

# THE UNTRANSLATABLE SELF: AFFECTIVE TRANSLATION IN MULTILINGUAL LITERATURE

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## Abstract

*In this paper, Multilingualism in Comparative Literature is discussed in terms of affective translation and the importance of how emotional experience changes when an author writes or translates in a different language is highlighted. Going beyond the conventional issues of semantic correctness and cultural availability, the paper leans towards the investigation of how emotions, sensations and memories that are embodied in the process of linguistic transition are transformed or destabilized. Based on the affect theory and phenomenology, postcolonial language and power, the current paper examines how the authors of Vladimir Nabokov, Ngugiwa Thiong'o, Samuel Beckett, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rabindranath Tagore, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie can re-create the emotional realities between languages. Another suggestion of the study is that affective translations come with emotional intensity, corporal expression, and temporal displacement, which reveal the untranslatable self as a bargaining ground instead of a loss. In the end, the paper concludes that multilingual writing restructures identities and belonging and puts language both as a medium of emotion and a place of change.*

**Keywords:** *Affective Translation, Multilingualism, Self-Translation, Linguistic-decolonisation, Untranslatability*

## Introduction

Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary discipline that examines literature as a discipline of various cultures, languages, and nations that allows to more deeply understand the expression of world literature. In a real sense, it is aimed at not only the exploration of texts but also the interdependences among them, as well as how the cultural contexts play a role on the themes, styles and narrative frameworks. Comparative literature thus provides a vibrant perspective in the light of which the intricacies of language and cultural interrelations can be viewed more accurately with the focus made on the importance of multilingualism in the world of literature.

In a multilingual sense, comparative literature is even more rich and complex. This strategy determines that some authors traverse across lingual environments and often attempt to use words of different languages in their creations resulting in distinctive types of literary multilingualism. Such a language alternation, code mixing or even the purposeful confusion of languages has produced a patch work of meaning that represents the multiple realities of their producers.

Multilingualism in literature explores the role of language choice and the meaning of identity, power and cultural exchange. It cross-examines the application of language by the authors not only to communicate but also to use as the instrument of artistic expression and cultural comment. The comparative analysis thus, has the potential of forming the narrative texture, character growth, and the richness of themes in various literary traditions.

Translation has long been regarded in the Comparative Literature field as a transference. It is considered to be an act of crossing the meaning of one linguistic vessel to the other. However, this idea of shifting thoughts overlooks the complex affective and existential displacements that occur when writers write in foreign languages. The process of translation and especially self-translation undermines not only linguistic forms but also emotional facts. Multilingual writers like Vladimir Nabokov, who has famously written that he was a perfectly normal trilingual child, or Jhumpa Lahiri, who has adopted Italian as a way of reinventing herself as a writer, are lucky to develop inter-lingual communication, they bear not only words but a suggestive world overload of feelings.

Since the idea of dynamic equivalence proposed by Eugene Nida to the theories of foreignization and domestication by Lawrence Venuti, translational theories mostly accentuate the comprehension of the reader as an individual or as a member of a specific culture. The issue of the translation or conveying of emotion is peripheral. Although cognitive and linguistic equivalence have served as the central themes in translation theory, the element of affective equivalence, where the textual textures, tonalities and mood changes between the language have barely received any attention. The current study article attempts to fill this gap that is demonstrated during translation of literary works.

To plug this gap, the paper presents to affective translation, (a term coined by Brian Massumi, Sara Ahmed and Silvan Tomkins) and phenomenological linguistics. Affective translation is concerned with how emotions as embodied experience, cultural gesture and psychological residue work. Either they are coded or lost during the process of linguistic transition. As an example, when writing in or against a specific language, Nabokov, Lahiri or Ngugi are also translating sentience as well as syntax.

