

Translation and its failure in the modern postcolonial short story

Autor(en): **Allemann, Vidya Ravi**

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Vidya Ravi Allemann

Translation and Its Failure in the Modern Postcolonial Short Story

Des critiques et écrivains de nouvelles ont défendu l'idée que la brièveté et un unique moment de clarté sont les éléments essentiels du format court typique de la nouvelle. Cependant, la nouvelle postcoloniale est plurielle, polyphonique et versatile, et elle a tendance à s'appuyer sur le désaccord culturel, social, et linguistique. Ce chapitre examine la traduction et l'échec de celle-ci dans l'œuvre de deux nouvellistes prolifiques qui viennent des deux différentes traditions postcoloniales : Nadine Gordimer et Anita Desai. La prémisse de mon argument est que les nouvelles de ces écrivains ont pour la plupart lieu dans des espaces périphériques, par exemple des villages et des avant-postes. Elles dramatisent une forme de processus postcolonial de désengagement des centres de pouvoir en explorant et en remettant en question des hiérarchies discursives. Cette renégociation implique la présence de perspectives multiples et de subjectivités plurielles, de même qu'elle insiste sur des traductions problématiques et des malentendus surgissant en leur sein. Par l'étude de textes de Gordimer et Desai, ce chapitre considère plusieurs formes de malentendus – fausses représentations, mécompréhension, traductions erronées et obstructions linguistiques – qui se présentent dans deux nouvelles. Il ressort de cette analyse que les malentendus sont susceptibles de devenir les instruments de l'expression d'une résistance dans les sites hégémoniques de la langue et du pouvoir.

In her essay "The Flash of Fireflies," the South African writer Nadine Gordimer describes the short story as having the effect of a sudden glimmer of light. Short story writers see the world through the light of this flash, for "theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation of what went before and what happens beyond this point."¹ The short story, by writers and theorists alike, has been seen as a compressed, concise, unified, and crafted form, prized for its economy and characterised by, as Edgar Allan Poe writes in his 1846 essay, its "unity of effect."² Charles E. May contends that the short story's brevity "forces it to focus not on the whole of experience but rather on a single experience lifted out of the everyday flow of human actuality."³

Compactness and that single moment of clarity are essential elements to the short form, while messiness and verbosity are to be avoided. Short story writers from different parts of the world have taken from, and contributed

1 Gordimer, "The Flash of Fireflies," 264.

2 Poe, "Poe on Short Fiction," 60.

3 May, "Why Short Stories Are Essential," 24.

to, what seems like a golden rule. However, given the transnational nature of the modern short story, cultural, social, and linguistic friction is integral to its narrative arc – friction that might even be at odds with its formal requirements. The postcolonial short story, in particular, seems to be caught in this double bind.⁴ If the short story describes a moment of loneliness and speaks for “submerged populations,” as Frank O’Connor’s influential study *The Lonely Voice* puts forth, then it seems that the postcolonial short story complicates the boundary between margin and the centre, the dominant and the submerged.⁵ As Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell contend, the postcolonial short story is all about exploring and challenging discursive hierarchies – “who gets to speak of what and how.”⁶ This renegotiation involves, even insists upon, the presence of multiple perspectives and plural subjectivities, and upon cross-translations and misunderstandings that arise between these lonely voices.

In this essay, I explore translation and its failure, and how misrepresentations might serve as possible loci of meaning, in the work of two prolific writers. Nadine Gordimer and Anita Desai emerge from different postcolonial traditions – South African and Indian, and are accomplished practitioners of the short form. My reasoning for using these writers is two-fold. Both Gordimer and Desai are innovative short story writers, and their work has also been commended for the valuable insights into the culture, society, and language of their respective subjects – Apartheid South Africa (in Gordimer’s case) and rural India (in Desai’s). While I don’t intend to lump these two writers together and conflate two distinct literary contexts, I do subscribe to Peter Hulme’s understanding of the postcolonial as not an evaluative but a descriptive term. As Hulme argues, postcolonial “refers to a *process* of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome.”⁷ This process of disengagement is very apparent in these writers’ works, which are often set in villages and outposts – peripheral places far from the centre of power. By looking at these writers together, we can see how the restless if not messy narrative form of the short story intersects with, and is even enriched by, confrontations between the local and the transnational, between the centre and the margins. Reading itself, in these writers’ works, becomes a cross-cultural act, welcoming a plurality of interpretations and opening up vistas for multiple subjectivities.

