

Cultural Transference in Translation: A Study of the English Renderings of Jibanananda Das' "In Camp" ("ক্যাম্প")

Md. Hamidur Rahman*

Abstract

Transference is the 'implantation' of meanings of the source language into the texts of the target language. In this process, an SL (Source Language) item is used in a TT (Target Text) keeping the SL meanings intact. It may take place when the TL (Target Language) lacks the suitable equivalence of an SL item. This is predictable when culture, geography etc. are in question. Jibanananda Das, a widely read poet nowadays, has enormous capability of using strong, cultural and apparently 'unfamiliar' diction along with the thematic inclination of his poetry. These multifaceted dimensions of his poetry pose a challenge for the translators to translate them with fidelity. In other words, the complex layers of his diction compel the translators to 'borrow' words from the SL. "ক্যাম্প", translated into English by many as 'In Camp', is one of the most notable poems. It raised much criticism even during his own time, and Jibanananda Das had to write an article explaining his own standpoint against all adverse criticism. This poem, however, is replete with diction that has powerful cultural association. 'Dakhina Batas', 'Bosonter Raat', 'Hridoyer Bon', 'Romhorso', 'Horinir Daak', 'Foringey-kitey' etc. in this poem show why transference in translations is inevitable. This paper will explore the English renderings of "ক্যাম্প", and show the transferences of culture and evaluate them. Again, in translation, some equivalent words used for SL items may emotionally offer different meanings. As a result, translation of some transeemes may damage the cultural connotation of the ST. This article will also look into this issue.

Keywords: Transference, culture, translation, poetry, language.

Introduction

Though, according to Sussan Bassnett, "translation is always a rewriting of an original",¹ it does not mean only the conversion of words into another language. Only words do not make a text. With every text, there is much contribution of culture and history. She also asserts that the study of translation practice "had moved on and the focus of attention needed to be on broader issues of context, history and convention".² A good translation, therefore, ensures non-linguistic inclusion as well as manipulation of meanings of those words. While translating a text, transference of meanings should be given importance keeping the clear utterance of the context both culturally and linguistically because "clarity in understanding the source text is the key to successful translating into a receptor language".³

"In Camp" ("ক্যাম্প") is one of the much-debated poems composed by Jibanananda Das. It invited much criticism from the critics immediately after its publication in the famous little magazine *Porichoy* in 1931. Some critics attacked the poet only as part of their

* Associate Professor, Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Engineering and Technology, Qadirabad, Natore 6431, Bangladesh; E-mail: hamidur148@gmail.com

regular and habitual practice of going against him. Others did it because they lagged behind the time lived by Das. Even his diction appeared to be queer to them, not 'unfamiliar' though.

It is known that T.S. Eliot had to give explanatory footnotes to the poem "The Waste Land" to make the ideas and diction clearer and more understandable to the readers. There are a few other poems which need to be explained by their creators. Alexander Pope wrote "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" to answer the criticism made by his opponents. Jibanananda Das is the only Bangali poet who had to explain his own two poems only to defend the severe attacks of some 'prurient' critics. The byproduct of this answer or reaction, as the poet has termed it, is that the general readers have the inner meaning or the subject matter as well as the theme of the poem. Since the hidden message is clearly expounded by the poet, little scope is left to have so many layers of meanings. For this reason, while discussing the poem, a reader must keep these issues in mind. While translating this poem into a different language, what the poet himself said about the poem should also be kept in mind.

In his reaction titled "*Campe Prosonge*" ("About 'In Camp'"), Jibanananda Das asserts that he has written the poem in an easy language, in a 'common' language, but "yet there is a possibility that many will not understand the poem. In the real sense of the meaning, the poem becomes so difficult to some readers that they are accusing the poem of being obscene" (*translation of mine*).⁴ He continues:

The ultimate, constant theme that the poem upholds is the helpless theme of the life of human being, insects and grasshoppers- of all's life in general. The poem solely indicates that we are extremely helpless in the hands of creatures- and nothing else.... The poet thinks that a hunter continues his hunting all through our lives; it seems that everywhere there is an arrangement of destroying love-life-dream mercilessly.

