

Viability of Visibility of Translator: Looking back and beyond Venuti

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Abstract

*In translation and cultural studies, the issue of (in) visibility of translator has taken its firm grounds especially after the publication of Venuti's (1995) *The Invisibility of Translator* and its subsequent row of arguments and counter-arguments for and against the theoretical perspective as given in the book. The current research paper is an attempt to have an overview of Venuti's and his critics' arguments and add to the existing discussion of (in) visibility of translator, foreignization, and domestication of translation and projection and preservation of source culture during the act of translation by resisting the linguistic and cultural hegemony of English. This paper has, broadly, three main divisions of ideas: a firstly brief overview of Venuti's arguments; secondly, a brief overview of Venuti's most recent critics' arguments like Pym, Tymoczko, Baker, Cronin, and Shamma; and thirdly the researchers own arguments about the issue based on the detailed analysis of previous literature. Conducting a close reading, as a popular method of analysis in qualitative research methodology, of the literature related to the issue of visibility of translator, the researcher has tried to suggest that the act of translation, during the voluntary act of foreignization, adds a concocted essence to the real spirit of the literary piece of work which neither remains beneficial for the assertion of the individuality of the source culture nor it helps very much in the resistance of the dominating language and culture. At the cost of aesthetic pleasure, the foreignization method also entails the sacrifice of literary meanings and effects.*

Keywords: Visibility, Invisibility, Foreignization, Domestication, Culture, Translation

Introduction

The value of translators has been debatable in the circles of translation theorists. Buffagni and Garzelli (2011) argue that translators like Moshe Kahn are of the view that translator is also an artist but at the service of the author. The translator's greatest award is not in being the author but in making the voice of the author heard by people in another language. Robinson (2003 p. 41) states that translators are like performers the way a musician performs specific music. They have the same kind of talent as that of the performer for they are performing the art of someone else. But this performance is not just the copy, rather their creative skills are also involved. But a performer cannot add something of his own will for it will be an injustice to the writer's intention and commitment to the words. The content and form in such kind of translation are likely going to be out of place. It would be "transgression" as Bassnett (2006) suggests which an alteration in the originality of the work is. However, Ivancic (2011) suggests that those translators who work closely with the authors are allowed some kind of penetration in the work of the author but under their instruction and supervision, they share some kind of authoriality but that would be an "appropriative penetration" (Steiner, 1998, p. 314).

Since the Barthean concept of the "death of the author", translation came to known as "productive writing called forth by the original text" (Derrida, 1988, p. 153). Postmodernists and feminists started ascribing a specific status to the authorial role of the translators as it was mainly due to postmodern thinking that the relationships among various things had been redefined, the relationship between the author and translator being one such example. Arrojo (1994, p. 160) goes so far as to emphasize the authorial role of the translator and bring them out of their "marginal status". Vanuti (1998) argued that the translator redefines the originality of the work and thus is a kind of

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author. Therefore, authorship should be taken as a “derivative, not as self-originating” (p. 43). But this view has been criticized by Pym (2011) that authorship is related to originality and commitment with the words and hence is different from translation.

Research Objectives, Questions, and Methodology

During the act of translation, the issue of visibility and invisibility of translators has become debatable since there are two groups on opposite poles: one suggesting that the translators’ visibility is important and can be achieved through different acts; while the other contends that the translator is invisible and should remain so to be true to the text. The objective of this research is to investigate the issue and try to ascertain if the visibility of the translator is impertinent and useful for the translation of the specific text. The overarching research questions explored in this study are: how has the issue of visibility and invisibility of translator been discussed by theorists in the field of translation, and what are the implications of these two aspects of translators i.e. visibility and invisibility? Applying the close reading research analysis method on the texts of the theorists bearing these opposing views, the study tries to develop the argument by evaluating the possible implications of translations specifically of the literary works where aestheticism in the text being translated and individualism of the author have a significant place.

