



## **A Contextual Critique of the Issues Involved in the English Translation of Indira Goswami's *Nilakanthi Braja***

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### **Abstract**

*Translation is as old as creative writing itself. However, there are certain issues that sprout with the discourse of translation. The query arises on the translator's reliability, on the intentions of the translator, on the issue of finding the appropriate equivalents etc. In this paper an effort has been made to study the translated work of Indira Goswami's novel Nilakanthi Braja which is translated by Gayatri Bhattacharyya and published under the title The Blue-necked God. The issues that the paper focus is on the degree of subject-specific knowledge, degree of SL and TL proficiency, unconscious personal intrusion on the part of the translator, and difficulty in finding the appropriate equivalents that needs to be considered in the process of translation. The diminution of TL text's ornateness is the immediate ramification of its flouting.*

**Key Words:** *translation; source language; target language; equivalence; alien matter; inappropriate and incorrect transference; literal translation; semantical translation; untranslability.*

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**Introduction:** "Nothing that the Muses had touched can be carried over to another tongue without losing its savour and harmony" —Dante

Translation is as old as creative writing itself. However, it has not always enjoyed the same status and esteem that it is enjoying now. Having appeared in the literary canvas in the late 1970s, a fledgling discipline like Translation studies consolidates in 1980s. In 1980s, attention in the translation theory and practice of translation flourishes and in 1990s it becomes an autonomous discipline as it is upheld as the era of its global augmentation.

By this time a question should arise regarding the explanation of Translation as a discipline:

"Translation is the representation of a Source Language (SL) text into the Target Language (TL) in such a way that the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and the structures of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted." (Bassnett 2002:12)

Translation is indeed an autonomous discipline. It is neither a trifling off shoot of comparative literature, nor a specialized region of linguistics, rather an immensely complex field with numerous far reaching ramifications. Jacques Derrida's reviewing of Walter Benjamin has unlocked the vista of reevaluating the significance of translation—as a mode of interaction and exchange in general, and as a process of perseverance in special. Translation ensures the survival of a text and effectively becomes the 'afterlife' of a text; a resurrection in the lingo.

In 21st century, the world of increasing fragmentation, translation can perform a vital task in lending a hand to apprehend the colourful global culture. Michael Cronin, an Irish scholar, has highlighted that a translator is equivalent to a traveller who undertakes a journey from one source to another. On the other hand, André Lefevere has offered a radical concept of translation as "refraction rather than reflection" which contradicts the longstanding perception of translation as a reflection of the original. The assigned task of a translator according to him is to "decode" first and then "re-encode" it.

Roman Jakobson has distinguished three types of translation in his article *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*:

- (1) Intralingual translation or “rewording” (“an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language”).
- (2) Interlingual translation or “translation proper” (“an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language”).
- (3) Intersemiotic translation or “transmutation” (“an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems”).

(Jakobson 2004:139)

Jacobson has instantly highlighted the fact that the fundamental encumbrance in all the above types of translation is the accomplishment of maximum correspondence through translation. Levý, the great Czech translation scholar, has upheld the view that any shrinking or skipping of problematical expression in translation is immoral. The emphasis in the translation is always on the reader and the decoder is to supervise the SL text so as the TL adaptation is always consistent to the SL version, simultaneously, not forgetting that the “convention” in SL may not parallel the “convention” in the TL. “Hence Albrecht Neubert’s view that Shakespeare’s Sonnet, *Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?* Cannot be semantically translated into a language where summers are unpleasant, is perfectly proper.”

(Bassnett 2002: 31)

“Translation of idioms and phrases takes us a stage further in considering the question of meaning and translation for idioms and phrases, like puns, are culture bound.” (Bassnett 2002: 32). As for example the Assamese phrase *Pānit hāh nosor āobosthā hoā* in the expression “Ram-or pānit hāh nosorā obosthā hoise” cannot be literally translated. However, it can be semantically translated into English by finding its appropriate phrase in English. The image that this expression invokes in our mind would seem abstruse and baffling if the context was not signified rather specifically to such a situation. The English idiom that reminds us of this Assamese phrase, *to lead a dog’s life*, would also be abstruse unless used idiomatically, and thus the sentence on accurate recoding becomes *Ram is leading a dog’s life*. In the context of recoding, Dagut’s observation regarding the difficulties of recoding metaphor is fascinating:

“Since a metaphor in the SL is, by definition, a new piece of performance, a semantic novelty, it can, clearly have no existing ‘equivalence’ in the TL: what is unique can have no counterpart.”

(Dagut1976: 21-33.)

This assertion of Dagut puts the whole idea of translation in question and opens up new window of untranslability.