This inquiry is fundamentally comparative, since affective shifts when juxtaposed are only perceptible. To be concise, the affective shift is perceptible when comparing:

- Russian and English in Nabokov's texts
- English and Gikuyu in Ngugi's texts
- English and Italian in Lahiri's texts
- Bengali and English in Tagore's works
- Igbo and English in Adichie's works

All these instances reveal the way in which the untranslatable self comes out as not a part of loss but a place of emotional negotiation.

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The affective turn in humanities as a general field of study has created possibilities to rethink more about translation as a subjective experience as opposed to being a strictly linguistic activity. Brian Massumi defines the nature of affect to be an intensity - independent of the will and of consciousness (Parables for the Virtual 27). Affect is prior therefore to the representation; it is the beat of sensation that eggs out language. When authors translate themselves, they have to think over re-incarnating this intensity in a different language system. They are likely to fall in the cultural politics of emotion. Most of the languages repress this expression of affection, in the process of translation.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her masterpiece *The Politics of Translation* and NgugiwaThiong'o in his *Decolonising the Mind* put us back to the reality that the language cannot be discussed without relating it to power. In the postcolonial theory of translation, it is necessary to state that writing in the language of the colonizer is to walk the line of emotional dissonance - between intimacy and alienation, visibility and erasure. Affect is a listing of this struggle. The untranslatable is thus not a hindrance but a powerful mark of colonial and psychological past which can not be assimilated, adapted and absorbed.

To Maurice Merleau-Ponty of phenomenology, language is not a separate extraneous accompaniment of thought but its entire body (*Phenomenology of Perception* 183). It is a very strong suggestion that translation transforms the phenomenon of existence. What Nabokov recreates in his English prose on his Russian childhood what Lahiri writes in her Italian diary to detach from the expectations of English is actually doing what may be called affective metamorphosis. It is a re-embodiment of self in terms of linguistic re-inhabitation.

An affective theory of translation thus encompasses three criterias that are interlinked:

- Emotional Intensity: How affective charge varies across linguistic versions of the self.
- Embodied Expression: The changes in sensory and cultural signifiers of emotion (gestures, rhythm and idiomatic expressions) occur.

The reorganization of emotional memory in the historical process of rewritings or translations of the past experience is called Temporal Displacement.

It is this framework that permits a subtle comparative analysis of multilingual authors whose worlds of affect, albeit fragmented, nonetheless, are symbiotic.

### **From Transition to Analysis**

The same framework applied in the current paper is used in contrast to the close reading of the choice works of major authors from all over the world when the process of affective translation dramatizes and beautifies the process of struggle and reinvention of the self.

- *Speak, Memory and Lolita* (English vs. Russian sentimentality) by Nabokov.
- *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngugiwa Thiong'o and *Petals of blood* (Gikuyu vs. English Affect).
- *Molloy and En Attendant Godot* (English/French existential emotion) by Beckett.
- *English vs. Italian rebirth In Other Words* (JhumpaLahiri).
- *Gitanjali* (Bengali mysticism to English lyricism) translated by Tagore on himself.
- *Americanah* (Igbo affect fix in the English Global discourse) by Adichie.

## **Affective Translation and the Multilingual Self — Close Literary Analyses**

### **Vladimir Nabokov: Interpreting Nostalgia and Exile**

Speak, Memory (1951) by Vladimir Nabokov is one of the most emotional acts of self-translation in the modern literature. Nabokov tries to re-create his past in English language that he once referred to as his second skin since he had written his autobiography earlier in Russian language. The setting of the book supports the fight between the emotional truthfulness and linguistic competence. Nabokov writes,

**“The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness” (Speak, Memory 19).**

It is the rhythmic precise and metaphysical melancholy that the sentence belongs to, that shows how English is the place of a re-coded affect: nostalgia mediated by of aesthetic mechanism.

Nabokov in his Russian prose works lyricism is frequently lavish and luxurious, but in English it is always straightforward and satirical. It is not just a stylistic development but an emotional re-creation. According to one scholar, Brian Boyd, Nabokov translates not words but the feeling of remembering (Boyd 212). His self translation goes beyond the linguistic containment. Nabokov does not have any pure Russian or English nostalgia. It is more of a composite feeling, which is in between being an outcast and an aesthetic craftsmanship.

