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Freedom and Fidelity: A Comparative Study of William Shakespeare’s Hamlet and its Tamil Translation

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Indian Drama has its origin and roots in the Sanskrit theatre. It is claimed that there are two influences on Indian drama; one is the Greek influence and the other is the influence of the four great Vedas which are original to India.

“. . . there are well-read scholars who maintain that India has borrowed the drama from Greece. Ever since the days of Alexander the Great, Greek colonies were thriving at the seaports and trading stations of the East” (Horowitz 76).

In addition to the Greek influence, during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the Indian Theatre was influenced by the British theatre and especially William Shakespeare was one of the most celebrated playwrights in India. In India, the presence of Shakespeare can be traced back to the Indo- British encounter. The colonial rule is one of the important reasons for the advent of Shakespearean plays in India. The Indian theatre has adapted Shakespeare into their literary and theatrical traditions. Shakespearean appropriations in Indian languages exhibit the translators’ participation in various literary and cultural movements and at the same time portray the evolution of Indian drama during the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.

This research paper focuses on the differences between the Tamil translation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the original English version. It also attempts to understand why the translation differs from the original text and how Tamil culture has been an important factor for incorporating the differences that are found in the translation. To an extent, this paper agrees that culture has a crucial role to play in translations and it enhances the perception and the reception of the text among the target language readers. The Tamil translation of *Hamlet* that is chosen for study is written by Aru. Somasundaram and it is the only translation available in print.

The introduction to the translated *Hamlet* clearly marks the intention of the translator. In the Introduction to his book, Aru. Somasundaram mentions that he intended to translate Shakespeare because he wanted the Tamil readers to experience the genius of Shakespeare and his plays.

One of the significant changes is that the Tamil *Hamlet* begins with an introduction of the plot. The translator had given a “MunKathai” which means a short introduction to the plot. This introduction mentions that Claudius had killed Sr. Hamlet and he had married Sr. Hamlet’s wife, Gertrude. It also mentions that the ghost encounters the Prince Hamlet and he is deeply worried by the actions of his uncle. So the readers do not get to know the past through the course of the play. It is one of the major disadvantages because the readers are already told what had happened and there is no element of suspense experienced by them during the course of the play. This is a loss as the readers are not allowed to unravel the past on their own. The intention of the translator might have been to facilitate better comprehension but it completely destroys the suspense and thrill.

In Act 1, Scene 1 (in the Translated *Hamlet*) Francisco asks Bernado to give him a code to assure that he is Francisco. It is a usual practice in the South Indian Kingdoms to use code words to reveal the identity so that no one else can deceive the royalty by disguising as someone else. Whereas in the original text it is mentioned only as “Unfold yourself”. If “Unfold yourself” is literally translated into Tamil there will be a confusion to understand the context and its meaning, so we can assume that the translator used the local culture of asking code words to reveal one’s identity. Translations are affected by localization in many small ways. Though these may appear very petty and simple, one cannot overlook these contexts as they reveal the practices and culture of the Tamil people. To an extent, it can also be argued that these changes are mandatory as they enable the readers to understand the context better and these changes do not affect the original in any possible way. There are neither losses nor gains.

In Act 1, Scene 1, another significant change happens in the translated work. In the original *Hamlet*, the apparition of Hamlet’s father disappears at the crowing of the cock. “Cock” is replaced as “crow” in the translated *Hamlet*. A careful analysis of this symbol reveals the importance of “Crows” in Hinduism. In Tamil Nadu, according to the Hindu mythology, people assume that crows connect the dead and the alive. There is also a popular belief that ancestors come in the form of crows. In the original *Hamlet*, the cock is used as a symbol. In Christianity, Rooster cocks symbolize the arrival of Jesus Christ and it is believed that the evil spirits will remain inside the graves during the Christmas season when the Rooster cocks make noise at night. English audience might be aware of this fact and they can understand the cock as a potent symbol which tries to communicate deeper meanings. But the Tamil readers are neither aware of the Rooster cock’s association with Christianity nor can they comprehend it as a symbol or an imagery. Edith Grossman, in the Introduction chapter to *Why Translation Matters* talks about the requirement of keen sense of style in both the languages. She mentions that setting and mood should not be hampered. This is rendered true by using crow instead of cock.

In Act II, “Fencing” is replaced by “Silambam” which is a martial art. In Tamil Nadu, the soldiers of Kings Puli Thevar, Veerapandiya Kattabomman and Maruthu Pandiyar relied supremely on the art of Silambam in their warfare against the British Army. Indian martial arts suffered a decline after the British colonists banned silambam along with various other systems. Translation here becomes a response to colonization and to the restrictions imposed on the colonized. Edward Said’s idea on post colonialism can be applied in this context. Edward Said mentions that the colonized should write against the colonizers and assert their identity, culture and tradition through their writing and literature. When the colonized has its own voice, it can assert its traditions and identity in a strong manner. Therefore, we can assume that the translator responded to colonization by choosing Silambam over sword fighting.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is known for its profound and a significant phrase which is “To be or be not” (Act 3, Scene I). This phrase can be interpreted in several ways. It is an ambiguous statement and at a superficial level one could possibly conclude that it is a question of life or death. Many

researchers and critics have tried to explain this statement and each shares a different perspective. It could be Hamlet's question of avenging for his father or not. It could also be his struggle to kill Claudius. This statement supposedly summarizes the character of Hamlet. The essence of the entire play is revealed in this particular statement. This statement is of crucial importance in the play as it deals with the theme of the play and sets the actions forward and it also clearly reflects the mood of Hamlet and the entire play.

In Tamil *Hamlet*, the translator has translated this statement as "to live or to die". This is a superficial translation and the soliloquy of Hamlet has completely lost its essence and the "to live or to die" does not express any of Hamlet's fears, anxieties, confusions and the statement serves just as a normal statement and the value one assigns to "to be or not to be" cannot be associated "to live or to die".

In total, the translated *Hamlet* is a faithful rendition to the original. The localization of a few symbols are necessary because it helps the target language audience to understand, experience and appreciate the genius of Shakespeare which is one of the prime motives of the translator.

The Tamil translation of *Hamlet* is a culturally rendered translation of the original text. It could not be considered as an unfaithful rendition of the original because the plot and the setting are not changed. The changes that Aru Somasundaram had incorporated into the *Hamlet* have losses and gains too. The loss of the translation will be the prosaic rendering of *Hamlet*, but the gains outweigh the loss. The gains should be looked at from the period in which the translation was written. It was a period which attempted to familiarize Shakespeare among the Tamil readers. The translator's intention was also to enable the Tamil readers to experience the wit and genius of Shakespeare. The translation does not do away with the plot of the original. It just makes a few changes so that the readers are not baffled.

The translator's intention had played an important role in the process of translation. The byproduct of the intention can make a translated text either linguistically authentic or aesthetically authentic or both.

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