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Who Speaks in Translation? From the Death of the Author to the Birth of the Translator-Reader: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

“. . . the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author”, the very statement made at the end of the essay ‘The Death of the Author’ by Roland Barthes dismantles the authority of the author, decentres the author from the creative field to allow the centre to the reader. The shift from the author to the reader relocates the meaning of the text, not in the text but in the very act of reading. In the light of the reader-response theories, particularly by the one given by Roland Barthes, this research paper tries to argue that be it an act of reading the Source Language text or an act of translating the Source Language text into the Target Language one, the reader and the translator get married/united in the very act of reading first, interpreting next and particularly for the translator, translating the last. The embedded meaning of the text regenerates itself in the engagement of the reader with the text while reading. It is attempted to argue and arrive at some conclusion by theoretical references: Who speaks in the text? The author? The reader? Who speaks in the translation? The author? The translator? Applying the very idea of Barthes, it is discussed here how from the death of the author till the birth of the translator-reader in the act of translating/re-creating the text, the text gets reborn.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, Death of the Author, Reader-Response Theory, Translation Studies, Meaning Production.

1. Introduction

Why does an author write/create a text? to create meaning? to get interpreted? To get pleased? Why does a reader read a text? to get meaning? to interpret? to get relished? to get moralized? For a long time, it has been discussed and believed that the meaning of the text lives/resides in the intention of the author. Along the same lines, the act of translation was looked at a practice with the primary task of the translator to recover the meaning of the Source Language text embedded by the author and reproduce the same into the Target Language text with as much as fidelity to the text possible. However, after the invasion of the reader’s response theory like ‘The Death of the Author’ by Roland Barthes, the fundamentality of the very assumption that the meaning lies in the very intention of the author has been challenged. The shift from the author to the reader relocates the meaning of the text, not in the text but in the very act of reading. In the light of the reader-response theories, particularly by the one given by Roland Barthes, this research paper tries to argue that be it an act of reading the Source Language text or an act of translating the Source Language text into the Target Language one, the reader and the translator get married/united in the very act of reading first, interpreting next and particularly for the translator, translating the last. It is attempted to argue and arrive at some conclusion by theoretical references: Who speaks in the text? The author?

The reader? Who speaks in the translation? The author? The translator? Applying the very idea of Barthes, it is discussed here how from the death of the author till the birth of the translator-reader in the act of translating/re-creating the text, the text gets reborn.

2. From Fidelity to (Free) Interpretation in Translation:

The shift of the theory from the author centric to the reader centric may create serious questions: What about the fidelity of the translator? What about the originality? What about lost in translation? This shift has while challenging the authority of the author challenged fidelity of the translator allowing him more freedom, not to translate but to recreate the Source Language Text. Many translation critics have argued about the fidelity of the translator to the author of the Source Language Text. Fidelity to the text according to Dryden is, “A translator is to make his author speak as he would himself have spoken, had he lived in another age, or in another country” (Dryden 1956: 114), to Eugene Nida, it is “the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message” (Nida 1969: 12), to George Steiner fidelity is, “not literalism but the ethical responsibility of interpretation” (Steiner 1998: 317), to Lawrence Venuti, “Fidelity is no longer understood as adherence to an invariant meaning” (Venuti: 2008: 18) and to Schleiermacher “The translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him”

(Schleiermacher 1992: 49). Gayatri Spivak says, “The translator must be scrupulously honest with the text” and adds that “The task of the translator is to surrender to the text” (Spivak 1993: 179). According to Harish Trivedi, “Fidelity in translation must be accompanied by cultural honesty” (Trivedi 1999: 281).

