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Retranslating *Agnisakshi*: A Skopos Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Agnisakshi is a famous novel written in Malayalam by Lalithambika Antaranjanam and published in the year 1976. A highly critically acclaimed work that won both the Kendra Sahitya Academy Award and Kerala Sahitya Academy in 1977, the very next year of its publication *Agnisakshi* is a novel focusing on the socio-cultural and gender aspects of the Nambuthiri brahmins of Kerala. It was translated in the year 1980 by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan and was retranslated by the same translator 35 years later in 2015, by the title *Agnisakshi: Fire My Witness*. This study explores the retranslation of the literary work *Agnisakshi* through the lens of Skopos theory, emphasizing the importance of purpose-driven translation strategies. It examines how the motivations behind retranslations influence interpretative choices and reception, highlighting the shifting cultural and contextual elements that inform the translation process.

By analysing specific examples from the original text and its retranslation, the paper investigates how the translator strategically adapts the narrative to meet the skopos, that is the purpose of retranslation, which may include updating ideological perspectives, clarifying cultural nuances, or enhancing accessibility for contemporary audiences. The findings reveal that the retranslation process, guided by Skopos Theory, serves not only to convey the core narrative but also to reinterpret and reposition *Agnisakshi* within a modern literary landscape.

Skopos theory is a translation theory that emphasizes the purpose of a translation as the most important factor in determining the translation method and strategies. According to Hans Vermeer, the proponent of this theory, "A translation is adequate if it is fit for the purpose for which it was intended." This underscores the functionality of the translation; it needs to work in its new context.

Keywords: Skopos theory, translation, retranslation, Malayalam novel, purpose-driven

1. Introduction

This paper explores the application of Skopos theory to the retranslation of Lalithambika Antharjanam's Malayalam novel, *Agnisakshi*. An English translation of the novel by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan was brought out by Kerala Sahitya Akademi in 1980. In a rare instance of self- retranslation, with 35 years between them, Vasanti Sankaranarayanan rendered a fresh translation of the same novel in 2015 with the title *Agnisakshi: Fire, My Witness*. (George & Das 2023b) It delves into the complexities of translating literary works in general and specifically focuses on this renowned Malayalam novel of Antharjanam, *Agnisakshi*. Skopos theory posits that the primary aim of translation is determined by its intended purpose or 'skopos.' This article employs this theory, which is a functionalist approach to translation, to analyse the potential strategies and considerations involved in creating a new translation of this significant work.

Skopos theory, or "Skopostheorie" in German, is a prominent concept in translation studies. The late 1970s marks the beginning of a translation theory, Skopos theory (Skopostheorie), proposed by Hans J. Vermeer (Nord, 2012, p. 26). First introduced in 1978 by Vermeer in a German journal *Lebende Sprachen*, this theory is claimed to be a "framework for a general theory of translation" (Nord, 2012, p. 27). Hans J Vermeer was a German linguist and translation scholar. He developed this theory as part of the functionalist translation theory. It essentially emphasizes that the primary factor determining a translation is its purpose, or "skopos," rather than strict adherence to the source text. It is a purpose-driven translation, i.e., the core idea that every translation has a purpose. Vermeer holds that the skopos of translation is paramount, and that it determines the translation methods and translation strategies of the translators, which is the famous skopos rule, also the central idea of Vermeer's Skopos Theory. (Yang,2020). This purpose dictates the methods and strategies employed by the translator. The "skopos" can vary widely, depending on the intended audience and the desired function of the target text. According to Vermeer, the commission is the source of the skopos of a specific translation action. A commissioner needs to state clearly the commission of the translator, including the goal and the conditions under which the goal should be achieved (including the fee and deadline). The commission is the source of the skopos of a specific translation action. (Yang, 2020) There are two other important theories in Vermeer's Skopos Theory, the intratextual coherence rule (or the coherence rule) and the intertextual coherence rule (or the fidelity rule). The intratextual coherence rule requires that the target text must be translated in such a way that it is coherent with the circumstances and knowledge of the target text receivers. The intertextual rule, also the fidelity, requires that there must be coherence between the source text and the target text. (Yang,2020) Skopos theory departs from traditional translation theories that prioritize "equivalence" between the source and target texts. It acknowledges that a "faithful" translation may not always be the most effective, especially when the target audience and purpose differ significantly from the source.

