

# Bakhtin and Translation Studies



# Bakhtin and Translation Studies:

*Theoretical Extensions  
and Connotations*

By

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Dedicated to

*Amma & Papa*



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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION: WHY BAKHTIN?

Translation and cultural theorists have been restlessly active in theorising the subtleties that translators and cultural analysts encounter in their escapades. The upsurge in the theories on translation and culture is partly due to the “cultural turn” that took place in literary theories in the 1980s and 90s, and partly due to the challenge and promise these disciplines offer. Every culture is unique in its own right, and the complications and dilemmas a particular culture encounters radically differ from those of another. As translation is an inter-cultural phenomenon, and cultural encounter a cross-cultural concern, the internal and external subtleties during such interactions are more complicated than one can possibly imagine. They are operations associated with the process of “cultural transmission” (Eagleton 2000, 113), hence, they require conceptual frameworks that impart divergent perspectives for an understanding and interpretation of such disseminations.

But why should we have a Bakhtinian approach to these cultural operations? What significance will such a proposition have? Under the guise of “divergent perspectives,” for an understanding of the nuances involved in the cultural processes, are we not proceeding towards an anarchic situation, where every point of view acquires validity as just one more way of approaching cultural conditions? An answer to these questions demands a critical overview of translation theories.

### **A Critical Survey of the Major Theoretical Currents in the Field of Translation and Cultural Studies**

The discipline of translation studies has shown a greater degree of vulnerability to the transformations that have been taking place in the field of literary theories in the twentieth century. Prior to the influence of

structuralism, translation studies lacked a theoretical outlook, and was accorded with a secondary status. For the scholars of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, translation was just an act of mirroring that lacked creative potential, and therefore was a subsidiary and derivative practice.<sup>1</sup> It was also a mechanical process associated with notions like “imitation” and “mimicking.” In Hilaire Belloc’s words:

This natural underestimation of its values has had the bad practical effect of lowering the standard demanded and in some periods has almost destroyed the art altogether. The corresponding misunderstanding of its character has added to its degradation; neither its importance nor its difficulty has been grasped. (in Bassnett 1980, 2)

This underestimation was due to an overemphasis on the finished translated work, rather than the process of translation. An examination of the translated work would inevitably mean a comparison with the “original” work, giving rise to value-judgements like gain or loss after translation. Such an analysis led to a hierarchical relationship of master/servant between the author of the “original” work and her/his translator. As Susan Bassnett (1980, 3) comments:

The powerful Anglo-Saxon anti-theoretical tradition has proved especially unfortunate with regard to Translation studies, for it has managed so aptly with the legacy of the “servant-translator” that arose in the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century, the “servant translator” rose to challenge the inferior position s/he was granted, as the focus was now shifted from the finished translated work to the activity of translation. Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator” (1923) examines how the “after-life” of a text and “the survival of language” are determined by translation.<sup>2</sup> In Benjamin’s view, while all languages are different they mutually supplement each other in the conveyance of intentions. As he writes, “Translation ... of all literary forms ... is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (2000, 18). For Benjamin, a translator acquires a significant position as her/his task involves contributing to the, “eternal life of works and the perpetual renewal of language” (Ibid.).

While Walter Benjamin’s essay was a milestone in the growth of a theory of translation, the second major development was Ferdinand de Saussure’s revolutionary work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). In the 1950s and 60s, Saussure’s work wielded a profound impact on disciplines like

anthropology, Marxist criticism, psychoanalysis, and cultural analysis. The reverberations of Saussurean influence were also felt on translation studies as new approaches like formalist and structuralist perspectives started emerging. Saussure was concerned with an objective approach to studying the linguistic units of every language that make human communication possible. For Saussure, a study of language meant a study of the system of signs and not the individual speech units. As a translator is concerned with two language systems, it was felt that a study of the objective linguistic features of both the languages would help in striking a linguistic balance in translation.

Russian formalism, which was influenced by Saussurean linguistics, provided a new theoretical perspective to analyse the system of signs in a text by emphasising their individual and independent statuses. Roman Jakobson, in his essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” develops a formalist approach to the process of translation. Jakobson identifies three kinds of translations: intralingual, that is, translation within the same language; interlingual or translation proper, that is, translation between two languages; and intersemiotic or transmutation, that is translation between different semiotic systems (1959, 233). Jakobson’s classification is a landmark in translation theories as it provides a theoretical framework for an understanding of its problematics on different planes. As he points out, languages differ not merely because they are two different semiotic systems, but because they convey different messages. The task of the translator is to find an “equivalence in difference,” which would lead them to, “an examination of their mutual translatability” (1959, 234).

However, Jakobson’s approach suffers from certain shortcomings. His overemphasis on the notion of “code” and his move to identify a translator with a decoder and recoder of a message are reductionist and minimalist enterprises. Codification denies the recognition of the vital dynamics that constantly operate in a language. A code is a closed system that ignores the vibrations that are active in a word/message. As Bakhtin writes: “A code is only a technical means of transmitting information: it does not have cognitive, creative significance. A code is a deliberately established, killed context” (1994, 147).

