



Ghosh's Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began: A Critique of Cultural Translation

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Abstract:

Travel writing frequently portrays the culture of the visited country via the cultural prism of the traveller. The article analyses cultural translation in travelogues. The analysis is based on Bishwanth Ghosh's *Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began*, which recounts his experience as an outsider in Madras. We chose this literature because few authors have written extensively about Madras (Chennai), one of India's oldest towns. The travelogue is unique in that it recounts the author's decade-long residence in a place, as opposed to just passing through it. The present paper tries to shade varied aspects of Ghosh's translation of traveled culture by following MLA eighth edition of literary documenting.

Keywords:Cultural translation, travelogue, Madras city, real-life events, bridge between cultures, etc.

Introduction:

Travel writing has emerged as a fascinating topic of literary study in recent years. According to travel writer Mary Baine Campbell (2002), the genre appeals to academics in anthropology, cultural studies, and literary studies. It is a type of writing that:

provokes certain kinds of essential literary questions and formulations. Most interesting here are works of literary criticism that find themselves directly facing issues of power, knowledge, and identity as a consequence of the very nature of the formal matters raised. Formal issues that have been fully explored with relation to travel



writing in recent decades include the nature and function of the stereotype, lexical matters such as the hidden etymologies,...the subjective presence of the author(s) in texts of knowledge, truth value in narrative writing, the independent or hard -wired shape of narrative itself, the rhetorical nature of ‘fact’, ‘identification’ in reading (with its consequences in social and political life), the representation of time, inter-cultural ‘translation’ and the function of metaphor and other figures.(263)

Cultural translation is the transfer of culture. Understanding cultural translation enquires familiarity with the concept ‘culture.’ There is not an ideal description for the phrase. According to John Storey, culture refers to the “shared meanings we make and encounter in our everyday lives...the practices and processes of making meanings with and from the ‘texts’ we encounter in our everyday lives.” (221)Raymond Williams, a renowned theorist, defines culture as both commonplace and a way of life. The author defines culture in three ways: lived culture, documented culture, time culture, and selective tradition culture.

Cultural translation and culture studies go hand in hand. Cultural Studies is a critical field that seeks to find the ways by which culture functions in the modern world, cultural productions work and also the formation of cultural identities. However, the critic Chris Barker is of the view that cultural studies as a domain explores the production and inculcation of culture and that cultural studies constitutes the game of language in it. (Barker2012)

Based on the foregoing, it is possible to conclude that cultural translation encompasses not just translating languages from one text to another, but also the transmission of ideas between cultures. Homi K.Bhabha(1994), in *The Location of Culture* explains the function of cultural translation –“Cultural translation desacralizes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy, and in that very act, demands a contextual specificity, a historical differentiation within minority positions.” (327)

Travel writing is a unique way to transmit culture by capturing real-life events and expressing them verbally through travelogues. Travel writing has become increasingly popular and well accepted.Roy Bridges (2002), explains travel writing as an important genre.



Travel writing...has a complex relationship with the situations in which it arose. It is taken to mean a discourse designed to describe and interpret for its readers a geographical area together with its natural attributes and its human society and culture. Travel writing may embrace approaches ranging from an exposition of the results of scientific exploration claiming to be objective and value-free to the frankly subjective description of the impact of an area and its people on the writer's sensibilities. (p.53)

A travelogue aims to capture and explore a certain land's culture. The traveller uses their work to introduce readers to new areas and provide vivid descriptions of the local culture. The writer helps unfamiliar readers grasp the location, people, and culture depicted in the travelogue. By the term culture, the scholar means "the way of life or the ordinary life." (54) as given by Raymond Williams.

Travelogues function as a bridge between cultures, making it intriguing to explore the challenges of transmitting cultural nuances of a city. This study examines the Indian travelogue *Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began* through an analytical lens. The author, Biswanath Ghosh, provides a description of his life in Chennai (Madras) and his opinions on the local culture. Boris Buden (2006) offers a unique perspective on cultural translation. He opines that "the purpose of translation is not to facilitate the communication between two different languages and cultures, but to build one's own language..." (Buden 2006)

Bishwanath Ghosh is a well-regarded Indian travel writer and journalist. He has published three travelogues, including *Chai Chai: Travels in Places Where You Stop but Never Get Off* (2009), *Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began* (2012), and *Longing, Belonging: An Outsider at Home in Calcutta* (2014). *Tamarind City* is a travelogue about the author's experiences in Chennai, his second home. His efforts and observations helped him understand a new city with cultural variations from his previous home.

Travel writers from East and West showed less interest to write about Southern India compared to the North. Ghosh starts his author's note with a disclaimer. The author describes numerous aspects of Chennai residents' lives. In this travelogue, the author explores the history, geography, arts, and culture of Madras in an engaging way. Travel writing explores the daily



behaviours of a community of individuals living in a specific environment, capturing their culture.

Many travelogues contain stereotypical and prejudiced portrayals of specific places and individuals. Many travelogues are written based on the author's second-hand experience, rather than visiting the destination. Travel writers from the West often visit India with preconceived conceptions and stereotypes, only to be astonished by the reality. Pankaj Mishra's (1995) book, *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India*, emphasises this point. He cites a Westerner's perspective on the Indian city of Benares.

