

Translation and the Emergence of Modern Sinhala Theater in a Postcolonial Context.

By Kanchuka Dharmasiri

Theater is a space where various sociopolitical and ideological issues are enacted, contested, and subverted. Sri Lankan theater has often functioned as a critique of contemporary political and social issues and has been a popular medium frequented by many. Sri Lankan theater consists of Sinhala, Tamil and English theater. In this article, I will focus mostly on Sinhala theater. Modern Sinhala theater as one knows it today does not have a very long history and became a distinctive art form in the middle of the twentieth century in a postcolonial context. A significant factor that comes to mind when talking about theater in Sri Lanka is the role that translation has played in the process of establishing it as a distinct art form. What I would like to do in this article is to sketch a brief history of the formation of the modern Sinhala theater and to examine the various roles that translation has played in fashioning it as a specific creative practice. At the same time, I will also explore some of the complications a translator faces when translating a play and look at theater as a space where multiple levels of translations occur.

Itamar Even-Zohar in *Polysystem Studies* (1990) examines the place that translation occupies in the literary system and perceives translation “as a system fully participating in the history of the polysystem, as an integral part of it, related with all the other co-systems” (1990:22) In the same text he argues that more research should be done to investigate “the major role translation has played in the crystallization of national cultures” (1990:21). Using Even-Zohar’s notions of literary systems, Annie Brisset illustrates the way in which translation played a major part in the formation of the Quebecois national theater and also helped valorize the Quebecois language. In *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* (1999) Maria Tymoczko comprehensively illustrates the major role that translation played in the Irish cultural renaissance further illuminating the significant role that translation plays in the formation and revival of national cultures in postcolonial contexts. My study of translation and Sinhala theater uses Even-Zohar’s ideas about translation, systems theory and his ideas about the significance of translations in forming national cultures. Moreover, I will engage with André Lefevere’s concepts about rewriting,

refractions, and recreation of texts and refer to Ortrun Zuber's and Sirkku Aaltonen's ideas about the challenges in translating theater and the translational aspects embedded in the theater space. In order to understand the colonial and postcolonial situation in Sri Lanka in terms of culture, I will also look at Frantz Fanon's position on national culture, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's writings on Kenyan national theater, and Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity.

Sri Lanka was granted independence in 1948. It was a colony for four centuries, from 1517 to 1948, colonized respectively by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. The central part of Sri Lanka did not come under British rule until 1815, and thus Sri Lanka became fully colonized only in 1815. The colonizers influenced many political, economic, and sociocultural aspects of Sri Lanka, then Ceylon (the name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972). What happens to a nation that has been colonized for more than four centuries? What happens to the people and the culture of the colonized land? How do the people reaffirm their identity? Four centuries of colonization had a lasting effect on the language and culture of certain classes of Sri Lankans, especially those of the middle and higher classes. Ngugi contends that the mindset of the formerly colonized is influenced by the language and culture of the colonials and that colonialism's "most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world" (1981:16). The colonized are in fact left with a value system that enforces the imperial world view. Thus, he perceives the need to surpass this mindset in order to decolonize the mind. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) Frantz Fanon asserts that this process can take various forms ranging from literary and cultural revival to violence.

In postcolonial Sri Lanka, the native intelligentsia, mostly bilingual, takes it upon itself to fashion an identity for the nation. This is in keeping with Frantz Fanon's chapter "On National Culture", where he argues that it is the native intellectuals belonging to the middle classes who start seeking a national culture and for them "the demand for a national culture and the affirmation of the existence of such a culture represent a special battle-field" (Fanon 1967:167). Accordingly, the postcolonial period sees a resurgence of nationalistic ideas and a renaissance of language and traditional art forms. In Sri Lanka too such a revival was visible in literature – novel, short story, and poetry – and art. Amidst this cultural resurgence, a need was felt for a theatrical tradition that captured the national identity of the country. The formation of the modern Sinhala Theater can be situated in such a context. It arises as a part of a larger

cultural renaissance and as a need to affirm an identity of a nation.

In his introduction to Annie Brisett's *A Sociocritique of Translation* (1996) Richard Bauman writes that "For Germany in 1800, for the Ireland of Yeats and Synge, the creation of a theatrical repertoire was essential; the very existence of the (future) nation depended on the creation of a 'national' theater. The authors discussed by Annie Brisset give this same central role to the theatrical repertoire" (1996: xv). In this segment Bauman discusses the crucial role theater plays in forming the ideas of a national culture; it almost suggests that the concept of the nation should be performed as a collective at a certain level. The desire for a national theater points out the desire for a communal art form capable of constructing the idea of what is perceived as essential to a certain community. In her work, Brisset also illustrates the extremely significant role theater occupied in Quebec. In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1981) Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o shows how a national theater in African languages became a necessity after independence from the British and how such a movement came about as a result of people's desire to have a form that they could call national theater, as opposed to the English theater done by British expatriates living in Kenya.