Jibanananda Das has compared this arrangement with King Lear's assertion: "As this to wanton toys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport". The poet goes to the extreme to declare that this theme of rootlessness in this poem is 'pure and concrete'. He confidently states that Bangali readers have rarely come across the lines like "We all are like those dead deer in the moonlight".⁵

To prove that his poem is not about any 'obscene' issues, he reminds the readers of the use of 'mind's sister' that reflects Shelley's expression 'soul's sister'. "These two words," says Das, "only let the prurient hearts know how much prurient they are— as no other conscience works in them". To strengthen his argument, he recalls Robert Browning: "She was the child of his heart by day, the wife of his breast by night". His last blow is his assertion that "to a prurience, the soul of a real critic is always absent, unknown".⁶

The poet strongly asserts that the poem has nothing obscene in it. For this reason, while translating the poem, a translator must be very careful in using diction that should not connote any 'obscene' figures to the target readers. This article will evaluate the translations of this poem keeping this very information at the heart of the discussion.

Translations of the Poem

The poem has been translated into English by many translators home and abroad. For this study, translations of Clinton B Seely, Joe Winter, Fakrul Alam and Mushtaque Ahmed have been evaluated.

Limitations of the Existing Translations

Background: As stated above, Jibanananda Das was mercilessly attacked by his contemporary critics. Among them, Sajani Kanto Das, the then influential critic, was the most remarkable one. He was well-known for his hardhearted criticism against Jibanananda Das. In his article published in the literary magazine *Sonibarar Chithi*, Sajani Kanto Das accused Jibanananda Das harshly of using 'obscene' words in this poem. He also severely criticized the magazine *Porichoy* for publishing such an 'obscene' poem in the magazine which was blessed with the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Hirendranath Tagore and the like. He goes on to write: "The fact of how much severely lewd poems the magazine, which is honoured with the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Hirendranath Tagore, can publish and is still publishing has already been proved to the readers. ""*Kampe*" ("In Camp") is the absolute specimen of it. So, it is the readers who will judge them for whom the recognition and power are increasing."⁷ (*translation of mine*)

The attack was very much harsh and it affected the poet so acutely that he did not publish any poem from 1932 to 1935.⁸ However, Das could not but respond to such severe attacks.

Distortion of the Meaning of 'Ghai', the Central Diction: A translator must have the fidelity to the ST while rendering the context into TL because "translation plays a major role in shaping literary systems".⁹ Even the misinterpretation of a single word may destroy the acceptability of the whole text. This may present the source text and its author wrongly to the target readers. Since a "translator is a bilingual mediating agent between monolingual communication participants in two different language communities",¹⁰ the role of a translator (as the mediator between two different languages) is very crucial. For this reason, the meaning a translator imposes on a particular phrase/word under a particular context should faithfully be transferred to the target readers since they (target readers) are solely dependable on the translated version of the meaning.

It is obvious that the central character of the poem "In Camp" is *Ghaihorini*. This was also at the centre of Sajani Kanto's criticism. It may so happen that he did not know the meaning of the word 'Ghai', or he willingly imposed a wrong meaning on it. Unfortunately (or coincidentally), Sajani Kanto seems to be reflected in the translations of Clinton B Seely, Fakrul Alam and Mushtaque Ahmed because *Ghaihorini* becomes "a doe in heat" in the translations of the first two, and "a love-sick doe" in the translation of the last. What is the meaning of the phrase 'in heat'? According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the phrase 'in heat' means '(of a female mammal) to be in a sexual condition ready for mating'.¹¹ This is exactly what Sajani Kanto tried to say in his criticism. This translation of the phrase gives the wrong message, and this is absolutely against what Jibanananda Das wanted to convey to his readers in this poem.

