Chapter III

Translation Theory of Arnold-

On Translating Homer
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Translation studies which is relevant, actively research oriented, burgeoning field of study today has come to be seen as a discipline in its own right from the late twentieth century. Eminent theorists of translatology Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere rightly note: “Translation has been a major shaping force in the development of world culture, and no study of comparative literature can take place without regard to translation” (Bassnett & Lefevere 12).

But the scenario was completely different in Britain from the nineteenth century to late twentieth century. There was a virtual drought of translation activities and theorizing about translations. Barring a few sporadic attempts no one was particularly concerned about translation. In nineteenth century Britain translation was accorded a very low status and even a modicum of respect was not attached to the activity of translation. All these things can be attributed to Britain’s steady emergence as a puissant imperial power to be reckoned with, the changes in self esteem, and an euphoric feeling about the supposed inherent superiority of the
English literary system. Itamar Evan-Zohar, the avantgarde theorist of modern translation studies tried to explain the reasons behind the extremely low translation related activities in the nineteenth century Britain. Evan-Zohar says that much translation activity takes place when a culture is in a state of transition, in dire need of renewal and expansion. On the contrary when a culture is upon a solid foundation, when it is in an imperialist stage, when it is very conscious about its dominance, translation is neglected, almost relegated into limbo. This seems to elucidate why the emergent European nations struggle liberty in the early nineteenth century translated so abundantly and why translation activity steadily declined in the late nineteenth century Britain. Corroborating this point of view in her remarkable critical study on comparative literature Susan Bassnett says:

Certainly by the nineteenth century, the status of a translation was generally considered to be lower than that of an 'original', and theorists of comparative literature, while acknowledging
the role played by translation in their work, tended to assert the primacy of reading in original languages (Bassnett 139).

Hilaire Belloc's views in his Taylorian lecture in 1931 was almost a continuation of the prevalent views:

"The art of translation is a subsidiary art and derivative. On this account it has never been granted the dignity of original work, and has suffered too much in the general judgement of letters" (Belloc 2).

Matthew Arnold who was much ahead of his time and hailed by many as the founder of the main line of Modern English criticism was probably the first man in his era of late nineteenth century to dedicate a substantial body of work to the theories of translation. But this powerful social and literary critic of nineteenth century had not succumbed to the fascination of translation theories from the very dawn of his career. Initially, he too like his contemporaries considered translation as a much inferior activity. Mulling over his choice of classical subjects and modes
of re-creating it, Arnold made disparaging comments on translation. In the "Preface" to *Merope* (1858) Arnold says:

But a translation is a work not only inferior to the original by the whole difference of talent between the first composer and his translator: it is even inferior to the best which the translator could do under more inspiring circumstances (*CT* 39).

But interestingly only three years later in 1861 Arnold in a complete volte-face concerned himself about the theories of translation, though Arnold professed to give certain practical advice to a translator and not to concern himself with theories:

My one object is to give practical advice to a translator; and I shall not the least concern myself with theories of translation as such (*CT* 98).

*On Translating Homer* turns to be a virtual core book of translation theories in general and Homeric translations in particular.

Apart from *On Translating Homer's* importance as a profound tome of translation theories it also contains precious observations on classical
Greek literature and Homer. It earned rich plaudits from such an exacting critic as A.E.Housman.

However, in his Oxford lectures *On Translating Homer* Matthew Arnold's ostensible aim was to dissect the renderings of Homer's Iliad by F.H.Newman in unrhymed English meter, and provide certain practical advice to the prospective translators of Homer. But in profounder dimension, in these three lectures and a 'Last Word' appended at the end, Arnold's chief aim was to give some sound instructions about general theories and practices to the translators of future. Here Arnold set some objectives and dos and don'ts for the translators to come.

At the outset Matthew Arnold states that the problem of the most elemental kind is yet to be resolved, he writes, "[w]hat aim a translator should propose to himself in dealing with his original" (*CT* 97).

In the time of Arnold there were two current conflicting views. One group insisted that the original should be absolutely remoulded into another medium i.e. into another language, should be almost newly created. Another group contended that the translator should imitate everything.
every detail and particularly have the original, and should ever remember that they are translating and not creating a book anew. However at one point, Arnold thinks the contending groups seem unanimous regarding the translator’s fidelity to the original. According to Arnold, ‘[p]robably both sides would agree that the translator’s ‘first duty is to be faithful’” (CT 98).

When dismissed the views that one can evoke the same reaction amid the audience of TL text as evoked by the SL text, he was anticipating in a way the hypothesis of Edward Sapir:

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds not merely the same world with different labels attached (Sapir 69).

Arnold speaking in the context of Homeric translation said:

But I advise the translator not to try ‘to rear on the basis of the Iliad, a poem that shall affect our countryman as the original may be conceived to have, affected its natural hearers,
and for this simple reason, that we cannot possibly tell how the Iliad "affected its natural hearers" (CT 98).

However, Arnold may seem a bit contradictory when he claimed, "it is our translator's business to reproduce the effect of Homer" (CT 98).

According to the modern theorists of translation like Peter Newmark, when Arnold stated that the same reaction evoked by the SL text can never be evoked by the TL text, Arnold ruled out any chance of achieving what is known as 'equivalent effect' in modern parlance. One can really know nothing about Homeric audience now.

Then Arnold turned to the question of proper evaluation of a translated text, the most sensitive point which Susan Bassnett terms as: "One final great stumbling block waiting for the person with an interest in Translation Studies: the question of evaluation" (Bassnett - Mc Guire 8).