4 While it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore how the postcolonial short story developed cross-culturally and cross-nationally, it is important to mention here that the short story has long been used by postcolonial writers as an effective medium of dissidence. For more, see Awadalla and March-Russell, 4-5.

5 O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice*, 18.

6 Awadalla and March-Russell, “Introduction,” 4.

7 Hulme, “Including America,” 120.

In the first instance, I turn to an early story by Gordimer, “The Amateurs.” In this story, an amateur theatre troupe performs Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* in a black township. The tension between representing and not understanding comes to a head in this story, as various failed efforts to translate culture yield errant yet extant meanings. The stories of Desai often focus on an archivist’s obsession to transpose the marginal or the unknowable into unassailable chunks of information. Desai’s story “Translator Translated” shows how an unfaithful translation might actually be a subversive act of rewriting a hegemonic colonial language. By exploring discursive ticks, linguistic obstruction, and free indirect style in these writers, this paper considers how mistranslations can become valuable material, and how resistance and renewal are housed in the structural glitches that make up the short story.

Gordimer’s “The Amateurs” (first published in the collection *The Voice of the Serpent* in 1953) announces its theme in the title. In an interview, Gordimer explained that the story was based on her personal experience. Part of an amateur theatre troupe in her youth, she had gone to a township to perform Wilde’s play. “I think I suffered a culture shock in my native country [...] who were we, feeling superior, showing off European culture to an audience with no background in understanding what we were doing, an audience whose own culture *we* did not know at all?” she recalled of the incident in a 1979 interview.⁸ In Gordimer’s story, the group comes to a township, referred simply to as “the Location,” in a flurry of excitement. They stumble in the darkness, dodge open drains, “all talking at once [...] and laughing in the pleasant little adventure of being lost together.”⁹ They cast themselves as tourists and explorers, armed with culture and knowledge that they intend to impart. “What a story to tell!” a shrill free indirect voice repeats at regular intervals, gathering the performers into a single entity. However, the louder their laughter and exclamations ring out, the Location remains shut to them: “they peered white-faced at the windows, wanting to see what it was like. But, curiously, it seemed that the Location didn’t want to see them. [...] Life seemed always to be in the net street, voices singing far off and shouts, but when the car turned the corner – again, there was nobody.”¹⁰

It is not so “curious,” as it transpires, that the Location remains unknowable to the group. They are “white-faced,” alluding to their race, the make-up they don during their performance, and to their obliviousness of their essentialist idea of black identity. The liquid black grease paint that one of the actors applies relates metonymically to the blackness with which they paint the “the rows and rows of hundreds and hundred who lived and ate and slept

8 Gordimer, *Conversations*, 103.

9 Gordimer, *Why Haven’t You Written?*, 51.

10 Ibid., 52.

and talked and loved and died in the houses outside.”¹¹ The metaphorical doors remain blocked on both sides. An actual door does open and some dialogue is about to ensue. The players look out into a courtyard filled with men from the street. A “tall slim native, dressed in the universal long-hipped suit that [...] knows no colour bar or national exclusiveness, leaned back on his long legs, tipped back his hat, and smiled,” only this opening is shut as soon as it is opened: “I’m going to close it again,” an actor says.¹²

The idea that culture is untranslatable keeps coming up. The members of the troupe translate themselves into foreign surroundings, yet there is no translation with the intention to share and celebrate difference, for any difference is framed as “they would not understand.” The amateurs, deciding that the audience “don’t know the difference” and “won’t understand the period,” put on a parodic performance – a pantomime version of the play: “they found there was nothing *real* for them, so they made do with the situations that are traditionally laughable and are unreal for everyone.”¹³ As the hall fills up with more and more people, “the people from outside who hadn’t been asked,” another line of divide appears. The audience and the uninvited crowd “pretend not to see” each other. Their response to the show are vastly different, and applause, silence, conversation, and laughter all merge together: “There was something else in the hall now [...] there was something that lived, that continued uncaring, on its own.”¹⁴

Gordimer creates complex shifts in consciousness to blur the boundaries between the amateurs and the audience, black and white, European and native. One of the actors, when trying to find the hall, explains “we’re supposed to be giving a play – concert – tonight.”¹⁵ The ambiguity of whether it is a play or a concert comes up again when the troupe take to the stage: “They were ready. When would the concert begin?”¹⁶ It is easy for the readers to misread these two lines, and both possibilities of reading contribute to the irony of the story. Neither line is credited to the amateurs, but we get the sense that the first describes the players’ collective thought, while the second, the audience’s collective impatience. However, in light of the slip between play and concert, it seems that the second, or even either line, could describe either party.