In Lolita (1955), the use of English as the language used to express deviant sensitivity by Nabokov also complicates affective translation. The fact that Humbert is able to confess that he always relies on a murderer to give him a fancy style of prose (Lolita 9) in itself reveals the corruption of language. In this case, the creativity of the language conceals ethical conflict, and shows the possibility that the sense of affection can be changed into irony, and not only empathy. The multilingual Nabokov is an American and not an American at the same time in terms of English emotion. He turns the exile of language into the aesthetics. His art makes it clear that affective translation does not just coincide with loss but re-composition. It is the power to make new emotional notes, which is impossible in the native language.

### **Jhumpa Lahiri: Affective Rebirth through Italian Language**

In case the English of Nabokov is exile, Italian, on the other hand, of Jhumpa Lahiri is excessive desire to avoid linguistic heritage. In Other Words (2016), Lahiri narrates her linguistic self-migration she imposed on herself, leaving the English language and turning into the Italian one. She writes, “I write in

Italian to feel transformed. In order to larnish me naked. To begin again” (In Other Words, 25). This passionate translation is a masochistic and a liberating stance of the writer. Italian turns out the Emotional Test Ground, a place where no one is safe and everyone is hostile toward each other.

There is also a weakness of the Italian prose by Lahiri, which was not present in her previous English fiction production Interpreter of Maladies (1999). Emotion is distilled not dramatized in the Italian text. The ease of expression provides a power of silence that is similar to the concept that theorist Silvan Tomkins defines as the “script of shame). It is a paradoxical

affect, which is able to hide and show emotion at the same time (Tomkins 86). The self-translation, which Lahiri resorts to later, when she translates *In Altre Parole* into English, is not directed at similarity; it represents a duplicated self. According to her translator, she writes in her note, I am torn between two languages, two identities. The writer and the reader do not coincide with each other (*In Other Words* xvi).

This chapter brings out the affective temporality of translation. This feeling is not a stable referent but a flowing by means of language. In this case, Alessia Ricciardi notes that Lahiri recreates the immigrant situation by the literary decision and not a geographical one (Ricciardi 203). To Lahiri, writing in Italian is an experiment in self erasure and re-invention that reveals, also, that affect has the power of migration, mutation, and the ability to seek new locations of meaning.

### **Gugiwa Thiong'o: Decolonising Emotions**

Affective translation according to Ngugiwa Thiong'o is highly politicized to the politics of decolonization. In his book, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) he states that, Language carries culture, and culture carries with it, the sum total of values through which we come to understand ourselves and our role in the world (Ngugi 16). Hence writing in English is an emotional concession. He did not go the Gikuyu route merely based on philosophical reasons but on an emotional one. It was an effort to reinvent the emotional resonance of an ethnic and indigenous past suppressed by the colonial language.

The English prose (*Petals of Blood*) written by Ngugi in 1977 is vibrating with the repressed rhythms, Gikuyu heart. The purgation when the character Munira screams, The fire in Ilmorog will cleanse us all, is a collective effect that is based on oral storytelling traditions. The affect in this case is resistant to translation since it is culturally entrenched. Postcolonial critic, Simon Gikandi argues that the linguistic change that Ngugi undergoes is a form of reinvention of the ground of affect of the communal sense and identity (Gikandi 147). Ngugi makes translation into an act of affective deportation by translating himself to Gikuyu. The act itself serves as an emotional re-emergence of the emotional order, which uproots colonial emotional order.

### **Samuel Beckett: Affective Minimalism of Bilingual Expression**

Samuel Beckett who wrote in English and subsequently in French once said he wrote in French because he wanted to write without style. A very paradoxical statement this indicates an impulse of affectiveness, which is to cut out language of emotional overflow. The harshness of the French wording created affective minimalism in the French *En Attendant Godot* (1952). It is a low-pitched, existential note, on which despair is denied the pathos. By saying, at one time, *Rien a faire* (Nothing to be done), the flattening effect of the line summarizes the emotional economy (consumer behaviour) which Beckett was aiming at.

