



ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE TRANSLATIONS OF KALIDASA'S ABHIJNANASAKUNTALAM

Dr. T.Devika

Assistant Professor of English

ADM College for Women (Autonomous)

(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)

No.1, College Road, Velippalayam, Nagapattinam - 611 001

Tamil Nadu.

Email: saidevika2106@gmail.com

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Abstract: There are mainly seven texts attributed to Kalidasa. He composed two Mahakavyas i.e. epics, the Raghuvamsa and the Kumarasambhava; two Khandakavyas i.e. lyrics, the Ritusamhara and the Meghaduta; and three natakas i.e. plays, the Malvikagnimitram, the Vikramorvasiyam, and the Abhijnanasakuntalam. The play Abhijnanasakuntalam has a world-wide appreciation and is universally acclaimed as the best creation of Kalidasa. The seven-act play portrays the passionate love between the king Dusyanta and Shakuntala, the daughter of a celestial nymph, Menaka and sage Viswamitra. The plot of the play is based on the Sakuntalopakhyana of the Adiparva of the epic Mahabharata. In the epic, Dusyanta, during his hunting expedition comes to the hermitage of sage Kanva and has relished the company of Sakuntala. He falls in love with Shakuntala and wants to marry her according to the Gandharva ceremony of marriage. Sakuntala agrees to marry him on the condition that her son would become the heir of the kingdom. They marry and the king leaves for his kingdom. After nine years, Sakuntala and her son Sarvadamana comes to the palace of the king. But the king out of the fear of the people refuses to accept her. In the meantime, a divine voice is heard that Shakuntala is the married wife of Dushyanta and therefore he should accept her.

Keywords: Kalidasa, play, Abhijnanasakuntalam, Sakuntala, marriage, culture, translation

From William Jones to Mani Rao, Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* in English translation travels a long way highlighting several changes at the linguistic and cultural level, and also change in the approach of the translators. It will be naïve to assume translation as a purely linguistic act rather it involves issues that are determined by the cultural and linguistic determinants. The analysis of socio-cultural positioning of the translators: colonial, nationalist, post-nationalist and globalization

phases, thus point to translational endeavors through which prevalent norms, social and cultural constraints, and the resulting translational behavior will impact the work of the translation.

Translation is a complex political act involving a play of power and dominance. It creates as well as reinforces the dichotomies such as the self and other, and dominant and subordinate. It is a linguistic activity involving an intercultural transfer of ideas from one language to another that involves a cultural reconstruction. The political appropriation of translation became evident during the period of British colonization. During colonialism, it was used to domesticate the Orient. Thus, it was associated with hegemony, colonial expansion, and oppression as well as access to power and the knowledge of the Orient. Orientalist translators projected translation as a humanistic endeavor rendered to patronize the Orient and to save the Oriental literature from oblivion but the translation of Oriental texts contributed to the consolidation of British colonization.

Orientalists used translation as a strategy to domesticate, understand and control the Orient. It was used for demolishing the native languages and cultures so that the culture of the colonizers can be flourished. The translations of the Eastern texts by Europe need to be studied by taking into consideration the ideology and politics of colonialism. The European attempt to study the Orient involves a misrepresentation of the culture of the Orient. “The colonizer is less curious about the culture of the colonized and more concerned about asserting what he believes to be the appropriate culture of them” (Thapar 235). The Orientalists used the knowledge produced by the translated texts to appropriate, rule and manage the Eastern colonies. The knowledge produced was appropriated and distributed to justify their rule.

The translations of *Abhijnanaśakuntalām* by the European translators William Jones and Monier Monier-Williams come under the ethnographic projects. They stressed the significance of studying the Oriental discourse and translations for the effective administration of India. The ambition and curiosity to know about the Eastern world led them to translate the play. The text served as a document to study the culture of the people and geography of the place with a view to controlling India. Their translations were part of the colonial project that was undertaken under the pretense of refinement. The aesthetic worth of the text was neglected so much that:

the appreciation of poetry takes second place to practical ways of making society more functional. A controlled culture was a safe area where the colonizer and colonised could meet—controlling the culture of the colonised was a form of inventing a new

way of perceiving and using that culture. (Thapar 235)

The selection of the text helped them to use the strategy of domestication. *Abhijnanaśakuntalām* comprises sensuous, colourful and concrete imagery depicting the Hindu culture and tradition. The West perceived the world presented in the drama as the exotic and unknown world that needed European colonial control to civilize them. The drama depicts the concepts of Indian values, the Brahminical culture, ascetic life, womanhood and astrology that were prevalent in Kalidasa's period. In this context, Romila Thapar argues:

The colonial uncovering of India's past was motivated by curiosity about its earlier culture and equally by the fashioning of its form to suit the requirements of the colonial policy. The primary interest was therefore in the codes that governed Hindu society and its religious texts. Creative literature was something of an aside. (*Revisiting Abhijnanasakuntalam* "Foreword" xvi)

William Jones used the high cultural values of the play to convey a feeling of the Indian mystique. The protagonists were transformed to suit his purpose; for instance, Dushyanta was made to represent the colonial powers that wanted to colonize the land and the female body. The character of Dushyanta was explored as a dominant and refined monarch encapsulating in himself all the political characterization of the colonial West. Kalidasa's Shakuntala was a "child of nature," but Jones transformed her as a "rustic girl," the "feminine east," that lacked a voice. Like the East, her modesty was misrepresented as eternal, uniform and incapable of defining itself.

Shakuntala is portrayed as a savage beauty representing the negative cultural traits attributed to the Orient. The play was reworked by him with a stereotypical idea in the mind that the East is the cultural Other of the West. Thus, in his attempt, he was guided by political exigency rather than aesthetic contentment. His translation can be called as rewriting of *Abhijnanaśakuntalām* with a colonial framework. Like Jones, Monier Monier-Williams too translated the play to draw inferences and knowledge about Indian culture and its customs. Thus aesthetic merit of the play was marginalized over the content of the play. His agenda behind the translation was to make the Sanskrit text palatable to the European readers. He presented himself as a humanitarian translator who had transformed the text according to the Western taste and sensibility. His translation expressed his contempt for Kalidasa, whom he referred to as earthly and savage. The spiritual life and Hindu customs presented in the play were reconceived as an oblivious and orthodox way of life. The translation of *Abhijnanaśakuntalām* became the representative of the East. Monier Williams

reinvented the play which was intended to endorse the view that the rational hands of the West are required to refine the uncivilized and savage East.

These translations prove that translation is not an innocent act as it deeply involves the operations of power. These translators projected their own fantasies on “the Orient.” The East which was rich in religious, artistic, spiritual and philosophical terms could share its cultural heritage with Europe which was out of touch with its spiritual and religious bearings. These translators translated the Sanskrit text with a partial and imperfect understanding of the original play, its writer Kalidasa, the age and culture that it represented. Their prefaces to translations explicitly expressed their racial prejudice and Xenophobia. They overlooked the poetic craft of Kalidasa and were also unsuccessful in their attempts to understand the cultural and linguistic utterances of the original text. The liberty they took with the original served as evidence of the insignificance they gave to Kalidasa and how they considered his poetic craft untrained and unrefined. They were so focused on historical, topographical and archaeological details contained within the text, that they ignored the poetic worth of the text.

These translations manifest an intentional „political“ shift as instead of colonial ideology, the nationalist ideology becomes prevalent but like the Orientalist translators, they also endorse Indian spirituality and thus in a way carry forward the Orientalist images of India as a land of mysticism. Scholarly, “faithful” and literal version of M. R Kale in a way freed Kalidasa from the Orientalist misinterpretations and redeems the play from the alien Shakespearean and Biblical mold. Versions by C. R Devadhar, N. G Suru, and Bela Bose attempt to provide a nationalist understanding of the play as a story of Aryan India, its culture and tradition, and hence the way in which people of India are related to their tradition and past. They were so focused on endorsing the historical facts, cultural identity and nationalist details contained within the text, that they ignored the poetic value of the text. These translations are of not much literary worth as they are not much concerned about the aesthetic and creative merit of their translation. These translations are not disinterested endeavour and manifest political inclination as they endorse the tenets of Indian nationalism. However, Indian translators who initiated the project of translating the play in the nationalist period tried to redefine themselves in their terms but they were unsuccessful in shedding the hangover of the Orientalists; for instance, Devadhar and Suru’s translation illustrates the limitations of a sub-Shakespearean Indian language in capturing the spirit of the original.

In the 1950s, nationalism gives way to modernism. During the nationalist era, Indian translators approached the play to evoke national consciousness, a sense of pride and identity and explored the

mythical Hindu past and cultural origin through the play. The concerns of independent India are quite different. P. Lal's version reflects the impact of the post-nationalist era and is influenced by the contemporary Nehruvian ideology i.e. India as a nation constituted by a secular, liberal, just and democratic social order. Thus, P. Lal reinvents the text to suit post-independence modernism.