There were parallel trajectories in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The situation in the country was complex because there were different performance traditions, but the problem was that none of them was considered to be the "national" theater.ⁱ It is in such a context that Ediriweera Sarachchandra,ⁱⁱ a playwright, scholar and novelist, took center stage in founding a national theater for Sri Lanka. As a professor in the Department of Sinhala, he was involved in translating European plays and working with English department professors such as Ludowyke. His first translations (in the 1940s) include Molière's *The Doctor In Spite of Himself* and the *Bourgeois Gentleman*, Gogol's *Marriage*, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, and Chekhov's *The Proposal* and *The Bear*. Many of these adaptations became successful and their popularity may partly be attributed to the satire and comedy that were pervasive in the traditional ritualistic and folk performances in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, Sarachchandra realized that translations of comedies and the use of the European form did not exactly meet the need for a national theater. He then started looking at traditional performance methods and connecting them to traditions of theater in Japan and India.

I will take this moment to give a brief impression of the performance traditions that existed in Sri

Lanka prior to the creation of a modern theater.ⁱⁱⁱ Although theater did not exist in the formal "Western" Aristotelian sense in Sri Lanka, there were many performances connected with rituals and other religious traditions. Some were a component of healing and blessing ceremonies. Speaking about *tovil*, a healing ceremony, Schechner asserts that "The tovil trance-fire dance is theater nested in performance" and "structurally, the thovil presents a complicated picture. Entertainment, ritual, athletics, . . . and spirit possession are all mixed" (1988: 90). Rituals and healing ceremonies were vested with performance aspects.

Sokari and *Kōlam* were two other performance practices that belonged to the up country area and the coastal areas of Sri Lanka respectively. They were ceremonies that utilized masks and stylized performance methods. Some of these performances still exist today, but not as abundantly as before. The masks and the movements in these performances can have a symbolic function and these dramatic traditions are "more presentational than representational" (Bauman).

Nādagama [plural: *nādagam*] was another folk drama and there too stylistic dances and music were used. The *nādagama* was influenced by the Catholic Church and Tamil performance practices. Some of the plays were in fact translated from Tamil:

The earliest *nādagamas*, we may infer from the evidence of the texts themselves, as well as from the existence of the prototypes in the Tamil language, were translated into Sinhalese from Tamil originals. The Tamil prototype of the *Sthakki nadgama* is the Roman Catholic play known as *Stakkiar*, which is said to have been acted before Christian audiences in Jaffna some years ago. (Sarachchandra 1953:89)

The *nādagama* seems to have gone through several transformations and is a form that encompassed many traditions including Tamil performances and *Stakkiar*, a Roman Catholic play. The language of the *nādagama* also deserves a certain amount of notice. In *Sinhalese Folk Play* Sarachchandra introduces Pillippu Sinno, one of the first translators of the *nādagama*, and asserts that his "language is a peculiar mixture of Sinhalese and Tamil words, with a large portion of pseudo-Sanskrit in it. Some of it is hardly intelligible" (1953:90). What is interesting to note here is the incentive of the translator to integrate three different languages, even though "some of it is hardly intelligible!" This particular instance shows "the

heterogeneous dynamic character of language use” and how it plays a “central part...in social construction of reality” (Bauman 1977: 60). For Phillippu Sinno there was nothing amiss in constructing a folk play that was an amalgamation of many traditions and languages.

Sokari, k lam and n dagam were mainly practiced in rural areas. Nurti was popular in the city. Nurti consisted mostly of musicals and often were direct replicas of Indian Parsee pieces. The Indian raghadari music and melodies captivated Sri Lankan audiences. Sometimes, the Indian pieces were mimicked without any coherence and songs forcefully infused into the play. In the end, it was the songs that drew the audience to the Nurti, “an ungainly hybrid with little to recommend it artistically” (Gunawardena 1). Yet it did have “a long-lasting impact on Sinhala culture” (1) and producers such as John de Silva were successful in their creations.

John de Silva in fact played a significant role in using nurti and some aspects of n dagam to create plays with nationalist themes. Neloufer de Mel, who does an analysis of gender and national theater in Sri Lanka, illustrates how John de Silva was creating a drama that specifically addressed emerging nationalist sentiments. She shows how he selected themes about national heroes and patriots and was outwardly critical of the colonials. What is also interesting about John De Silva’s work is that while he rewrote historical Sinhala tales and wrote plays on historical and religious themes, he also made translation a major part of his work. In the early 1900s, John de Silva was involved in a prolific translation of Shakespeare’s plays, including *Othello* (1909), *Hamlet* (1909) and *King Lear* (1913).^{iv} He also translated Kalidasa’s *Shakunthala*. De Mel asserts that “in de Silva’s “preface to *Othello* (1909) he stated that [Shakespeare’s plays] would enrich the native language, and that Shakespeare belonged not only to Englishmen but to all communities and races” (2001:63). Thus, when it came to the performances in Sri Lanka, one can see how borrowing from other cultures and traditions occupied a significant place. The process of translating and transporting other cultural forms has been central to the evolution of this art form.

