INTERPRETING *KOSLA*: TRANSLATION AS AN ACT OF NEGOTIATION

Dr. KAVITA PATIL
Assistant Professor, Department of English
B. M. Ruia Girls' College, Mumbai

Abstract

Translation is more than a linguistic transfer; it is an interpretative and creative act that involves negotiation between cultures, languages, and ideologies. This paper examines translation as an act of interpretation by analysing Kosla (1963) by Bhalchandra Nemade and its English translation Cocoon (1997) by Sudhakar Marathe. While much of translation studies have focused on the final translated product, this study shifts the focus to the process of translation itself. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Octavio Paz, George Steiner, Paul Ricoeur, and Umberto Eco, the paper argues that translation is not a static reproduction but an active engagement that reshapes meaning. Through an in-depth comparison of key passages, this study highlights how translation choices—such as additions, omissions, and modifications—serve as interpretative strategies that alter the reception and meaning of a literary text. By closely analysing Kosla and Cocoon, this paper demonstrates how translation negotiates cultural and linguistic boundaries, transforming a text's identity to cater to new readerships. It explores how Marathe domesticates certain aspects while foreignising others, thereby mediating between the Marathi and English literary traditions. The paper further discusses how translation extends the afterlife of a text by introducing it into a different linguistic and cultural framework, making it accessible to a broader audience. Ultimately, this study asserts that translation is not merely an act of linguistic substitution but a dynamic process of re-creation that reflects the translator's ideological and interpretative stance.

Keywords: *translation, interpretation, kosla, cocoon, negotiation, george steiner, umberto eco*

Introduction

While translation studies have largely centered on the final translated product, the process of translation itself has received comparatively less attention. This process inherently involves additions and omissions, much like the acts of reading, understanding, interpretation, and negotiation. As a result, translation emerges as a deeply interpretative and dynamic engagement with the text. Much like an interpreter, a translator can be seen as a life-giving performer, breathing new meaning into the text. Understanding language is, in essence, understanding translation. Octavio Paz, in his article "Translation: Literature and Letters" (1971), asserts:

When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child who asks his mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simple words he already knows. In this sense, translation within the same language is not essentially different from translation between two tongues, and the histories of all peoples parallel the child's experience, even the most isolated tribe, sooner or later, comes into contact with other people who speak a foreign language. The sounds of a tongue we do not know may cause us to react with astonishment, annoyance, indignation, or amused perplexity, but these sensations are soon replaced by uncertainties about our own language. We become aware that language is not universal; rather there is a plurality of languages, each one alien and unintelligible to the others. (152)

Learning to speak is, at its core, an act of translation. The process of translation begins with language acquisition itself. When children ask their mothers for the meaning of a word, they are essentially seeking a translation into simpler terms they already understand. This challenges the rigid distinction between 'external translation' (between different languages) and 'internal translation' (within the same language). Over time, people recognise that, despite linguistic differences, shared human experiences and ideas enable mutual understanding. This process of comprehension encourages interpretation, making understanding a

dynamic and interactive negotiation of meaning—the very essence of translation.

George Steiner, in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975), examines interpretation in both French and English, emphasising that interpretation extends beyond the text itself. Similarly, translation revitalises the original work, reshaping its meaning for new audiences. Consequently, the terms 'interpretation' and 'translation' are often used interchangeably. Expanding on this idea in *On Translation* (2006), Paul Ricoeur states:

> There are two access routes to the problem posed by the act of translating: either take the term 'translation' in the strict sense of the transfer of a spoken message from one language to another or take it in the broad sense as synonymous with the interpretation of any meaningful whole within the same speech community. Both approaches are legitimate: the first, chosen by Antoine Berman in *The Test of the Foreign*, takes account of the solid fact of the plurality and the diversity of languages; the second, followed by George Steiner in *After Babel*, is directed at the combining phenomenon, which the author summarises in this way: 'To understand is to translate.' (11)

According to Ricoeur, the act of translation can be examined through two fundamental approaches. The first considers translation as the transfer of meaning from one language to another, aligning with Antoine Berman's theoretical framework of linguistic plurality and diversity. The second approach, influenced by George Steiner, views translation as an act of interpretation that extends beyond linguistic conversion. Ricoeur succinctly encapsulates this idea by asserting that to understand is to translate, and to translate is to interpret.

