empire, which is to say, buttressing current manifestations of imperialism.

Nevertheless, Bhabha's position, as is indicated by Trivedi and Wagner, was endorsed by quite a few critics and thinkers in the decades that have passed after it was written in the early 1990s to climax *The Location of Cultures*. A case in point is Boris Buden who in his 2006 paper "Cultural Translation: Why It Is Important and Where to Start with It" gives his approval to a concept that he finds strategically useful when pitted against identarian discourses, essentialist claims, and superficial concessions given to people of other cultures under the pretext of multiculturalism by purveyors of overarching cultures as the German one he is a part of. Like Bhabha, Buden sees

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cultural translation as an outcome of deconstructionist strategy given to subversion and recognition of difference in cultural relations. Like Bhabha, too, Buden finds inspiration in Benjamin's recognition of the afterlife of translated texts, and like Bhabha, once again, he interprets the great German theorist's ideas about translation in his own way, indifferent to Benjamin's use of the concept in the very specific and limited context of interlingual translation. What Buden finds inspirational in Benjamin is the idea of the immigrant being given space to thrive in a postmodern/postcolonial "third space" that enables "newness to enter the world" (Bhabha title). Thinking exclusively of the immigrant at this point, and enlisting the British theorist Judith Butler in the final stage of his argument, Buden finds in "cultural translation" the space needed for what she has called elsewhere "the return of the excluded" (Buden, 4). Following Bhabha and Butler, this is what Buden would call "cultural translation"! But as before, is this not a case of special pleading and does it not make such translation entirely a matter of immigrants adapting to a new cultural environment? In other words, is not this an impoverishment of the word?

However, there have been more meaningful variations in the use made of the concept by theorists, scholars and critics who have chosen to follow the line pursued by Bhabha where cultural translation is seen entirely as something related to any dispersed population adjusting in a world that is new to them. A case in point is the work of the American scholar of Slavic Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Iowa, Tomislav Z. Longinovec. In "Fearful Asymmetries: A Manifesto of Cultural Translation", Longinovec somewhat ingeniously compares the translation of cultures to alchemy, since to him it is "to be imagined as a secret formula which enables the movement from one state to another, with the increase in the value of the original" (5). This comment in some way echoes Rushdie who, as was noted above, pointed out that there is gain as well as loss for cultural migrants, particularly the creative ones among them. Writing soon after the traumatic moments of 9/11, Longinovec clings to hope for the "new entity" that can result from cultural translation, since he believes that it enables transformation of the kind that can open "up a space of the national in-between, the gold of hybrid and mobile identities amidst the current catastrophes of war and terror" (5). Clearly influenced by Bhabha's postmodernist/postcolonial take on the concept, Longinovec underscores its potential for enabling a diasporic intellectual like himself to leave behind the scars of domineering and disruptive ideologies and to enter a brave new world of accelerated encounters with cultural others. He sees cultural translation as dialogic for those poised for "hybrid performances" and "'in-between encounters'" (ibid) in intellectual and creative endeavors. The outcome can be cross-fertilization in the field of knowledge that results in the "emergence of new forms of thought in the humanities and social sciences" (6). It is nevertheless clear that Longinovec has really in mind his own experience of conveying concepts from "lesser-taught foreign languages" to dominant ones. He stresses the importance of the

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intersemiotic crossings that can ensue, suggesting that they are welcome consequences of cultural translation (Jakobson, 114).[v]