Structuralism also played an important role in affecting translation studies. Saussurean emphasis on a study of objective linguistic structures influenced translation theorists who now started searching for the underlying structures of the source language and the target language. Eugene A. Nida, for example, developed an approach that would be a

“science” of translation, studying objective features common in a language, and validating and transforming them in a different language. In his essay “Principles of Translation as Exemplified by Bible Translating,” Nida writes:

it is essential that we point out that in Bible translating, as in almost all fields of translating, the most frequent mistakes result from a failure to make adequate syntactic adjustments in the transference of a message from one language to another. Quite satisfactory equivalents for all words and even the idioms may have been found, but a person’s oversight or inability to rearrange the semantic units in accordance with the different syntactic instruction as being “foreign” and unnatural. (1959, 31)

Drawing from his experience of translating the Bible, Nida argues that a perfect communication is not possible during translation. Nevertheless, a closer approximation can be obtained if the translator is sensitive to the latent structures of the languages.

In his book *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), Nida advocates the necessity of a theoretical approach to studying the fundamental structures of different languages. The notion of “underlying structure” has Chomskian overtones, implying a deep structure/surface structure conceptualisation of language. Noam Chomsky, in his *Syntactic Structures* (1957) and later books, studied “phrase structure rules,” comprising a deep structure and a surface structure that operate at different levels in a language, ranging from the unconscious working of the human mind to their surface expression. Nida appropriates and adopts Chomsky’s theories to provide a “scientific approach” to the theory and practice of translation (Gentzler 1993, 46).

However, Nida’s approach suffers from certain fundamental limitations. In his attempt to develop a “science” of translation, Nida underestimates the role of interpretation. A text is neither a closed entity nor a systemic totality. The message of the text is never intact, and it will not be possible to grasp its pulsation through a search for a hidden, deep structure. A text is the result of a dialogue with the culture from which it emerges. Further, Nida does not recognise the significance of context in the emergence of a text. Nida’s attempt to find a “science” freezes the entire social aspect of a text and its translation. As Bakhtin writes:

When one analyzes an individual sentence apart from its context, the traces of addressivity and the influence of the anticipated response, dialogical echoes from others’ preceding utterances, faint traces of

changes of speech subjects that have furrowed the utterance from within—all these are lost, erased, because they are all foreign to the sentence as a unit of language. (1994, 99)

As Nida's theory emerges from his practical experiences of translating the Bible, there is a peculiar sacredness attached to the "original" work. Nida's "science" acquires a prescriptive dimension, which attempts to safeguard the intentions of the "original."

The next major development towards a new theoretical approach to translation is the target-oriented approach of Gideon Toury. His theory of translation is based on a field study he undertook over a period of fifteen years to determine the aims of the translation of texts from English, Russian, German, French, and Yiddish into Hebrew, along with the decisions made by the translators, the publishers' preferences, and the selection of the texts. In his essay "The Nature and Role of Norms in Translations" (1978), Toury examines the pivotal role played by social and cultural norms, and concludes that translation is certainly a "norm-governed activity" (2000, 200).

In Toury's opinion, a translator has to execute the task allotted to them by a community, which demands they "play a social role." In his words: "The acquisition of a set of norms for determining the suitability of that kind of behavior, and for manoeuvring between all the factors which may constitute it, is therefore a prerequisite for becoming a translator" (2000, 198). Toury then proceeds to classify these norms into two larger groups: the preliminary norms related to the actual nature of translation, the text selected, its reception, and appeal in the target culture; and the operational norms concerned with the decisions during translation. For Toury, such a set of norms will help a translator to implement their "translation policy" (2000, 200).

In *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (1980), Toury observes that linguistic and aesthetic components, which were hitherto given utmost importance, were not the major concerns of the translator. Texts are selected more for their ideological content than for their literary or aesthetic significance. Translations break the rules of conformity and faithfulness to the original to cater to the demands of the target audience. Though there are some exceptions, they are merely "accidental." The general picture that emerges for Toury is that translation is a target-oriented activity where the aims to be achieved are decided and dictated by the target community.

Toury's approach is significant for the shift in focus from the source-culture to the target-culture it brought about. The emphasis on linguistic features is now replaced by an emphasis on socio-cultural norms. However, Toury's conceptualisation suffers from certain drawbacks. While it is acceptable that a translator should have a clear comprehension of the norms that prevail in the target community, the question that arises concerns the nature of such norms. Is it possible to determine a set of norms as representing a particular community? Norms are never static—when this is the case, how does translation take place across different historical periods? Can we have a “translation policy,” as Toury assumes?