Contextualising *Kosla* and *Cocoon*

This perspective is particularly relevant when analysing the translation of literary texts that challenge conventional narrative structures and linguistic norms. In this regard, *Kosla* by Bhalchandra Nemade and its English translation, *Cocoon* by Sudhakar Marathe, serve as a case study to explore how translation functions as an act of interpretation through negotiation.

Published in 1963, *Kosla* had a profound impact on the Marathi literary landscape. Divided into six parts, the novel departs from traditional plot structures and romantic narratives, instead adopting a loose, episodic format. It juxtaposes rural and urban Maharashtra in the post-independence era, centering on the protagonist, Pandurang Sangvikar, who subverts the conventional image of a hero. *Kosla* was groundbreaking in its linguistic experimentation, particularly through its use of colloquial expressions and short, fragmented sentences, making it a landmark in Marathi literature.

The novel offers a unique reading experience that evolves with the reader's age and perception. One of its most distinctive features is its innovative use of Marathi, a style that remains unparalleled—even by Nemade himself in his later works. Unlike many literary portrayals of hostel life, which tend to be romanticised, *Kosla* presents a starkly realistic depiction. Pandurang, the central character, stands out for his sharp cynicism despite his youth, adding a layer of depth to his narrative voice.

Translation as Negotiation

Lawrence Venuti's concepts of *domestication* and *foreignisation* provide a useful framework for comparing *Kosla* and *Cocoon*. In certain instances, the translator has chosen to domesticate the text, making it more accessible to the target audience, while in others, he has opted for foreignisation by preserving elements of the original cultural and linguistic essence. This balance between adaptation and retention exemplifies translation as an act of negotiation.

The opening passage of the novel serves as a compelling example of this negotiation, particularly in the handling of Marathi idioms, cultural references, and narrative style. Consider the passage in translation that begins with: "Me Pandurang Sangvikar. Today, for instance, I am twenty-five years old." (1) In this translation, the phrase "for instance" replaces "for example", subtly shifting the tone. Additionally, in the original Marathi text, the words "I am" (*me* in Marathi) are absent, yet the translator has added them for clarity and grammatical alignment with English conventions.

Another instance of negotiation appears in the sentence: "I've never really given examinations and such

with seriousness." (1) Here, the translator uses "given" instead of "attempted", which would have been a more natural equivalent in English. Additionally, the Marathi word *vagaire* is translated as "and such", whereas "etc.," "so on," or "etcetera" could have been alternative choices. These small yet significant modifications highlight how translation is not merely a mechanical process but an interpretative act, wherein the translator makes deliberate choices to shape meaning for a new audience.

In the translation, the terms "others" and "so on" are used for *vagaire*, allowing readers the freedom to imagine various possibilities. The verb *mhanalo* is translated as "thought," though in Marathi, it means "to say" rather than "to think." Additionally, the translator introduces the sentence, "I mean of course I'll tell that" (1), which is absent in the original text. In the sentence, "He is well thought of in our village, because we are pretty well-spread, solid farmers" (1), the adjective "solid" is used for *bhakkam*, which, in the local Marathi dialect, means "wealthy" rather than "solid." The translator also joins two originally separate Marathi sentences with the conjunction "but." Lastly, the noun *paise* is retained in the translation and explained in the glossary at the end.

This passage exemplifies the process of negotiation in translation, where the translator does not confine the text to the author's subjectivity or intentions. Instead, the translator engages in a dialogue with the text, allowing it an independent existence. This is achieved by moving beyond strict adherence to the author's original intent, as it is often argued that an author's authority over a text ends once the writing is completed. Additions and omissions become inevitable in translation, reflecting the interpreter's engagement with the text. This is evident from the very first passage of the translation. The translator both domesticates Marathi idioms, cultural references, and narrative style for English readers in some instances and preserves their foreignness in others. This strategic approach smoothens the linguistic complexity of *Kosla*, making it more accessible to English readers while simultaneously retaining its Marathi cultural essence.

