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## **TO BE OR NOT TO BE ... TRANSLATED**

### **CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND IDENTITY ISSUES IN MONICA ALI'S**

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**Abstract:** *In a globalised and deterritorialized world, the shift between languages and cultures is expected to be simplified and migration encouraged. Identity is now understood as more complex and the migrant is called either a 'global nomad' (Bauman 1998), a 'post-industrial migrant' (King 1995), or 'a translated being': 'The condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being' (Cronin 2006).*

**Keywords:** *globalization, migration, cultural translation, assimilation, identity*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The new political and economic forces and relationships between countries as well as the amazing powers offered by the new means of communication, especially the Internet, have changed the world and the relationships between people of the same country or 'belonging' to different countries. As Michael Cronin also puts it:

*The emergence of multiculturalism, interculturalism and cultural diversity as issues for many societies in recent decades is to do with the increased scale of migration attendant on economic and political developments and demographic changes but the prevalence of debate on these topics is also linked to the implications of living in a world of global connectedness. (Cronin, 2006:49)*

As globalization has a certain effect on the local – the 'impact of globalization is to change the very texture of locality' and 'the effects of globalization are felt within a particular locality' (Tomlinson, in Cronin 2006: 49) – one needs to look for the 'local responses to global changes' (Cronin, 2006: 49). One response, as offered by Mary Kaldor (1999), is that locality and specificity become inimical forces directed against difference. The other response is what Tomlinson calls 'deterritorialization', or the gradual fading of geographical and social territories, another synonym for 'globalization':

*Deterritorialisation, then, means that the significance of the geographical location of culture – not only the physical, environmental and climactic location, but all the self-definitions,*



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*clear ethnic boundaries and delimiting practices that have accrued around this – is eroding.* (Tomlinson, in Cronin 2006: 49).

**2.1. Migration and Translation. Being assimilated or being accommodated.**

Migrating to the country of the former colonist just as to any other Western country is what Chanu calls a 'tragedy': for him, being a migrant 'is to live out a tragedy' (Ali, 2003:91) that occurs from what the same character refers to as 'the clash of cultures and of generations' (Ali, 2003:91).

The migrant's 'translation' in another culture and another language is not only physical, but also symbolical and psychological. The 'displacement' mentioned by Cronin needs to be interpreted as incorporating the idea of 'in-betweenness', i.e. the 'place' of encounter between the source and the target cultures. The encounter is nothing else than a negotiation that takes place within one individual, a negotiation meant to turn the loss (of being displaced) into a gain:

*(...) their individual and collective identities will experience a series of transformations as they adjust to the loss of their place of birth and attempt to turn it into a gain.* (Anne Malena 2003:9, in Cronin, 2006: 45)

Translation in the context of globalization and migration is understood both in cultural and linguistic terms. According to Cronin, depending on the direction of the translation, the individual is either assimilated or adapted. If 'translation assimilation' refers to the translation into the language of the host culture and 'translation

'accommodation' (Cronin, 2006: 47) refers to the translation into the source language, taking the form of a refusal of being translated into the dominant language in order to assert the immigrant's conscious resistance against assimilation, then what is eventually the 'translated being'? If the 'singular Culture allows us to translate' and 'pluralized Cultures make us translate' (Cronin, 2006: 47), where does the 'translated being' stand? Is it more a matter of being translated or one of translating, one of objectivity or one of agency? The migrant is not only a translated being, but also a translating one. If we accept the migrant as being only 'translated', just like a text which is translated into the dominant language, we run the risk of understanding him/her as being merely assimilated, when in fact there is no full assimilation. Hybrid identities, like the migrants', evolve only based on the negotiation process between the two cultures. It is an ongoing process which the migrant must understand as such if s/he wants to be able to adapt himself/herself to the culture s/he chose to adopt. Or, in Sherry Simon's terms, the migrant lives in a 'contact zone' understood as 'a space that is redefining itself, a space of multiplicity, exchange, renegotiation and discontinuities' (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999: 14).

The ability of speaking the source language is almost vital for the migrant; otherwise, especially in the case of women, they will largely depend on others to communicate with other members of the society and to understand the surrounding world – which Cronin calls 'the failure to be translated' (Cronin, 2006: 53). Immigrant women who do not know the language and who, according to their traditions, are not



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allowed to work will depend on their husbands and children. Nazneen, along with the majority of the other Muslim women on the estate (except for Hanufa who was socially isolated by the other women from the community for getting a job in the city), do not speak English and only understand a few words that are more frequently used by others. There are still other cases in which they hear a certain word, are able to pronounce it and to recognize the appropriate context in which it may occur, but they are not able to make a thorough connection between the signifier and the signified. For example, for many years since she arrived in London, Nazneen has heard the word 'pub' several times but she could not explain what it meant as she has never been in one. Thus, at that point, her 'translation' was not complete. Later, she purposefully entered one as she felt that her 'translation' was limited. In a way, children and husbands can be considered interpreters for the women: they translate words and sentences and interpret the target culture for them. Little by little, Nazneen is no longer satisfied with the 'translation' supplied by her husband, especially since Chanu is more eager to translate excerpts of literature to her instead of instances of the real world, which would prove more useful for a migrant, and wants to interpret things for herself.

Until Nazneen was able to interpret the dominant culture and translate it for herself, she could use different interpreters, one of whom was her good friend, Razia, who presumably was somewhat older than her and, anyway, more eager to be 'translated'. Razia can be a good example of the assimilated immigrant or, rather, of the ready-to-be-completely-assimilated immigrant: she has

given up wearing her hair long and saris in favour of men trousers and jackets and short hair; she continuously fights with her husband in order to be allowed to get a job; and she even started going to English classes.

