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Translation of Shakespeare into Kannada: Some Critical Insights

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Abstract

Attempt to bring Shakespeare on to the Kannada stage began in the later part of the nineteenth century and fascination for his plays has not yet ended. From the first known adaptation of his play 'Nagadavarannu Nagisuva Kathe' (tr of Comedy of Errors, 1871) to the most recent 'Nadu Besigeyirula Nalganasu' (tr of A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2019) the Kannada theatre has negotiated with his plays in a critical way. As theatre activist K V Akshara puts it correctly, 'the Kannada mind has received Shakespeare in a unique mixture that can neither be categorised as acceptance nor rejection'. The innumerable translations of Shakespeare in multicultural, multilingual context are a challenge for any translation theory. This paper examines some of the adaptations, retellings, literal translations and transcreations with the backdrop of modernity and colonial transactions. The paper also investigates the domestication of Shakespeare in Kannada as a part of the process of representation and re-presentation in native atmosphere. The question of class and gender as well as post colonial interpretations of many of his texts is examined.

Key Words: Shakespeare, Kannada Theatre, adaptation, retellings, translation, translatability, transcreations, native society, colonial transaction, postcolonial interpretations

The question that haunts any student of literature is why interest in Shakespeare has refused to die down even after six centuries of his death? His plays were a constant source for creative negotiations in Kannada cultural context where the first adaptation was in the year 1971 with the adaptation of 'Comedy of Errors' brought to Kannada by Deputy Channabasappa. From this period to the present age, there are innumerable adaptations, transcreations, retellings and literal translations which have entered Kannada theatre quite naturally. As Ramachandra Deva correctly puts it, the tradition of Shakespearean translations has made Kannada sensibility more plural.

According to G S Amur, there are three distinct phases of bringing Shakespeare onto the Kannada stage. In the first phase, there were adaptations of his plays which were domesticated to suit the local cultural context. The writers like A Anada Rao, M L



Sreekantesha Gowda, Kuvempu and others passionately brought Shakespeare to Kannada by freely adopting and integrating. The second phase witnessed literal translations where the attempt was to translate him faithfully was in focus. The prolific writers like D V Gundappa, Masti Venkatesha Iyengar and others were involved in this critical endeavour. The third phase saw more creative translations and there is even an attempt to deconstruct Shakespeare deliberately. H S Shivaprakash, K V Akshara, Ramachandra Deva, K S Nisar Ahmed, K S Bhagvan and others attempted to translate Shakespeare by not bothering to be loyal to the original plays.

Any study of Shakespearean translations would deal with the question of nature of translations and adaptations. It is also argued that the colonial period witnessed readjustment of the elite middle class in the era of colonial modernity and the translation project reflected this readjustment. As critics like C N Ramchandran correctly point out, in the adaptations of the first phase everything i.e. names of the character, place, the title, themes, structure of the play and even the syntax was conveniently altered. There were additions, deletions, gaps and silences. There was also an addition of *Naandi* and *Mangala* song which was added to the tragic structure of the plays. The ending of the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet was changed to a happy ending to satisfy the expectations of audience. It must be remembered that at that time the concept of tragedy was not very familiar. The translators never bothered about the theme of fidelity to the original work and took maximum freedom. An example to this is the adaptation of Macbeth as *Prataparudra Deva* (1895) by M L Sreekantesha Gowda where the name of Macbeth is changed as *Veerasena*. Malcolm becomes *Prataparudra Deva* and Lady Macbeth becomes *Chandravalli*. Romeo and Juliet become Ramaverma –Leelavathi. The names changed in other adaptations of Romeo- Juliet are *Kamalaaksha Padmagandhiyara Kathe* (Bhandiwada), Ramesha-Lalitha (Keruru Vasudevacharya). The Merchant of Venice has the following changes-*Venupuriya Varthaka* (Srinivasa Iyengar), *Surath Nagarada Shresthti* (Keruru Vasudevacharya), *Venicu Nagarada Vanika* (Venkatachar Bhindiganavile), The Taming of the Shrew is changed to '*Gayyaligalannu Sadhu Maduvuke* (S G Narsimhachar), *Chandi Mada Mardana* (Lakshman Rao), and *Thratika Nataka* (Gadigeyya H H)