Lal molds the play and adapted it according to the new conditions of time, space and culture in which it reappeared. He calls his effort as an act of transcreation rather than a translation as he has transformed the play to suit the modern sensibility. He provides a short, concise and pithy translation with a modernized vocabulary avoiding repetitions and archaisms of the previous versions. Although Lal liberates the text in terms of language, he carves out Shakuntala according to the still prevalent patriarchal norms: an ideal *grahini* who is obedient and oblivious of any passion and anger. Through the translation, Shakuntala becomes the representative of the Indian womanhood. The translator's ideological concern is to provide easy accessibility to the text and thus he does not give full expression to the passion and eroticism of the text which may seem offensive to the readers. He also idealizes the character of the protagonists according to the still prevalent traditional Indian values.

The translations of post-80s attempt to give a global dimension to local texts. With the advent of the globalization era, it is not just the text, its historical status, and translator but several other agents participate actively which determine its scope and readership such as consumers, readers, publishers, and institutions. Translations of the period are free from the concerns which bothered the translators of the previous eras such as fidelity to original because of the evolution of new translation theories in the post-colonial phase. These translations differ from the translations of the previous eras in terms of their innovation and experimentation. They also retain the poetic nature and the musical qualities of the verses. Moreover, translators are much cautious about their translation technique and try to convey what was missing in the previous translations. These translations celebrate the eroticism of the play as the translators are no longer bothered about its acceptance by the readers because the attitude towards love affairs and sex during the period has become more liberalized. Translators understand the Indian aesthetics of *śrngara rasa* and give full expression to the description of Shakuntala's physical body, unlike the translators of the previous eras who omitted it altogether.

These versions also articulate the impact of the women liberation movements of post-80s as Shakuntala of early India was revisited challenging the traditional patriarchy. Shakuntala is portrayed as a liberated woman who is neither sexually inhibited nor a silent sufferer of atrocities. Bold speeches of Shakuntala in the versions of Barbara Stoller Miller and Michael Coulson are true

to the subaltern spirit of the contemporary era. W.J Johnson's version in a way liberates the text by associating Kalidasa's Shakuntala with the Shakuntala from the epic Mahabharata who is far bold and assertive. He seeks to "liberate" the text not only in terms of style but also content through the version by invoking comparison and the contrast between Shakuntala of Kalidasa's and Mahabharata. Mani Rao also re-establishes the traditional role model of the self-sacrificing wife in the contemporary context. Such revisions of the text can be acknowledged as an act of looking back an old and patriarchal text from a new and liberal perspective. These renditions, in a way, offer a feminist reading of Kalidasa's play as they undercut the essentialist patriarchal reading of the play.

Re-writing in the form of translation is thus a process of engagement with renewed energies as *Abhijnanaśakuntalām ślokaś* are not frozen events of history; they keep bouncing back in new permutations. Re-writing is seen as a continuous process in which each re-written text becomes original for its successive re-writing. Through these multiple versions not only the original becomes dynamic and fluid, re-writing as an activity becomes open-ended and full of futuristic possibilities. Commenting on the relevance of multiple translations, Rao says that a "strategy so varied within itself and from previous translations is only possible because of previous translations, because of the learning of tradition with interpretive possibilities and bewilderment nicely documented" (Rao, *Gita* xi-xii).

With each turn in history, Śakuntalā of Kalidasa renews herself and takes a new avatar. While during the oriental period she becomes one of the preferred icons of a child of nature—the rustic girl, under the Gandhian influence she becomes symbolic of non-violent nationalist imagination—the iconic Bharata Mata and she emerges as an arch-symbol of the marginalized and subaltern in the postcolonial phase. Postcolonial translators appropriated her name and story about the marginalization of women in canonical texts. As she is resurrected and re-invented, she undergoes strategic cultural transformations that mirror the changing contours of culture in our times.

Translating *Abhijnanaśakuntalām* thus remains an endeavor that never received an exclusive interest of the translators. The analysis points out the socio-political dimension of the act of translation. These dimensions come into sharp focus in case the same text is translated many times and read together in a comparative frame. The multiple translations of a text, if studied together, reveal distinct ideological, sociological, religious and cultural inclinations of the translators

involved. The present work, through the study of multiple translations of Kalidasa's play, not only maps the shifting trajectories of translation of the dramatist but also raises questions about the political urgencies of translating the source text all over again. As a text travels in time, the profile of a non-native audience undergoes a change—it needs to be renewed through fresh translation. The language in which the text is translated also does not remain the same; it acquires a new vocabulary necessitating its fresh translation. A newly translated text could subvert another, even displace another, and can also at times questions all the previous translations put together.

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