Sarachchandra did not find the form of the Nurti to be a suitable vehicle for a national theater. Also, by this time, he had realized that the translation of comedies did not exactly meet the need for a national theater and felt the need to move away from light farce and a theatrical tradition that was based on European models. He turned to the n dagam and traditional folk plays in his desire to come up with a

theater form that he thought would fulfill the need for a national theater. In the end, he combined the n dagam and the knowledge he gained by exploring the theatrical forms in China, Japan, India, and Europe to form the modern Sinhala Theater. Thus, already what is known as the national play of Sri Lanka was a hybridized form. Several traditions were integrated to create *Maname*, his play produced in 1956: the *nādagam* tradition, folk songs and musical rhythms, stylized dances and gestures, a storyline from the Buddhist Jataka Tales influenced by Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, and techniques from Noh and Kabuki. The original Jataka story tells the story of Princess Maname, married to Prince Maname, and how she falls in love with a *vedda*, an indigenous Sri Lankan, while traveling to the Prince's kingdom; She aids the vedda in killing the Prince. The story ends offering a cautionary note on the fickleness of women when the *vedda* leaves her in the thick forest to die. Sarachchandra tries to nuance and complicate the Princess's situation, showing that she was denied agency from the beginning, and leaving some of the fundamental questions about the storyline open, in a way that is reminiscent of *Rashomon*. In Kurosawa's *Rashomon* we are given four accounts of the murder of a samurai and each of the characters provide their own perspective of what took place in the grove. The viewer is presented with a complex situation without definite answers. In Sarachchandra's *Maname* too the position and intention of the princess are left open and ambiguous.

The colonized mindset was such that when *Maname*, “the transcreated n dagama” (Haththotuwegama 130), was first staged in the Lionel Wendt Theater where only English plays were staged, the English speaking elite dismissed it with disdain. It was only when Reggie Siriwardena, an influential critic who wrote for the English newspapers, gave a very positive critique of the play that the elite class started going in crowds to see the play. Sarachchandra's desire to stage the first national play in a theater that was frequented by a predominately English-speaking upper class emphasizes his own ambiguous position and “we see that the cultural problem as it sometimes exists in colonized countries runs the risk of giving rise to serious ambiguities” (Fanon 1967:174). Haththotuwegama asserts that already “the Sarachchandra oeuvre had become the site of contradictions and paradoxes that have never come to be resolved” (1998:131).

As I stated earlier, in his quest for the national theater Sarachchandra drew extensively on material from villages, a project somewhat similar to the one described by Ngugi. Many of the rhythms in

Sarachchandra's plays were popular in *n dagam* rhythms and his collaborations with Charles de Silva helped him to utilize these songs effectively in his productions. Nevertheless, the difference between the post independence Kenyan theater and post independence Sri Lankan theater is that, while they are both steered by the bilingual intellectuals, the theater movement in Kenya became a part of the people's desire to create a theater whereas the theater scene in Sri Lanka takes on a fairly bourgeois tone and form. The spaces in which the plays are performed, except for the open air theater in Peradeniya, are spaces frequented by the middle classes. Thus, Haththotuwegama accuses Sarachchandra of taking the *n dagam* from the villages, but never taking it back. The spaces in which his works are performed are essentially bourgeois spaces except when they are performed in the Open Air Theater at Peradeniya where a huge crowd of a variety of backgrounds from distant places comes to see the plays.

Sarachchandra's next play, *Sinhabahu* which retells the story of the origin of the Sinhala race, considered to be his best play, employs similar devices as *Maname*. Both plays consist of narrators introducing the characters and at times commenting on the feelings and thoughts of the characters. Stage properties and lighting and other technical effects are minimal in both plays. Some characters' faces are painted in such a way that they almost give the effect of a mask. The gestures and movements are influenced by Kabuki and Noh traditions. The music and the melodies are taken from the *n dagam*. What should be noticed here is the way that different cultural forms are integrated to construct the national Sinhala Theater. Thus, theater by the time of Sarachchandra had become a much hybridized form. This hybrid nature remains a strong asset of this theatrical tradition.

Two groups of theater artists emerged as a result of the renaissance of the Sinhala play: those who followed Sarachchandra and those who deviated from his highly stylized form. The latter perceived problems in the use of classical, written language and the mythical and historical themes in Sarachchandra's plays. The deviant group, named Apey Kattiya (our folks) and led by Sugathapala De Silva, opted for a more naturalistic theater that dealt with contemporary socio-political issues. Their main objections were directed at the high flown language and what they perceived as themes that were far removed from people's day-to-day political realities. An analysis of Sarachchandra's plays does show that he was concerned with contemporary issues despite his use of a stylized form. Nevertheless, Apey Kattiya felt constrained by the new form and sought different outlets to express their ideas. In contrast to Sarachchandra's work, de Silva's productions focus on urban characters in naturalistic settings. Jayawardena and Diyasena state that "Plays of the Ape Kattiya were on the other hand full of characters

one meets in urban streets, boarding houses, and mercantile offices” (1996: 26). It should be noted here that while the group that followed Sarachchandra was affiliated with the university, Sugathapala De Silva’s followers in Apey Kattiya were mostly government workers employed in offices. In addition to writing their own plays, the latter group also turned to “Western” theater artists and conventions to widen their field. Translation played a major part in their project. It is interesting to note how these theater artists rely on western forms to move away from the highly stylized modes that Sarachchandra initiated and that others were striving to imitate (Jayawardena and Diyasena 1996:27).