Thus, so far it is pretty transparent that the difficulty of achieving appropriate equivalence is one of the fundamental issues. “Eugene Nida distinguishes two types of equivalence—formal and dynamic, where formal equivalence ‘focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content. In such a translation one is concerned with such correspondences as poetry to poetry, sentence to sentence, and concept to concept.’ Nida calls this type of translation a ‘gloss translation’, which aims to allow the reader to understand as much of the SL context as possible.” (Bassnett 2002: 34). Dynamic equivalence aims equivalent effect, i.e. the association between recipient and message of TL should target to attain the same relation as there exists between the original recipient and the SL message.

**The English Translation of Nilakanthi Braja:** This paper strives to offer a critique of the issues involved in the English translation of Indira Goswami’s novel *Nilakanthi Braja*. Originally written in Assamese and later on translated into many other languages, the book raised many eyebrows with its graphic portrayal of the plight of the widows in Vrindavan. The novel has been translated into English by Gayatri Bhattacharyya with the title *The Blue-necked God*. “Translation is essentially a decision-making process that requires a combination of language ability, subject-specific knowledge, intuition, research skills and judgment. A proper translation expresses the meaning behind the use of written words in one language in the written word usage of a second language” (Bukacek 2001: 3). The question that has been raised in this paper is how much successful the translator is in translating an Assamese language text into English; how much effective she is in retaining the original essence while transferring it from the SL text and how much justification she has done to the original author while recoding the original text.

The translation of the title itself erects several questions. The original title is *Nilakanthi Braja* which becomes *The Blue-necked God* in the English version. Now, the instantaneous question is who

is Nilakanthi or the “blue-necked god”? In Hindu mythology Lord Shiva is known as *Nilakanthi* for He is the possessor of blue Adam’s apple; and it is due to the effect of *Halāhal*, a deadly poison that comes out from the heart of the sea in the course of *Sāgar-Manthan*, which He drinks, to save the universe. *Braja* or the *Braja dhām* is the place where Lord Krishna spent His childhood, i.e. Vrindavan, which is a place of Hindu pilgrimage. Next question is Why Vrindavan, a holy place, is entitled as *Nilakanthi*? It must be because Indira Goswami has exposed the uglier side of the city; the deadly poison of depravation –of physical, emotional and financial, that is faced by the young widows; their plight and mental agony. Thus the original title is defended. On the other hand, the title in the translated version, *The Blue-necked God*, which signifies Lord Shiva, has no connection with the novel as a whole. Thus, the title from this stance is totally deceiving and misleading. This is the immediate ramification of a lower degree of subject specific knowledge on the part of the translator.

Exclusion of problematical expression and incorrect transference raises the question on the degree of SL proficiency on the part of the translator. A translator is licensed to recode the SL text but he/she is neither permitted to exclude any part of TL text nor allowed to recode it erroneously. In *the Blue-necked God*, the translator has taken the freedom by herself to execute both which in turn exhibits the translator’s degree of proficiency in Assamese language. In *Chapter one* (pp. 9, Nilakanthi Braja) when Saudamini enters her dark room and opens the only window in the room, she discovers the first disgusting face of the Braja life and shutting the window she decides not to open it any more. The translator has unpardonably skipped the whole paragraph (pp. 15, The Blue-necked God) encompassing the emotion that follows thereafter. The reader of the TL text will not be able to understand Saudamini’s sentiment which she feels on witnessing such callous acts. Certain difficult sentences have also been excluded as in *Chapter Thirteen*. The Kesighat priest approaches Sashi near the ashy remains of Alamghari and advises her to decide whether to wander around the temple and spend her days in a shack with the radheshyamis or to spend her life as a nurse under Dr Roychoudhuri’s supervision and he says that it is the appropriate time to decide it (pp. 128, The Blue-necked God). The expression after that, *Morāxo etā āgot thākile tripāpor bixoye sikshā diyā jenedore pholdiok somoy* (pp. 83, Nilakanthi Braja) which means “just as it is an appropriate time to give a lesson on *tripap* if there remains a dead body in front”, has been replaced with mere ellipsis. Again, in *Chapter Fifteen* (pp. 98, Nilakanthi Braja), a vital question that repeatedly arises in Saudamini’s mind has been deplorably skipped in the translated version (pp. 151, The Blue-necked God). The interrogation after translation would have been something like this—“Is there anyone who being in this holy ground is obsessed with a similar thought? Is there anyone for whom those precious and encouraging anecdotes are insignificant like dust?” These interrogations give us a picture of Saudamini’s contemplations regarding the widows of Braja. But its exclusion veils this picture from the TL text readers. Another instance in *Chapter Seventeen* (pp.106, Nilakanthi Braja) where the radheshyami who looks after Anupama reproachfully tells Saudamini to have control upon her passion until her mother dies and then she is free to go to whoever she likes—Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Punjabi. The expression there after which goes thus—*olop samoi diā bhaktimati tiroṭā keijonimānor hādōt bon gagiboloi mātro olop samoi diā tomāloke*, (you people wait for some time, just for some time for a few pious ladies to die and decompose) has been abruptly skipped (pp. 165, The Blue-necked God). Again, certain words like the name of the plants like *kabuli romonā*, *bon dimoru*, *kolgos*, and untranslatable terms like *chandratap*, *bisārchatri*, *tānzām* have been startlingly omitted without which, probably, the fragrance of Vrindavan remains incomplete.