In the translation of the play to the English, Beckett did little to change the tonal shades of the play *Godot*. The English *Nothing to be done* has retained the gloom, and has obtained a slight tread of resignation which the French did not possess. Beckett hence authenticates that a slightest syntactic variation can re-arrange affective texture. Ulrika Maude, who has been critical of Beckett, observes, that Beckett is bilingual but this creates a realm of psychic

suspension, his characters have to speak in between the tongues and their emotions fail in translation (Maude 93). In the case of Beckett, linguistic duality is, thus, a figurative way of expressing the inexpressibility of emotions, in which the affect is not in words but in non-words.

### **Rabindranath Tagore: Mysticism and the Loss of Emotional Rhythm**

A typical example of translating under the influence of culture asymmetry is the self-translation of *Gitanjali* (1912) by Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poem into English. The Bengali poems, whose rhythms are musical, their devotional affections are sterile in English. An example is the Bengali original of where the mind is without fear which calls upon a rhythmic prayer; in English, it is a passionate statement: Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high. The Bengali syntax musical feeling translates into an ethical feeling of the English language.

The expression of the affective compromise of global reception is revealed in Tagore when he acknowledges that he translated the work upon the ear of the world. According to Sisir Kumar Das, *Gitanjali* is an English novel that by Tagore changes bhakti into romantic idealism (Das 58). The indefinable quality of the devotional feeling so transforms into a universal humanist tone. In this case, emotions are rearranged to face the colonial modernity.

### **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Translating Cultural Affect in the English Novel**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, despite writing mainly in English, is in a constant bargain to negotiate the affective charge of her Igbo linguistic object. Emotional intimacy in *Americanah* (2013) is repeatedly explained with the help of the untranslated Igbo phrases that identify the affective authenticity. Obinze addresses Ifemelu as Nkem, which translates to my own, Adichie leaves it as it is, leaving its warmth to flow through its foreignness. She describes it in an interview saying, sometimes translation can flatten emotion. I leave Igbo words since they have a burden that English cannot carry with them (Adichie, qtd. in Osei-Nyame 114).

The example of Adichie choice is an application of the idea of strategic untranslatability. It is an act of denial that is voluntary in nature highlighting a feeling of defiance. Her international audience should experience the foreign influence and not decipher it. This would be similar to the request of Venuti to foreignize translation, but Adichie moves it into the sphere of feeling. As Madhu Krishnan points out, the linguistic preferences of Adichie create intimacy based on the principle of the opacities; affect takes the place of understanding as a form of relation (Krishnan 182). In these strategies, Adichie reinvents meaning of translation as an emotive sovereignty that makes a claim of local affect to not be assimilated into global English.

### **Affective Untranslatability: Comparative Discussion**

Nabokov nostalgia, Lahiri vulnerability, Ngugi reclamation, Beckett severity, Tagore sublimation, and Adichie intimacy are all the manifestations that show that emotion can never be transferred in a neutral way. In all these writers, we get to grasp that affective translation comes out as a rupture as well as a reconnection. Language has the power of enhancing certain affects and silencing others.

Three comparative insights manifest:

### **Emotion as a Linguistic Habitat**

Both authors show that affect lives in language like climate. Nabokov, by making the English perfect emotion, turns it to irony, whereas Tagore, by transforming devotion into reflection, makes it fresh with English. In this case, the difference and not semantics is the affective temperature.

### **Untranslatability as Resistance**

For Ngugi and Adichie, emotional untranslatability turns out to be a decolonial strategy. To leave a word untranslated is to assert cultural autonomy over affect.

### **Translation as Rebirth**

Lahiri and Beckett are two good examples of how translation is a way of rebirth. It strikes as one of the means to rejoin emotion by deprivation. This notion is also verified by Lahiri when she writes, that every word in Italian is a seed, and it will develop in me in a different way (In Other Words 33).