In the adaptation of Othello into Kannada as *Raghavendra Rao* by G K Churumuri, Othello becomes *Raghavendra Rao* , Desdemona becomes *Venkubai* and Casio becomes *Subraya*. Iago's name is changed as *Narasingaraya*. This adaptation is interesting for another reason. In the Shakespearean play, the reason given for the evilic intension of Iago is ambiguous. As many critics have pointed out, he has no particular reason to take revenge on Othello. However, in Kannada context, the author G K Churumuri changes the cultural context by making it a play set in 19th century colonial bureaucratic India. The speeches of Iago are about climbing the hierarchical ladder of bureaucratic power thus making the play as a kind of resistance to colonial administration. There is also an elaborate discussion on family values and the influence of the English Education in contemporary society. Because of this reason,



the play acquires a new meaning in colonial context of India. For G K Churumuri, modernity is equated with bureaucracy and its ills.

Ramachandra Deva argues that Kannada sensibility has become more pluralistic by translating/adopting Shakespeare. Further, he states that the first phase of negotiating Shakespeare, there were only adaptations and the reason for this is to lessen the resistance in the mind of the audience. According to him, a kind of digesting the external culture to make it our own was in process. Another well known translator D V Gundappa argues that Kannada translators resorted to Kannada or Sanskrit names of the characters for making the play more local. Songs and dances were added to give the play local colour. Ramachandra Deva further shows a curious case of translation of the Sanskrit play 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' (1869) by Basappa Shastri (popularly known as Abhnava Kalidasa) which was a literal translation where as Shakespearean plays were adaptations. This according to Deva is because of the difference between the cultures of the east and the west. The Sanskrit drama is treated as close to our tradition and the west is seen as outside culture. It needs to be domesticated. That is why one is a translation and the others are adaptations. The other reasons given for adaptations of Shakespearean plays include a. Localisation b. Domestication c. Resistance. The recent studies of translation argue that the adaptations were a kind of cultural resistance to colonial onslaught. They further argue that the theme of writing back to the imperial centre was adopted by early translators. On the one hand there was this appreciation of colonial modernity and the advent of English education. And on the other hand, there was also an attempt of interrogating the onslaught of external European values by turning to local roots.

It is very interesting to note that there were dissenting voices during the 19th century itself for taking extreme freedom in translation and to change names. One person who identifies himself as 'enemy of translation' accuses the translators as betrayers. He wrote to a contemporary news paper that the poor quality of adaptations was contaminating the richness of Kannada language. But the renowned translator M L Sreekantesha Gowda has defended translators by stating that they were not betrayers.

While translating, many stereotypical notions about gender have entered into translator's sensibility. The translation of 'Taming of the Shrew' as *Chandi Mada Mardini* (1910) and its immense popularity both in Western and eastern context is noticeable. The theme of the process of 'taming of women' was popular even during the period of renaissance. The hegemonic patriarchal society treats brave, loud, hyper active women as *Gayaylis* (Shrew) and those who are not on the framework of loyal housewives are treated as transgressors. The representation of women in terms of binary oppositions like good and bad is continued even in the process of bringing Shakespeare to Kannada. The representation of women in this rigid framework can be seen in popular films as well as plays.



It is correctly argued that the rise of the elite middle class was trying to reinvent its cultural identity in the new age of colonial modernity and English education. In early translations, there was an attempt to retain Indian culture as a form of keeping the native values intact. Therefore there were visible changes in the adaptations of the 19th century. The sensuous details that were part of Shakespearean plays were deliberately avoided. For example, the sensual descriptions in Othello or open kissing scenes in A Midsummer Night's Dream were avoided. In Macbeth (M L Sreekanteasha Gowda), it is Macbeth who receives King Duncan to his palace and not Lady Macbeth as it was in the original play. This is because; it was deemed that in Indian culture, a woman receiving an important guest was considered improper. In the Banquet scene, giving drinks (alcohol) was avoided as the translator felt that drinking/distributing alcohol in public was immoral. V B Tharakeshwar argues that gender in the context of translated text becomes a site where caste identities are recast during the colonial period in princely Mysore state. He analyses M L Sreekantesha Gowda's translation of Macbeth as Prataparudra Deva and concludes that the response it got during that time smacks of caste identity.

