Siting text, culture, context and pedagogy in literary translation: a theorization of translation in cultural transfer with examples from selected texts in K iswahili

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Abstract

The study of literary translation in Kiswahili has over a long period of time tended to gravitate towards systematic comparisons based on minimalist classical linguistic formalism. This is a scholarly fact that is attested to by a copious presence of academic dissertations, seminar papers as well as critical essays that have engaged literary translation in various ways and from several perspectives. However, most such studies are characterized by normative generalizations and a lack of clear theoretical rigor, which means that scholars have hardly asked; "in what ways has translation been used as a way of figuring out the relations between cultures, particularly in terms of its encounter with changed contexts, cultures, temporality and the pedagogy engendered in such changed circumstances?" This study has sought to move out of such restrictive stances so as to embrace and foreground what may be considered the muted reality of literary translation, a recognition that besides being essentially linguistic, literary translation is also an engagement that explores culture interaction, about which theorists and practitioners cannot afford to offer explications that are self-effacing. It argues that there is a prudent need to view literary translation as process of mediation between cultures, a means of perceiving words both in their abstract senses and in contexts of use, of treating linguistic forms and textual meanings as cues to the perception of cultural nuances, always amenable to inversions, revisions and reshuffling in the contexts of target cultures. In its broadest sense, this study is a critical theoretical rethinking of literary translation that points out the critical and crucial lapses and inadequacies that have characterized its research in Kiswahili. It points out the critical labyrinth in which such research has been entrapped as well as the puerile generalizations that have been generally emblematic of the studies overall. It outlines and critiques the theoretical lacunae that have punctuated literary translation studies in which it argues that such omissions have been nurtured by the use of single variable theories largely based on the minimalist theories of linguistics and language. It is also an engagement and interrogation of such theories which at the same time proposes a composite theoretical paradigm founded on culture, context, temporality and pedagogy and the interplay between them in informing both the theorizing and explications of literary translation. Instead of making arguments in favour of the fidelity of translation to the anterior text, it has argues in favour of the 'relevance' of any given translation to its specific time and domestic audience, to its environment and historical space. This is an emergent paradigm that is informed by contemporary theoretical advances in text linguistics, reader responses theories, text interaction and meaning retrieval, deconstructionism and postcolonialism. The overriding argument and, therefore, the thrust of this study, is that there is an urgent need for theoretical reorientation in which literary translation theorists and practitioners increasingly understand literary translation as cultural interaction, conceptualize it not merely as a form of linguistic exchange but also a process of interlingual exchange that participates in both text production and discursive formations.