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Navigating Cultural Untranslatability in Rendering Calvino in Hindi

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Abstract

Translating Italo Calvino's novella *Il visconte dimezzato* (*The Cloven Viscount*) directly from Italian to Hindi posed a multitude of challenges. Some of these could be tackled easily, but others made the translator take some tough decisions in order to make the intercultural dialogue happen between the two very different communities. However, at the outset of this creative act the translator was aware of these challenges as the two languages involved are very distant from each other. Since languages are the carriers of cultures and they represent unique visions of life, cultural untranslatability becomes an issue much bigger than linguistic untranslatability. To transfer the cultural specificity of a source text without disruppting the readability of the target text requires creative interventions of the translator. This paper examines to what extent the foreignizing strategy of Lawrence Venuti could be effective in retaining the cultural nuances of the Italian novel in the Hindi translation.

Key words: *Calvino, Translation, Venuti, Untranslatability, Foreignization, Domestication.*

Introduction:

Il visconte dimezzato of Calvino is an Italian novella and thus it has so many terms which are embedded in Italian culture and tradition. Most of these have no exact equivalents in Hindi as Indian socio-cultural identity is very different from that of Italy's as these are two societies geographically very distant from each other. Food, clothes, gestures, habits and history etcetera are different in the two countries. Thanks to the globalization that now a few food items such as pizza and pasta and beverages like cappuccino and espresso are no more unfamiliar to Indians. What if we have to translate terms which are very rooted in Italian society and thus have no equivalents in Hindi? Now, the problem was to decide whether to retain the culture specific terms in Hindi or to eliminate them. While retaining them would have caused a damage to the natural flow of the translated novel, erasing them would have deprived the Hindi readers of the context of the novel.

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Bringing Calvino's work in Hindi is an attempt to fill the gap of non availability of many great Italian literary works in Hindi. It also aims at initiating a discussion around linguistic and cultural issues of translating directly from Italian to Hindi. However, the objective of this research paper is to investigate primarily some of the cultural issues of translating Calvino's novel in hindi. Furthermore, it also explores the risks and losses of retaining the cultural specificity of the Italian novel through foreignization, proposing the possible solutions.

Italo Calvino is one of the greatest and most translated Italian authors of the Twentieth century. Born in 1923 in Cuba, he moved to Italy in 1925. His initial literary productions dealt largely with realism and neorealism, but 1952 marked a new phase in his carrier in the sense that he penned his fisrt fantastical and allegorical tale with *Il visconte dimezzato*. His works like *Le città invisibili* (*The invisible cities*) and *Una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*On a winter's night a traveller*) etc. are some of his operas translated in many languages across the world, but very few are aware of the fact that he himself was a translator. He rendered *les fleuers bleues* in italiano come *I fiori di blu*.

The Italian novel is a story of a young viscount Medardo of Terralba who goes to a war to fight alongside Christians against Turks. It is his first experience in any war, and he is so naive that he goes straight in front of a canon. Consequently, he gets hit by a canon ball that divides him vertically in two equal halves. The right half, called *il Gramo*, is found and saved by the doctors. On its return to Terralba it unleashes cruelty and terror. As the story progresses appears even the left half, called *il Buono*, who is exact opposite to the right half. Both halves are equally hated by the locals for their extreme wickedness and goodness. They both fall in love with the same pastor girl, namely Pamela, and to have her as wife they challenge each other to a duel in which their old scratches get opened and both the halves are sewn together by doctor Trelawney and a complete Viscount comes alive. The story is narrated by the nephew of the Viscount. The novella has ten chapters and through the story of the Viscount and other characters such as Pietrochiodo, lepers and huguenots Calvino it actually underlines allegorically how the contemporary man is consistently mutilated and incomplete.