Apey Kattiya also deserves special attention because they were the first to successfully use spoken diction in “serious” plays. Translation played a major role in this endeavor. Annie Brisset speaks of a similar situation in Quebec, where the translations of Shakespeare into Quebecois French served to valorize a language that is seen as not belonging to the mainstream. Thus, what the translations do is to give validation to the language and help it become a part of the wider society. Although the translation scene in Sri Lanka is not the same as that in Quebec, one of the similarities between the two contexts is the way in which language acquires more validity as a result of translations.

Here, a brief discussion of the Sinhala language will be of use. The Sinhala language has a spoken form and a written form and the two are very different. In the beginning, in theater, the spoken form was only used for farcical purposes or was infused into the mouth of the servants or the “lower classes.” It was used to induce laughter. The first time that Sarachchandra used spoken diction for a “serious play”, Checkov’s *Ivan Ivanov*, “the audience, the playwright remembers, resolved its embarrassment by finding matter for mirth in it” (D.M. de Silva xvi). D.M. Silva claims that “it appeared – rightly – to Sarachchandra that the audience could not bring itself to reconcile a grave emotion or interest with the use of everyday prose” (xvi). This partly explains his use of poetic language in *Maname* and *Sinhabahu*. It was difficult to use the spoken diction for “serious plays” and it was only after *Maname* and the modern Sinhala play was established that it became a successful venture. For the first time, after the cultural upheaval, spoken diction was used in “serious” plays successfully and translations played a major role in this endeavor.

In his discussion about translation as rewriting Andre Lefevere sees rewriting – and rewriters – as important because “they are at present, responsible for the general reception and survival of works of literature among non-professional readers, who constitute the great majority of readers in our global

culture...” (1992:1). He states that the term non-professional reader “does not imply any value judgment whatsoever” and that “it merely refers to the majority of readers in contemporary societies” (6). He emphasizes “the importance of rewriting as the motor force behind literary evolution” (2). Consequently, the dynamic resurgence of theater initiated by Sarachchandra continued in the 1960s and continues to the present with translations of plays by Bertolt Brecht, Luigi Pirandello, Dario Fo, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Peter Weiss, Eugene Ionesco, Tennessee Williams, Shakespeare, and others.^{vi} In that sense translations done into Sinhala become one of the forces behind the evolution of Sinhala theater. The dramatists used these various European texts in order to point out problems within their own society and to discuss issues relevant to the social fabric of Sri Lanka.

One of the other factors that should be noticed in relation to the theater scene in Sri Lanka is the constant debates that took place among playwrights, critics and spectators about “original” plays, translations, and adaptations. Whether a certain play should be labeled as a translation or an adaptation was one of the main arguments that recurred. Critics and spectators tried to evaluate to what extent a certain translator did justice to the source text. There was also an attempt to make value-based judgments about “original” plays and translations: Could one assess the task of a writer and a translator on the same basic principles? However, the fact that “original” plays and translations existed side by side is exemplified by the fact that the national drama festival awarded two prizes for scripts: the best original script and the best translated script. There was only one award for the performance of the best play. Thus, the importance of translation was recognized at a national level and “original” plays and translations continue to exist side by side.

The debate has led to serious discussions about issues in theater and translation. As A. J. Gunawardena, a leading critic in Sri Lanka asserts, “the debate was a necessary exercise – an evolutionary need, as it were – in a medium that was trying to define itself” (1). The debates were taking place at a time when the idea of a national theater was developing and these dialogues were a significant asset to it. Moreover, this issue became a vital point of discussion in a time when Sri Lanka was trying to define its identity as a nation. What does an original work signify in such a context? What does a translation signify? What then is an adaptation? The impossibility of giving fixed definitions to these queries in some ways reflects the ambiguity that is a part of the question of national identity itself. G.K. Haththotuwegma comments on the debate as follows: “The translations and adaptations that were claiming the favor of a new, advancing fashion bore the marks and pressures of this critical creative dialogue. The discriminating

if not finicky distinctions made between translations and adaptation reflected the complications inherent in the discourse” (142). It was indeed a “critical creative” dialogue that further enriched the field. What should be realized is that it is difficult to have “facile categorizations” (Gunawardena) when it comes to a dynamic, live medium such as theater. Furthermore, the hybridity and the ambiguity inherent in attempts to define and categorize the theater itself serve as an indicator of the more problematic aspects of the larger question of national identity.