According to such theory, a source text could be translated into various versions with regard to various functions or purposes. Instead of equivalence, it pursued their destination. (Yan & Huang 2014)

The target text is considered an "offer of information" in the target culture. According to Reiss & Vermeer, Skopos theory only regards a source text as an 'offer of information' to which it will eventually be simulated, as a whole or partially, into an offer of information in a target text by taking into account the target language and culture.

Skopos theory gives translators greater flexibility to adapt texts to suit specific needs. Skopos theory has made a significant contribution to the world of translation training. Where other theorists are based on linguistics and equivalences at the micro level, Vermeer breaks the dominance through the introduction of a general framework for translation with a strong emphasis on the skopos or purpose; thus, this theory can come in handy in practices until today. Another advantage of the Skopos theory is that it does not limit the translators to what translation methods to analyse and apply for a specified translation task. (Trisnawati, 2014) to choose and apply for a specified translation task. It's particularly relevant for translations of technical, commercial, and functional texts, where the primary goal is to achieve a specific outcome.

In essence, skopos theory views translation as a purposeful act of communication, where the translator's role is to produce a target text that effectively fulfills its intended function.

This study examines how the skopos of the retranslation of *Agnisakshi* influence the translator's choices, particularly in addressing shifts in socio-cultural contexts and evolving reader expectations.

Essentially, the article moves beyond a purely linguistic comparison of source and target texts. Instead, it examines how the purpose (Skopos) of a retranslation influences the translator's choices.

It considers factors such as the intended audience, the cultural context of the target readership, and the specific goals the translator aims to achieve. By applying Skopos theory, the author explores how a retranslation can offer fresh interpretations and perspectives on *Agnisakshi*, potentially highlighting different aspects of the novel's themes and messages for a contemporary audience. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between source text, translator, and target readership, highlighting the creative and strategic decisions inherent in the act of retranslation.

To sum up, this article employs Skopos theory, a functionalist approach to translation, to analyse the potential strategies and considerations involved in creating a new translation of this significant work.

This study aims to explore the application of Skopos theory in the retranslation of the novel *Agnisakshi*, examining how the purpose of the translation shapes the strategies and methodologies used to convey cultural, thematic, and linguistic nuances. After analysing the problem and research questions, the researchers can postulate four objectives to conduct this study. The first objective is to identify and analyse the intended purpose (skopos) of the retranslation of *Agnisakshi* and how it differs from previous translations. The second objective is to investigate the specific translation strategies employed to achieve the intended purpose, considering the cultural, thematic, and linguistic elements of the novel.. The third objective is to assess how the target audience's cultural context and expectations influence the translation decisions and the reception of the translated work. The fourth and last objective is to compare the retranslation with previous translations to identify significant differences and improvements that align with the Skopos theory framework.

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1.1. Literature review

“Skopos Theory: A Practical Approach in the Translation Process” by Ika Kana Trisnawati discusses about Skopos theory as a functionalist approach to translation that emphasizes the purpose (skopos) of the target text.

“Evaluation on the Significance and Shortcomings of German Functionalist Vermeer’s Skopos Theory.” Yang, M.M. (2020) focuses on the shortcomings of this theory in a detailed discussion.

“The Culture Turn in Translation Studies” by Yan & Huang emphasizes the crucial role of culture, social context, and the translator's subjectivity in shaping translations.

“Retranslation as Re-vision and Self-Reflective Criticism: A Comparative Analysis of Two Translations of *Agnisakshi* from Malayalam to English by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan” by Chythan Ann George & Sriparna Das. This paper examines Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan's retranslation of Lalithambika Antharjanam's "Agnisakshi," highlighting the significant shift in her approach after 35 years. Unlike her initial, adulatory translation in 1980, the 2015 retranslation reflects a feminist perspective and critical engagement with the text's politics.