Further, Toury considers translated texts as facts on which he builds his theory. The existence of such a fact is highly questionable, as facts are the subject matter of interpretations. Toury's theory has attempted to universalise certain observations he made in his field of study. Finally, Toury undermines the relation between language and culture. Words carry with them various cultural traces. As time moves from the past to the present, and as translations are carried out across temporal and spatial categories, words acquire and realise their potential, their “chain of meanings.” To recall George Steiner's words:

No raw data from the past have absolute intrinsic authority. Their meaning is relational to the present and that relation is realized linguistically. Memory is articulated as a function of the past tense of the verb (1975, 132).

The entire problematic of translation underwent a drastic change with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction that held sway in the 1980s and 90s. Derrida questions the “presence” of a defined and definite meaning in a text by highlighting the constant alterity and difference between the signifier and the signified. According to Derrida, the history of Western metaphysics is one of setting boundaries that limit language, writing, and reading to certain specific categorisations. Deconstruction attempts to show that language is always in the state of “freeplay” with multiple significations.

Deconstruction poses certain fundamental questions to the traditional understanding of translation. The notion of the “original” is highly problematic for Derrida, who subverts the traditional binary of “original/translation” to bring out the significance of the latter. In his view, “the origin of philosophy is translation or the thesis of translatability” (1985, 120). For Derrida, every thought that is written is a translation, as



writing brings out the impossibility of adhering to a fixed identity or meaning. Since translation involves both a differing and a deferring of meaning, Derrida writes that translation best explicates what he terms as “différance.” “Différance” refers to a “play of traces” that signifies an absence of an identifiable meaning in a text. Edwin Gentzler, commenting on the “play of traces” in translation, writes:

In terms of informing translation theory, Derrida’s “play of the trace” belongs not to a translation which carries identifiable meaning across boundaries, but to a movement along an absent road, one that has disseminated or evaporated, of a voice which tells but cannot be captured, an echo disappearing as it is heard. (1993, 146)

In his essay “Des Tours de Babel” (1985), Derrida discusses how translation becomes a fabric of traces that is differing all the time. The French title is significant as Derrida demonstrates how meaning betrays us the moment we think we have captured it. As Joseph F. Graham writes in his “Translator’s Note”:

The title can be read in various ways. *Des* means “some,” but it also means “of the,” “from the,” or “about the.” *Tours* could be towers, twists, tricks, tours, or tropes, as in a “turn” of phrase. Taken together *des* and *tours* have the same sound as *detour*, the word for detour. To mark that economy in language the title has not been changed. (1985, 206)

The Judeo-Christian myth where God interrupts the construction of the tower of Babel acquires the status of a text for Derrida, who sees the episode as leading to a “confusion of tongues.” By adopting Walter Benjamin’s phrase, Derrida writes that the “task of the translator” is to transgress the limits and disseminate meanings. Derrida questions the notion of “pure meaning” behind words or languages. Instead, there is a constantly altering graphic disorder. In his words:

A translation would not seek to say this or that, to transport this or that content, to communicate such a charge of meaning, but to remark the affinity among languages, to exhibit its own possibility ... In a mode that is solely anticipatory, annunciatory, almost prophetic, translation renders present an affinity that is never present in this presentation. (1985b, 186)

According to Derrida, any debate that “centres” around the “original” is the product of metaphysics. Deconstruction would erase any fixation of identities, meanings, and representations attached to the “original” by displaying the graphic force that operates in the “freeplay” of “traces.”

However, in the post-Derrida discussion, the notion of “différance” in translation has generated a lot of criticism. Andrew Benjamin, in his *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy* (1988), argues that pure difference has no place in the activity of translation, because such an understanding erases the specificity and significance of differences that play a major role in a translator’s task. For Benjamin, mutual understanding becomes almost “inescapable” (in Gentzler 1993, 178). He reaches back to the notion of rationality as envisioned by Kant and other post-enlightenment thinkers to provide a humanistic dimension to the activity of translation.<sup>3</sup>

Raymond Van den Broeck, another major critic of deconstruction theories of translation, argues in his article “Translation Theory after Deconstruction” (1988) that, as Derrida attempts to subvert the source-text oriented theories, he should rather focus on the translated texts for the target culture. In his view, an approach like the one developed by Gideon Toury, highlighting the target-oriented nature of the whole enterprise of translation, is more acceptable than Derrida’s theories that advocate a “play of traces.”

Apart from the above criticisms, Derrida’s approach presents certain practical difficulties. Derrida’s assertion that every thought is in the first place a translation is radical and revolutionary. It implies a dissolution of the division between the source-text and the target-text. However, such disintegration denies the subtle dialogues that a translator maintains with the source-text, and which in turn find an echo in the target text. Translation is certainly not an activity that “centres” around the source-text—Derrida rightly revolts against any such “centring.”