Henry Jayasena contributed to this debate with his translation of Bertolt Brecht, adamantly claiming that his translation/adaptation of Brecht’s *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) is a translation, but not an adaptation. At the same time, a factor to bear in mind here is that Jayasena used Bentley’s translation of Brecht’s *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* to translate it into Sinhala. Since Jayasena leaves out entire sections, especially in the fifth episode in his translation/adaptation of the play, his statement that the play is a translation and not an adaptation becomes a significant issue. For example, in the trial scene he omits the trial of the two corrupt doctors. In the same episode, he leaves out a significant section of the text where Azdak, the ironshirts and Sauwa discuss a certain period in Persia when “a peasant ruled when the Vizier was hanged” (Bentley 90) and where a soldier commanded the army (90). Jayasena leaves out these scenes where Brecht’s Marxist ideas come to the fore. Why does Jayasena edit ideologically saturated scenes out of the play? Does this reinforce his idea “that Marx was not relevant to a discussion on Brecht? (Haththotuwegama 1998:142). Thus, is Jayasena infusing his own ideological stance into Brecht’s play? Is it inevitable that the translator’s ideology and way of thinking interferes with the translation/adaptation? This is quite surprising because Jayasena’s original plays grapple with union issues and the complications of such activities. He depoliticizes Brecht’s highly political play. Haththotuwegama asserts that Jayasena needs to bring Marx back to the discussion of Brecht.

However, Jayasena’s *Hunuwataye Katawa* is Brecht for the majority of theater goers in Sri Lanka. They know Brecht and talk about him because of Jayasena’s production. As André Lefevere affirms, “[t]he refraction ... is the original to the great majority of people who are only tangentially exposed to literature “(1992: 16). In fact, Lefevere’s ideas about translation and refraction are quite useful when one deals with this issue:

First of all, let us accept that refractions – the adaptation of a work of literature to a different

audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which the audience reads the work – have always been with us in literature. ... These refractions have been extremely influential in establishing the reputation of a writer and his or her work. (1992:4-5)

Jayasena's rendition of Brecht's play does influence the spectators' notions about who Brecht is and what his work signifies. It is Jayasena's play that has "[established] the reputation the writer." Therefore, refractions have an effect on the reception of a certain work in the target audience. What does this say about translations and adaptation? If the audience is first exposed to Brecht through Jayasena's production and if that is their reference point when it comes to Brecht, what does that say about translation?

Here, I have to mention that Henry Jayasena's translation of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is one of the longest running plays in Sri Lankan history. It has been running for 30 years, has had more than 3000 shows, and in 2004 was reproduced with a new cast and crew. The play is so popular in Sri Lanka that Grusha and Azdak have become part of Sri Lankan culture. Manel Jayasena, who played Grusha, and Henry Jayasena, who played Azdak, are sometimes identified as Grusha and Azdak rather than by their own names. A few years ago when Manel Jayasena passed away, the media recalled her exceptional portrayal of Grusha and commented on how she made Grusha a part of the Sri Lankan cultural imaginary.

Moreover, although Jayasena translates Brecht's prologue, he omits it in the performance and instead opts for a very short version of it. So, what does translation and adaptation signify for a dramatist? What happens when a theatrical piece is translated with performance in mind? How does a live dynamic art translate from one culture to another? Since theater is a live medium, there is not much space to pause and think about the meaning of each and every utterance or gesture. They have to be made familiar and easily comprehensible. I feel that this is where a translation for the stage differs from a textual translation. As Sugathapala de Silva, the translator of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, asserts "When a text is translated into another language, possessing knowledge of the source language alone will not do justice to the source text. It is extremely important to have a visual image of the theatrical aspect ... when one is translating a play" (1992: i).

There are two aspects that one should take into account when translating a play: the linguistic and the cultural. I also think that the process differs when one translates a play into another language with the intention of performing it (as Jayasena did). Depending on the specific objective – whether the translation

is done for reading or with the intention of performing – the translation may vary. Ortrun Zuber addresses some issues that come up when translating a play, in his article “The Translation of Non-Verbal Signs in Drama” (1980). He perceives a difference between a translator of a play and a director who would eventually translate the written text into a performance. He offers a few suggestions:

Another possibility for the translator will be to produce a reading edition in the target language with comprehensive notes explaining the meaning and ambiguity of a verbal or non-verbal sign in the original and leave the difficult task of transposing all allusive signs to the producer, actors and readers of the play. This would mean that the translator only points out the problems and the producer is left to solve them, in other words the role of the producer has become more challenging and demanding. (1990:73)

Zuber’s suggestions are based on the assumption that the translator and the producer/ director are two different people. However, what happens when the translator is the potential director? Would not her/his project become more complicated if that were the case? Many of the translators of plays in Sri Lanka are the directors themselves. Thus, their visualization of the text differs from a translator who would only view it as a written text.

