

Dialogic Reading of African Literature in Bengali: A Study from Bangladeshi

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Abstract:

Translation is always dialogic as it requires dialogues between two different languages, cultures, texts and authors and literature is usually defined by its content and its attachment with the realities out of which it emerges, not by its language. Modern African literature has reached the international readership mostly in the English language even though French and Portuguese languages have become a very considerable media of it. Africa, with its more than two thousand languages, can be comprehensible to a huge number of monolingual, bi-lingual and multilingual readers of the world through translation in the language of the local readership. In Bangladesh the majority of readers are mostly monolingual. So, to be comprehensible to the Bangladeshi readership African literature requires to be translated into Bengali. Many prominent translators have translated and are still translating a considerable number of African literary texts. But it is noticed that the speed and impulse which are invested in translating a European or American or even Latin American literary text are not employed in translating an African literary text. It may be because of the lack of communication with African cultures and languages and the linguistic limitations to negotiate with the creoles and pidgins used in African literary texts or even colonial legacy. Besides, translation is never apolitical. It re-creates through intertextuality and negotiations between two diverse cultures and languages. Interaction today is possible to a remarkable extent through the internet and hi-speed communication media. But in a postcolonial situation in the context of neo-colonization and crony capitalism, economic realities and psychic boundaries deeply impact the process of fortification of the

dialogues between two diverse cultures, inevitable for creative translatability of these phenomena. How the translators respond to the synchronic and diachronic contexts of the source texts is important for the re-creation and at the same time authentication of the translated texts. This paper seeks to critically explore the factors related to the reading of African literature in translation dialogically in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Bilingualism, Dialogic, Heteroglossia, Dialogues, Translatability

Bangladesh is basically a monolingual country and almost all the people, with some exception of the ethnic people living particularly in the hill tracts, communicate in Bengali. English is a second language here but because of the compartmentalization of the local society side by side with the rise of corporate economy, a global phenomenon, learning of English language with a view to using it in everyday enterprises is confined to a particular class of people who, of course, financially far ahead of the majority of the people, have a firsthand exposure to international community. Besides, the nationality or national consciousness that worked behind the formation of the Bangladeshi nation is mostly based on linguistic identity. In 1952 this nation started a movement for Bengali language as its state language and subsequently this Language Movement geared up the people and led them to independence. Historically Bengali lies in the borderline between Bangladeshis and the other. For expressing internal emotions and describing external experiences especially Bengali, not any other language with significance, serves as the unique language in Bangladesh. Hence, literature in the English language has become a reading for a considerable

rably small section of readership here. In this connection, for the majority the only gateway to world literature is translation, translation from English to Bengali. African literature in English is now finding an access, though very small in quantity, in comparison with English or Latin American or American literature, into the university-curricula the average readers mostly depend on translation into Bengali. At present Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Elechi Amadi, Nuruddin Farah, Tayeb Salih and many other major African litterateurs are being read even by the average readers in translation into Bengali. The interest of the Bangladeshi readership in African literatures and cultures originates from the common fate related to the colonial hegemony and it is undeniable that "Like a great part of Bangla literature, African literature grows out of the trauma it experienced in its encounter with the colonial enterprises" (Hossain, 2022, p. 253). Besides, development of cyber technology is now enabling the Bangladeshi readership to know more literary, cultural and historical realities of Africa than before. For centuries Africa had been a construction of Europe and European narratives presented Africa with significant distortion to portray the African as subhuman beings with a view to justifying their exploitative colonial enterprises. Africa was a repository of slaves and wealth for the European colonizers. Distorted image of Africa was always being constructed by Europe to justify its exploitative mission of plundering Africa. The outer world could know about Africa only what Europe wanted to let it know. But due to the development of internet facilities, diplomatic communication and mercantile activities among the countries especially after the independence of African countries from colonial rule by 1960s, the world is now able to look at Africa through the eyes of the African authors and their narratives. As a result, African literatures and cultures have started to occupy a noticeable space in the reading of Bengali readership like many other parts of the world. Some seminal authors also have access to the curriculum of our universities. Some universities have introduced comparative literature departments and they are teaching

African literatures and cultures there side by side with Latin American, Caribbean and South Asian literatures.