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Literature Review / Theoretical Framework:

As far as the case of Italian literature translated directly from Italian to Hindi is concerned, there are literally less than ten works available for the Hindi readership. Some books translated from the English renderings of Italian literary works may be found in Hindi, but it's needless to mention that these translations would have definitely borne a great amount of loss in the nuances of the source text. Some of the direct translations available in Hindi include Antonio Tabucchi's *Notturno indiano* rendered as रात के आईने में by K C Dutta and Dino Buzzati's *Il deserto dei Tartari* as तातारी वीरान by Ghanshyam Sharma. It's almost impossible to find academic writings and researches carried out on an Italian work directly translated into Hindi. Only very recently a few researchers have started engaging vigoruously in this area. Dr. Rakesh Kumar submitted his PhD thesis on the Hindi translation of Primo Levi's *Se questo è uomo* in the university of L'Orientale of Naples. The author of this paper is also expected to submitting his PhD thesis on the Hindi translation of *Il visconte dimezzato* di Calvino in the University of Delhi. Interestingly, both translations have been carried out by the researchers themselves.

Since, translation was studied for a very long time under the discipline of linguistics, the act of translating was seen and evaluated mostly in terms of linguistic equivalence. One of the major linguistic theories was the one propounded by E. Nida. She proposed 'formal' and 'dynamic' equivalence: while 'formal' equivalence prioritized fidelity to the form and content of the source text, 'dynamic' equivalence advised that the effect created on the target readers should be same as that created on the readers of the source text. But, with the introduction of cultural turn, translation practice stopped to be considered as a mere mechanical act of linguistic transfer from one language to another. The focus shifted from linguistic differences to a more complex question of cultural untranslatability. Peter Newmark divided culture specific items into five categories such as ecology (flora, fauna, climate etc.), material culture (food, clothes, towns etc.), social culture (work and leisure), organizations (customs, activities etc.) and gestures and habits. Consequently, he suggested many procedures such as transference, cultural equivalent, descriptive equivalent and notes etc. to deal with such items. Additionally, he drew difference between strategy and procedure: while strategy is applied on the entire text, procedures are applied on individual elements. Lawrence Venuti developed the strategies of domestication and foreignization. Foreignization, as opposed to domestication, is

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a strategy that involves preservation of cultural references of the source text/country in the target text rather than eliminating them. Translation, in this way, is a politically charged act because preserving the cultural specificity of the source community allows target readers to acknowledge and eventually respect the 'other'. This also ensures a visibility to the translator becuase the reader becomes aware of the fact that he is reading a text in translation. Applying domesticating strategy i.e. substituting all the source cultural references with cultural references from target linguistic community paves way to a text free of any kind of exoticism thereby creating an impression that the text is not translated but originally written in the target language. Which of the two strategies to be employed depends especially on what German linguist Vermeer calls 'skopos' i.e. the intended purpose of the translated text.

Research Methodology:

As the first step, the Calvino's novel *Il visconte dimezzato* was translated into Hindi. While translating it, all the challenges were noted down. Multiple readings and revisions of the text helped restructuring sentences to ensure readability and get rid of anomalies. In order to have clarity around some complex passages and cultural nuances, native Italian professors and scholars were consulted. While the Italian syntax was adapted according to the grammatical norms of Hindi to make the sentences sound natural, socio-cultural uniqueness of the source text was preserved as much as possible to make the target reader aware of the same because they lack equivalents in Hindi. Later, the researcher reflected profoundly on all the issues that emerged out of linguistic and cultural differences between the two languages and societies, and also on the solutions opted. Foreignizing the cultural references from the Italian novel posed a threat to the fluidity of the translated text, so they were analysed at length and various solutions were proposed. Some of the Newmark's procedures could be traced these solutions. Therefore, this research is qualitative and reflexive, and a great part of the analysis is retrospective.

There are different version of Hindi available in India. As a translator it was a challenge to decide which Hindi to use. Since Calvino confessed that he wrote this book to entertain himself and his readers, the Italian used in the book doesn't resort to a high register, the translator chose to avoid the Sanskritised Hindi. However, at times some typical Hindi terms had to be used because of lack of options, and many English terms can also be found in the translated novel.