Furthermore, Zuber distinguishes between the translator, director, actor, and reader. I would also add the spectator to this list. One of the factors that must decide the direction that a translation should take is the audience. Will the translation of a play be read by a reader or will it be viewed by an audience? Since a live audience would not have the advantage of glossaries or footnotes, the translator must present the ideas and concepts in a way that will facilitate the audience to grasp them quickly.

In fact, some of the changes that Jayasena makes are done with the intention of making the play more accessible to a Sri Lankan audience. He changes several culturally specific details in the play. For example, Brecht talks about the revolt of the carpet weavers in several instances in the play. Since carpets are not a common commodity in Sri Lanka and there are no carpet weavers as such as a profession, the word would not signify anything substantial for a Sri Lankan audience. Thus, Jayasena employs the word "vatu kamkaruwo" meaning plantation workers. This term evokes ideas about the working class and enables the viewers to establish a more immediate relation with the context. Food too is a very distinct

cultural marker and Jayasena changes food items that are not familiar to a Sri Lankan audience. Thus, “corn cake”, which in fact is the English translator Eric Bentley’s term, would not have any impact on a Sri Lankan audience and is transformed into a “kavum petta”, a familiar food item made out of rice flour and treacle. Furthermore, “the elm tree” in Grusha’s farewell song to Simon is translated as an “ehela tree” a common tree that bears red flowers, especially during the Traditional Sinhala and Tamil New Year season. Thus, not only does the tree conjure up familiar images, it also denotes a new beginning. As I stated earlier, Jayasena is using Eric Bentley’s translation of Brecht’s *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis*. Thus, in that sense he is already using someone else’s interpretation or rewriting of Brecht’s text.

Furthermore, it should be noticed that he changed songs, humor, and profanities in the play. Lefevere comments on how “both Hays and Bentley eschew Brecht’s profanities in their translations” (15). Jayasena seems to be no different from the two:

CORPORAL: A good soldier has his heart and soul in it. When he receives an order, he gets a hard-on, and when he drives his lance into the enemy’s guts, he comes. (Bentley 50)

The Sinhala lines, translated into English, would be as follows:

CORPORAL: A good soldier is someone without a mind and a heart. When he receives an order, he gets goosebumps. When he strikes the enemy with his spear, his blood boils. (37)

Jayasena completely erases the sexual implications of the lines. Throughout the play, he alters and leaves out much of the sexual innuendos. Does this arise as a result of some ethical, moral code that he is embedded in? Jorge Luis Borges in “Homeric Versions” illustrates how different translations of Homer’s *Iliad* tell more about the translators than about Homer or the *Iliad*. For example, Pope’s version is “oratorical and visual”, “speeches and spectacles.” “That is Pope”, affirms Borges (74). Borges also demonstrates how Butler turns “Homer’s text into a series of sedate news items” (74). Thus, the translation will be influenced by the translator, her/his ideological stance, and the sociopolitical context in which the translation is done. Hence, do Hays’s and Bentley’s and Jayasena’s translations of Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* tell more about Hays, Bentley, and Jayasena and their respective contexts than about Brecht? And if, Jayasena’s text is based on Bentley’s version of the play, how many levels of

rewritings and recreations occur prior to what Sri Lankan audiences ultimately view on stage?

Eventually, what the Sri Lankan audience gets is a hybridized play, a version that encompasses Brecht's concepts, Bentley's thoughts, and Jayasena's ideas. The play becomes easily accessible to a Sri Lankan audience because the use of masks, stylized gestures, and employment of a narrator are not alien concepts for them. The *n dagam* too had a narrator and introduced the characters before they came onto stage. *Maname* and *Sinhabahu*, the classical pieces of the modern Sinhala Theater in fact employ many of these strategies. Like Brecht – and quite independently of him – Sarachchandra had made use of techniques borrowed from Chinese opera. Therefore, the stylized performance methods and the use of masks are not unfamiliar elements for an audience used to a stylized presentational space. Thus, we see here how a foreign play is incorporated to the cultural fabric of Sri Lanka. The translation of Brecht happens in a space between European culture and Sri Lankan culture. In Homi Bhabha's words,

If the effect of the colonial power is seen to be the *production* of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonial authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (35)

The postcolonial Sinhala Theater is the third space where there is resistance, subversion and negotiation. It is a powerful force because it encompasses multiple traditions. The dramatists take the “foreign” form and render it their own or rewrite it as their own. Haththotuwegama speaks of a similar possibility when he asks the question “couldn't translation be an *empowering* process, helping *re-discover* the possibilities of languages pushed into subservience?” (2006)

If rewriting is a way of getting material across to the nonprofessional reader –also in terms of theater to the “non professional spectator – the street theater of Gamini Haththotuwegama is a perfect example of it. In his innovative and radical theater, he enacts contemporary issues related to economic liberalization, capitalism, neocolonialism, power, and ethnicity in the street. And, of course, to say the least, translation is a significant part of Haththotuwegama's *The Wayside and Open Theater*. If Jayasena took Brecht to the proscenium theatres in Sri Lanka, Haththotuwegama took Brecht to the streets with his recreation of Brecht's parable “Mr.K” and his play based on Brecht's poem “The Importance of Governance.” His “transcreation” of Anton Chekov's short story, “Misery” is another example of his creative translation process. In this particular play, he takes Chekhov's story “Misery” and recreates it to

fit a Sri Lankan context: thus, for example, instead of a horse drawn carriage, there is a carriage drawn by bullocks.