This vexing question is not easy to be solved. Modern translatologists think that this can be achieved by two limited means. First, a view of the closeness of the translation of the SL text can be perceived by a critic having an access to both languages. Arnold simply
prefigured this view when he insisted that scholars, acquainted with two worlds, could make the proper evaluation of Homeric texts:

But there are those who can tell him how Homer affects them. These are scholars; who possess, at the same time with knowledge of Greek, adequate poetical taste and feeling. No translation will seem to them of much worth compared with the original; but they alone can say whether the translation produces more or less the same effect upon them as the original (CT 99).

The other view of evaluation consists in the TL texts' workability in their own language and culture. But an hauteur is attached with the critic's view that they: “will define a translation as good or bad from a purely monolingual position occupied by translation vis-à-vis another type of metatext” (Bassnett – Mc Guire 9).

Arnold seems to be an avatar of this group of academic critics of translation. Arnold warns the prospective translators to avoid and discard any, “special vocabulary for his use in translation" (CT 100).
Arcane words and outlandish lingo peculiar to a special class of society should never be used in translation, because this practice makes the readers feel alienated from the text.

Arnold was of the opinion that a perfect translator should try to realize his original text and feel truly the mind of the original author. Arnold thinks that the efficacy of a translator depends upon the attitude, 'the frame of mind' of the translator to the original author. Arnold actually wanted to say that a translator should almost identify himself with the thought content of the original author, his mind and art. The translator should absorb within himself the special traits of the author. To illustrate this point Arnold said that a good translator of Homer should, "Above all be penetrated by a sense of four qualities of his author" (CT 102).

These four qualities are Homer's rapidity in movement, plainness alike in words and style, simplicity in ideas and nobility in manners. Then Arnold showed exceedingly well how everyone of the translators of Homer, be he Chapman, Pope, Cowper or Mr. Newman failed to capture a
complete Homeric essence in their renderings. Arnold reiterated his emphasis on the point of oneness of the translator with the original author, “that union of the translator with his original, which alone can produce a good translation” (*CT* 103).

According to Susan Bassnett, Matthew Arnold’s primary objective was to make the translator involved intimately with the original SL text: “the translator must focus on the SL text primarily, according to Arnold, and must serve that text with complete commitment” (Bassnett - McGuire 69).

Arnold repeatedly asked the translators to depend upon the scholars for right judgement about their work. It is because Arnold emphasized upon the intimate fidelity of the translated texts to the original. The scholar is, Arnold says, “ Accustomed to test a translation rigidly by comparison with the original” (*CT* 117).

At this point Arnold introduced the concept of ‘general effect’ in his writing. He warned the scholars who are to judge the translations that they must judge by the yardstick of ‘general effect’ evoked by the
translated text. The translators too must endeavour to produce the 'general effect' of the original text in their renderings. But he will be the ideal judge, "who demands but one thing in a translation that it shall as nearly as possible reproduce for him the 'general effect' of Homer" (CT 118).

Arnold’s concept of 'general effect', a *sine qua non* for good translation reminds us of John Dryden who wrote in 1711 in his "Preface" to the Life of Lucian thought almost in the same line of Arnold. Dryden thought that a translator:

> Ought to possess himself entirely and perfectly comprehend the genius and sense of his author, the nature of the subject, and the terms of the art of subject treated of. And then he will express himself as justly, and with as much life, as if he wrote an original; whereas he who copies word for word loses all the spirit in the tedious transfusion (Bassnett 149).

Apart from Dryden's pleas for almost Arnoldian 'general effect' it also has a keen proximity to another argument of Arnold. Though Arnold
stressed upon the point of fidelity of the translator to his original text, he at one point asked the translator a sacrifice without ‘scruple’ the, “verbal fidelity to his original rather than run away risk of producing by literalness an odd and unnatural effect” (CT 157-58).

In fact too much honest, close verbal ‘word for word’; rendering may mar the general effect of the original text instead of enhancing the appeal.

A good translator’s language must be unambiguous; his frame of references must be shorn of opacity. When the original text is written the cues and hints in the language are enough for the first reader to comprehend. But TL audience must be presented the matter without any obscurity, otherwise their perceptions would be clouded.

In an alien language and culture many unforeseen problems may crop up if the translated text is not presented with sufficient clarity, “the connection of meaning must be even more distinctly marked in the translation than in the original” (CT 165).
We can finally leave the scene by spelling out another counseling of Arnold regarding the prose renderings of poetry. Though Andre Lefevere in his celebrated book *Translating Poetry, Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* thinks that in prose renderings of poetry the SL text suffers the distortion of sense, communicative value and syntax, Arnold considers this method as a safer way for the translators to translate the great works of poetry. The lack of the magical touch of ingeniousness on the part of the translators then would not impede the enjoyment of the essence and flavour of the original text:

There are great works composed of parts so disparate that one translator is not likely to have the requisite gifts for poetically rendering all of them. Such are the works of Shakespeare and Goethe's *Faust*, and these it is best to attempt to render in prose only (*CT* 167).

The apparent concern of Matthew Arnold’s *On Translating Homer* is to determine appropriate methods for a perfect translation of Homer. But in reality it turns out to be a mine of general translation theories, immensely
readable and useful for the practitioners of translation theory and praxis.

It provides a framework of principles, rules and hints for translating texts and appreciating translations.