Such slippages and overlaps continue:

At first there was so much to *see*; the mouths of the audience parted with pleasure at the sight of the fine ladies and gentlemen dressed with such colour and variety; the women? gasp at them; the men? – why laugh at them, of course.

11 Ibid., 52.

12 Ibid., 53.

13 Ibid., 55.

14 Ibid., 56.

15 Ibid., 51.

16 Ibid., 54.

But gradually the excitement of looking became acceptance, and they began to listen, and they began not to understand.¹⁷

This is a bit more convoluted, for neither the subject nor the object of these observations is delineated clearly. Who looks at whom? Who gasps at whom? Who begins to listen to whom? And who begins not to understand whom? If we read the above passage as the thoughts of the audience upon seeing the players, we hit a snag at tell-tale phrase, “why laugh at them, of course,” as full of affectation and performance as it is. We come closer when we read this as the amateurs projecting onto the audience what they feel ought to be the audience’s reaction, in which case it seems that the players are the ones doing the looking, the listening (for reactions – gasps and laughter), and the “not understanding.” The irony develops further and further, subsuming the reader into this roguish free indirect voice and multiplying the possibilities of misreading.

After the slapstick show ends, an audience member goes up on stage to thank the actors, performing for outsiders the essentialist black identity that forms the base of their assumptions: “This play tonight [...] made us feel that perhaps we could try and occupy our leisure in such a way. [...] Isn’t this what we need?” The amateurs are awe-struck, “forgotten by themselves and each other [...] each was alone.”¹⁸ The irony now takes a turn. No longer jocular, it is biting and earnest, but still Gordimer keeps the reader guessing as to the author of the gratitude and pathos imparted by the woman’s speech. In other words, who is speaking of what and how? The story comes to a close with the players trying to regain some composure, until one of them repents “we shouldn’t have done it.” Whether the “it” refers to the play or to their mistranslation of it remains open to the reader. Not understanding comes full circle as they reflect finally, “we didn’t know what to do.”¹⁹

In spite of the admission of ignorance and unknowability, Gordimer’s story does come to a productive close in that through trying on different versions of readings, and of admissions of misreading, the reader’s frames of reference keep shifting. The effect is not of unity but of doubt in the anticipation of it. Do reading and potential possibilities of misreading amount to a violation of the text, Gordimer’s story demands of the reader.

What we see in Desai’s work is a reversal of the act of translation, and how what seems to be a cultural violation could open up new modes of writing difference. A text in a local language is not quite translated, but completely re-written and Anglicized in order to appeal to westernized audiences. In this story, translation and even authorship constitute a willful misrepresentation

17 Ibid., 54.

18 Ibid., 57.

19 Ibid., 58.

of, and a raucous intervention into, an external reality. In “Translator Translated,” a short story published in the collection *The Artist of Disappearance* (2012), an embittered college professor Prema finds a sense of purpose when she is commissioned by an editor to translate an unknown regional writer, Suvarna Devi. Prema, having the ability to read the vernacular Oriya, is one of the few who can decipher the author’s work, and she adds, edits, embellishes the original, empowered by visions of herself as the creator of the text: “I was interpreting the text for her because I had the power – too strong a word perhaps, but the ability, yes. I was also the one who knew what she meant, what worlds her words evoked.”²⁰

Whereas she had once thought of the author’s work as revelatory and lyrical, she, when translating it into English, finds it lackluster and wanting: “A faithful translation would clearly make for a flat, boring read. I saw that what was needed was for me to be inventive, take things into my own hands and create a style for the book. So, instead of a literal translation, I decided to take liberties with the text.”²¹ The first publication is a success. However, when Prema finally meets with the author, her protégée as she refers condescendingly to Devi, she is astonished by the meek, modest appearance of the woman. When another work is demanded from Devi and pages start pouring in, Prema finds it downright poor, as if she is allowing her vision of the writer (small, provincial, inelegant) to cloud her judgement of the writing. She changes liberally and claims her transcription an “enhancement,” ridding the text of sentimental detail, unnecessary repetitions, and irrelevant matter. Her game is found out at the end, and when she sets out to write her own story, or what we might think of a story of the story, she finds that she can write neither in English nor in Oriya. Then she acknowledges that the translation has taken all of her words and that she has nothing original to offer anymore, suggesting, paradoxically, that translation is an impotent task, but also that amounts to a cultural and linguistic violation.