Haththotuwegama is also a theorist of translations and adaptations. He uses the term transcreation to indicate how a text from a specific context goes through a linguistic and cultural transformation and takes on a new form and meaning in a different socio-political and cultural setting. He believes that a theatrical form is a translation in itself and that translation is inevitable. In his productions he uses Sinhala, English, and at times Tamil and the integration of the languages is done in a very powerful way. According to him, art forms from different cultures and traditions overflow into each other and one should think about ways of empowering local art forms by borrowing from other languages and cultures. His work is a case in point as he extensively uses borrowings from other cultures and constantly shifts between languages, especially Sinhala and English.

There is another small detail I would like to mention before I end the article. In the performances of *The Wayside and Open Theater Group*, it has become a convention to sing Bob Dylan's song, "Blowin' in the Wind", at some point in the performance. The English version is accompanied by Sinhala and Tamil translations. This may be a minor aspect of the rewriting, but I see this as an instance where translation practice is taken outside of the academy, outside of the stereotypical image of an indoor theater, and performed instead in an open, outside, and a more public space. Before the group sings this song, they provide an introduction to the freedom and civil rights struggles of the 60s and 70s and point out how artists took to the streets to protest against the violence, wars, and inequalities created among human beings. Thus, the trilingual song, while connecting the protest movements in other parts of the world and Sri Lanka also acquires various significations in the Sri Lankan context in terms of the violent conflicts within the island. The Wayside and Open Theater's translation of 'Blowin' in the Wind' enables three linguistic communities to engage with the ideas of freedom presented in the song and it is significant that this moment of engagement occurs in open and public spaces.

Not only has translation expanded the theater system in Sri Lanka, it continues to enrich what remains a hybridized space. Here, it should be emphasized that I am not ignoring the power politics that is embedded in a system where translation only functions one way. While each year many theater translations are done into Sinhala, there are hardly any translations done from Sinhala to English. Is theater a particularly difficult form to transfer from one culture to another? Does translation from a dominant culture differ because many of the ideas of the dominant culture are already embedded in the

less-dominant one? Does this serve as an indicator of the cultural hegemony that disseminates knowledge only from the dominant space to the Other? Or can one take another perspective and try to understand how the exposure to multiple cultures empower and enrich these “less dominant marginal spaces”?

The fact that translation functions only one way exemplifies that it is a form of cultural hegemony at one level.

I will reaffirm that translations have expanded the theater system in Sri Lanka and continue to do so. It is not a recent phenomenon, but one that was a part of traditional folk performances as well.

Borrowing from other cultures and traditions remained a significant asset to performances in Sri Lanka. It is an inevitable outcome in a nation that is multiethnic and multilingual. Hence, it is the hybridized nature of the postcolonial Sinhala theater which remains a powerful asset. It is this ability to understand and experience two or more cultures simultaneously that positions the spectator in a complex space where many cultures and worldviews cross each other.

Consequently, what becomes apparent in a study of modern Sinhala theater is the way in which translation has been a central process in the art form. Translation has not been a peripheral activity, but one that has been a major component in the formation of the modern Sinhala theater. Another aspect that becomes clear is the way in which translations and rewritings were a central part in performance traditions in Sri Lanka prior to the modern period. For example, the *n dagam* were influenced by a variety of sources. The concept of hybridity thus exceeds the aftermath of the colonial period because a close look at performances in Sri Lanka shows that the performance traditions were already influenced by other art forms and were already hybrid. Thus, this examination sheds light on various aspects of nationalism and national culture through theater. The search for a national theater ends up in a creation of a play that is extremely hybrid in nature. *Maname* is seen as “original” by many and plays belonging to the “translation” category help in establishing the difference between the two genres. If the first national play is a hybrid, what does this say about national identity and national culture? If the first national play was a transcreation and an amalgamation of a variety of traditions and forms of performance, what does it say about national identity? The extensive use of translations and borrowings to form the national theater in Sri Lanka make us question the nature of “original” texts and translations and also extends the critique to questioning national culture and identity.

Notes

I will describe different performance traditions in Sri Lanka in detail later in the article.