While Longinovic seems to have found a major source of inspiration in Bhabha's text, he does not wander away completely from interlingual translation as the latter did. His optimism is that of someone who thinks positively about cross-cultural hybridization, but his ultimate parameters still seem to be interlingual translations of texts. In other words, it is translation as we normally think of it but related to the migrant, diasporic, or hybrid or "translated' intellectual that is the locus of Longinovic's speculations in his essay. Benjamin is clearly in his mind at one point when he emphasizes the afterlife of the translated text and he is sensitive too to the trial of the foreign, but Longinovic concentrates mainly on the way identities can be altered by the work of cultural translators in hybrid zones. He suggests that, "the reshuffling" between the original and translation by displaced intellectuals can lead to "movements of culture that disrupts the silence of the nation" (10) This is why he salutes the possibility of "endless translation" and finds in it a way of upsetting the hegemony of a domineering culture or a language and sees it as a means to for what he calls, "meaningful but fearful asymmetries" (12). For him interlingual translations from foreign languages are instrumental in enabling larger cultural formations. He is clearly appreciative of the multilingual intellectuals who play a large part in such formations. True, at times Longinovic appears to be talking of cultural translation as if it was only a matter of hybridity created by migration in the way Bhabha did, but more often than not he has in mind the benefits of opening up to other cultures through translations and the transformation of cultures that translation activity can achieve, whether that activity is intralingual, interlingual, or intersemiotic.

Let me now discuss Robert J. C. Young's "Cultural Translation as Hybridisation" as a final instance of how Bhabha's ideas have been stimulating those thinking about the concept. What Young takes up for discussion from Bhabha's essay in his paper is the nature and possibilities of cultural translation in contact zones. In some ways Young goes a little further down the road opened by Bhabha as did Longinovic since he sees it as a "means for thinking about the ways in which cultures are transported, transmitted, reinterpreted and re-aligned through local languages." He finds the concept particularly valuable for appreciating the way migrants come into contact with other cultures in "contact zones" (156). He wonders about the impact of cultural translation on languages as well as individuals in such zones and is also interested in the way culture can be translated through interlingual work. Admitting that there was always something nebulous in its initial conceptualization and its projected afterlife since a culture cannot of course be translated like a text, he is for finer discriminations in its usage.

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Young points out, nonetheless, that Bhabha sought a new direction for cultural translation by reversing Asad's ideas, for while the anthropologist was interested in "translating remote cultures to western ones" inspired by the experience of interlingual translators, Bhabha is all for immigrants "translating" their culture "*into* that of the host community" (ibid, 157, emphasis Young's). Aware of Trivedi's reservations about such an appropriation of the word, he declares that translators themselves have been proclaiming that they render cultures as well as texts from one language into another. Young notes that Bhabha's ideas have been taken up by scholars working in a traditional discipline such as Sociology as well as an emerging one such as Migration Studies. Young invokes the dialogicity of the concept and the commitment to cultural cross-fertilization and transformation that it implies. He is ready to concede, however, that pushed too far the concept is still vulnerable to Trivedi's criticism, for then "cultural translation is no longer translation as such but a loose metaphor exchangeable with a list of other concepts relating to mixture [sic] that are all recklessly admitted to each other" (ibid, 163). Nevertheless, the idea of cultural translation is a valuable one for Young for he thinks of it as a means of promoting "syncretic, hybrid, cultural mish-mashes" (164). Here we are back with a vengeance to Bhabha's ideas and once again, we cannot help but wonder: is this not special pleading? Is not Young, like Bhabha and Buden before him, appropriating the dominant meaning of "translation" and reserving it exclusively for the travails of diasporic people in a manner that is problematic, for should not the word be about conveying texts, linguistic or not, from one place to another, and are we not getting stuck in only the host one, and overcommitting ourselves to a special group of people, albeit a vulnerable one, that is to say, the migrant community, and concentrating exclusively on its exchange with the members of the host community and diasporic afterlives in such a case? Bhabha and those who pursued his path see translators as those who convey meaning across cultures and cultural translation as a matter of facilitating exchanges between cultures, are they not moving down a one-way street and downplaying cross-cultural connections in all directions in their emphasis on immigrants in the west?