Kuvempu's adaptation of Hamlet as *Rakthakshi* (1930) as D R Naagaraj argues is a text that shows the characteristics of mimicry- a concept developed by Homi K Bhabha who spoke about the forms of resistances to the colonial onslaught. According to Bhabha, the mediations and imitations of the west by eastern writers can be taken as creative deconstructions of the hegemonic west. It is one way of showing that the west can be made fun of by imitating it poorly. Ramachandra Deva feels that Kuvempu's play lacks in substance and states that Kuvempu's sensibility originated from the writers like Tolstoy and William Wordsworth. According to him, the play *Rakthakshi* lacks from the complexity of Hamlet. Countering this line of argument D R Nagaraj states that *Rakthakshi* must be seen in terms of creative deviations from the original. Kuvempu makes the play women centric unlike Shakespeare's Hamlet. The character of Rudrambe (Ophelia) is much stronger than passive Ophelia in Hamlet. Hamlet sees the whole world in terms of evil and rottenness. In *Rakthakshi*, Basavayya (Hamlet) looks at the world as an inspiration.

Further, critics argue that the tradition of adaptations is not new to Kannada literary cannon. Adikavi Pampa's epic poems *Adipurana* and *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* are the re-tellings of the known epic *Mahabhartha*. Karna becomes a tragic hero instead of Arjuna in *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* because Pampa's sympathy was with Karna. Similarly the folk tradition of storytelling which was a part of our rich oral tradition of India depend more on deviations and appropriations. It is only in 1936 that D V Gundappa translated Macbeth as 'Kanandada Macbeth' resorting to literal translation.

The period of 'faithful' translation began with D V Gundappa's translation of Macbeth (1936) who stated that it is better to show the world of Shakespeare as it is. Further, he states that translations are most urgently needed to make Kannada sensibility plural. Masti Venkatesha Iyengar translated King Lear by using prosaic language instead of poetic



language. G Gundanna's translation of The Merchant of Venice used old Kannada or Sanskritised Kannada language. Shakespeare used colloquial dialect in his plays extensively but here translators like G Gundanna were using poetic Kannada in their plays.

The third phase witnessed more of breakings and retellings of Shakespeare. The translation theories talk about the impossibility of completely faithful translations and writers like H S Shivaprakash (Maranayakana Prasanga), Chandrashekara Kambara (Marikadu), K V Akshara and others have domesticated Shakespeare with an eye on recording the post colonial anxieties and paradoxes of the present time. K V Akshara speaks about his experience in staging of the play Macbeth in 1987 and states that Jan Kott's (considered to be an authority on Shakespeare) interpretation of Shakespeare profoundly influenced him. He says, 'my study of Shakespeare entered a new phase between 1998 and 2002. The post colonial studies were already applied to Shakespearean plays like Tempest and Othello. But I was more interested in Merchant of Venice and Measure for Measure which allowed me to contextualise these plays in Kannada world.' For example K V Akshara has translated Merchant of Venice as *Venissina Vyapara* (Venice's trade) rather than the use of the term *Vyapari*. (Merchant). This is because the author was trying to negotiate and record the onslaught of globalisation and the power of the corporate world. The corporate financial transaction that dominates the contemporary society is powerfully articulated in this retelling giving the play a larger socio-economic canvas. Again, he also looks at the clash between majority and minority cultures which lived in two different ways-a culture that would have the backing of the majority would treat the minority as 'uncivilised'. This is a modern postcolonial response to Shakespeare.

To conclude, as the poet and critic H S Shivaprakash puts it, Shakespearean plays are as much a part of our inner world as Sanskrit or any other plays are.

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