However, Derrida’s supposition that there is nothing a priori to translation is questionable, as it does not provide any space for a discussion of the interactions of two cultures during translation. Translation is an activity where both the source-text and the culture that “writes” it, and the target text that emerges for a target audience, are important. The relation between the source-text and the target text should not be comprehended in terms of a “metaphysical dualism,” as Derrida asserts, because such an understanding is based on an assumption that there is a hierarchical relation, which requires a deconstructionist analysis. Rather, a theorist of translation should focus more on the agreements and disagreements during the process by situating the source language/culture and target language/culture on a democratic and dialogised platform.

The above investigations elucidate certain key issues. The five approaches considered here—traditional, formalist, structuralist (or objectivist), target-oriented, and deconstructionist—have been among the most influential theories that have illuminated the subtle nuances of translation. Though we need to be cautious about constructing canons for translation theories, it is difficult to undermine the profound impact these approaches have exerted. As an exhaustive survey is not the purpose of the current study, the focus here is on discussing what could be called the “major currents” in translation theories. The central idea is to show the drawbacks and constraints of these theories that necessitate the emergence of a new perspective that would expand the present knowledge and account for certain limitations of the previous approaches.

A Bakhtinian approach to discussing translation as a dialogic activity involving both “inner-dialogism” and “inter-dialogism” will be an innovative proposition for understanding translation. The task of the translator involves their entering a dialogic space, where the target text emerges from dialogue with both source language/culture and target language/culture. To translate is to create a new utterance with many “microdialogues.” In Bakhtin’s words, “the reproduction of the text by the subject (a return to it, a repeated reading, a new execution quotation) is a new, unrepeatable event in the life of the text, a new link in the historical chain of speech communication” (1994, 106).

A Bakhtinian approach would not require us to prioritise either the “original” or its translation. Rather, it involves a process of mutual understanding, of “both/and.” Further, Bakhtin builds a bridge between language and culture by drawing our attention to the operation of cultural voices that are imbibed in a word in the course of its dialogic ventures. Dialogism accentuates the extralinguistic features of a discourse, which Bakhtin terms as “metalinguistics.” The notions of “polyphony” and “carnival,” that refer to the multiple voices in a text and subversion of hierarchies through laughter and parody, respectively, also provide critical insights for comprehending translation. Hence, a Bakhtinian approach will prove to be a major step towards achieving a new theoretical perspective for an understanding of the intricacies that make translation an extremely complicated endeavour.

Let us now shift the focus towards an interpretation of the term “culture,” which has attracted many interpretations in the field of literary criticism and theory. The semantic multi-layeredness of the term makes it one of the most difficult to define and interpret.<sup>4</sup> To trace the trajectory of the term is

certainly an arduous task, since it acquires multiple contextual implications over its journey through the different stages of historical meanderings. A good deal of confusion could be avoided if we focus on the connotations of the term following specific scholars and theorists. As our primary focus is on cultural encounters, we will examine the term “culture” merely for its meaning and significance both in the traditional scholarship (by which we mean pre-Raymond Williams’s scholarship on culture) and in twentieth-century literary theory.

Though the term “culture” has been used to denote certain meanings, like “a way of life,” “civilization,” “customs,” “refinement,” “sophistication,” and “cultivation,” it was Matthew Arnold, in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1882), who used the term in a critical sense for the first time. For Arnold, culture refers to the whole set of ideas that elevate an individual from the drawbacks of societal prejudices and allow the perfection of their being to flourish. In what he terms “sweetness and light,” Arnold observes the true strength and spirit of culture (1993, 12–35). Sweetness and light also become vehicles for Arnold that carry a particular culture’s essence and spirit to other cultures. In this sense, cultural encounters help to spread this sweetness and light and illuminate each other’s dark corners. Interestingly, Arnold prioritised culture over religion; religion, for Arnold, was merely a supplement to the set of values that culture demonstrates.

T. S. Eliot, in his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), attempts to expand the meaning of the term “culture” by highlighting the relations a culture establishes with other cultures and nations. In Eliot’s words:

we become more and more aware of the extent to which the baffling problem of “culture” underlies the problems of the relation of every part of the world to every other. When we concern ourselves with the relation of the great nations to each other; the relation of the great to the small nations; the relation of intermixed “communities,” as in India, to each other; the relation of the parent nation to those originated as colonies; the relation of the colonist to the native; the relation between people of such areas as the West Indies, where compulsions and economic inducement has brought together large numbers of different races: behind all these perplexing questions, involving decisions to be made by many men every day, there is the question of what culture is, and the question whether it is anything that we can control or deliberately influence. (1962, 27)

Eliot’s observations throw light on the interaction of cultures that are not similar to each other in any respect. The unevenness and the disorderliness among cultures call for an interrogation of the factors responsible for their

hierarchisation and discrimination. Eliot is hinting at the politics of cultural encounters, which becomes an important concern for more recent postcolonialists and postmodernists. He seeks to interrogate culture not as something that “makes life worth living” for a particular community or a group of people, but in a world of many cultures and nations he questions the factors that disturb the peaceful living and thinking of people. Differences, in terms of “great nations” vs “small nations,” “parent nation” vs its “colonies,” “colonist” vs “native” etc., demonstrate asymmetrical platforms that disturb the process of dialogue between the two cultures. Eliot emphasises the role played by religion in curing the illness that plagues the modern world. Also in Eliot’s writings, a strain that prioritises the Western knowledge and religion as superior to the Eastern chain of thought is noticeable.