To be fair to Young, later in his argument he also defines "translation as a technique of transmission which enables mediation on a universal basis while at the same time allowing individual languages to retain their own particularity, including perhaps their own elements of untranslatability" (Young, 166). Here is a route that leads back to Benjamin and even further back to another pioneering thinker of translation studies, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and away from Bhabha . [vi]After all, these German theorists of translation had implied that its ultimate goal is the enrichment of the source language in the sense that because of what has been conveyed from it, it can no longer remain in isolation. To quote Young on the point: "the translation, instead of rendering the source language perfectly into the 'target' language, transforms the target language

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so that it begins to read like the original source" (166). This is true cross-fertilization, and this is as cultural translation should be positioned, in "a two-way street" where exchanges take place freely between cultures and benefits are dispersed eventually to the source culture as well as the target one. As George Steiner noted in his classic 1975 study of translation, *After Babel*, "The original text gains from the orders of diverse relationship and distance reestablished between itself and the translations. The reciprocity is dialectic: new 'formats' of significance are initiated by distance and by contiguity" (Steiner, 189). Granted, there is some amount of idealism in such a view, but such idealism about the circular movement initiated by any act of translation is surely desirable.

**IV**

Cultural translation, it can now be emphasized, like interlingual translation, has always had a utopian dimension. This is also to say that such translation, as Steiner implied by titling his book *After Babel*, was not only inevitable but also desirable because of the dispersion of races and diversity of languages and cultures and the eventual proliferation of nations produced by history and geography. As the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur observes, while there was "scattering and confounding" there always was and there always will be translation, despite or because of such differences (18). Theorists of translation like him have often agreed that from one point of view translation is impossible and translators commit themselves to unavoidable losses and chances of betrayal since absolute equivalence is only for the delusive and huge risks must be and are taken that do not always bring the targeted dividends. But most of them also agree that it is a task that has to be to be taken up despite everything that may vitiate it; as Ricouer observes, after all, it is a "thing to be done" so that "human action", and one can add, interaction, can "simply continue" (19). The perfect translation and optimum cultural communication may be a consummation devoutly to be wished for than realized, but desire for it should be written into any agenda of cross-cultural relationships.

An excellent discussion of the utopian element in translation is to be found in Jose Ortega Y Gasset's "The Misery and the Splendor of Translation" where the Spanish philosopher stages an imaginary colloquium to address the following question: is "translating…. necessarily a utopian task" (49)? He sets out to answer it by saying that the human race is utopian by inclination since humans instinctively aim for goals that may never be fully achieved. Translation is a particularly onerous task that humans take on themselves out of utopian aims, but while "the bad utopian… thinks that because it is *desirable*, it is possible", the "good utopian… thinks that *because* it would be desirable to free men from the divisions imposed by languages, there is little probability that it

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can be attained; therefore, it can only be achieved to an approximate measure" (53). Translation can never conquer elements that a culture has that are distinctive, but "a possible marvelous aspect of the enterprise of translating" is to reveal a world of infinite human differences even as translators gesture at "an audacious integration of Humanity" (57) and reveal these differences as not absolutes. A great translator takes one away from one's language and culture and allows one to enter the orbit of another language, culture and civilization through a "voyage to the foreign" that also enables a return to the orbit of the originary planet in what Steiner has called the "hermeneutic motion" and that is ultimately immensely enlightening. Therefore, translation activity carried out on a gigantic scale as the Europeans did of the Greco-Roman classics of antiquity" during the renaissance "is absolutely necessary" (ibid, 61) for integrated education of peoples.

In "Translation, Community, Utopia" Lawrence Venuti shows how a culture domesticates a foreign text in translating it, thereby suggesting another way in which translation activity attempts to bridge cultures and undo the damage done in human relations because of Babel. Venuti declares unequivocally that "motivated by the ethical politics of difference, the translator seeks to build a community with foreign cultures, to share an understanding with and of them and to collaborate on projects founded on that understanding, going so far as to allow it to revise and develop domestic values and suggestion" (469). Like Steiner and Y Gasset, Venuti feels that translation activity completes a circle since the impossible attempt to overturn the consequences of Babel is in the end enriching for human understanding taken as a whole. To quote Venuti, "a translation can also create a community that includes foreign intelligibilities and interest, an understanding in common with another culture, another tradition" (477). This, inevitably, is an imagined community at the outset and that is the utopian dimension that his title gestures at. Venuti adapts not only Benedict Anderson but also the Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch's "theory of the utopian function of culture" to explain how despite the inevitable "asymmetry between the foreign domestic cultures" (485), the domestic culture is fertilized significantly by the imaginative foray into the unknown through the medium of translating, interlingual or otherwise.