The second passage I have selected is the opening episode of the second part, which describes Pandurang's journey from his village to Pune with a gentleman from his village. In the sentence, "with me for the college admission and such rigmarole was sent a gentleman from our village" (18), the translator replaces *vagaire* with "such rigmarole," introducing a slightly informal and dismissive tone. In the following sentence, "He'd spent a couple of years at college in Poona" (18), the word *don-teen* is translated as "couple," whereas "two-three" would have been a more direct equivalent.

Additionally, the translator inserts extra words and phrases in the sentence: "But I was off to Poona for the first time, so he ought to have described Poona to me or something beforehand, you'd think" (18). Here, two sentences are combined with a comma, and the phrase "or something beforehand, you'd think" is an addition not found in the original text. The use of "Poona" instead of "Pune" aligns with English usage in the 1960s when "Poona" was the commonly accepted English pronunciation, while "Pune" remained the Marathi pronunciation. This choice reflects the translator's adaptation to the linguistic conventions of the time.

In the sentence, "Later, waking up, our gentleman said, Poona, Poona" (19), the translator omits the Marathi word *me*, subtly altering the focus of the sentence. Similarly, *vagaire* is once again translated as "so on" in the following sentence. In "Since our gentleman quarrelled with the porter or something" (19), the Marathi noun *hamal* is replaced with "porter or something," introducing a level of vagueness that is absent in the original text. The phrase "or something" is an addition by the translator, subtly shifting the meaning and tone.

In a broader sense, the translator is not merely rephrasing the original text but also introducing new elements that shape the reader's interpretation. This highlights the nature of translation as a process of extension beyond mere linguistic equivalence. Umberto Eco, in *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (first published in 2003), emphasises the cultural impact of translation over strict fidelity to the original, stating: "The impact a translation has upon its own cultural milieu is more important than an impossible equivalence with the original" (52). He further describes negotiation as a process of mutual concessions: "Negotiation is a process by virtue of which, in order to get something, each party renounces at something else, and at the end somebody feels satisfied since one cannot have everything" (67).

Translation, therefore, is not only a linguistic act but also an ideological and cultural negotiation. The translator's choices—such as additions and omissions—reflect his perspective and the sociopolitical and literary context of 1990s India.

The translator attempts to balance *Kosla*'s rebellious, anti-establishment themes with a translation that remains accessible to a different readership while still retaining Nemade's critique of society. *Cocoon* is translated with a literary, academic, or general audience in mind, shaping the translator's choices regarding word selection, sentence structure, and the handling of Marathi-specific concepts.

In the third passage, where Pandurang reflects on his stay at his maternal aunt's house and his first day at college, the translator introduces several changes. In the sentence, "But ever since Nana, Maushi's husband, got home, he had refused to let me fall asleep" (21), the phrase "Maushi's husband" is an addition not present in the original Marathi text, possibly to clarify relationships for non-Marathi readers. The translator also splits the following sentence into two: "Even after dinner was over. He inquired about all sorts of things from our village" (21), changing the flow of narration. Similarly, two sentences are merged into one: "Still I was pretty well-behaved. I sat up straight and tried to pay attention" (21), subtly altering the rhythm and tone.

Further modifications appear in the next sentence, where the translator introduces a dash, omits a question mark, and merges two sentences: "My whole life was taking a crucial turn – and to think that I'd feel sleepy when all this was going on about my own aim in life" (21). The Marathi original, "*Mhanje aaplya samband aayushyala ek valan lagata ahe. Aani aaplya dhyeyabaddal vagaire chalala astana aaplyala zop yavi?*" (21), retains a rhetorical structure with a direct question, which is softened in the translation. Additionally, in "I said, I have not decided yet but languages I do like" (21), the translator restructures the sentence by combining two separate Marathi sentences using "yet," creating a slightly different emphasis.