Mushtaque Ahmad's translation of *Ghaihorini* as 'a love-sick doe' is very similar to that of Seely and Alam. This 'love-sick' meaning of '*Ghai*' does not go with the context. In other words, it is wrongly interpreted not only connotatively, but also denotatively. This has certainly distorted the original discourse. But the cultural connotation of the ST should have been ensured because translation "involves translating or transplanting into receiving culture the cultural framework" within which a text is embedded.¹²

Seely believes that the term *ghai* is "intelligible" because "[c]ontextually, *ghai* seems to suggest estrous, such connotation of sexual excitement making the poem rather controversial", but he does not seem to comply with this belief while translating this part of the poem. He emphasizes the 'context' because, according to him, "none knew what the word actually meant".¹³ This is not true. *Ghai* is an Assamese word which means a trap or bait. It goes with Jibananda's own explanation of the term. When a connotation is misleading, and it leads the meaning to controversy, its denotation might be chosen. It is unintelligible why Seely chose a contextual meaning that goes against the poet's own explanation of the term. Such translation of the word *Ghai* by him has strengthened the Sajani Kanto version of the poem.

However, only Joe Winter who translated *Ghaihorini* as 'decoy doe' seems to be close to the meaning of the ST because 'decoy' means trap or "something or someone used to trick or confuse other people or animals into doing something, especially something dangerous",¹⁴ which is what Das exactly meant in his poem.

Cultural Connotation in Other Expressions: Because a translation is "no longer perceived merely as a transaction between two languages, but rather as a more complex process of negotiation between two cultures",¹⁵ and "neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational 'unit' of translation",¹⁶ cultural aspects and meanings of a context should be given utmost importance. In other words, it is very important to preserve culture even if it is translated into other languages. Eugene Albert Nida aptly says, "Although a language may be regarded as a relatively small part of a culture, it is indispensable for both the functioning and the perpetuation of the culture".¹⁷ For example, some SL texts have names of particular months and occasions which have specific connotative meanings. Literal or word-for-word translation of them may pave the way to misinterpreting the text. Though *Choitro* (the last month of the Bangla calendar) is never seen to be translated as 'December' (the last month of the year), *Basanta* (a season in Bangla) is frequently translated as 'Spring'. It is needless to say that *Basanta*, *Choitro* (*Choitror Batas*) etc. should be rendered keeping their intended (SL) meanings in order to keep their cultural association with the context (ST) intact.

In the original text ("In Camp") the time of action is *Basanta*: Spring as it has already been introduced in the previous paragraph. The translation of the Bangla season *Basanta* into 'Spring', which encompasses the time from mid-February to mid-April, seems misleading. Spring is the literal translation of *Basanta*. But if the weather and its cultural connotation are considered, the season with a similar weather context in the English-speaking countries should be used as transposition of the word. There is a deep cultural connotation regarding the season *Basanta* because it is the season of moderate weather- immediately

after the winter. In Bangla, it has a romantic connotation. As it is after the season *Seet*, it has also a symbolic meaning of revival. The Spring, on the other hand, in cold countries (and particularly in England) does not go with this meaning because Spring which comprises March, April and May is “a time for sudden rain showers, blossoming trees and flowering plants”.¹⁸ Hence, Summer can be a suitable transposition because Summer, which spans June, July and August, is “generally mild and pleasant” in London.¹⁹ So, when *Basanta* becomes Spring, language is translated. But a translator should not ‘translate languages but texts’.²⁰ Moreover, “in a poem the lexical meaning of the words is one meaning; what is carried by the flow, another”²¹ and an effective transference of the meaning is “precisely what clients want and need”.²² Nida emphasizes ‘nonlinguistic’ aspects of a text saying that “the appropriate meaning of a nonlinguistic event also depends on the context of who does what, when, where, and for what reason”.²³ In this connection, transparency, in other words, the target readers, should get priority and *Basanta* should be translated into Summer. However, foreignization²⁴ can be a better alternative because “Foreignization... reflects the SL norms and reminds the target culture readers that they are dealing with a translation, thus in some ways bringing them closer to the experience of the foreign text”.²⁵ So, keeping *Basanta* as ‘*Basanta*’ in the translated text is safer because this process will ‘bring’ the target readers ‘closer’ to a foreign culture. Berman seems to be more direct in this context: ‘the properly ethical aim of the translating act is receiving the foreign as foreign’.²⁶