**V**

Moving closer to a conclusion now, let me sum up the different stages of the argument in the evolution of the concept of cultural translation and the debates and ramifications of the term that I have been tracing till now. I began, you will remember, by reproducing the three primary meanings of the word "translation" as sanctioned by OED: to bear or convey from one space to another; to turn a word or a text from one language to another, and to change in form or appearance, as was Bottom's case of translation in *The Midsummer Night's Dream*. I then noted how Talal Asad linked

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the word "culture" to "translation" to describe how anthropologists attempt to convey a remote culture for their peers professionally by learning from the work of interlingual translators. Homi Bhabha and others, we saw, took the idea of bearing, indirectly perhaps from Asad, but directly certainly from Rushdie's usage, reversing its application though to suggest how migrants are "translated" or transformed in their passage to their host countries and how there is gain as well as loss in such cultural translation, although I stressed how Bhabha and those who thought like him about the issue ignored the interlingual aspects of translation totally and restricted it to hybrid happenings in diasporic space. I hope you have also got the sense from what I have said till now that more than interlingual translation is now seen as fair game in any contemporary discussion of translation; there has been a constant loosening in the use of the terms "translation" and "culture" in recent decades. Finally, I tried to make the point that there is a utopian dimension in translation and its role in inter-cultural communication, for despite the failures and half-successes that are legend in the history of translation post-Babel translators have been endeavoring to bridge languages and cultures over the centuries, enriching them and facilitating cross-cultural communication in doing so. Indeed, their efforts have often been enhancing the value of the original as well as the translation because of the afterlife of their feats of translation. I have also emphasized, following Steiner, that there is a hermeneutic motion involved in translation, both interlingual and cultural, for people in both source cultures as well as target ones are ultimately enriched by translation activity, whether conceived strictly or loosely. You will also remember that at one point of my introductory section I had talked about the courtly audience present at the original performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who could appreciate all three meanings of translation because they had been so acculturated by their reading of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* that they would have enjoyed Bottom's transformation into an ass intertextually as well as delight in Quince's malapropism in using the "t"-word. What we can learn from them is to delight in the nuances of the word "translation" and "culture" and the semantic richness that results when the two words are put together. Certainly, a culture where translation played a major part had enriched their aesthetic appreciation immensely because of the increase in translation activity and interest in the concept in the renaissance. We can also say that major translation feats and extensive translation activity occur at paradigmatic moments of history and impact on cultures in major ways so that there is a transformation in the way people perceive the world afterwards. Or to put it slightly differently, cultural translation over time has had a dynamic that had far-reaching consequences for the world, transforming it and integrating it time and again at major junctures of history.

Interlingual and other kinds of translations have continued to impact decisively in cultural transformations that have been taking place in the centuries afterwards. Surely this was the case in

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the Bengal renaissance, when, for example, Shakespeare was translated into Bengali and the Bengali stage was transformed thereby. Rabindranath Tagore was of course one of the beneficiaries of that renaissance and his work can be situated in the context of cultural translation in any number of ways. For example, did he not bear with him concepts of drama, stagecraft and comic singing that he had viewed on his first visit to England to India and did not his first-hand exposure to English culture lead him to the comic musicals that he would write and stage on his return from England? Did he not reflect on the cultural translations of the Indian epics that he witnessed in his trip to Bali in 1927 and did he not in turn effect a cultural translation of sorts by incorporating what he saw there in the dances and craft motifs he would simulate in Shantiniketan afterwards? Do not his renderings of the poems he chose for the English *Gitanjali* reveal his intent to translate with the help of the rhythms of the King James Version of the Bible? And did not his devotional poems initiate a wave of translations throughout Europe that resulted in cultural transformation of no little intensity there, at least for a while?

