

Bharati and the Art of Translation

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Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subramania_Bharati

Abstract

This paper throws light on Bharati's art of translation to which glorious tributes and compliments were given for attaining the pinnacle of success. As far as the poetic world of Bharati is concerned, one must have historical context in mind. Truly speaking, translating a poem by a poet opens new lanes in the literary world.

Keywords: Subramania Bharati, Translation, Versatile Genius, National Poet, Devotional Love, Liberty.

Subramania Bharati occupies a prime status as a poet of the New Age in the history of Indian literature. Even though he lived only thirty nine years, he is said to have left behind a legacy, of which the whole country feels really proud. It is said that Bharati started his literary career initially as

a translator of English articles into Tamil, for the sake of journals and newspapers. He himself had acknowledged his indebtedness to the task of translation, for he laboured in coining Tamil words during the process of translation of English Essays. Glorious tributes and compliments were paid to his translating abilities. The method that he followed for translation work was found to be something extraordinary, for he could translate the English original in one reading with no corrections. Such was the power of Bharati in the art of translation. No wonder, he was well versed in translating English to Tamil and Tamil to English.

Bharati was fortunate to have Aurobindo's friendship and company. Aurobindo was indeed held responsible for the spiritual growth in Bharati's mind, for Aurobindo was the one who turned Bharati's mind to the Vedas and to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* and initiated him into the truth of things, the secret of world-existence as the play of Shakti. Under Aurobindo's influence, Bharati translated the *Gita* and a chapter from Patanjali into Tamil and hymned the glory and greatness of Mahashakti in poem after poem. Greatly praised as a national poet, his writings are now recognised as national literature. Generally speaking, poets please and enlighten people, while patriots serve their country. But only a few are gifted with patriotic fervour and Bharati is said to have been one among the few.

Bharati as a poet has to be studied chiefly with the historical context in mind. Unrest and upheaval against the British prevailed in the country. Bharati as a poet with his roots in the distant past, affected by charges in his own times, saw in a clear vision, the horizon of far-away future, and so used translation as a media for propagating his ideas all over India.

A study of Bharati as a poet will not suffice without references to various influences of English Romantics like Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Keats and also American poets like Whitman and Emerson. Bharati was highly indebted to the Romantic poets and had a lot in common with the English Romantic poets – his passionate defence of freedom in all its forms like the emancipation of the oppressed, the women -- in the pervading lyricism and aestheticism of his poems. The American poet Walt Whitman also wielded a considerable influence on the poetry of Bharati. In fact, Bharati was probably among the first of the Indian poets to experiment with 'verse libre'.

Whitman's poetry was devoid of rhyme, alliteration and such poetic devices. Whitman believed that the meaning of poetry was in words, not in rhyme and so he wrote free verse, retaining only the rhythmic beauty of the language. Bharati had followed the same trend in many of his English translations and English poems.

Bharati was born in a time when literature, especially poetry was in the hands of poets who composed high class poetry. Those who composed simple verses for the average man in the street was condescendingly referred to as versifiers and their compositions were considered to be of a low order. This class distinction persisted through centuries until Bharati arose on Tamil literary horizon.

Bharati put an end to the traditional poetic style of eulogising great people. He wrote poems in simple, lucid style and with equal felicity and ease. Patriotic, devotional love or heroic – any kind of poetry flowed through his pen with great ease and vigour. He followed the same trend in writing poems in English and his translations.

Bharati's poems in English are in fact very few in number, when compared with his output in Tamil. Yet, they proved his greatness as a poet in an alien tongue. It would be more appropriate to refer to the foreword given by C.R. Reddy and K.S. Venkatamani in the collection of Bharati's English works namely *Agni and other Poems and Translations and Essays and other Prose Fragments*:

“When a poetic soul like Bharati's happy beyond dream in his own mother-tongue turns to an alien language for the aching joy of self-expression, it is no surprise to find that the art becomes laden with a more serious thought. For the highest aim of expression even in art is after all self-realisation. This intense longing for the Divine is visible in every song and every page of this collection. We shall not analyse the finalities of each. Analysis is a kill joy though the Tamil mind rejoices in it” (Agni iv).

Bharati's poems in English are 21 in number which could be divided into three categories; Bharati's own poems in English, English renderings of his own Tamil poems, his translations of three of Nammalwar's *Tiruvaymoli*, three of Nachiar's *Tirumoli* and two of Arunagiri's *Tiruppugal*. As Prof. Dr. V. Sachithanandan puts it, “Bharati's English poems, in their way of presentation and the handling, we are reminded of Tagore, Whitman and Aurobindo. Yet these poems were born out of Bharati's individuality. His Shakti tantra and Vedantic philosophy enabled him to write such poems. Some of his English renderings are not repetitions but are complementary to his Tamil poems.”

Translation of one's poems in another language known to the poet is not a new one. This custom is a very old one which prevailed from the time of Romans and Sanskrit poets. Of course, a poet translating a poet's work opens new lanes in the literary world traffic, according to Schlegel, Taylor and Fitzgerald. At the same time, the poet as a translator had to come across a few problems in the process of translation. It could not be assured that a poet's poetic imagination would be proficient in another language other than his mother-tongue. There may be exceptions like Samuel Beckett, who could successfully bring out dramas both in French and in English, with equal merit and appreciation. The same applies to Bharati who could write poems in Tamil and also in English for which the collection of English poems stands as an evidence.