Jibananada Das, in a letter to Buddhadeva Basu, also gave arguments in favour of foreignization. He asserts that the names of trees and rivers along with the months should not be translated:

If you change “Paus” into “December”, then are you going to change “Magh” (O Kokil of Magh Night) into “January”? Let the foreign readers learn that *Paus* and *Magh* are our winter season; let their ears get accustomed to our rivers, seasons, and various other things. Later they can make the connections.²⁷

He suggests that footnotes, instead, can be inserted in such cases to clarify the Bangla words/phrases, or give the meanings of them. He seemed to be very practical indeed. It can easily be assumed that he was not acquainted with the term ‘foreignization’ which is used by the translation experts now, after 1995. But he had the idea of foreignization.

In the text (“In Camp”), the phrase *Chaitrer Batas* has been translated into “April breeze”²⁸ by Seely and “spring breeze”²⁹ by Alam, whereas “*Chaitra’s* breeze”³⁰ by Winter. In the first two translations, the fidelity in translation has distorted the connotative meaning of the ST. By maintaining foreignization, Winter seems to keep the contextual meaning intact. Similarly, *Bosonter Raat* should not be translated word-for-word as ‘spring night’ (by Seely and Alam), or ‘night of Spring’ (by Winter and Ahmed).³¹ This translation of the phrase has also changed its cultural connotation as it has already been discussed.

The word *Mreeto* (dead) is translated into ‘slain’ by Seely.³² The context of the poem or, to a larger context, the hunting of stags, does not assert that they were ‘slain’ on the spot. It is true that the stags were ‘killed’; but how it happened is not stated directly. ‘Slay’ and ‘kill’ are synonymous, but their connotations are very different: ‘slay’,

according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, means 'to kill sb/sth in a war or a fight' whereas 'kill' means 'to make sb/sth die'.³³ There are possibilities of killing the stags by slaying, or by piercing their hearts with a spear or any other weapon. In this context, 'dead' is a safer translation, which is done by both Alam and Winter.

Dokhina Batash is another instance in the context of the Indian Subcontinent. This wind symbolizes the fresh weather, the clear sky and the moderate temperature, and therefore, it is a periphrasis that indicates the season Spring. Thus, it has its cultural connotation with ease and comfort. All translators have used the word 'southern' or 'south' to mean *Dokhina*. Since the wind in England flows "generally from the west and south-west for most of the year" and "in spring there is an increased incidence of winds from all directions" (Climate and Meteorology), the 'southern wind' does not give any special information to the target readers. The translations of the poem, because of personal shift and other domestic reasons, are replete with such issues.

Conclusion

In the chapter "Viewing Bangla Literature" Seely says, "Jibanananda [is] engaged in the act of viewing and then creating for us, through a text, [his] view of reality- not all reality but some portion of it".³⁴ It indicates that the ideas about the world around him is translated into verbal language. And since "Culture has ... been linked with language", interlingual translation demands more care. Mukherjee also invites the concerned to think of 'cultural inwardness'.³⁵ By this she wants the translators to become "aware of the culture and the social context of the literature on which we might comment as critics, and that we be aware of how the literature in question is viewed by Bengali critics and readers".³⁶ According to Bassnett, "the translator is involved in complex power negotiations".³⁷ If this is the case, a translator must seriously think of the cultural connotation of a text when they translate it. The questions "about ideology, ethics and culture" are also expected to be at the heart of any interlingual translation.³⁸