Therefore, there is no failure in affective translation, it is a matter of transformation. It is a creative maladjustment whereby the self is continuously rewritten and re-read in history.

### **Affective Zone in Comparative Literature**

The above analyses highlight how the multilingual writers lead a dynamic process of affective translation. In this case, it is not just words but emotion that is the subject of translation. These more subtle, material changes cannot be explained in terms of comparative literature, attached as it has always been to thematic and linguistic equivalence. Emily Apter in her critical piece, *The Translation zone*, believes that translation is a way of living critically with the untranslatable (Apter 7). To read authors like Nabokov, Lahiri, Ngugi, Beckett, Tagore, and Adichie in relation is to understand that they all occupy such a space, in which the emotional self is rewritten with the help of language.

In this affective area, untranslatability is a dynamic category as opposed to a weakness. The untranslatable self is the feature of the remnants of feeling that still remains between languages and defines their literary style and emotional coloring. This condition is justified in terms of Brian Massumi and his conception of affect as a pre-personal intensity, which is associated with the transition between one experience state and another (Massumi 28). In their very world the works of these multilingual authors resonate in a swinging, which is present in their tone, rhythm, and silence.

Its implications to comparative literature are very insightful. When affect has the capacity to move or to mutate between languages, then comparative reading needs to bring to saturation emotional texture no less than to textual reliability. Comparative literature, in this case, is placed between the fields of linguistics, psychology, and phenomenology as the answer to the affective theory of translation. It turns the examination of writings into an examination of sensual experience across tongues.

## **Language, Memory, and the Ethics of Feeling**

The question always arises as to how the writers commemorate the emotional reality of their experience when the language of their feeling is no longer available or is allowed to be repressed. To Nabokov, his nostalgia of the Russian language is rebuilt in irony by writing in English. It turns out to be a kind of emotional mask which enables the memory to withstand the displacement. Conversely, linguistic decolonization is transformed by Ngugi into emotional with the choice to reclaim Gikuyu. Restoration. The warmth of the lost communal speech of his comes back in the form of political passion, in his texts.

Similarly, the Italian experiment Lahiri has conducted reveals that affective authenticity can require estrangement. Emotions are recreated to her where they are not associated with the familiarity of English. She mentions it as she says that to live without being translated, to be naked in a different language is to be nearer to the fact of feeling (In Other Words 57). Quite the contrary, Beckett bilingual minimalism carries out a reverse gesture. He records writing as an emotional extinction, meaning that the most accurate emotion can be the silence that one experiences after losing it. All these variations come to play to express the fact that emotions are never language-neutral. Every tongue makes a difference in terms of affective possibilities. The intranslatable self is, then, the self that continually attempts to compromise between conflicting emotional grammars.

Neither can the political aspect of the affective translation be ignored. Ngugi and Adichie make us remember that language option is enslaved to colonization pasts. In keeping Igbo endearments in Americanah, Adichie is approving what Homi Bhabha refers to as a third space of assertion. It is coincidentally a site of affect that is difficult to translate to imperialism. Her words which are not translated down are her defiant and assimilative action against the English language. However, Tagore, in his Gitanjali, the English version, unveils the inconsistency of translation in the colonial modernity. The transformation of devotional intensity into universal humanism can prove that the colonial power transforms not only the meaning but the emotional authenticity as well.

In this regard, affective translation, as well, traces the flow of emotion around the world. Multilingual literature of the modern world reveals the fact that emotion is migrating with the elements of colonial violence, exile, and longingness between languages and continents. Such migrations are observant of comparative literature, which defines it as an emotion in motion. The untranslatable self is not just a theory. It is the experience of most of the contemporary writers. Their work emphasizes on a poetics that is very necessary to recognize the vulnerability and the fertility of emotional translation. The following propositions may be used to describe such a poetics:

### **Untranslatability as a Novel Creation**

It is quite correct that that which cannot be perfectly translated inspires invention. The dazzling English of Nabokov and the stern Italian of Lahiri, the simplified French of Beckett, are all hymns of loss, whose fruits are new.