Raymond Williams, in his *Culture and Society* (1958), adds a new dimension to the term “culture.” In his words, “the idea of culture is a general reaction to a general and major change in the condition of our common life. Its basic element is its effort as social qualitative assessment” (1958, 295). For Williams, culture invariably carries three elements: social order, historical change, and the responses and reactions of the masses to such changes. For Williams, any study of culture should concentrate on the social order that binds human existence and the materialist enterprise that drives human necessities. Williams emphasises the study of “cultural materialism,” which believes that the cultural products are always material products; that is, cultural forms and practices are to be analysed not in themselves but as determined by the societal materiality.<sup>5</sup>

Williams’s understanding of culture is not only more radical and subversive, but also, in its attempt to emphasise the material aspects, it provides a new leftist dimension to culture. Cultural exchange and encounters, from Williams’s perspective, are necessarily material exchanges. Hence, domination and exploitation in the process of production, which are at the heart of Marxist analysis, shift bases through such encounters and exchanges. Thus, cultures are the arenas not merely for class-conflicts but also for the determination and sustenance of a material base for “cultural production.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, the influence of postmodernism encouraged the emergence of an interdisciplinary field that advocates a dissolution of disciplinary divisions and a recognition as well as celebration of marginalised cultures. In cultural studies, a study of

cultural politics takes precedence over philosophical scepticism, and retrieving the lost voices submerged due to domination perpetrated by the superior race, class/caste, and gender acquires importance. Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), which elaborates the role played by discursive formations in knowledge construction, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which substantiates such a hypothesis, have influenced cultural analysis tremendously, especially in the context of countries that were once colonised.

Said's later book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) problematises the question of the "other" by drawing our attention to the continuance of the discourse of the empire long after colonialism has ended. As it is the notion of "other" which is significant in any cultural inquiry, cultural studies has come to mean a study pertaining to the issues that surround the "Other."<sup>6</sup> Cultural studies is concerned with the way in which binaries, like white/black, male/female, centre/periphery, and nature/culture, are subverted and their implicit dominance overturned. Hence, concepts like "cultural crises," "cultural hybridity," "cultural syncretism," and "cultural encounters" have come forth as problematic areas requiring a conceptual and an empirical analysis.

In their essay "Cultural Studies: An Introduction," Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg write:

The productive tension surrounding the models of culture and modernity defines the specific practice of cultural studies, shapes the constantly transformed relations of history, experience, and culture, and provides a place which makes judgement and even intervention possible. (Nelson et al. 1992, 15)

This "productive tension" interweaves relations between different cultural practices, everyday life, and material, economic, political, geographical, and historical contexts. This tension is dialogic and open-ended because it encourages a dialogue between critical and political practices and explores fresh uncharted territories in the field of knowledge. It encourages intellectual and political experimentation, and challenges structures of power and hegemony. It aims to understand how the dominant discourse creates and sustains models of authority that govern and structure knowledge in different historical situations.

A Bakhtinian understanding of cultural encounters will help us analyse the complex social and political contexts that manifest during an intermingling of cultures. As Bakhtin writes, "a dialogic encounter of two cultures does

not result in merging and mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched” (1994b, 7). For Bakhtin, when two cultures encounter each other they give rise to many questions that are possible only in dialogic encounters. Such questions about their identities would not arise had the two cultures not interacted. Cultures reveal themselves completely only when they encounter each other. Dialogic encounters help cultures to overcome their own “closedness” and “one-sidedness.” They develop a creative understanding of each other and a potential to know the other of their self. There is no unitary merging in such an encounter, but there is a dialogical dispersion of their cultural ingredients and mutual enhancement of their cultural subtleties.

### **An Overview of the Major Principles of “Dialogism”**

The aim of the present study is to examine the process of translation and cultural encounters in light of the dialogical principles proposed by the Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). Dialogism, which briefly means the philosophy that bases itself on the dialogue between the self and the other and the relation between the two, forms the theoretical ground for the study.<sup>7</sup> The study utilises the principles of dialogism like “dialogue,” “utterance,” “heteroglossia,” “polyphony,” “metalinguistics,” “indirect discourse” (of Voloshinov), and “architectonics” to explore the possibility of conceptualising a theoretical formulation for understanding and interpreting interlingual translations and intercultural encounters. It seeks to problematise interlingual translations by questioning the two extreme tendencies in translation; namely, complete target-orientedness, and close imitation of the source-text. At the same time, it envisages a Bakhtinian alternative to the existing models that interpret the cultural subtleties when two different cultures encounter each other.