These choices suggest that Marathe adjusted sentence structures and punctuation to align with English-language conventions, which have influenced the tone. By modifying rhetorical elements, adding clarifications, and altering sentence flow, the translation subtly shifts *Kosla*'s ironic, introspective, and satirical voice.

"In a sentence: 'At long last Maushi said, now that's enough, all right?' (21), the translator adds the final two words, 'all right,' which are not present in the original Marathi text. This addition slightly alters the tone, making Maushi's remark sound more casual or reassuring in English than in the original. In the next paragraph, the translator combines two separate sentences by inserting a comma, as in: "After a little more time had passed, I suddenly paid attention again, at which Nana was saying, Sleep now." (22). This restructuring affects the rhythm of the passage, making it more fluid but also subtly changing the pacing of Pandurang's internal experience.

Further, in the second sentence of the following paragraph, the translator inserts the word 'normally' into: "If there are many such chores to do I normally feel excited all day" (22). The original Marathi sentence, "*Khup kama asali ki mala sakalpasun shevatparyanta khup utsaah asto*" (22), does not contain an equivalent of 'normally.' This addition nuances the meaning, implying that feeling excited is Pandurang's usual response to tasks, whereas the original simply states that he feels enthusiastic whenever there is a lot to do.

Similarly, in the sentence: "I thought, watching from our autorickshaw" (22), the translator adds "I thought," which is absent in the Marathi version: "*He kunitari mothe sahityik asanar. Rickshatun pahat hoto.*" (22). In the original, the observation about someone being a great writer (*mothe sahityik*) is more impersonal, while the translation explicitly attributes the thought to Pandurang, making his internal monologue more pronounced in English.

Overall, these modifications highlight the translator's role in actively shaping the text rather than merely transferring meaning from one language to another. While some of these changes make the novel more accessible to English readers, they also raise questions about how translation choices affect the novel's humour, irony, and rebellious tone. This suggests that *Kosla* in translation is not only a linguistic transformation but also a negotiation of cultural and ideological meanings. The following sentences serve the example of modification:

> *Hostelpasun paach mintanchya antarawar college. Aani tithech canteenpan. Tithe me gaavi milat nasalele navenave Madrasi padartha roj ek hya pramane khaun tyanchi naava lakshat thevali. Aamlet khaun zyalyawar he shakahari nahi asa kallala.* (23)

The translator translates it as:

> Within about five minutes' distance from the hostel was the college, and so was the canteen. There I ate novel Madrasi dishes which we couldn't get in our village. One a day. And memorized their names. Only when I'd finished my omelette did I find out that it was not a vegetarian dish. (23)

The translator modifies the sentence structure by combining the first two sentences with a comma and breaking the following sentence into three smaller ones. These structural changes impact the rhythm of the narrative, influencing how the protagonist's thoughts and experiences unfold in English.

The translator's interpretation of Pandurang Sangvikar fluctuates between fidelity to his existential struggles and a softening of his inner turmoil. At certain moments, the translation remains true to his philosophical musings, while in others, it dilutes the intensity of his reflections. This inconsistency raises questions about whether the English version captures the full depth of the character's internal conflicts or whether it subtly reshapes them for a different readership.

Ethical decisions play a crucial role in the translation process, particularly in handling Marathi culture-specific words, sarcasm, colloquial expressions, and regional dialects. The translator opts to appropriate some Marathi terms into standard English while also lengthening certain sentences, a choice that affects the tone and impact of the original dialogue. These decisions reflect an attempt to balance linguistic accuracy with readability, ensuring that the essence of the text is preserved while making it more accessible to English readers.

Cocoon adheres to English literary norms while still retaining the rawness and unconventional structure of *Kosla*. Through deliberate omissions, additions, and structural shifts, the translation negotiates between fidelity to the original and readability for an English-speaking audience. These modifications make the text more fluid in English, yet they also highlight the inevitable compromises that come with translating a novel deeply rooted in a specific cultural and linguistic context.