## **Affect as a Comparative Medium**

Instead of juxtaposing texts in terms of their themes or plots, it is possible to juxtapose them in terms of affective temperature which is composed of rhythm, tone and texture of feeling.

## **Embodied Reading**

The comparative literature should be phenomenological and cognizant of the fact that simply reading across languages is an act of affection in itself. The reader also becomes a translator.

## **Ethical Resonance**

Empathy between differences is prefigured by affective translation. It reminds us that translation is the closest of all reading acts, the closest of all things to reading is to be intimate (Translation Politics 183) and that all intimacy is affective.

Through these propositions, comparative literature redefines itself not as the study of equivalence, but as the study of difference that is experienced.

## **Conclusion**

The authors discussed in this paper are proponents of the paradox of the untranslatable self, noting that it is indeed such a deep reality about language. It is a connector and a obstacle in projection of human feelings. Through their respective linguistic histories and literary traditions, each of these writers reveals how language can create a complex web that describes the vexed realities of identity and experience. The nostalgia of Vladimir Nabokov is entrenched in the fusion of his native Russian and English language which he had learned at a later age in life. His writings tend to alternate between the overtones of yearning and alienation and show the way in which the process of translation may create an illusion of loss and simultaneously a further realization of what was lost. The analysis of the vulnerability by Jhumpa Lahiri also shows the specifics of the identity in translation. In her stories, the characters struggle with the emotional burden of cultural displacement, walking through the complexity of language that unites and divides them with their culture.

The discourse of reclamation by NgugiwaThiong asserts in advance the use of language as a potent instrument of reclaiming identity and history. Ngugi criticizes colonial languages and their role in defining self-identity by writing in his native Gikuyu. His works prove that translation may lead to reclaiming and reassertion of voices that tend to be marginalized. Conversely, silence as explored by Samuel Beckett is the best illustration of the theme that certain feelings are indefinable. His minimalistic wordplay also explores the things that are not translatable in human experience and argues that silence itself can indeed be a powerful expression, overcoming the constraints of language.

The theory of sublimation of Rabindranath Tagore could also be used to look at this phenomenon. The inquiry of his works is a strong spiritual and emotional desire that is depicted in a combination of languages and forms of poetry revealing how translation can take emotions to another level and change them in the process. In the meantime, the portrayal of intimacy by

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains the way in which linguistic diversity in personal relationships can make emotional relationships richer. Throughout her stories, it can be seen that translation can be useful in understanding each other and building a new dimension to the personal relationships.

Together, the paper, using these authors, proves that translation is not just a mechanical process of translating words in one language to other but a dynamic metamorphosis of feeling and meaning. Both texts shed some light into how multilingualism can enhance literary expression and refute the idea of emotional disloyalty to the act of translation. The authors to be analysed confirm that the process of translation makes it possible to transform the emotions, which allows a reader to get involved into the heavy experience of identity, culture, and human life. Finally, the research prompts us to adopt the multi-dimensional aspect of language, in the sense that the experience we go through during our translation process may make us appreciate ourselves and others in the world we live in today, even more and in a more sophisticated manner.

Translating the self is to excavate sensations that have been buried under the linguistic depositions. The untranslatable is thus the place where emotion is undergoing a process of change, where exile becomes memory, and language becomes the body of affect. By redefining translation as an affective practice, this paper puts comparative literature in the border of the humanities where emotion, identity and language come together in the collaborative act of meaningful making of powerful. The untranslatable self, comes about as the most applicable means of conveying ones feelings even when words fail. We have been able to observe, throughout the study, the strength of translation to bridge as well as offer transformation. So it in one way is an important part in helping to dialogue and comprehend cross-culturally. Recognition of complexities and challenges involved in translation adds more flavors to our interaction with literature and enables us to sense the nuance and richness of expression evident in various literature.

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