I suppose the shock was greater because of that, [happening in Benares] and also because we had just come up from the South where we had faced absolutely no problems at all...I think it also has something to do with the present moment, with how people treat each other in daily life, civic manners, a certain basic decency towards women, older people, and if you take that criterion, Benares comes right at the bottom of all Indian cities we visited. (211-12)

Throughout history, India has been heavily stereotyped. India is either seen as a source of spices and richness, or as a symbol of poverty and gloom. According to Donald F. Lach (1968), India was often associated with wealth, dark-skinned locals, disease-free living, and mystical qualities in popular culture.

India is a multicultural, multilingual country with several hundred ethnic groups that maintain unique rituals in a variety of ways. Because of the country's cultural richness, many misconceptions and preconceived assumptions arise in the minds of its citizens, which can lead to stereotyping. Bishwanath Ghosh's (2012) travelogue, *Tamarind City Where Modern India Began*, begins with a stereotyped perspective of a fellow North Indian traveller on a train to Chennai.

Do you live in Chennai? I asked him. It had been hours since I had spoken to anyone. He recoiled in mock horror at my question. Then, slapping his palms together, burst out laughing. 'Chennai main reh karmarna haikya?' he asked. 'Do you think I'm crazy to be living in a place like Chennai?' His body was still shaking with mirth." (xiii)



North Indians stereotype all South Indians as Madrasis, similar to how Americans perceive Indians as curry-loving. His prologue highlights:

The lay north Indian has known very little about Chennai except that it is inhabited by conservative and religious people called Madrasis who live on idli and dosa. There was no need to know more. The south, for the north, was always the back of beyond. People from the south came to the north in large numbers to work. But there was no movement in the reverse direction...(xxv)

India's diversity of customs and cultural practices creates distinct identities for each state. This might lead to misconception and disinterest among the general public.

His writing about a South Indian city challenges North Indian stereotypes. Ghosh, who lives in Chennai, focuses on recognising the history of the city and causes that have influenced it, as well as introducing readers to its unique culture. South Indian readers may recognise his stereotypes about Tamil culture and attitudes towards the people in his travelogue.

Even today, it is common to see Brahmin men, no matter where they work or what positions they hold, wearing the caste mark on their foreheads-the general exceptions being those who have had a liberal upbringing outside Tamil Nadu or have grown up in anglicized homes. (Ghosh 61)

Ghosh has misrepresented Tamils in this instance. Wearing a caste mark on the forehead is not exclusive to Brahmin men. It is not limited to a specific caste. Nowadays, wearing such tattoos on the forehead is a question of personal choice. Some people wear it on their heads, while others do not. The writer should have used a more generalised language instead of focusing solely on one caste.

According to the study, Ghosh (2012) used his outsider perspective to mock specific Tamil habits, rather than providing accurate information to readers. For instance, he depicts a Tamil girl heading to the gym as shown below.

There is a plump woman I run into every afternoon...On the treadmill, she walks like a toddler practicing her first steps. The jasmine retains its freshness, she her weight...Apart from me, no one, not even her trainer, seems to find her attire or attitude out of place. (59-60)



We need to consider the last sentence. Ghosh is disturbed by the very visual of a Tamil lady dressed in a traditional way. In another context, he makes fun of an old Brahmin lady whom he meets during a musical festival at Parthasarathy temple. He quotes- “I am Mrs.Parthasarathy,’ she replies. The name suits the setting. That’s not even her name, but her husband’s. It’s the name she wants society to know her by.” (265) The author sounds a little crude in his remark. As an Indian, he must have known that throughout India, the practice of using husband’s name is the result of a colonial hangover. To extend it further, in the rest of India, woman takes up the caste name of her husband, thereby being addressed as ‘Mrs.Gupta’, ‘Mrs.Sharma’, etc.

Travelogues sometimes require cultural translation as they capture the socio-historical and cultural aspects of a place. One key challenge in cultural translation is the author’s subjectivity, which is particularly evident in travelogues. They often include the his/her personal observations and experiences while travelling in a specific country. Subjectivity is unavoidable unless the author intends to write otherwise. his travelogue focuses on the history of Madras and its changes over time.

Even First Line Beach, the most vital road of Madras in the early colonial era, with the harbor on one side and the all-important public buildings on the other, appears deserted in 1910 photograph. As if it is under curfew. Today the same road, renamed Rajaji Salai, is as much a nightmare for the motorist as the pedestrian. If any place in the city remains as unpopulated as it was a century ago, it is perhaps the sea. (25-26)

Conclusion:

To summarise, travel writers document their experiences to share with others. They highlight a region's cultural diversity through language, food, politics, and people's daily lives. Travel writers must break down cultural barriers to experience new places and cultures. To do this, the writer must be devoid of biases and inhibitions towards the travel destination.

His travelogue highlights the distinctive culture of Chennai and identifies its distinguishing features for readers to learn about. “Translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions.” (Tourey 200) he draws parallels between the city and his home culture. The researcher attempted to comprehend the



cultural components as well as his narrative methods through a detailed assessment of the study. Mary Campbell's analysis highlights challenges in translating his personal travel experience, including prejudices and stereotypical notions regarding a place, the author's subjectivity, and language barriers during narration. Ghosh's journalistic background allows him to gain first-hand knowledge of Madras culture through informal talks, observations, and personal interviews.

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