True, a considerable quantity of African literature is at present available to the readers in Bengali translation. But the question arises— how far is it possible to have a taste of the essence of an African text in Bengali translation? Another question, in this connection, arises about the role of the translator. For ensuring authenticity of an African literary text in translation and evading translation into object of sentimentalization and garnering considerable attention of the readers, what should be the role of a translator? It is irrefutable that translation is a kind of re-creation and if African texts are re-created in translation, then a translator is to be immensely competent to bring about a successful negotiation between the source text and the target text because it is inevitable for ensuring an authentic comprehensibility of the ethnographic and ethnological conditions that work as stimuli behind the creation of a source text. Besides, translation is mostly influenced by the mindset of a translator and social realities with which he consistently communicates and develops dialectical affinity. In this connection, Wole Soyinka's apprehension can be rightly mentioned. He apprehends that in postcolonial situations translation may have a chance to be manipulated by the biases and racism borrowed from the colonial legacy (Dey, 2020, p. 645). But translation has got some immensely positive aspects that invite the readership to peep into the regions of meanings of the source text that may not be discovered in its original language because translation is a "transfer from one language to another [and] reveals the interdependence among languages and their various ways of expressing the same thing" (Augst, 2012, p. 132). Maintenance of this totality of meaning is a challenge for the translator. In this connection, Jaques Derrida asserts that "the translation will truly be a movement in the growth of the original which will complete itself in enlarging itself" (Derrida, 1985, p.188). As translation is a growing process it does not always follow the source text faithfully because if it is done the target text will conspicuously lose its

authenticity since the variation of languages brings about variation of ideas. This loss of authenticity obviously tells upon the source text, but at the same time it recreates the source text in the way which opens up a new dimension of meanings. In this connection, the most crucial task is done by the translator because he places himself in the juncture and negotiates between the source text and the target text and makes the readers acquainted with a new system of ideas that does not deviate the source text from the target text much. He must also ensure readers' access into the truth, that is, the true taste of source text. In this connection, a translator does this challenging job by maintaining a radical fidelity to the meanings of the source texts more than to the individual works. Khaliqzaman Elias in his translation of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People* has been successful to a great extent in doing this job. While reading his translation readers feel like reciting the original texts because of his close and intensive knowledge of Achebe's mind and location in his indigenous cultural realities. It is possible for Elias because he is a professional translator and his extensive study of African literatures and cultures enables him to do so. Kazal Bandyopadhyay's translation of Wole Soyinka's drama *Kongi's Harvest* also deserves equal acclamation for his excellent capacity of bringing about the aforementioned negotiation between the cultures of Africa and that of Bangladesh.

As translation is the gateway to ethnographical and intercultural understanding a translator should develop his affinity with this phenomenon. It immensely contributes to the transculturation process through which a community leads towards transformation. Here lies the power of translation. Actually, translation, according to Tullio Maranhao, "...can refer to not only linguistic but also cultural and inter and intra-semiotic systems" (Maranhao, 2003, p. xi). It is because a translator writes not only what a creative writer writes, but also what a creative writer means. To grasp the meaning of the creative writer a translator cannot but possess the capacity to bring about ethnographic negotiation with the context in which the source text is produced. This capability enables a translator to

understand the translatability of the source text and in such circumstances he may avoid being branded, as in the word of Italian critic Benedetto Croce, 'a traitor' (Das, 2003, p. 1). To obtain authenticity of a translated text a translator must be a reader first and then a writer. Hence, translation is known as a 'reader centred' task (Das, 2003, p. 101). But the difficulty that a translator of African literary texts in Bangladesh encounters is his limitation in comprehensibility of a huge number of pidgins and creoles and it poses a difficulty to the translators. For example, while translating Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* an translator encounters a lot of pidgins almost in every sentence. In this case, it is really difficult for him to select the appropriate words and grasp the implied meanings in Bengali. It is one of the reasons why African literary texts are not widely translated in Bangladesh. But many of African literary texts have been produced in indigenous languages, for example, Sotho, Kiswahili, Bantu and other indigenous languages. Hitherto, almost all the source texts from African literatures that have been translated into Bengali are written in English. Texts of African literatures in indigenous languages still remain out of the initiatives of the translators because of their inaccessibility into those local languages. Thus, translation presents a fragmentary picture of African literatures and cultures to the Bangladeshi readership.