It is true that the writer's conscious and/or unconscious incorporation of words/phrases connected deeply to any cultural issue will be different from the understanding of the same expressions by the translators. This is more acute in the case of a translator who is from the TL. House also asserts that "the poet who is viewing his own cultural world and writing about it, and what Said calls the "Orientalist," who is viewing a culture not his own and writing about that... are not comparable".³⁹ Hence, difference is inevitable. But when differences are prone to creating misunderstanding about the ST, and imparting a wrong message about the source author, things related to the issues should be handled with more caution even if it is through foreignization. Moreover, in order to make a translation acceptable to both the author and the target readers, a translator should give equal emphasis on "both source and target cultural signs".⁴⁰ Unfortunately, some translations of "In Camp" lack the judicious diction which is essential to make the text faithful to the author and transparent to the target readers. It is unfortunate that through some translations of the poem, Jibanananda Das has been presented imperfectly to the English-speaking communities. It is expected that any endeavour to translate Jibanananda Das may take the issues discussed above into active consideration in future.

Notes and References

- ¹ Susan Bassnett. "Culture and Translation" in *A Companion to Translation Studies* edited by Piotr Kuhiwezak and Karin Littau. (Bristol: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2007), p. 14.
- ² Bassnett, p. 14.
- ³ Eugene Albert Nida. *Contexts in Translating*. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), p. 3.
- ⁴ Jibanananda Das. *Jibanananda-Rachanabali, Vol-IV* (Dhaka: Oitijhya, 2017), p. 647.
- ⁵ Das, p. 647
- ⁶ Clinton B Seely. *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954)* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), p. 108.
- ⁷ Abdul Mannan Syed. *Shuddhatama Kobi* (Dhaka: Pathak Shamabesh, 2011), p. 372.
- ⁸ Jadob Chowdhury. "Kampey: Jibanananda Das: 125". www.bangla-kobita.com. nd. Retrieved on 15.8.2022.
- ⁹ Bassnett, p. 13.
- ¹⁰ George Steiner. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 45.
- ¹¹ A S Hornby. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 602.
- ¹² Lorna Hardwik. *Translating Words, Translating Cultures*. (London: Duckworth, 2000), p. 22.
- ¹³ Seely, p. 101.
- ¹⁴ *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 363.
- ¹⁵ Jeremy Munday. *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 179.
- ¹⁶ Bassnett, p. 8.
- ¹⁷ Nida, p. 13.
- ¹⁸ "Weather". study-uk.britishcouncil.org/why-study/about-uk/weather. nd. Retrieved on 20.12.2022.
- ¹⁹ "Weather and Seasons". londonperfect.com/plan-your-trip/practicalinformation. nd. Retrieved on 20.12.2022.
- ²⁰ Nida, p. 3.
- ²¹ Joe Winter Winter, Joe. *Jibanananda Das: Naked Lonely Hand*. Translation (Dhaka: Journeyman Books, 2020), p. 17.
- ²² Nida, p. 2.
- ²³ Nida, 14.
- ²⁴ "A term used by Venuti (1995) to designate the type the translation in which a TT is produced which deliberately breaks the target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original" in Mark Shuttleworth and Moira Cowie. *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 59.
- ²⁵ Munday, p. 189.
- ²⁶ Antoine Berman, 'Translations and the trials of the foreign', in L. Venuti (ed.) (2004) *The Translation Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 297.
- ²⁷ Seely, p. 244.
- ²⁸ Seely, p. 19.
- ²⁹ Fakrul Alam. *Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems with an Introduction, Chronology, and Glossary*. Translation (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2015), p. 33.
- ³⁰ Winter, p. 43.
- ³¹ Mushtaque Ahmed. *Gleanings from Jibanananda Das*. Translation (Dhaka: Adorn Publication, 2018), p. 35.
- ³² Seely, p. 23.

³³ Hornby, p. 1210.

³⁴ Clinton B Seely. *Barisal and Beyond: Essays on Bangla Literature* (New Delhi: DC Publishers, 2008), p. 165.

³⁵ Juliane House. *Translation: the basics* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 47.

³⁶ Seely. *A Poet Apart*. p. 167.

³⁷ Bassnett, p. 14.

³⁸ Bassnett, p. 14.

³⁹ House, p. 166.

⁴⁰ Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere (eds). *Translation, History and Culture* (New York: Pinter, 1990), pp. 11-12.