Bakhtin’s ideas, which appear in his scattered writings from the 1920s until his death in 1975, are elusive and abstruse. As Michael Holquist writes in his “Dedication” in *The Dialogic Imagination*: “There is nothing more fragile than the word, and Bakhtin’s was almost lost” (1994a, xi). Bakhtin’s oeuvre demonstrates the absence of a systematic philosophy; it lacks coherence and organisation. As he stays away from a “general system” that exhibits a “closure,” his philosophy is anti-structuralist. For Bakhtin, there is no “kernel” or “deep structure,” only unfinalizable utterances with a “chain of meanings” that populate the world. At the same time, it could be observed that throughout his writings there are many

repetitions and identical arguments; his fragmented and disjointed utterances lack a form that also demonstrates the anti-formalist thrust of his philosophy.

However, a *tension* or a *dialogic momentum* can be identified in his writings. This tension arises out of the many meanings his concepts exhibit when they are used in different contexts. Bakhtin's approach was to explain a particular term or concept by utilising its different meanings without strictly defining it. For instance, Bakhtin uses the term "dialogue" in multiple senses in different contexts. In the present study, from the point of view of extending and applying Bakhtin's "dialogue" to the theory and practice of translation and cultural encounters, we will focus on three different senses of the term. Firstly, Bakhtin uses the term in its most ordinary sense to refer to a verbal interaction between two individuals. In his words: "Language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it" (1984, 183). Here, the term "dialogic interaction" refers to the process of an utterance directed towards the other for a response. Three elements that are necessary for a dialogue become important in this context: the existence of two entities, the self and the other; the use of a language to convey an experience; and the relationship that develops between the two as a result of their interaction.<sup>8</sup>

Dialogue, in the second sense, is used as a metaphor to refer to the inter- and intra-orientation of a word with other words uttered or written. Owing to the interaction of the word with other alien words in the discourse, this orientation of the word leads to a conflictual condition, a "tension-filled environment." The dialogic word always lives in such a tension. As Bakhtin writes: "The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way" (1994a, 279). This aspect of the word forming its own object through interaction with other alien words demonstrates the "internal dialogism" of the word; that is, the dialogism that "penetrates" the "entire structure" and "semantic layers" of the word (1994a, 279).<sup>9</sup>

In the third sense, the term "dialogue" is used by Bakhtin to refer to the "unfinalizability" and "open-endedness" of the world. It is used to refer to a pluralistic sense of truth that arises from an understanding of the world as a non-monologic entity. On a philosophical plane, it is a consciousness of the other, and through the other a consciousness of oneself. It is a special interaction that interweaves relationships on the basis of mutual reciprocation. In Bakhtin's words:



I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other, finding the other in me (in mutual reflection and perception). Justification cannot be justification of oneself, confession cannot be confession of oneself. I receive my name from the other, and this name exists for the other (to name oneself is to engage in usurpation). Self-love is equally impossible. (1984, 311)

For Bakhtin, dialogue is a form of understanding human relations that are never static, but always in the process of being made or unmade. It is an epistemological device that accounts for the meaning and significance of human existence in an “unfinalizable” world.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, dialogism is a term used by Bakhtin scholars like Michael Holquist, Katerina Clark, and Ken Hirschkop to refer to the philosophy of Bakhtin. As Holquist writes:

Stated at the highest level of (quite hair-raising) abstraction, what can only uneasily be called “Bakhtin’s philosophy” is a pragmatically oriented theory of knowledge; more particularly, it is one of several modern epistemologies that seek to grasp human behavior through the use humans make of language. (1990, 15)

Dialogism is a study of the various concepts put forth by Bakhtin in his writings, and their connotations and significance for the different branches of knowledge, particularly literary studies and philosophy.

It is now possible to understand the tension and momentum in Bakhtin’s philosophy. There is a movement or a progress that Ken Hirschkop identifies as “conceptual movement” in Bakhtin’s principles (Hirschkop and Shepherd 1989, 4). According to Hirschkop, this conceptual movement enables Bakhtin, “to have a foot in the camps of both philosophy and empirical cultural analysis” (Hirschkop and Shepherd 1989, 4). This “tension” in his thought has made different interpretations possible, which in turn have led to an application of his principles to various theoretical issues and cultural phenomena. For instance, Don Bialostosky in his *Wordsworth, Dialogics and the Practice of Criticism* (1992) and Lynne Pearce in her *Reading Dialogics* (1994) have extended and applied Bakhtin’s principles to examine dialogism and polyphony in lyric poetry. *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (1989), edited by Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, consists of articles that explore Bakhtinian principles in the context of feminism, decolonisation, body politics, existentialism, and reader response criticism. In the same vein, *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges* (1989), edited by Gary

Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, is a collection of scholarly articles that explore notions like metaparody, oedipal dialogue, and hermeneutics in the context of Bakhtin's ideas. *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words* (1998), edited by Michael Gardiner and Michael M. Bell, presents articles that demonstrate the relevance of Bakhtin's philosophy to social, anthropological, political, and cultural theories. The conflict of "voices" in a culture, the operation of "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces during war time, and different forms of "chronotopes" in postmodern and postcolonial situations are some of the concerns of Bakhtin scholars.