1.2. Research questions

The study tries to address the following questions

1. How does the application of Skopos theory influence the translation strategies and outcomes in the retranslation of the novel "Agnisakshi," ?
2. what impact does it have on the reception and interpretation of the text in the target culture?

1.3 Methodology and Data Collection

The current study adopts a qualitative approach. The data required for this study is collected from Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan’s translation and retranslation of the Malayalam novel, *Agnisakshi* by Lalithambika Antarjanam through the textual analysis method. A comparative analysis of the collected data is conducted at different aspects namely divergence, translation strategies adopted, and skopoi of the translations selected.

2. Discussions

Application of Skopos theory to the translation and retranslation of *Agnisakshi* certainly highlight the crucial role of purpose and context in shaping both these translation choices. The main source of the skopoi of these two translations are the Translator’s Note provided in both the texts. Sankaranarayanan’s first translation which was published in 1980 has the same title as that of the source text. The title was simply a transliteration into the target language, i.e., English.

In this the Translator's Note says thus "The germ of this idea was sowed in my heart when I read the first chapter of the novel in the Mathrubhumi weekly where it was being published as a serial. It made a very great impact on me. The language was unusual; the imagery stunning. It was not mere prose; I would call it poetic prose. I knew in my bone that it was going to be an extra-ordinary novel right from the start. When she had completed four or five chapters I wrote to Mrs. Lalithambika Antarjanam expressing my greatest admiration and empathy for the novel and requesting her to allow me to translate it when it was completed." "It was out of sheer feelings for the novel and the story there in that I took up this job of translating the novel." "Since a book of this type should be read and appreciated not only by people within India but outside also one has to be extremely careful about once English usage"

It is evident from these selected extracts from the Translator's Note that the skopos of the first translation is the urge developed within the translator to translate it into the target language out of the awe and admiration felt for this literary masterpiece. The translator held a feeling for the novel and its story and considered that such a great work must be popularised in a target language like English to increase its readership beyond the state and national boundaries. Hence increasing the readership beyond the language boundary was also a potentially strong skopos for the first translation.

Now moving to the skopos analysis of the second translation or the retranslation of the source text to the same target language, English, by the same translator, Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, which happened 35 years later in 2015, the following extracts from the translator's note reflect the skopos of this retranslation- "In the year 2010 when I applied for a Charles Wallace Scholarship, I had to name and describe a project which I wished to pursue. The scholarship was for the translation of an Indian-language book into English. Mini Krishnan, who has been a mentor and guide, suggested that I retranslate *Agnisakshi* (1976) by Lalithambika Antarjanam, which I had done long ago for Kerala Sahitya Akademi (1980).

At first, I did not find the idea overly thrilling. For me the challenge and enthusiasm in translation did not lie in walking a road already taken."

"Mini explained to me the advantages of translating the same book a second time. It was the only novel of an iconic Malayalam author who was no more and a classic of Malayalam literature deserved a reinterpretation through a fresh translation. It had been made into a film by the same name by the well-known director Shyamaprasad and had won the best film award from the Kerala Government and the central government. The era recalled in this book is a span of post- and pre-independent years, all together forty years which is a significant period in the history of India and Kerala in particular. It also depicted the social customs prevalent in Kerala in the early part of the 20th century especially in the Namboothiri community and came from a woman author. Two of the main characters in the novel are women, each in her own tradition trying to break away from the conservative and antiquated tradition that existed at that time to find their own freedom and to thus carve out new life for themselves. They could be called the early revolutionaries who sought female empowerment Kerala.

I began reluctantly to see Mini's point of view. Suddenly I did a 360 degree turn and felt I was destined to translate this book once again. Was it the force of Antarjanam herself called 'fate'? Now on the eve of this book going to press I feel it is a '*niyogam*' which in Malayalam means 'entrustment'. Often while I was going through the exercise of editing along with Mini who

literally forced me to reinterpret the content, I could feel the presence of Antarjanam herself requesting me to do this job. I felt that I would be honoring her charismatic presence in Malayalam literature, especially in the early women's writing of Kerala through retranslation and reinterpretation. More than a hundred years have passed after her birth and this would be a befitting gift to a generous and creative person like her.