The first poem ‘Agni – The Goodwill in the collection is a repetition of his Tamil poem ‘Velvi Thee’. Bharati is said to have adopted free verse in his translation reminding one of Tagore. This poem may be the result of Bharati's involvement in the study of Vedic seers and Upanishads. Many images originated from the poet's own imagination. The next two poems are about Krishna, one of Hindu deities. Bharati's major work *Kannan Pattu* is a compilation of 23 songs, where

Kannan undergoes several metamorphoses. Bharati might have felt like Tagore in considering God to be one among our dear and near ones. A paragraph from Tagore's *What is Art?* Would exemplify the above statement:

“In India, the greater part of our literature is religious, because God with us is not a distant God; He belongs to our homes as well as to our temples. We feel his nearness to us in all the human relationship of love and affection and in our festivities” (Ramakrishnan 12).

Human passions, feelings and emotions can never be effaced but they can be sublimated. Human love in the hands of Alvars and Nayanmars has become a divine one. Viewing God as the bridegroom and the devotees as brides is a very ancient one. Our Alvars and Nayanmars who were deeply read in the Sangam classics adopted the same literary tradition. Bharati who had been cradled in the lap of the same tradition went a step ahead for he gave immortal expression to man's various relationships with God. Bharati viewed God in different forms such as a friend, mother, father, servant, king, disciple, master, and child. While others adored and sang in praise of Kannan, Bharati added the epithet 'amma' and called his favourite as Kannamma. No wonder, Bharati, an ardent devotee of Shakti sang in praise of Kannamma. Of the 23 songs on Kannan, Bharati had translated only two, namely, 'Krishna my mother' and 'In each other's Arms'. The Tamil version 'Kannan-En Thai' appeared in *Gnana Bhanu* started by Subramania Siva in 1913 and the English version 'Krishna my Mother' was published in 1915.

The poem 'In Each other's Arms' is a translation, of his own Tamil poem 'Kannamma – En Kathali subtitled 'Yoga'. Bharati himself had given a note that the Supreme Divinity is imagined as the beloved Kannamma and the human soul as the lover and the burning desire of the soul for unification knew no laws. Kannamma is described as the essence of life, jnana and the quintessence of the Vedas. As the lover desires his spiritual sustenance from his beloved, he has no life without her. The poem is a string of antithetical images which stress the idea of Synthesis or union with the Divine for which the Yogi lives:

“Thou to me the flowing light
And I to the discerning sight
Honied blossom thou to me
Bee enchanted I to thee;” (Agni 5)

What use has the eye for me if there is no sight? Without light, man is spiritually blind and his existence is futile and meaningless. What is life to the bee without honey? What is man if he has not tasted of the honey of the experience of the Divine. The third poem 'Lakshmi' is an adaptation of Bharati's own Tamil poem '*Thirumagalai Saran Pukuthal*'. The revolutionary Zeal of Bharati made him declare that he would put an end to the tyranny of indigence all over the earth. Bharati strikes a new note in this poem. The poem 'Love Thine Enemy' a translation of 'Pakaivanukku Arulvai', is a historical and political significance. 'Veduthali Kummi', a famous Tamil poem was also translated into English by Bharati, under the title 'The Kummi of Women's Freedom'.

In fact, Bharati planned to start a *sangam* in order to develop the language, especially Tamil, in various aspects. Bharati wanted the world to recognise the literary merits of Tamil poetry. Bharati's renderings into English of select verses from Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli* is considered to be the epitome of the Vedic truths. Bharati gave a vivid account of Nammalvar in English essay and acknowledged his merits:

“The lines which we have translated
are a fair specimen of the great Alwar's
poetry” (P 113)

The second rendering of 10 stanzas, starting with the line ‘Tis glory, glory, glory!’ is a ‘Hymn of a Golden Age’. The third rendering titled ‘Love-Mad’ is also an English rendering of the best of Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli*, wherein we have the depiction of God's love in the best Nayaki Nayaka Bhava. Bharati was able to see even

“In the raven's sable hue
Nanda Laala” (Nanthakumar 38).

He felt the presence of God in fire. He realised God in things by the vision of Divine love. The three poems that follow Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli* are the translations of Nachiar's *Tirumoli*. Even though he encountered difficulties in translating and coining of words, Bharati was successful in the poetic translation of a poetic spirit from one language to another and the representation of the ideas and images of the original in a form altogether diverse from their own but perfectly adapted to the new conditions of time, place, custom and the habit of mind in which they reappear:

“Considerable agreement exists that poetry
should be translated into poetic form,
but there is less agreement on the question
whether or not the same verse form, rhyme
scheme should be used in the translation” (41)

So, Bharati takes the privilege of translating a verse into prose-verse or any form that he fancied.

To conclude, it may be said that Bharati's name and fame as a translator should be, no doubt, brought to light and a pride of place should be assigned to him as a translator, though he followed no fixed theories of translation. No doubt, Bharati is a versatile genius striking a new note in the art of translation.

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