This story works on different levels. While we sympathize with the frustrated translator, we are also made aware that all her efforts are underwritten by vestiges of a colonial imagination – the driving of a regional language into the margins by exoticizing it as an unknown and indecipherable text – an unfathomable other upon which light is forcibly shown and from which meaning harshly extracted. As Anuradha Dingwaney writes, translation is not simply a “linguistic transfer” but a “vehicle through which Third World cultures are (made to travel),” and that such a transfer “entail[s] varying degrees of violation, especially when the culture being translated is constituted as that of the ‘other.’”²² An annoyed audience member asks Prema at a

20 Desai, *The Artist of Disappearance*, 60.

21 Ibid., 82.

22 Dingwaney, “Introduction,” 4.

press conference, “*Who needs to have this revealed to them?*”²³ This question reverberates with the central tension of the postcolonial story – who gets to speak of what and how.

Desai’s story itself acts as a translation – it is subject to interferences, changes in discourse and register, and a blurring of boundaries between life and art, between the story and the narration of it. The story jumps from past to present tense, first to third person narration, all told and sometimes even retold from Prema’s perspective. When she is hankering after nostalgic visions of the rural village, the story is told in third-person past tense; however, when Prema is invested with a sense of authority and power, the story shifts to a first person present tense. The following passage highlights the shifts in discourse and how the perspective at times wrests control of the prose. Towards the beginning, the reader observes Prema return home from a meeting with the editor:

When she got home on the bus and climbed the stairs to her rooftop apartment – left unswept by the landlady’s slatternly maid (she would have to complain again) – the day was inking into its murky nicotine-tinged haze of dust with home-going traffic pouring through it like blue-black oil from a leak in the street below. The crows were dropping into the scraggly branches of the lopped tree below with exhausted squawks. Would she allow herself to be dragged into the gloom by it all once again? Heaving the cloth satchel off her shoulder (which had become permanently lowered by its familiar weight), she determined she would not. Letting spill the book she had shown Tara – which had so miraculously caught Tara’s eye – she ran her fingers lightly over its cover.²⁴

We see here shifts between plain narration – she gets home, climbs stairs, etc. – and the authorial slight of hand – “the day was inking into its murky nicotine-tinged haze of dust.” There is however a third register, that of Prema’s free indirect thought, interrupting both the discursive and lyrical voice – “Would she allow herself [...]” What we realize later, when Prema starts turning Devi’s sentimental style into a more poetic one, is that these poetic flourishes that we see in the above passage and attribute to the writer is an extended free indirect discourse, with Prema exhibiting her own poetic flourishes that she will later exert upon her translation. Towards the end of the story, when she claims that she has run out of words, the narration shifts to a first person past tense. The tense and perspective shifts suggest that the reason that she’s run out of words is because her story has already been written.

The writer and the translator fuse into one figure, and this conflation of roles allows Desai to reframe the story not as a parable about conflictual

23 Italics in original. Ibid., 78.

24 Ibid., 48.

multiculturalism of postcolonial India, but of the possibilities of expression and dissent written into a colonial language – English. Desai, in an interview, described the affinity between the writer and the translator. She said: “I must seize upon that incomplete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around me and try and discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths.”²⁵ Prema’s text, like the Amateurs’ slapstick play/concert, is both a failure and a success. Both these performances lay bare uncomfortable presumptions of who gets to speak and how, yet they also show how failure in translation might yield a wider imaginative horizon. Going back to Gordimer’s metaphor of the “flash of fireflies”, illuminations of various voices and interpretations, fleeting and mistranslated as they might be, allow the postcolonial short story to teeter between reaching for a unity of effect and giving into different possibilities in the search for it.

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25 Desai, “Replies to the Questionnaire,” 1.