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Translating Ecological Terms:

Terms related to ecology are in abundance in the novel as Calvino had a great penchant for flora and fauna because he grew up in a family of science scholars. Before he developed a strong interest in literature, he too had been associated with sciences. Sometimes, one can find the scientific names of plants and trees in his writings. In the story we discover that all the fruits and flowers cut into two halves by the bad half called *il Gramo* actually represent the psychological mutilation of the contemporary man in the same way Medardo does. Fortunately, many of the terms relating to flora and fauna have direct Hindi or English equivalents. However, a reference to different kinds of *funghi* (mushrooms) posed a challenge to the translator. It is believed that the common Hindi readers may not be familiar with their names and thus may find them very exotic. Someone good at botany would perhaps know them better. Anyway, in Italian *funghi* is an umbrella term whose English equivalent 'mushroom' is naturalized and very frequent in Hindi despite the presence of two Hindi equivalents i.e. खुमी and कुकुरमुत्ता. The Italian novella carries reference to different types of *funghi* such as *porcino* and *boleto*. To render them in the Hindi their respective English equivalents have been phonetically transliterated in *Devanagari* as पोर्चिनी मशरुम and बोलेटस मशरुम. *Vesce*, *ovuli* e *agarici* are some other types mentioned by Calvino. Their English equivalents have been retained as पफ़बॉल, सीज़र मशरुम and एगारिकस. But this approach, chosen to avoid a dense concentration of foreignized terms in one paragraph, does change something significant especially in the rendering of *ovuli*. In Italian the name evokes the shape of an egg, but in English it is named after a historical personality i.e. Ceaser.

Translating Religious Terms:

There are many terms related to Christianity present in the text. For instance, there is a reference to *Salmo* (Psalm), which is a biblical prayer, sung by *Ugonotti* (Huguenots), a group of the French Calvinists who have found refuge in Italy. Its equivalents in Hindi dictionaries are given as भजन (*bhajan*), स्तोत्र (*Stotra*) and धर्म-गीत (*dhram-geet*). Now, the moment one listens or reads these terms, s/he is immediately reminded of Hindu deities and prayers. Hence, replacing the Italian term with any of these three terms would have given an impression of Hindu's prayers being offered. Therefore, in order to keep the source context intact, it was deemed necessary to retain the source term. But the next question that appeared before the translator was whether

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to foreignize the Italian term or the English equivalent of the same. Since the given term doesn't carry a concept embedded exclusively in Italy, but in many other countries inhabited by the Christians, including India, it was considered more practical to insert its English equivalent transcribed in Devanagari as साम and to facilitate the understanding of the same for the Hindi speakers unaware of meaning a brief description as ईसाई भजन (*isaai bhajan*) was put under brackets in the text. A few more religious terms like *massa* (mass) e *messale* (missal) pertaining to the abovementioned religion met the same fate in the translation.

There is a reference to an Italian festival called *Pasqua* (Easter), which happens to be a Christian fest. This English term is naturalized and assimilated in Hindi among the target readers, including Indian Christians, that instead of foreignizing the Italian term, the translator chose a pragmatic solution of inserting in the translated text the *Devanagari* transliteration of Easter. Interestingly, this is not a case of pure domestication because the word chosen doesn't erase the Christian reference of the festival, but a domestication mediated through English.

Translating Social Culture:

In the Italian novella there is a mention of a card game, called *tressette*, being played by the character of Dr. Trelawney. It is a very famous card game in Italy and is played in four, where two groups of two make a team same as many card games in India. In Hindi, the card game is known as पत्तों अथवा ताश का खेल. Hence, using this would have stripped the translated text of the Italian card game and retaining the name of the play would have sounded exotic to the target reader. So, the translator took a middle path by preserving the Italian term in the transcribed form as त्रेसेत्ते followed by an intratextual reference so that the reader doesn't feel alienated. In short, its translation reads in Hindi as त्रेसेत्ते नामक पत्ते का खेल.

Translating Gestures and Habits:

Translation of a gesture, greeting or a wish is another challenging task, especially when we deal with two countries like Italy and India which are culturally very different because a gesture or wish considered absolutely normal in one country may appear outrightly outrageous and hence unacceptable in the other. Moreover, it may also lack an equivalence or a corresponding situation. For instance, in an episode in the seventh chapter of the novel the doctor, who fell into a lake, is saved by the left half of the viscount and while they are talking the doctor happens to sneeze following which the left-half of the viscount wishes him *salute a Lei* (May God bless

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you)! It's important to add here that just the single term *salute* would have communicate the same message, thus the translator deleted the remaining part *a Lei* (literally translates to 'to you' in a formal context), and focused on rendering just '*salute'*. In a homologous situation in India, one would resort to the same English wish, even in the Hindi speaking belt, as there is no culturally equivalent term available. In this case, the translator had to insert either this borrowed expression in Hindi or retain the Italian term *Salute* and explain that in a footnote. Finally, the translator opted the second strategy to not compromise the Italian context and make Hindi readers aware of this increasingly common term used in quotidian life.