Cultural and Ideological Interpretation

Sudhakar Marathe, as a translator, does not merely "transfer" *Kosla* into English but actively negotiates meaning, culture, and ideology—reshaping the novel's identity in the process. A comparison of key passages from *Kosla* and *Cocoon* reveals how meaning is reinterpreted through translation. The translation balances both domestication and foreignisation, adapting the text for English readers while preserving its cultural essence.

Marathe's translation transforms *Kosla* from a Marathi nativist text into an existentialist, postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. While the central themes of alienation, absurdity, and critique of the education system remain intact, the regional specificity and linguistic play of Nemade's original are softened or generalised. Even the shift in title—from *Kosla* (which has historical and political connotations) to *Cocoon* (which emphasises existential isolation)—reflects this transformation. In this sense, *Cocoon* is not just a translation but a reinterpretation, bridging Marathi nativist existentialism with global modernist traditions.

This revision streamlines the sentences and clarifies the ideas while maintaining the original meaning. As Gadamer argues in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (1986):

> There has been a tension between the practice of the artist and that of the interpreter. From the artist's point of view, interpretation appears arbitrary and capricious, if not actually superfluous. And this tension becomes all the greater when interpretation is attempted in the name and spirit of science. The creative artist finds it extremely difficult to believe that it is possible to overcome all the difficulties of interpretation by using a scientific approach. The problem of composition and interpretation actually represents a special case of the general relationship between the creative artist and the interpreter. As far as poetry and poetic creation are concerned, it is not uncommon to find the practice of interpretation and artistic creation united in one and the same individual. This suggests that poetic composition has a more

> intimate connection with the practice of interpretation than the other arts do. (66)

This passage highlights the tension between artistic creation and interpretation, particularly in the context of translation. The artist often perceives interpretation as arbitrary or even reductive, fearing that it distorts the personal expression embedded in their work. This tension becomes more pronounced when interpretation is approached through a scientific lens, as artists may struggle to accept that an analytical method could truly capture the essence of creative expression.

The discussion extends to the broader relationship between artists and interpreters, emphasising that while this tension exists across art forms, it is less pronounced in poetry. Poets, unlike other artists, often engage in both creation and interpretation, blurring the boundary between these roles. This suggests that poetry has an inherent connection between the act of creating and interpreting, making interpretation an organic extension of the poetic process.

Ultimately, the passage underscores the deep interconnection between a text and its interpretation, as well as between the original work and its translation. It argues that interpretation is not an external imposition but an intrinsic part of the creative process. Just as a text invites interpretation, translation is an extension of this interpretative act, reinforcing the idea that meaning is always evolving within different cultural and linguistic contexts.

Conclusion

Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay *The Task of the Translator* (1923), argues that translation transforms the original text while simultaneously enriching the target language. This perspective underscores the idea that translation is not a mere transfer of words but a dynamic process of reading, understanding, and interpreting. The act of translation first requires deep engagement with the text, then an effort to grasp its nuances, and finally, an interpretation that shapes its meaning for new readers. Translation, as an interpretative act, is influenced by various factors, including the translator's cultural and intellectual background. The translator brings their own understanding to the text while also striving to preserve the author's intent. In doing so, they mediate between the original and the audience, ensuring accessibility without sacrificing depth. Just as every reading of a text offers a fresh perspective, every translation and interpretation reconfigures meaning, making the text part of an ongoing dialogue between cultures and time periods. Both translation and interpretation involve a continuous negotiation of meaning. The translator, much like an interpreter, first engages in an act of reading, then seeks meaning within and beyond the text. These three tasks—reading, understanding, and interpreting—are inseparable from one another and from translation itself. In this sense, Sudhakar Marathe's translation of *Kosla* into *Cocoon* is more than a linguistic shift; it is a deliberate act of interpretation tailored to a contemporary, English-speaking audience. The success of a translation is often measured by the readership it garners and the relevance it maintains across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Marathe has successfully provided *Kosla* with an "afterlife"—or even a "better life"—by reinterpreting it in a way that resonates with modern readers. His translation is not merely a reproduction but a reinvention, ensuring that Bhalchandra Nemade's work continues to provoke thought, engage audiences, and remain a significant literary text beyond its original Marathi context.

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