Turning to popular culture in the age of mechanical reproduction we can see time and again the dynamic of cultural translation in extra-lingual spheres such as the cinema where Hollywood films and song and dance numbers are being translated into Bollywood versions, as was the case with the blockbuster Hindi film of 1975, *Sholay*. Kyle Conway's 2012 paper, "Cultural Translation, Global Television Studies, and the Circulation of Telenovelas in the United States" discusses how television is a prime area of activity for some cultural translators and how a few of them are engaged in adapting telenovelas that originate in Brazil for the North American market through cultural translations. Their work, says Conway, is their "mode of participation in a semiotic economy where signs are exchanged for other signs, on a basis not of equivalence, but of negotiation" (8). In this case, the filmmakers and scriptwriters are "translators" and the television serials they produce are their versions of the Brazilian soaps.

Conway admits that this is an "expanded notion of cultural translation" and we recall Wagner's strictures against the "inflationary nature" of the concept of cultural translation when used by Bhabha and his followers that had irritated her so. No doubt my reference to Rabindranath's work as examples of cultural translation is also vulnerable in similar ways. The conclusion must be that we should use the concept with sensitivity and critical self-awareness. Another caveat is offered by Conway himself in his conclusion, for in it he strikes a "cautionary note since he is aware that "cultural translation" in its media reincarnations "can prop up and perpetuate the avatars of global capitalism" (25).

In any case, the final words on cultural translation must be that though it is a term that has come to stay for at least the time being and that it will be of manifold use to scholars working in Sociology, Migration and Cultural Studies as well as Literature and Anthropology. We need to be

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aware of its transformative potential and appreciate the manifold ways in which translation activity has conveyed cultures from one sphere to another over time. We should also note the immense possibilities of cultural translation in the age of electronic reproduction even as we should be wary of the way it lends itself to the tentacles of capital in the era of late capitalism. In a world of travelling cultures and travelling theory, in the era of digitalization and satellitisation, in the brave new world being created by the paradigmatic shifts induced by the electronic revolution, cultural translation will keep demanding our attention and we must learn to view it critically even as we endeavor to benefit from it for creative reasons and to foster cross-cultural communication. Cultural translation promises much for worldwide cultural integration, even as its manifestations make us at times wary of globalization's ways of appropriating all concepts for its colonization of the world.

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**Notes**

[i] The term is Roman Jakobson's; see his "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" in *The Translation Studies Reader*. For his "three kinds of translation": "intralingual", "interlingual" and "intersemiotic translation.. (Jacobson, 114)

[ii] See Madeleine Forey's "'Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou Art Translated!': Ovid, Golding, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *The Modern Language Review*, 93:2 (April, 1998): 321-329) and David Lucking's "Translation and Metamorphosis in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *Essays in Criticism*, 61: 137-154 for excellent discussions of Shakespeare's use of Ovid in his depiction of the "translated" Bottom.

[iii] The word is use in the sense that Birgit Wagner uses it in her essay, "Cultural Translation: A Value or a tool? Let's Start with Gramsci". 10. See further down the presentation for more on her use of the term.

[iv] Wagner considers this to be a Gramscian term although Benjamin seems to use it independently of the Italian Marxist. At least that is what I can deduce from the translation of Benjamin that I am using. But see Wagner, p.2

[v] Jakobson, however, restricts "intersemiotic translation" to "interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems" (114).

[vi] See Robert J. C. Young's reference to Sclehiermarcher on p. 166 of "Cultural translation as Hybridisation" in the context of his discussion of "foreignizing translation".

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