Another female character worthy of mentioning as an illustration of assimilation by the host culture is Dr. Azad's wife who wears very short skirts, smokes and goes to the pub and who seems to have a very clear opinion on immigrant attitude: she prefers to rely on facts when it comes to judging the host country. For her, an immigrant who decides to live in a Western society must let himself/herself be alienated (read assimilated):

*'(...) Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad things.'* (Ali, 2003: 93)

She thinks one needs to adapt and re-adapt oneself depending on the country one inhabits. It is the kind of negotiation (adaptation and re-adaptation) one must perform for the 'translation' to take place. The woman understands that the immigrant must understand translation and avoid mistranslation:

*'(...) when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business.'* (Ali, 2003: 93)

On the contrary, for Chanu, assimilation is not to be accepted that easily; he is more aware than the doctor's wife of the need to preserve one's traditions and believes that children are threatened to be 'spoiled' by the white culture, a threat which needs to be



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fought against by running away (going back to the country of origin):

*'I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own (...), about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. (...) about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent.'* (Ali, 2003: 92)

Both types of translations (assimilation and accommodation) can occur in one individual at different stages in their lives; this occurs in relation to the immigrants' children who are born in the host country and who experience a sort of 'cultural self-reflexivity' (Cronin, 2006: 62). They are usually assimilated (for example, Shahana) by the host culture when very young, but later, some become aware of their origins and start looking for their roots (Karim). It is a 'new cultural self consciousness or awareness' expressed by 'the wish not to make translation invisible but rather to make it more visible, to acknowledge that there are two languages, two cultures (each with its own internal complexity), which come to determine or influence the dialogical self of the immigrant subject or his or her dependants' (Cronin, 2006: 62).

Shahana and Karim are not examples of successful cultural negotiation, especially in Shahana's case, because they take one side in favour of the other. At first, Nazneen's boyfriend speaks perfect English and stammers when he speaks Bengali; later on, he plucks courage, he becomes the leader of the Bengal Tigers, and the more he becomes aware and proud about his parents' country

and origins, the better Bengali he speaks. In this character's case, assimilation occurred as a natural consequence of being born in a particular country whose language was acquired as a second mother tongue, but the process began to be interrupted and even rejected by Karim who could not manage to negotiate with the dominant culture.

On the contrary, Shahana is the embodiment of assimilation of Western norms and values. For her, identity is not a place of negotiation, nor is it shaped by birth (read 'nationality') and traditions of the source culture; birth is important only if it is understood as 'place of birth' and the place is the host country. This is why she repeatedly cries out at her father who has made big plans for both her daughters, but which will unfortunately fail to be achieved:

*'I didn't ask to be born here!'* (Ali, 2003: 148)

This is her statement of complete assimilation and her conscious and obstinate refusal to accept the values and traditions of the source culture. When she realizes she is still too young to make decisions for herself and when she is forced by Chanu to act as a perfect preserver of Bangladeshi culture, Shahana starts kicking. Kicking is another form of refusal and rebellion at Shahana: 'she kicked the furniture, she kicked her sister and most of all she kicked her mother' (Ali, 2003: 152). For Nazneen's little daughter, the host culture was her culture as well, and there was no interior conflict going on within her, which could have been triggered by an impossibility of coping with values pertaining to different cultures. The perspective of going back home as Chanu carefully planned proved so terrifying for her that she actually ran away



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from home. Shahana and Karim have not been 'borne across the world' (Rushdie 1991) from a Third World country to England like their parents. Still, they are 'translated' beings who occupy a 'Third Space', or, as Bassnett and Trivedi put it by quoting Bhabha:

*(...) the translated hybridity of the 'unhomed' migrant now inhabits a Third Space.* (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999: 12)

Whether s/he accepts it or not, the immigrant remains a 'translated' as well as a 'translating' being, able to understand and adopt the norms of the host culture and at the same time preserving and promoting those of the source culture. S/he must perform the bidirectional process of translation, which is the basic requirement for a successful negotiation between two cultures that meet on a common ground, that of an individual's self. Precisely because s/he lives in the 'contact zone' where the boundaries of cultural identity disappear, the individual fights the battle of negotiation and renegotiation.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The translated being will always perform a negotiation process between cultures. The 'going back home syndrome' may take up several forms (Chanu, because of his incapacity to adapt; Nazneen, only as a retrieving with her beloved sister; Karim, as a discovery of his identity), but will not disappear. A multicultural society encourages the assertion of diversity and, inevitably, conflicts between different groups, who fight for power and recognition. The solution to the conflict may be an intercultural approach, based on harmony and cultural exchange, but it is an ideal to be achieved as long as the

national sentiment is still powerful and discrimination is felt by one or another of the groups. Boundaries are transgressed and boundaries are created around the thorny identity issue which defines the contemporary globalised world. To give credit to Bassnett and Trivedi, I will side with their assertion:

*Contemporary understanding of translation both as reality and as ideal, Simon suggests, has more to do with discontinuity, friction and multiplicity.* (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999: 14)

Therefore, to be or not to be translated is understood as a negotiation and a renegotiation performed in the Third Space of in-betweenness occupied by that individual preoccupied more or less consciously by his/her identity (social, personal or cultural) called the immigrant. Identity-finding is by no means another process of negotiation. One needs to understand and accept that one's identity is fluid and cannot be calculated or set within rigid parameters. Still, understanding and accepting do not make up the solution for the dilemmas related to the individual caught between multiculturalism and migration.

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