### **The Necessity of Utilising Bakhtin's Principles**

Over the years, the term "translation" has undergone a radical metamorphosis from a language-restricted activity to something that refers to a transfer of information between any two semiotic systems.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on the intersemioticity of translation has widened the horizons of translation studies to include a rendering of meaning from one cultural context to another, from reality "proper" to virtual/fictional reality, and even from conceptual to empirical domains. Currently, translation studies is no longer a marginal discipline. Its independent status among other academic disciplines owes a great deal to literary theories. As Lawrence Venuti writes: "At the start of the new millennium, translation studies is an institutional network of scholarly communities who conduct research and debate across conceptual and disciplinary divisions" (2000, 334).

In the present study, by translation we mean the "interlingual translation" or "translation proper" in Roman Jakobson's sense; that is, a transfer of meaning from a source language to a target language (Jakobson 1959, 233) (for a critical analysis of Jakobson's ideas see below). In this sense, translation is a communicative process that requires the translator to mediate between two languages and cultures. It is a process of cross-cultural interaction that occurs in a particular social context. It does not merely require a cognisance of the literary qualities of the source-text but also a meticulous grasp of the linguistic traits, extra-linguistic characteristics like psychological and sociological dimensions, and cultural aspects of both the source culture/language and the target culture/language. A translator has to substitute the chain of signifiers of the source language/culture of the source-text with a chain of signifiers of the target language/culture.

The task before the translator is to bridge the gap between the two cultures/languages and make a meaningful dialogue possible. S/he is troubled by certain inevitable questions: How does s/he translate without mechanically imitating the source-text? What theoretical postulates help in communicating the semantic density and stylistic modulations of the source-text? How does s/he address the problems of generic specificities, cultural markers, ideological dimensions, authorial intentions, and linguistic diversity? The translator should have a theoretical framework that would help her/him resolve these difficulties. S/he has to strike a balance between interpreting, abstracting, communicating, and explaining the subtleties of the source-language/culture to the target readers. In George Steiner's words:

Good translation ... can be defined as that in which the dialectic of impenetrability and ingress, of intractable alienness and felt "at-homeness," remains unresolved, but expressive. Out of the tension of resistance and affinity, a tension directly proportional to the proximity of the two languages and historical communities, grows the elucidative strangeness of the great translation. The strangeness is elucidative because we come to recognize it, to "know it again," as our own. (1975, 393)

Steiner's observation highlights three key characteristics of a "good translation." Firstly, it arises out of a tension between resistance and affinity. In other words, the translator should not separate herself/himself from either the source language/culture or the target language/culture. The act of translating should be a product of a flux between the two; this flux will create a conflictual condition where the interests of both the cultures overlap and assimilate. Secondly, this overlapping and assimilation occur due to the proximity and distance between the two cultures. The translator's task is to carefully gauge the ratios and proportions of distance and proximity between the two languages/cultures. Not only should the translator understand the distance between the two cultures s/he is dealing with, but s/he should also locate herself/himself with respect to them. S/he has to build a relationship and sustain it to complete the task of translation. Thirdly, translation should demonstrate "elucidative strangeness"; that is, it should not be the product of an ideal mimesis; nor should it be a rewritten work that has little in common with the original.

Arguably, a translated text comes into being out of a "dialogic tension." The Bakhtinian notion of a dialogue becomes relevant in this context because dialogic relations are always "tension-filled environments." The flux and tension of a dialogic condition lead to a situation where neither of the two entities becomes dominant. A dialogue in the Bakhtinian sense has

to be developed by the translator between herself/himself, the source language/culture, and the target language/culture. The closeness and the distance that need to be maintained in such a dialogue between the two cultures/languages have to be analysed by the translator, and they need to work out an attempt to produce the “elucidative strangeness” in translation. The present study seeks to demonstrate how Bakhtinian ideas can be productive in this regard to the theory and practice of translation.

Another concern of the present study is the focus on the notion of “cultural encounter.” Culture exists in an interconnected network of cultures, contesting and acclimatising itself to the changing sequence of events. As Edward Said writes, “all cultures are involved in one another: none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (1993, xxix). Interactions, interdependence, and disagreements arise when two or more cultures enter a contact zone, and evoke a variety of interpretations.<sup>12</sup> A hybridisation of values and practices takes place in such cultural encounters that destabilise any institutionalisation of discourses. A cultural encounter is a dialogic venture, characterised by agreements and affiliations, and disagreements and disjunctions. It is a unique and “unfinalizable” condition (in the Bakhtinian sense) that gives rise to cross-cultural dialogues. An enquiry of cultural encounters from a Bakhtinian viewpoint with examples from Indian literatures and cultural situations will be the second major aim of the current study.