Translation offers an ample scope to understand an alien culture through their literary productions. However, an incorrect or misleading translation can sketch a disingenuous and distorted image of a particular culture. The similar lapse is very much detectable in the translated work of *Nilakanthi Braja*. Several words, sentences and even idioms have been recoded incorrectly. As for example the word *noirāshya* (Chap 1, pp. 3, Nilakanthi Braja) which denotes ‘disappointment’ has been misinterpreted as ‘intoxication’(Chap 1, pp.4, The Blue-necked God); *ātmasamarpan* (Chap 17, pp.107, Nilakanthi Braja) which literally means ‘surrender’ has been incorrectly translated as ‘sacrifice’(Chap 17, pp.166, The Blue-necked God); *bolīā* (Chap13, pp. 73) which literally means ‘mad’ or ‘crazy’ has been confusingly transferred as ‘possessed’(Chap 13, pp.113, The Blue-necked God); *kāndh* (Chap 13, pp.73) which literally means ‘shoulder’ has been translated as ‘upper body’(Chap 13, pp.114, The Blue-necked God) which obscures the real meaning of *uttariyā* which has no English equivalence; *sabhājātrā* (Chap 13, pp. 85, Nilakanthi Braja) which means ‘procession’

has been written as ‘parade’ (Chap 13, pp.132, The Blue-necked God); *kukurnesiā* (Chap 13, pp. 87, Nilakanthi Braja), an Assamese word which means ‘wolf’ has been recoded as ‘dog’ (Chap 13, pp.135, The Blue-necked God), in the translated version. Just as the use of improper colours may distort a whole painting, so is the use of inappropriate and unsuitable words can misrepresent a whole piece of literature. And, the same is the consequence of the English translation of *Nilakanthi Braja*. Apart from these words, an Assamese idiom—*kāsor bābe mānik neheruā* (Chap 13, pp. 82, Nilakanthi Braja) which means ‘not to lose a gem for a piece of glass’ has been deplorably as well as humorously translated as ‘not to lose a gem for the sake of a mere tortoise’ (Chap 13, pp. 127, The Blue-necked God). It must be noted here that *kās* (glass) and *kāso* (tortoise) becomes homonym when possessive marker ‘-or’ is suffixed with *kās*:

Kās-or	bābe	mānik	ne-heru-ā
Kās-poss	bābe	mānik	ne-heru-inf
Glass	for	gem	not-lose-to
Not to lose a gem for a piece of glass.			

Again the Assamese expression *Tyāg āru ahimshār protik goirik boxon dhāri bibhinna ponthi sādthur dole bhorī porise* (Chap 13, pp. 74 Nilakanthi Braja), which when translated into English should be “the Ramanreti’s dharamshala is packed with the sadhus of various religious groups clad in saffron, the symbol of sacrifice and nonviolence”, has been translated as “saffron robed sadhus belonging to various religious group and spiritual sects dedicated to selfless and non-violence could be seen” (Chap 13, pp.115, The Blue-necked God). The original writer has not spoken a word about the nature of the sadhus as it has been done by the translator when she says that they are *dedicated to selfless and non-violence*. What Goswami has done in the SL text is that she has simply commented on the dress of the sadhus which may have an ironical interpretation too.