Besides, translation is never impeccable and it has many reasons to be manipulated by the biasness and topographic stance of the translator. For example, Sanskrit epic poet Valmiki's *Ramayana* throbs with the spirit of chivalry but while Krittibas Ojha, a Bengali poet translated it into Bengali he discarded the heroic spirit of the epic and imposed tragic intensity and humility, very common characteristics of the Bangalees, upon it. Critical readers accuse Krittibas and claims that his Rama is different from Valmiki's Rama. Hence, translation is may have the chance of being manipulated by the translator's geographical, cultural and linguistic location. The spirit of self-expression and social rebellion functioning in the confluence of cultural and political elements are prone to politicize translation. For example, if the history of the subcontinent is inves-

tigated critically it is found that “[T]ranslation became political during the colonial period” (Das, 2003, p. 103). The first de-facto Governor General of Bengal Warren Hastings took initiative to translate *Dharmashastra* from Sanskrit to Persian by the local pundits and from Persian to English by some English scholars with a view to fortifying their hegemony upon the natives after knowing their epistemology. *Bhagavad Gita* was translated by Charles Wilkins in 1774 and many seminal books of this subcontinent were translated into English to enslave the natives epistemologically. Kalidasa’s *Sakuntala* was translated into English by the Asiatic Society established by William Jones, the first Orientalist in true sense, to take Oriental epistemology into their grip and impose their intellectual and epistemological hegemony upon the local people. This politics of translation worked with extensive impact in all the colonies of the European colonizers. The tone and voice of the translators were imposed upon the target texts and distort the source texts with a view to creating a vacuum into which the colonial discursive texts penetrated. Even in the situation of postcoloniality, the task of translation of a foreign text is still going on recklessly. Now the West has become the nucleus of the power-structure and corporate economy. Hence, with corporatization of economy and the triumph of capitalism which directly control the publication industry, in the Third World countries a desire behind the act of translation works among the translators to be blessed by the favour of the West. In contrast with Europe and America, Africa cannot offer these allurements or facilities and consequently, the speed and impulse that are found in the translation of a European or American text, are not found in the case of translating an African text. This disposition emanates more from economic and political realities than from psychological disposition. True, translation is to serve as a bridge that ensures transmission of information between two different cultures. But as the colonial hegemony is solely annihilating, not accommodative, the translation of the texts of the colonizers served the purpose of the power-structure one-sidedly, not the purpose of the natives or the target readers. As a

result, the local texts in local languages have a potential risk of being led to the periphery or margin. In this connection, a translator has to do a mammoth task while selecting the source texts for translation. He should take care lest he should turn into an intellectual slave.

Again, ideological location of a translator affects the act of translation to a certain extent. His role as a mediator or communicator gets impacted by his location in the target culture. Translators of the Global South or Third World countries cannot deny the global hegemony of English. It occurs due to their growth out of the unequal power-relation between the First World and the Third World. To challenge this power-structure and hegemony translators must fortify their positionality as a mediator between the texts of the Third World countries and those of the First World countries. It is difficult but not impossible to challenge the insidious discursive practice of the hegemony of English as one of the major lingua franca of the First World texts. It cannot be overcome by culture oriented approach because it enables the translator to evade 'negative stereotyping'. In this connection, Bandia "...discusses African writing in European languages and argues that translation of their works requires a source culture oriented approach which takes particular care to avoid 'negative stereotyping' in the transfer into the colonizer's language..." (Baker, 2008, p. 140). As English is an overriding language, understanding the viability of other languages, and above all, due to its close relation with the power-structure, it grasps the focus of attention of the translators. Accordingly, inevitably in Bangladesh mostly the texts written in English are usually chosen for translation into Bangla. European and American texts get priority for translation because of their hegemonic status in world literature. In competition with the literatures, African literatures lag far behind because being stereotyped by the colonial framework of mind. African literatures in indigenous languages are not able to draw considerable attention for translation. Only the writings produced by a handful of writers, such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ben Okri, Sembene Ousmane,

Ama Ata Aidoo, and many other writers who write in English are lying in the foci of the translators of Bangladesh.

Besides, it's undeniable that African colonial and post-colonial literatures are basically political literatures. Ngugi's stance against the post-independence Kenya's government is uncompromising. This position is metaphorically reflected in all his writings. Wole Soyinka has also been doing the same thing throughout his career. While approaching these writers for translation, the translator must cherish the same ideology. Otherwise, the target text will be doomed into failure in tone and truth content. Cultural location of both the source texts and the target texts contribute to the task of creating stereotypes for the context of the source texts and they significantly control the attitudes and approach of the target readers and consequently, it may derogate the source texts. These stereotypes and translation patterns tend to domesticate and dehistoricize the source text because

[T]ranslation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures. The selection of foreign texts and the development of translation strategies can establish peculiarly domestic canons for foreign literatures, canons that conform to domestic aesthetic values and therefore reveal exclusions and admissions, centers and peripherals that deviate from those currently in the foreign language (Venuti, 1998, p. 67).

