

## Cross-Cultural Issues in the Translation of African Literature

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### **Introduction**

Language, culture and literature are inseparable elements in the process of translating literary texts. Thus translation is not just about transferring linguistic codes from one language to the other but a meeting point between the cultures involved. This meeting point allows us to identify and to understand the diversities of the cultures involved. Considering the linguistic and cultural diversities characterizing our world today, cultural translation makes it possible for us to discover the socio cultural context of the source text, thereby promoting mutual understanding and by consequence, global world peace.

Culture is a dynamic phenomenon encompassing the totality of attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and world views. It is an integral part of every human society and all social groups are characterized by it. In other words, it is that “complex pattern of behaviour and material achievement which are produced, learned and shared by members of a community” (Ameh 2002: 165). In the conception of Peter Newmark, Culture is the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression. (1988: 94) One crucial part of culture is language, as every culture has a language that best expresses it: there is no culture without a linguistic basis. Language is the means of expression and communication of a community. It serves to safeguard and to transmit their artistic and scientific acquisitions as well as their perceptions and world view. These world views in written form “literature” become accessible to all as a cultural product. By literature, we mean any piece of writing that expresses human experience and feelings through imagination. It is a product of a culture and therefore of a people’s way of life and of the values or norms inherent in the society in which it is rooted. Therefore literature is the mirror to the values of a culture as it highlights the specifics and the socio cultural elements of a group of people.

### **Culture, Language, Literature and Translation**

There is an indisputable link between language, culture and literature, and translation covers this domain. Translation is an act of communication across cultures. To transfer the literary specifics of one language into another implies the transfer of cultural realities from one community to another. Thus translation consists of transferring the cultural compositions of a source text into another. Cultural translation cannot be separated from literary translation as the latter

necessitates the transposition of the socio cultural facts present in the source text. Translation is thus an important vehicle for intercultural contacts, as cultural meanings are intricately woven into the texture of the language. In the words of Komissarov, Translating from culture to culture means,

“to bring to the receptors new facts and ideas inherent in the source language culture, to broaden their cultural horizons, to make them aware that other people may have different customs, symbols and beliefs, and those other cultures should be known and respected”.

This cultural and educational role of translation cannot be too much emphasized. As literary translation implies the transfer of one linguistic and socio cultural environment to the other, it is thus imperative for the translator to make available to his target audience, the salient points and ideas of the source text which will allow them appreciate the culture of the source text. The cultural factor in translation is undeniably obvious. It goes without doubt that the translator must as a matter of obligation have an in-depth understanding of the source text as well as an understanding of the culture associated with the language of the text. This is because the meaning of the words of the source texts is steeped into the culture of the text. Aire buttressed this fact when he said:

“Anyone who has ever had to translate from one language into another will readily agree that it is not always easy to find corresponding equivalences, some of which, in fact do not exist. Indeed, quite often, the translator has to resort to glossing descriptions and even glaring circumlocutions”.

Cultural value systems are difficult to grasp as they are intricately woven into the texture of the native language. A conscientious translator, therefore, must be willing to make the extra effort that is required to unearth the full cultural meaning hidden in the language. He must be alive to the two socio cultural systems with which he is working in order to narrow the gap that separates them. His task becomes even more complicated when he is working between two languages of divergent socio cultural backgrounds and the issue takes another twist when the translation is between the languages of the “colonizer” and the “colonized” Bandia (1993:56).

A non African unfamiliar with the historical realities of the Africans will find it impossible to understand and appreciate them in the literary work in which they are reflected, and express them adequately in a language that is different from that of the source text. Ade Ojo posits that familiarity can be achieved either by the physical contact with the geopolitical and cultural reality in which the work is rooted.

### **Addressing the Challenges of Cross-cultural Encumbrances in Translation**

There are a number of factors to consider in the translation process which includes the type of source text, the form in which the source text is presented, the form in which the translated work should be submitted and the specific requirements the translator will be called upon to meet in the process of the translation exercise. This brings up the concept of untranslatables in



cultural translation. These untranslatables involve local names of people and objects, names of places, local terms, local customs and concepts, festivals and other cultural elements that do not exist in the target text, but which succeeds in informing the readers of the peculiarities of the society in which the source text emanates from. In the words of Ade Ojo, such cultural specifics can be handled with the use of “footnotes, glossaries and appendixes incorporated into the translated text by way of explaining such culture bound concepts and elements”. Caught between the need to capture the local colour and the need to be understood by an audience outside the original cultural and linguistic situation, a translator must be aware of both cultures as his/her responsibility is to initiate the target-language reader into the sensibilities of the source-language culture. The translator must then be particularly careful about how he handles the material of the source language in his desire to be faithful to the target language and culture. In a nutshell, while being aware of the sensibilities of the target language reader, “the translator should also endeavour to preserve the socio cultural content of the source language” (Bandia, 1993: 56).

Even with all the apparent cultural hurdles, a translator can create equivalence by the judicious use of resources. Such cultural hurdles can be resolved through reformulations in the forms of adaptations, compensations, calques, omissions and additions. A cursory examination of any translated text reveals inevitable losses, increments or additions or changes of the information transmitted from the source text. In the conception of Thriveni, most translations are intended to serve, however imperfectly, “as a substitute for the original, making it available to people who cannot read the language in which it was written.” This imposes a heavy responsibility on the translator as a translation is considered to be faithful when it establishes a global equivalence between the source text and the translated text.

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