Venuti’s Arguments of Visibility of Author

Encountering the question of visibility and invisibility of translator is in a way dealing with how to confront the foreign (Coldiron, 2012, p. 189). Depending largely on the ways of using and giving value to the foreign, the author’s visibility and invisibility come at the forefront. The debate was revitalized by Venuti (1995) when he developed his argument from the study of the attitude of the British and the American who enjoyed the translations that were “fluent” and in which the translators were “invisible” to keep things closest to the original (p. 1). To make the actual writer more visible, the cultures of Britain and America were convinced that more fluent translations would keep the translators more (in) visible. It was for the love of the retention of the originality of the author that the translation was preferred to be transparent and pure. Venuti (1995) revolutionized the idea of translation by bringing in the “foreignizing methods” to hold out against the linguistic and cultural hegemony of English (p. 20). This theoretical underpinning of Venuti augmented a debate on the visibility of the translator giving them a recognized position as translators who could show themselves in translations.

Venuti bases his arguments on the study of the translations from the past two centuries, yet, in the medieval times, the translators were very much visible in the translations in certain ways while claiming for the originality and truthfulness of the text (Copeland, 1991; Youcesoy, 2009). Assessing the current conditions of the translators in respect to their identity, agency, and the translation processes, Heywood and Harding (2020) argue that the translator's position needs to be understood and valued because they are considered to be good if non-existent which a clear devaluation of their identity and efforts is. Extending the theoretical perspective of Venuti (1995), the importance of a translator’s visibility could be realized even today. But the counterarguments related to the originality of the work and fluency of the text also hold their grounds in translation and interpretation studies which also cannot be set aside.

Translators’ Invisibility: The Opposing Theorists

Contrary to the ideas of Venuti are theorists like Pym (1996) who have serious doubts on the workability of the foreignization of the translation and the uses of the visibility of the translator. Pym (1996, p. 166) questions the very objective of Venuti (1995, p. 41) to develop a democratic cultural exchange kind of situation in the world and emphasizes that the answers are completely lacking even in the arguments of Venuti and it does not in any sense seem practicable. Pym (p. 167) also argues that there has not been any evidence of change in the domestic values as suggested by Venuti that the visibility of the translator brings such change. Overall, Venuti has been considered to attempt to establish a theory that has no sound practical grounds. Pym (p. 165) also refutes the four major arguments that Venuti (1995) presented and tried to substantiate in his book i.e. attitude of the Americans and British towards good translation; the low percentage of translations into English than the authors in the world; less value of the translators in the copyright contracts; and a complacent attitude of the Americans by being imperialists abroad and xenophobic at home. Pym refutes each argument in the paper on Venuti’s visibility and suggests that such an idea is not workable at all. The arguments that base his refutation stance are that of insufficient data and miscalculation regarding low

percentage of translations in English, the uselessness of the debate of foreignization or domestication of translation, the complacency in the attitude of Americans towards translation.

Visibility of the translator, as suggested by Venuti (1995), can be achieved through the foreignization of the translation. Tymoczko (2000) argues that Venuti has not clearly defined the concept of foreignization and that the criteria for foreignization has also not been established where one could discern between the foreignization and domestication or how could one draw a balance between these two contradictory concepts and how could one go about it during the act of translation. Unless these concepts are not defined the very act of foreignization cannot be done properly for the methods and clear ways of doing this practice are missing in the arguments of Venuti. Myskja (2013) argues that the boundaries of foreignization and domestication could be drawn as Venuti (2008) suggests through different means but the actual issue is that the contradiction between domestication and foreignization cannot be taken as universal standards in the practice of translation all over the world. The literary texts may have such characteristics which could be foreignized or not but it cannot be surely said about any text that it was foreignized completely. In this case, these juxtaposed ideas could not be taken as standards.

Mona Baker (2013, p. 115) develops the discussion further and argues that the dichotomy between foreignization and domestication of the text for (in) visibility of the translator to resist the hegemonic situation of English seems too simple to be acted upon. The act of translation is a complex one that could contain elements of foreignization as well as domestication at a balanced level. Moreover, this classification does not seem to ensure that the desired results would be achieved through the practice of translation. There is no surety that the act of translation is going to achieve the same effect as is desired by the author or the translator through the classification of foreignization and domestication. It is this surety that the theoretical perspective of Venuti could not be held to be true and practicable.