In contrast to what has been discussed earlier, there are some translation critics who reject the very idea of fidelity to the author. The theorist of *skopos*, Hans Vermeer argues that it is the intention or the aim of the translator that decides how s/he will translate. Vermeer says, “Fidelity is subordinate to purpose” (Vermeer 1989: 182). Roland Barthes argues rejecting the monopoly of the author as original when the meaning of the text is plural, fidelity to a single meaning turns to be impossible “A text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning... but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 1988: 148). To Walter Benjamin imitation cannot be the goal of translation who says “No translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original” (Benjamin 1968: 73). Andre Lefevere says that the translation has to be shaped by an ideology. He says, “Translation is rewriting, and rewriting is manipulation undertaken in the service of power” (Lefevere 1992: 2). Roman Jakobson says that fidelity is impossible as “Poetry by definition is untranslatable” (Jakobson 1959: 238). Jacques Derrida outrightly rejects the very idea of originality when he says, “There is no such thing as a purely original text” (Derrida: 1981: 84). When there is no existence of the original text, no foundation for the fidelity is possible. Eco rightly argues when he states, “To translate is to negotiate” meaning negotiation always invites compromise (Eco 2001: 5). Though Harish Trivedi favours fidelity, he believes that “The concept of fidelity becomes questionable once translation is seen as cultural negotiation” (Trivedi 1999: 281). A critic like A. K. Ramanujan advocates the freedom of choice to be given to the translator when he argues, “The translator must choose which features of the original are to be preserved” (Ramanujan 1999: 159).

The post-Barthes time destroys the very idea of fidelity, challenging the authorial authority. It can't be simply the choice and freedom of interpretation but is an interpretative responsibility. E. D. Hirsch raises a fear in his mind if the reader doesn't have an intention to interpret, then what may happen? He argues, “If meaning is not determinate, interpretation becomes indistinguishable from invention” (Hirsch 1967: 5)

3. ‘The Death of the Author’: Challenge to Traditional Authorship and Acceptance of Translator’s Authorship:

The very idea of fidelity of a translator to the author of a Source Language Text in Translation Studies and the very idea of allowing freedom to interpret to the reader in ‘The Death of the Author’ by Roland Barthes coincide thematically. Translation theories and literary criticism rest on the assumption of the ideology of the authorial authority. Meaning of the text originates from the intention of the author that includes the social context itself. The very traditional idea of extrinsic criticism that involves social, historical and material conditions to interpret the text is in the words of Jerome J. McGann, “Literary works are social products and social events” (McGann 1985: 7). McGann while introducing the concept of social text states, “The literary work is not a self-contained object but a social text whose meanings are

produced by historical and institutional forces” (McGann 1983: 21).

Applying the very idea of McGann to Barthes, one can notice that the text for its interpretation cannot be solely dependent on the authorial authority only. Thus, translation represents the very critique of Roland Barthes discovering the instability of the meaning emphasizing the active role of the translator. To support the same, Barthes ends his essay writing, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 1988: 149). Rejecting the very notion that the author is the sole source of the meaning, Barthes says, “It is language which speaks, not the author” (Barthes 1988: 146). According to Barthes, the author cannot have an authorial authority as the original creator of the meaning because he assembles the language which is already loaded with the cultural codes. This renders the text the identity of the intertextual construction. To Barthes, the text is “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 1988: 148). The very idea of originality has been forfeited now.

To George Steiner, “Translation is an act of interpretive understanding” (Steiner 1998: 312). The same text is sometimes found translated by multiple translators. Various translations of the same Source Language Text prove that translation is not a mechanical transfer but an interpretative act. The diversity of translations justifies the idea of Barthes that meaning is not fixed in the origin rather it is interpretatively recreated. Barthes empowers the translator as a reader. Bassnett very rightly notes about the role of the translator, “The translator reads, interprets, and rewrites the text (Bassnett 2002: 38). Wolfgang Iser argues that “The meaning of the text is not a definable entity, but a dynamic event” (Iser 1978: 21). The meaning is created out of the interaction between the text and its reader. According to Stanley Fish, the function of the reader is to fill up the gaps. Fish notes, “Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing” (Fish 1980: 327). Meaning is thus reproduced within the possible interpretative communities. Thus, the translator after decoding the meaning of the Source Language Text recodes/reconstructs the same in the Target Language Text.

Translation is an act of reinterpretation whereas reading of the text is also the same. This has made the relationship between the translation and the death of the author very explicit. Derrida asserts, “There is nothing outside the text” (Derrida 1976: 158). This argument of Derrida justifies that the translation is nothing outside the meaning but it gets rearticulated in the process of translation itself.