I also feel that I am the right person to do this translation having gone to the exercise once before.”

“Apart from the literary, political, and social significance of this book, Mini felt that it would be a landmark in my translation career. When I translated the book over thirty years ago, I was a novice. Since then, the art of translation as well as my own knowledge and experience and technique have changed and developed.”

“This translation would be a commentary on the modern, ever-changing techniques of translation and experiments in it.”

“In 2011, with my new understanding of literary merit as well the political and social ideologies, I looked at the same work with a more critical eye. My attitude changed and with it my translatorial approach. I think it would be dishonest to not explain this new critical attitude to my readers, so I have tried to put into words my own estimation and analysis of *Agnisakshi* as a literary product based on this new understanding. This, I hasten to add, does not in any way diminish the importance of the book as a literary work or my admiration for the author and her work; instead, it adds a new dimension to its contents from a feminist perspective.”

Analysing the extracts from the translator’s note of the retranslation of *Agnisakshi* titled *Agnisakshi: Fire, My Witness*, it is evident that the translator has least interest in the beginning of undertaking the task of retranslating the work that was translated by the same author thirty- five years back. There is a presence of a motivator who actually lured the translator into the task of retranslation. It can be seen from the earlier extracts that the translator undertook this task in order to achieve a personal gain that is to win the chance of an academic scholarship abroad. Though the translator began the task reluctantly later she found out a lot of skopoi in this retranslation. They are:

1. *Agnisakshi* deserved a re-interpretation through a fresh translation.
2. The novel was adapted into film and had won best film award both from the Kerala Government and the central government. This had definitely increased the readership and viewership of the Malayalam novel *Agnisakshi*. Hence, an attempt to reinterpret this novel through retranslation was most welcoming and relevant.
3. The translator was able to find new perspectives that demanded reinterpretation of the novel through retranslation such as the significance of the socio-political setting of the source text, feministic connotations and gender perspectives of the novel, centenary of the birth year of Lalithambika Antaranjanam, the author of the source text and above all the knowledge and experience gained by the translator herself over the years.
4. In the retranslation, Sankaranarayan has identified the opportunity to become more critical on the backdrop of the deeper understanding of literary merit, political and social ideologies gained over the years.

3. Conclusions

The application of Skopos theory to Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan's translations of *Agnisakshi* vividly illustrates the dynamic and purpose-driven nature of translation. As evidenced by the translator's notes, the initial translation, driven by a deep personal admiration and a desire to expand the novel's readership, prioritized accessibility and emotional resonance. Conversely, the retranslation, undertaken 35 years later, was motivated by a confluence of factors: academic pursuit, the recognition of the novel's enduring literary and socio-political significance, and the translator's own evolving understanding and expertise.

The retranslation, *Agnisakshi: Fire, My Witness*, emerged from a critical re-evaluation of the source text, enriched by the translator's accumulated experience and a nuanced understanding of feminist perspectives and socio-historical contexts. This shift in skopos, from personal admiration to a deliberate reinterpretation for a contemporary audience, underscores the power of Skopos theory in elucidating the motivations behind translation choices. The study reveals that retranslation is not merely a corrective exercise, but a distinct act of communication shaped by new skopoi. The translator's initial reluctance, followed by a profound sense of *niyogam* (entrustment), highlights the transformative power of purpose in the translation process. The retranslation served as a tribute to Lalithambika Antarjanam, a testament to the novel's enduring relevance, and a commentary on the evolving art of translation itself. This analysis demonstrates that Skopos theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the intricate relationship between purpose, context, and translation. By examining the skopoi articulated in the translator's notes, we gain a deeper appreciation for the nuanced decisions that shape literary translations and retranslations, ultimately enriching our understanding of *Agnisakshi* and its enduring legacy.

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