True, the act of translation of a text of African literatures requires the translators' intimate study of the situations related to the realities, such as cultural atmosphere, political realities, historical experiences, aesthetics and moral values, the absence of which fails to bring about a fruitful negotiation between the source text and the target text and this failure acts as a block to the readers' approach to the target text. True, readers spontaneously respond to a translated text when they are able to develop communication with it. Here lies the task of a translator and he is to overcome all the

barriers on the readers' way to communicate with the target text. A competent translator knows this job well. Topographical biasness of a translator may affect his work and cause displacement of the source text. It is true that a translated text is a different one as it borrows the translator's personal approaches and sometimes biasness. But the breach between the source text and the target text must be kept at the minimum level so that the readers may not be deprived of having an opportunity to have a peep into the essence of the source text. In many of the translated books it is found that to impress the readers very often translators impose their own linguistic patterns, local dialectical elements, linguistic and aesthetic elements upon source texts. It has a conspicuous chance to derogate the source text to the level of domestication that undermines rather than valorizes the source text's 'truth content'. For example, Khalequzzaman Elias, a very well-known and widely recognized academic and translator in Bengali language, has put up vernacular language of a particular region of Bangladesh where he was born, into the lips of the character of some of the stories from Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War*. He may have done it to exhibit the similarities between the marginalized people of two different cultures and places and bring the target text closer to the target readers. But this domestication process cannot evade the risk of causing the source texts to lose its genuine color and flavor emanated from the indigenous aesthetics and values out of which it emerges. Moreover, domestication in the translation process tells upon the universality of the source text.

Another remarkable phenomenon that is commercialization of the project of translation is now playing a dubious role. It is stimulating this project and at the same time it is encapsulating the literature of the source text into a limited framework. Thus, translation has a very fatal limitation, especially in the age of corporate economy when it has been totally commercialized. Consequently, a common tendency is found among the translators to translate the best sellers or prize-winning books. As soon as an author wins Booker Prize or Pulitzer Prize or Nobel Prize, his/her masterpieces

are translated almost overnight. Target readers also show a disposition to read only those books in translation that belong to the majority culture. This disposition is more political and economic than intellectual as in this way the prize winning author is presented among the target readers as a representative author while a huge number of author of the prize winning author's literature remain out of the cognition of the readers. Thus translation deliberately silences the voice of the unheard and unread. Psychologically interpreted, it can be considered to be an impact of the colonial legacy and the corporatization of the market. Besides, most of the books which are translated into Bengali are originally in English language which promotes cultural reproduction which works "in the interest of the dominant class, rather than in the interest of the oppressed groups that are the objects of dominant policies" (Macedo et al, 2003, p. 14). Books in indigenous languages of the minority cultural groups do not usually get considerable attention. As translators have to depend on the publishers and the publishers as investors cannot but consider financial benefit, they cannot overcome the hegemony of English language because best sellers and prize winning books are mostly available in English. But bestselling books are not always best literary texts and thus the readers may have the chance of developing wrong ideas about the literature to which the source text belongs.

In Bangladesh most of the readers are monolingual. They can read and write mostly in Bangla. So, African literary texts in translation have a tenuous economic status. As the market is the first factor to be considered by the publishers, they do not want to take the risk of losing their investment. As a result, they want the best-selling authors to be translated. Bestselling authors have already reached the mass readers through various media and when they are translated they are widely accepted by the monolingual readership. On the other hand, less familiar books are not usually being translated commercially even though they may be authentically and artistically of higher value and quality. If translated, even the translators know that they cannot occupy a permanent space in the spec-

trum of existing literary canon, rather they enjoy "...the status of domestic ephemera, passing with the changing interests of the broadest possible audience, falling out of print when sales diminish" (Venuti, 1998. P. 124). This stance is common throughout the world and Bangladesh is not an exception. Professional publishers are not ready to publish the less familiar authors and as such, only the popular and prize-winning African authors are translated in Bangladesh. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ben Okri, Sembene Ousman, Amos Tutuola, Christopher Okigbo and a few others are translated into Bengali. But there are many other seminal authors who write in Portuguese, French and indigenous languages and they are powerful in content and style. But due to the corporate attitude of the publishers and even of the translators they remain out of the knowledge of Bangladeshi readership. This politics of both the publishers and the translators creates a linguistic and cultural stereotype which gives an air that African literary canon is limited and it is revolving only around political subject-matters. A huge and variegated canvas of African literature covering aesthetics, folktales, myths and romance remain out of the queries of the readers of Bangladesh as the present trend of translation project is offering a fragmented picture of African literature.