Translation, in modern period is credited as a creative product. It is because solely the story can be taken from the original text and the rest depends upon the translator’s creativity; how much able he/she is to persist the same essence in the TL version without distorting it or complementing it. He faces the maximum burden in digging up the TL equivalence failing of which leads to the evaporation of the ornateness of language. Unfortunately *The Blue-necked God* suffers from the same crisis. In *Chapter Eight* as soon as Anupama starts describing her experiences, Saudamini stands up all of a sudden and runs downstairs and sitting down on the ground she begins to sob. The way she cries has been described as—*tāi eti sishuor dore hāo-hāokoi kāndibo dhorile* (She starts bawling like a child) in the SL text (pp. 46, Nilakanthi Braja). However, the image has been swabbed away in the TL text while avoiding the simile and recoding it as “She sobbed as if her heart was breaking” (Chap 8, pp.71, The Blue-necked God). Again, When Sashi goes back to the Radheshyamīs after cremating Alamgarhi, the Radheshyamīs says: *Kio ākou āmār tezkoḥā khābo āhili?* (Chap 13, pp. 83, Nilakanthi Braja), which when literally translated should be something like—“why have you come back again to suck our blood?” But the sentence has been translated as “why have you come back here again to trouble us?” (Chap 13, pp.129, The Blue-necked God). It is as if the translator is not recoding it but is explaining the whole thing as one does in synopsis. Another expression: *samay bor sokur posārote bāgori jābo* (Chap 13, pp. 88, Nilakanthi Braja) has been translated as “the years will fly past so that you will not even realize it” (Chap 13, pp.136, The Blue-necked God), although it would have been more appropriate if it had been translated as *the years will fly in blinking of eyes*. In *Chapter Fifteen*, when Saudamini strolls aimlessly by the bank of Jamuna, a melodious song in the background touches her deeply. A line of that lyrical piece goes thus—*tumi neḥānāne āmi gorol swarup birahar analot aharah dahisu* (Chap 15, pp. 98, Nilakanthi Braja) according to which the speaker is enquiring the listener if he is unaware that they are burning incessantly in the poisonous pang of separation. However, it has been inappropriately recoded as “Do you not know that we have always lived with the poison of sorrow and desire?” (Chap 15, pp.151, The Blue-necked God). The original writer has created the image of “burning” but the translator has created the image of “living” although in sorrow.

The unconscious intrusion of the translator can affect the story as a whole including its influence on the reader. Trying to present the translator’s own interpretation and complementing something which is absent in the SL text is labeled here as alien matter. The cases of intrusion and inclusion of alien matter is very much visible in the present novel. Sashi was searching for Sherafi Sethni. “Her clothes were almost in tatters now and it was imperative she find the Sethni and ask for her

protection” (Chap 13, pp. 113, *The Blue-necked God*). Again, when Sashi was proceeding towards Ramanreti dharamshala suddenly she felt that “there was not any need for her to go any further. *The Sethni was not there.*” (Chap 13, pp.115, *The Blue-necked God*). The expressions in italics are alien matters that have been complemented in the translated version. These alien matters are nothing but the unconscious inclusion of the translator’s own understanding of the novel which is highly undesirable. What the translator has done here is that she has not offered any scope for “the birth of a reader”.

Apart from these, it seems that the translator has not taken much pain to adorn the TL text with the artistic ornaments (like the introduction of personification, construction of images, and employment of simile). If we look at *Chapter one* (pp.6, Nilakanthi Braja), we may see that Goswami has beautifully described the woods of Lilabarg which has been presented to be in the delicate embrace of the prickly *Kābuli ramanās* (a kind of shrub). The TL text, however, has given an insipid description of the woods—“The woods of Lilabarg were full of all kinds of dry, prickly shrubs and bushes” (Chap 1, pp. 10, *The Blue-necked God*). Moving, to *Chapter Seventeen*, in the SL text, Goswami has skillfully portrayed the virginity of Saudamini before her marriage, though she had a number of admirers. Goswami has created the image by asserting that Saudamini has never unbuttoned her blouse on the request of any of her admirers (pp.111, Nilakanthi Braja). This image, conversely, has been mopped in the translated text and portrayed colourlessly: “But in spite of the pleadings and persuading of her admirers, she had never given in to them, had never allowed any of them to take liberties with her body” (Chap 17, pp. 171, *The Blue-necked God*). Another example we can cite in the same chapter, where Goswami has used the colour of the nest of a weaver bird to portray the image of a gloomy sky (pp.106, Nilakanthi Braja). But no such colour has been used by the translator and has been simply scripted as “The sky has been downcast since the morning” (Chap 17, pp. 166, *The Blue-necked God*).

**Conclusion:** Indira Goswami was a prolific writer of her time and will remain unchallenged for her artistic use of language and the affect she can have upon her readers mind. However, it is unfortunate to see that the translated version projects just an opposite picture of her as well as her writing and the Assamese culture. As it is not possible to cover the whole book in a limited canvas, so, examples have been cited from only a few important chapters (Chap1, Chap7, Chap8, Chap13, Chap15 and Chap17). A comparative study of both the original text and the translated version makes it clear that the original text is like sugarcane full of sweet juice and the translated version is the nothing but the cane coming out of a presser, devoid of its sweetness and essence. The discussion exhibits the translator’s lack of subject specific knowledge, her lower degree of Assamese language proficiency, and her deficiency of taste and of knowledge of artistic use of language. In conclusion we can say that *The Blue-necked God* is the distorted image of *Nilakanthi Braja*.

#### ABBREVIATION

SL	Source Language
TL	Target Language
inf	Infinitive
pp	Page number
Chap	Chapter
poss	possessive
neg	negative

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