Similarly, *Ciao*, an informal Italian greeting, was foreignized in the translated text even if *namaste* can superficially be considered a good Hindi equivalent, with certain differences. While *ciao* can be used to greet while meeting a person and taking his/her leave, namaste is used upon meeting someone. Another marked difference is that while *ciao* is a strictly informal and casual greeting, *namaste* is used in both formal as well as casual setting. To keep the Italian identity of the source text intact and avoid this easily available equivalent having significant differences, the translator retained the Italian term, putting its meaning in the glossary. Moreover, retaining this term is worthwhile because it allows target readers to note something very remarkable pertaining to the Italian culture. Actually, the expression appears in a dialogue where the nephew greets his uncle Medardo with this term. When the reader discovers the meaning he/she comes to understand that while in India sticking to formal tone in a conversation with senior family members is an established social norm, as it's indicative of respect towards them, in Italy on the contrary informal language is a common place. Moreover, an interesting point to be noted is that while the informal Italian greeting is foreignized in the translated text as चाओ, the informal sentence has been made formal for the respect of the receiving culture as in India normally no nephew would use informal greeting or tone with his uncle.

Translating Material Culture:

Gastronomical elements are also embedded in the culture of their origin. Some dishes may be associated with a particular occasion or festival. It's very difficult to find an equivalent, unless the countries involved share a close cultural proximity. Sometimes people tend to use an equivalent from their native languages without looking properly into all the details/nuances.

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Despite this fact many dishes like pizza, pasta and sushi etc. have travelled long distances and are internationally known today, thanks to the globalization. Similarly, translating Italian beverages like cappuccino and espresso in Hindi poses no hurdle at all as Indians residing particularly in urban spaces are well aware with these Italian terms. Like many other languages Hindi has also borrowed them but not directly from the source language, rather through English. However, how to deal with food items and drinks which are not consumed or known in the target language? For instance, there is a drink very recurrent in the Italian novella called *grappa*. Dr. Trelawney seems to have developed a great fondness for this. It's actually an alcoholic drink of poor quality. To not compromise the context the term was transferred through transliteration as ग्राप्पा, and to help target readers comprehend it immediately a brief intratextual gloss as नामक शराब, was added. Another alcoholic beverage mentioned is *cancarone*, but Calvino has already added a very clear hint i.e., *vino chiamato* (wine called) in the text itself, therefore no explanation or note was needed.

Conclusion:

In order to make a dialogue happen between two distant cultures the translator has to overcome cultural untranslatability. We have seen that the cultural references from Italy have been retained and not substituted with those from India. Additionally, retaining them has not always been a case of pure foreignization. To ensure a greater readability of the translated novel the borrowed cultural terms had to be explained or described, sometimes in the text itself (intratextual glosses) and at times in the footnotes or the glossary (paratextual glosses). Transferring the informal Italian greeting *ciao*, used by the nephew against his uncle, but changing the register of the sentence from informal to formal in the Hindi text is an apt example to underscore how the two cultures have been accommodated in a single sentence, demolishing the binary of foreignization and domestication. Moreover, this case also demonstrates that rigidity has no place in the practice of translation as Indian readers have been taken to the Italian author and the Italian author has been brought closer to the target audience at the same time. Another distinctive aspect of direct translation from Italian to Hindi involves the presence of large quantity of English vocabulary because there are many ideas, concepts and notions that have entered the Hindi diction through English as a result of long-standing British colonialism in India. In the end, translations as such will allow Hindi readers to have access to

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Italian literature, expanding the canvas of translated Italian literature. This project will aware target readers about so many cultural nuances from Italy and introduce many Italian terms to them.

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