Further, for translating African literary texts a translator needs to know that correspondences between the source language and the target language produce meanings which are always plural because both the source text and the target text or translated text are the derivatives which "consist of diverse linguistic and cultural materials..." and a source text is a repository of many semantic possibilities (Venuti, 1995, p. 18). Translation of a source text becomes successful in retaining its essential aura of semantic possibilities if the translator possesses the capacity to accommodate all these dimensions of meanings. In this connection, translators like Shamsuzzaman Khan, Kabir Chowdhury, Syed Shamsul Haque, Asad Chowdhury, Kajal Bandyopadhyay, Khaliqzaman Elias and a few others have achieved accolade in translating the poems of Senghor, Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe and many other African poets.

Besides, a good number of translators are showing interest in translating a handful of folktales, speeches, dramas and novels. All their translations manifest the authorial voices of the source texts. Their translations have achieved viability to a great extent because of their capacity to bring about a correspondence, not always with physical contact with African culture and languages, but with their extensive and sincere study of Africa with all its diversities. Venuti, in his book *The Translator's Invisibility* claims that translation is a site in which a cultural other is manifested. But it is also true if the translator can bring about intertextuality between the self and the other, then the distance between the source text and the target text can be overcome to a considerable extent.

True, the study of African literature into Bengali is not new in Bangladesh. Rabindranath Tagore wrote his famous poem 'Africa' after Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in October of 1935. Buddha Dev Bose composed a famous poem named 'Chayachanna Hey Africa' (Trans. 'Shadowed Africa'). Both the poets with great compassion depict Africa with all its wealth of cultural diversity, ethnographical resource and geographical spectrum. In 1968 the then Bardhaman House, now Bangla Academy published a periodical named *Parikraman*. It was edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman and three valuable essays on African literatures were published in this periodical. Hasan Azizul Haque, Ahmed Humayyun and Safdar Mir reflected on various pros and cons of African literature and its future (Hossain, 2022, p. 235). Their focus of delineation fell mostly on political aspects, such as Africa's colonial experience and its response to the advent of colonial enterprises. Veteran author and linguist Suniti Kumar Chattapadhyay composed several essays in Bengali on African culture and ethnographical aspects of Africa. All these authors, poets, translators have drawn a considerable amount of interest of the Bangladeshi readership to African literatures and cultures.

To promote the study of African literatures in Bengali curricula of the universities of Bangladesh are including African literary texts though in comparison with English, American or even South

Asian literatures it looks impoverished in quantity. The canvass of selection of literary texts must include not only fictions and dramas but also Africa's orature which is the repository of African belief system, aesthetics, values and epistemology and the study of African literature without it is never complete. Inclusion of a few fictions and dramas of some major African authors truly presents a fragmentary picture of the diverse spectrum of African literatures to the readers. It gives the readers a very poor and liminal conception and thus they run the risk of falling into the pit of ideation that African literatures do not have many things deserved to be studied.

But with the rise of global communication and the increase of cyber technology Africa has started to draw significant attention from Bangladeshi readership. With a view to making Bangladeshi readership acquainted with African literatures and cultures in Bengali in 2014 **Centre for Studies in African Literatures and Cultures, Dhaka** was established in Dhaka. It is working to inspire the study of African literature and cultures in Bangladesh. Its regular periodical *Africar Alo (Light of Africa)* publishes translated short stories, essays, book reviews and interviews of African authors. Young people are now becoming more and more interested in African literatures and cultures and many of them are translating fictions, interviews, dramas and short stories and getting them published in journals, little magazines and periodicals. It is hoped that if they are patronized, African literatures in translation will go a long and remarkable way in Bangladesh. It will hopefully contribute to the mutual development and enrichment of both the literatures, African and Bengali literatures.

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