Translating Cultures: A Study of U.R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara in English and Beyond

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the politics and poetics of translation through a case study of U. R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara (1965) and its influential English translation by A. K. Ramanujan (1976). Written originally in Kannada, Samskara interrogates Brahmin orthodoxy, ritual practice, and ethical dilemmas within a caste-bound society. Its translation into English enabled the novel's circulation beyond regional borders, situating it within postcolonial, comparative, and world literature discourses. By analyzing Ramanujan's translation strategies–particularly his retention of culturally specific terms and his balancing of readability with cultural integrity–the paper highlights how Samskara travels across languages without erasing its rootedness. Drawing on theories of translation by Lawrence Venuti, GayatriChakravortySpivak, and Walter Benjamin, the discussion foregrounds translation as a process of cultural negotiation rather than mere linguistic transfer. The paper argues that Samskara in translation exemplifies the transformative potential of Indian literatures in global circulation, showing how regional texts acquire new meanings and afterlives in diverse cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS:

Translation Studies, Indian Literature, U. R. Ananthamurthy, Samskara, A. K. Ramanujan, World Literature, Cultural Negotiation.

Introduction:

Translation in the Indian context has always been more than a literary exercise; it is an act of cultural negotiation. With over twenty–two officially recognized languages and hundreds of dialects, Indian literature exists in a multilingual ecology where translation sustains circulation, reception, and critical recognition. One of the most significant examples of this phenomenon is U. R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara (1965), a novel originally written in Kannada that reached national and international readership through A. K. Ramanujan's English translation in 1976. The novel's journey across languages exemplifies the complexities of translating not only words but also cultural codes, ethical dilemmas, and philosophical debates deeply rooted in Indian traditions. This paper argues that Samskara in translation foregrounds the tensions between the local and the global, between fidelity to cultural specificity and accessibility to wider audiences.

Context of the Text:

Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man was first published in Kannada at a moment when modernist impulses were reshaping Indian literatures. The novel situates itself within a Brahmin agrahara (traditional settlement), focusing on the death of a debauched Brahmin, Naranappa, whose funeral rites remain unresolved due to his rejection of religious orthodoxy. The moral dilemma–whether he deserves Brahminical funeral rites–exposes the fractures in religious authority, caste hierarchy, and ethical responsibility. The novel thus critiques ritualism and orthodoxy while probing existential questions of dharma. In Kannada literary culture, Samskara occupies a canonical space for its social critique and philosophical depth. However, its reach beyond Karnataka was made possible through translation.

The English Translation by A.K. Ramanujan:

The English translation of Samskara by A. K. Ramanujan was published in 1976 by Oxford University Press. Ramanujan, himself

a bilingual poet, folklorist, and translator, was uniquely positioned to bring Ananthamurthy's text into English. His translation retains much of the novel's idiomatic Kannada flavor while offering English–speaking audiences access to the text's dense cultural and ritual references. For instance, terms like samskara, agrahara, and dharma are often left untranslated, a choice that foregrounds the foreignness of the cultural setting rather than domesticating it for the Anglophone reader. Lawrence Venuti's concept of "foreignization" is useful here: Ramanujan deliberately resists over–simplifying or erasing cultural particularities, ensuring that the English version remains marked by its rootedness in Kannada culture (Venuti 20).

Cultural Context of the Text:

Translating Samskara also raises questions about cultural politics. For Indian readers familiar with caste structures and ritual practices, the novel resonates with lived experiences and debates. For international readers, however, the novel risks being read as an exotic depiction of "Hindu orthodoxy" unless mediated through careful translation choices. Ramanujan's strategy balances these two poles. By retaining key cultural terms, he resists homogenizing Indian experience, while his fluid English prose makes the text accessible to Western readers and academic audiences. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's warning that translations of Third World texts often risk reducing them to anthropological curiosities is pertinent here (Spivak 371). Ramanujan avoids this pitfall by maintaining a fidelity to cultural embeddedness while still offering interpretive clarity through contextual glosses and explanatory strategies.

Reception and Afterlives of the Text:

The English translation catapulted Samskara into global recognition. It became a text studied in comparative literature courses, postcolonial studies, and South Asian studies programs. Moreover, it contributed to Ananthamurthy's stature as one of India's leading modern writers. The translation's success also led to adaptations, most notably Girish Karnad's 1970 film version,

which reached wider audiences in India and abroad. Interestingly, the novel has also been translated into several Indian languages, including Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam, underscoring the role of English as a "link language" in India's translation ecology. Through these translations, the novel's philosophical and cultural debates transcended regional boundaries to enter a pan–Indian and global literary space.

Theoretical Insights from the Translational Studies:

From the perspective of translation theory, Samskara illustrates the tension between equivalence and cultural untranslatability. Eugene Nida's notion of "dynamic equivalence" stresses the importance of conveying meaning rather than literal form (Nida 156). Ramanujan's translation demonstrates this principle: while Kannada syntax and idioms are adjusted for English readability, the ethical and philosophical stakes of the narrative remain intact. At the same time, the retention of untranslated terms reflects an awareness that some concepts, such as samskara itself, resist easy equivalence. Here, Walter Benjamin's notion of the "afterlife" of texts in translation becomes useful–the English Samskara is not a substitute but an extension of the original, one that carries the work into new contexts and interpretations (Benjamin 254).

Translation as Cultural Negotiation:

At its core, the translation of Samskara demonstrates how translation is not merely linguistic transfer but a negotiation of worldviews. The novel's central ethical dilemma–whether ritual should be performed for one who has defied religious norms–gains new valences in translation. For Indian readers, it resonates as a critique of Brahminical authority; for global readers, it may appear as a broader meditation on tradition versus modernity. This plurality of interpretation is made possible through the act of translation, which opens the text to multiple cultural frames of reference. Translation, then, becomes both a mode of preservation and a site of transformation.

Conclusion:

The case of Samskara highlights the crucial role translation plays in shaping the reception of Indian literatures across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Ramanujan's English translation foregrounds the cultural density of the Kannada original while enabling its entry into global literary circuits. The novel's circulation across languages underscores the politics and poetics of translation in a multilingual nation like India. Far from being a secondary act, translation here emerges as an act of cultural re–creation, ensuring that Indian literatures are not confined to their regional contexts but are positioned within world literature. Ananthamurthy'sSamskara, in translation, exemplifies how Indian texts travel, transform, and continue to ask urgent ethical questions beyond their immediate cultural milieu.

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