The focus of the present study is not merely on a conceptual analysis, but also on an intermingling of theory and practice of translation, cultural encounters and dialogism. The overall framework is Bakhtinian; that is, it is a dialogic approach, and the main aim is to examine a Western theoretical formulation through examples from the Indian literatures and cultural situation. Dialogue as the basis for human interaction, and thereby the basis for human existence, is a cogent argument relevant in every cultural condition. The study in itself is an encounter between the West and the East, and therefore dialogic from within.

It is noteworthy that Bakhtin has little to say on the activity of translation. Unlike Derrida, who wrote on translation in his works like *The Ear of the Other* (1985a) and “Des Tours de Babel” (1985b), Bakhtin is mysteriously silent on the possibility of a dialogical approach to the process of transfer of meaning (for a brief analysis of Derrida’s position on translation, see below). Though Bakhtin’s disorganised writings offer a conceptual base for an interpretation of various cultural phenomena, they do not deal with specific cultural encounters, like that of the East-West. Now, how does

one carry out an extension of Bakhtinian principles to certain fields of study that were not part of his philosophy? What principles are to be selected and how are they to be extended and applied to translation and cultural encounters?

The conceptual movement in Bakhtin's philosophy that enables an extension and application of his ideas provides us with answers to the questions raised above. As observed earlier, there is a tension or a momentum in his ideas that echoes throughout his philosophy.<sup>13</sup> So long as dialogism deals with the relations between the self and the other which are in a state of continual flux, it would certainly not be a forceful extension and application of his principles to translation and cultural encounters.<sup>14</sup> This is because the study of the process of translation and cultural encounters is inevitably the study of the self/other dynamics. In the case of translation, at least three kinds of dialogue between the self and the other can be identified: the first between the translator's self and the source-text or the other; the second between the translator's self and the target audience, the second other; and the third between the source culture/language and the target culture/language that a translator establishes through her/his translation. Translation, therefore, is a product of a dialogic encounter where the translator not only attempts to draw the attention of the target reader to the cultural peculiarities of the source-text, but also carries the authorial intentions as presented in the source-text to the target audience.

It is important for us to understand that the translator's self is not an isolated entity. Ahistorically and apolitically constituted, but like a dialogic self, it is intersubjective and the product of the numerous dialogues that keep occurring in a particular historical situation. That is, the translator's self is constituted only in the process of a dialogue with the other. It cannot have an a priori existence. It comes into being due to the dialogic encounter with the source and target language/cultures. As Holquist writes:

It cannot be stressed enough that for him [Bakhtin] "self" is dialogic, a *relation*. And because it is so fundamental a relation, dialogue can help us understand how other relationships work, even (or especially) those that preoccupy the sometimes stern, sometimes playful new Stoics who must dwell on the death of the subject: relationships such as signifier/signified, text/context, system/history, rhetoric/language, and speaking/writing. (1990, 19)

For Bakhtin, the self attains an identity and self-sufficiency due to its encounter with the other. Also, this identity is never complete but always in the process of creation. The intersubjectivity of the self is directly dependent on the categories of time and space in which the dialogic interaction occurs; that is, the perception of the reality outside always occurs in unique moments of time/space. Translation occurs in particular time and space categories and hence is the product of a unique moment. Translation, in this sense, is always a process engaged in the task of making something new out of the numerous dialogues already available. The translator creates relations and sustains them to accomplish translation. Her/his self is the result of a “co-being”; it exists due to its sharedness.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, translation becomes the product of a selfhood that bases itself on sharedness, making it a dialogic activity.

In the same vein, we can ascertain the dialogicality of cultural encounters. Cultures are not monolithic wholes, they are non-monologic entities that demonstrate an “internal dialogism” in the Bakhtinian sense. The inner contradictions, disjunctions, differences, and assimilations of a particular culture lead to a dialogue with another culture’s conflictual condition. Cultural encounters exemplify an intercontextual framework of juxtaposition and mutual reciprocation. If culture can be seen as a text, then studies in cultural encounters lead us to examine the intertextuality and intersemioticity of two or more cultures when they interact with each other. These encounters exemplify a dialogic tension between different cultural forms and practices. An investigation into this tension will not only be productive from the point of view of cultural studies, but will also help to problematise the relations between certain epistemic categories like history, modernity, discursive practices, and central and peripheral concerns in a culture.

Since the study of cultural encounters forms a part of the larger rubric called “cultural studies,” the problematisations that cultural encounters present have mostly been examined from a perspective that emphasises the interplay of the power struggle in cultures. Political implications have been foregrounded and the vested interests that govern the institutionalisation of cultural practices have been highlighted. In their essay “Cultural Studies: An Introduction,” Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg write:

In cultural studies, the politics of the analysis and the politics of the intellectual work are inseparable. Analysis depends on intellectual work; for cultural studies, theory is a crucial part of that work. Yet intellectual