As Tymoczko (2000, p. 35) pointed out that the act of foreignization and domestication could be used for “progressive political and cultural aims”, therefore, there is no need to make such distinction particularly when we are not sure to what ends this is going to lead us and to what effects. Tarek Shamma (2009) argues here that the 19th-century texts that have been considered as foreignizing by Venuti could also be taken as exoticizing the east which in turn reinforces the very bias of the English towards the East. Edward Burton’s translation of *The Arabian Nights* is being taken as an ideal example for discussion which has also been taken up by Venuti (1995) to substantiate his arguments of foreignization of translation. Shamma (2009) argues that there is a recurrent over-emphasis on “culturally alien customs and phenomena” (p. 65) which makes it the act of exoticizing by the translator and elucidates the prejudices of the translator towards the culture of the East. This leads one to the discussion of the difference between the Orientals and the occidentals, us and them, the ones in the center and at the periphery. In this way, a democratic cultural coexistence will not be possible which is ideally aimed at by Venuti (1995, 2008). Shamma (2009) is also unable to see a clearly defined strategy of translation and the methods of foreignization that could achieve the defined political objectives. Venuti (2008) responded to this argument by reaffirming in his paper related to Burton’s translation and foreignization and again stressed that the translation by Burton of *The Arabian Nights* is a practice of foreignizing in which the translator has made himself very much visible and that the elements within the text that signify the exoticizing of the east are the sensual aspects of the texts which the translator has countered through his visibility in being relative to the particular culture by resisting the dominant culture. It is the frank description of the very individuality of the particular culture that has its significant place in the eastern text. Shamma responds to this suggesting that Venuti did not directly go for the resolution of the issue of foreignization of the text and exoticizing of the east which is a typical colonial practice. If this is an act of foreignization through the visibility of the translator then it is purely ethnocentric for it makes an exoticizing effect on the readers. But one can never be sure of it.

Michael Cronin (2010, p. 250) extends the argument by discussing the practice of foreignization from another dimension when he argues that foreignization practice during the translation may be very useful from the viewpoint of the major languages in Europe but many languages are minor and may also be at the brink of extinction. This practice will very likely result in syntactic and lexical borrowings from the dominant language that the identity of the minor language can be at peril (Cronin, 2010, p. 251). During the act of translation from the minor language to the

dominant language, there could be benefits for the minor language, but when the situation is reversed, there could be serious consequences to the identity of the minor language.

Myskja (2013) argues that visibility of the author through foreignization for “resisting ethnocentrism and dominance in the presentation of the source culture” (p. 20) gives no surety that effect on the readers could be predicted as is objectified by Venuti (2008) and also there are serious concerns about the stability of the effect. There could be a reversal of the effect as Shamma (2005) saw exorcising effect of Burton’s translation while Venuti (2008) saw the foreignization act in the translation for the very purpose of resistance. It suggests that the effects of the translation could be different for different readers, in this way the critique by Myskja (2013) on the fulfillment of the objective for visibility of the researcher seems to be valid. Myskja (2013, p. 22) also refers to her Norwegian language in which the translators have been trying to do a fluent and smooth translation of the text in the target language because the translators were very well aware that such kind of translation would be beneficial for them as it has wider public acceptance and appraisal than the one in which the translator tries to make a difference through foreignization.

Discussion

Keeping in view the arguments of Venuti and his critics, we would try to build up my arguments by discussing all the four major points of Venuti (1995). The first point that the invisibility of the author is affirmed when the translator tries to be fluent in his translation. I would agree with the opinions of Myskja and others that fluency is not only the goal of the translator in the English language but also in other languages which are regarded as minor languages. Fluency is what gives meanings to the original text by developing the environment which had been intended by the original author of the work in any language. In literary writings, the creation of a particular environment and effect is central to the literary creations which also have their significant meanings. As an example, in telling the tale of Galileo, Brekht (1943/2008) used different impressionistic techniques in the drama which have their specific effect while being performed on stage. Originally written in German language and translated in English and other languages in montage style to create the specific illusionary effect, the drama would lose its impact if the fluency is missed out and the foreignization method is allowed by the translator. Therefore, the rule of fluency cannot be completely ruled out in literary writings for the creation and development of the impact is extremely important in conveying certain forms and meanings which the actual author had intended in the very beginning. If the meanings and effect are sacrificed for the sake of resisting the ethnocentrism of a dominant language, the text would not render the meanings it meant to do.