4. Translator’s Visibility: From Reader to Translator/Trans-Creator:

Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995) examines the role of fluency and transparency in translation of a text. The translation of a text transparently, Venuti argues, makes the translator ‘invisible’ in the translated text making the author of the Source Language Text authority in interpretation. Venuti observes that, “a translated text, whether prose or poetry, is judged acceptable... when it reads fluently” (Venuti 1995: 1). This task, opposite the very idea of Roland Barthes, erases the labour of the translator along with his subjectivity. In order to restore the authority of the reader, Barthes allows the author to die to give a birth to the reader to interpret the text very freely. The same idea applied to Translation Studies, Venuti introduced the concept of foreignization which renders the

translator of the text visible asserting that “translation is a process that inscribes the values, beliefs, and representations of the receiving culture” (Venuti 1995: 18).

The biographical criticism has been a traditional one and therefore, has been attacked by Roland Barthes. He argues, “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified” (Barthes 1988: 148). Imposition of the limit on the text deprives the translator to interpret the text subjectively and individually. The echo of the same is visible when Wimsatt and Beardsley argue, “The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work” (Wimsatt 1946: 468). The successful evaluation of the text leads it to destination. Barthes notes, “The unity of a text lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 1988: 149).

It is necessary to free the text from the political implications. Terry Eagleton notes, “The death of the author signals a liberation of the text from bourgeois notions of property and ownership” (Eagleton 1996: 121). Eagleton says that the death of the author destroys the bourgeois authorship. The theory advocated by Barthes is ideological. However, it is possible that this liberty to the reader may be illusionary. Sean Burke argues, “The author is never simply dead; he returns as a function, a name, a category” (Burke 1992: 22). The scope of multiple cultures definitely renders a translator visible since perfect integrity is not possible in translation. Barthes argues, “A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, and contestation” (Barthes 1988: 147). The absence of perfect translation makes the translator visible in the Target Language Text making the Source Language Text different from the Target Language Text. According to George Steiner, “No translation, however scrupulous, can reproduce the original completely” (Steiner 1998: 264), to Bassnett, “There is no such thing as a perfect translation” (Bassnett 2002: 51), to Walter Benjamin “Even the greatest translation is destined to become outdated” (Walter 1968: 73) and to Venuti, “Translation never communicates the same meaning as the original” (Venuti 2008: 18). When the translator can never communicate, according to Venuti, “the same meaning as the original”, the translator has to be visible in rendering the very act of translation.

The visibility of the translator is possible when the translator uses the benefit of the freedom of interpretation. However, there are some translation critics who are against the freedom to be provided to the translator rejecting the monopoly of the author at the cost of the death of the author. In the act of the birth of the translator at the cost of the death of the author, argues Burke that Roland Barthes replaces the authority of the author with the reader, another author. Burke says, “The disappearance of the author often results in the unchecked authority of the critic or reader” (Burke 1992: 24).

5. Conclusion

On the basis of arguments made here, it can be noted that fidelity to the Source Language Text is neither perfectly possible nor essential, nor expected as well as translation is an act of interpretation and recreation. If the meaning is produced by the reader/translator only, if this is believed and accepted for one and all, the translator-reader plays the role as an agent to meaning production. By reconceptualizing the translator as a reader who and only who creates the meaning, the field of translation cannot be considered as a secondary act but as a form of interpretation critically. Drawing arguments on the basis of the reader response theories, it can

be summed up that the translator retains the centrally privileged designation and position as the producer of the meaning. To end the argument, translation is an extended act of reading in which the ‘death’ of the ‘author’ gives a ‘birth’ to the translator-reader having an agency to interpret. When the ‘author’ reads his own text, the ‘author’ in him dies to offer a ‘birth’ to a ‘reader’ in him. When the translator-reader translates a text, he replaces the ‘translator-reader’ in him by the ‘author’ once the Target Language Text has been published, again to give a birth to a ‘new reader’ to be born. Thus, the vicious circle of the birth of the reader at the cost of the author goes on and on endlessly because, according to Eco, “Every interpretation is a response to a text” (Eco 1990: 6). The death of the author is inevitable as Barthes says, “It is the language which speaks, not the author” (Barthes 1988: 144). Thus, the very act of translation after ‘The Death of the Author’ is not a derivative but rather a creative practice.

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