So far as Venuti’s (1995) arguments regarding the copyright contracts that are a serious issue for the identity of the translators is concerned, it could be argued that translators have their low value in the society than the original authors. The status of the translators could never be higher than the authors because the authors are involved in the higher act of creativity than the translator. The author, during the process of creation, treads over the paths that are new and perilous for which much courage is required which is not there for the translator. The task of the translators is mostly to make choices among the available options. The author does a higher task by creating the choices and arranging these anew for conveying a specific impact and meanings. In these different functions for the translators as well as authors, the value in the society for each is going to be different. There is also politics involved in the process of writing and publication as argued by WaThiongo (1981). In the context of this politics, the value given to the author and translator is always going to be different and it is never easy to take them at equal balance. Putting the perspective of politics aside and delving into the issue from the perspective of literature as a higher form of the human intellect, the value of the author is always going to be different and higher than the translator even in their contracts of publications.

The question of the author as the translator has been raised by scholars and researchers with sides tilting to both directions in favor and against (Pym 2011). However, Goffman’s (1981) definition of the author is the one who accepts responsibility for the ‘utterance’ that he has made and the commitment to the ideas and beliefs that the author shows. Going along this definition of the author the translator is never going to be alluded to as an author. There is also a need to make a distinction between the animator and the translator. Animator represents what has already been said by the author without any responsibility to the ideas of the author. However, Pym (2011) goes on to suggest that the translator is not an author because of certain reasons primarily the responsibility of

the words taken up by the author is the basic criterion. The responsibility lies with the author not with the translator so far as the admittance of the beliefs of the author is concerned. Another important reason for not allowing the translator the status of authorship is the positionality issue. The author holds the position of using the pronoun “I” and this very use of pre-nominal is not of the translator. The translator in the words of Goffman (1981) is bound to use this “alien I” but it is never going to be the “I” of the author no matter the names on the title page shows that of the translators’. Another reason for the translator not being an author, according to Pym (2011, p. 6) is commitment and truthfulness to the ideas presented in the text. Such a claim can only be made by the author for the translator is required to claim if his translation is the true representative of the beliefs of the author. Thus, the author has to be someone whose commitment to the words that he has said is established and he has a responsibility also to manifest that commitment. The last reason was given by Pym (2011) for suggesting that a translator is not an author involves in the process of writing. When a translator is translating any text, he is mainly involved with the text that is already there in front of him at the desk, and that most of the time he is involved in rewriting the text in another language at the sentential level. Whereas, when the author is writing he has blank pages in front of him to fill up and most of the time adjusts the suitability of his ideas with time. Hence, the author is different than the translator. When there are distinctions between the ways both approach the language and express themselves, there is very little likelihood of their being the same.

However, to me, there seems to be a thin and blurry line between the author and translator owing to the amount of hard work, use of language, metaphorical conversions of meanings, dedication and commitment with the work, and use of creative faculties by both. But so far as the originality of thought and plot, owning of the beliefs and ideologies, and a higher degree of dedication and commitment by the author towards his work is concerned, authoriality cannot be given to the translator. It is also interesting to note, according to Hanne (2006) that most of the translators have not asked for the position of the author, although while doing the translation of the metaphor the translator has to choose among hundreds of metaphors which in itself is an individual and creative task (p. 221). But still, he would be regarded as a performer because of trying to choose the most suitable metaphor to the original text by the author. However, poststructuralists like Walter Benjamin, according to Bassnett (1980) insist that “[t]his translation becomes the after-life of a text, a new ‘original’ in another language” (p. 09). So far as the word ‘original’ is concerned, I think that it is the job of the translator to maintain the originality of the text by the author.

Conclusion

English culture is complacent towards other cultures for it has manifested its imperialistic strokes over the canvas of literary panorama and it is inherent that such mindsets would be xenophobic in their domestic environment by being extremely conscious of what comes from the outside. Therefore, the practice of translations would also be there to a limited extent. These two points of Venuti (1995) could be agreed upon but in no way, Venuti seems to suggest a coherent and practicable method of resisting the dominance of English in translation through foreignization. The way a translator has to traverse through foreignization is a way of converting a natural outcome of a literary text in superficiality and concoction which loses its essence and natural flavor. Although the translator can make himself very much visible, the result is never going to be that useful for the readers and even for the creative literary work that bears its aesthetic value. If the aesthetic pleasure which is to be gained from the study of the literary text is ignored, mere ideas are philosophical debates that are never pleasurable for those who have a love for literature and gain aesthetic pleasure. It is then to sacrifice the very act of creation of literary works and their spontaneities for pleasurable readings. Such visibility of a translator would thus be dangerous than being beneficial.

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