The following description of Sarachchandra by Haththotuwegama captures the variety of styles, forms, and influences that constitute Sarachchandra's work and his literary and cultural outlook:

"In his transcreated nādagama (*Maname* and *Sinhabahu*) he strained and culled some of the mixed treasures of our mixed artistic heritage adapting them to the complex cultural commerce of the times, to which he was party and proxy (plot sources: Buddhist Jataka local folk lore/ historical legend; formalistic mode: modernized folk nādagama-presumably originating in Tamil and Catholic sources-using narrator chorus-musical verse-stylized movement; stage: proscenium arch- picture frame with modern lighting and playing time scaled for modern urban usage, and audience: urban bourgeoisie; aesthetic ideology: western oriented criteria-via Cambridge- inspired English Dept. University intellectuals like Ludowyke- and Sanskrit Rasa theory. Academic training: English medium graduate studies in oriental classics/ post-graduate studies in Western and Buddhist philosophy/ Research input: Sinhala Folk play: critical training: Shanthi Niketan, overall political cultural inspiration: pan-Indian, anti-British anticolonial movement..." (1998:131)

Sokari and Kōlam are still performed, but the nādagam and nurti are extinct forms. It is for this reason that Haththotuwegama affirms that "Sarachchandra took the nādagama out of the village, but never took it back." More research is needed in this area.

Rashomon is a film based on Rynosuke Akutagawa's short stories "In a Grove" and "Rashomon." While "Rashomon" provides the setting for the film, "In a Grove" provides characters and the plot. In the short story, however, we are given seven accounts of what happened in the grove further illustrating the subjective nature of truth.

The dramatists and directors of earlier generation, because of their bilingual background had drawn inspiration, ideas and theater techniques from every available source- whether it was the Noh and Kabuki plays of Japan, Chinese Opera, the Western realist theater of Ibsen and Shaw, the Absurd theater of Beckett and Ionesco, Brecht's theater of alienation, Street Theater or the Broadway Musical. These they fused with their own ritual and native drama traditions and by doing so produced a rich and vital theater tradition that was enthusiastically supported by the population at large. (Obeyesekera 82)

Bibliography

Aaltonen, Sirkku. *Time-Sharing on Stage, Drama Translation in Theater and Society*.

Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2000.

Bassnett, Susan. *Translation Studies*. London: Routledge, 1980.

Bhabha, Homi. "Signs Taken for Wonders." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill

Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, & Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge; 1995.

--- *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

--- *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Brecht, Bertolt. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Trans. Eric Bentley. New York: Press, 1961.

Brisset, Annie. *A Sociocritique of Translation: Theater and Alterity in Quebec, 1968-1988*. (1990) Trans.

Rosalind Gill and Roger Gannon. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*.

The Mercurian, Vol. 2, No. 4

- New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar. "Polysystem Studies." *Poetics Today*. Vol 2. no.1, 1990.
- Fanon, Frantz (1961). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. 1963.
Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.
- Fernandopulle, Andrew. "Wayside Theater Steals the Show". *Sunday Observer*. Aug 3
2003. (<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2003/08/03/fea11.html>)
- Gunawardena, A.J. "Between Home and the World". *Frontline*. Vol. 16, No 4: Feb 13-
26, 1999. (<http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1604/16040710.html>)
- Haththotuwegama, Gamini K. "Unresolved Contradictions, paradoxical Discourses and
Alternative Strategies in Post-colonial Sinhala Theater". *Abhinaya*. Ed. Roland Abypala.
Battaramulla: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1998.
- Jayasena, Henry. *Hunuwataye Katawa*. Colombo: P.B.I. Printers, 1967.
- Lefevere, Andre. "Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a
Theory of Literature". *Modern Language Studies*. 12:3-20.
- Lefevere, Andre. *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*.
London: Routledge, 1992.
- Obeyesekere, Ranjini. *Sri Lankan Theater in a Time of Terror*. London: Altamira Press,
1999.
- "The Sinhala Theater of Sri Lanka: A Form of Political Discourse." *TDR: The Drama
Review: A Journal of Performance Studies*. 1992 Summer; 36 (2)
- Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind*. Nairobi: East African Educational
Publishers Ltd, 1981.
- "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space." *The Drama Review*. 41.3,
1997.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta Books, 1991.

Sarachchandra, E.R. *The Sinhalese Folk Play*. Colombo: Ceylon University Press Board, 1953.

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Silva, Sugathapala de. (intro). *Marat Sade*. Peter Weiss (1964). Colombo: Godage, 1992.

Tymoczko, Maria. *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1999.

---, "A Poetry of Masks: The Poet's Persona in Early Celtic Poetry." *A Celtic Florilegium*. Eds. Kathryn A Klar, Eve E. Sweetser, and Clair Thomas. Lawrence: Celtic Studies Publications, 1996.

Zatlin, Phyllis. *Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation, A Practitioner's View*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2005.

Zuber, Ortrun. "The Translation of Non-Verbal Signs in Drama". *Pacific Quarterly Moana*, 1980.

---, ed. *Languages of Theater: Problems in the Translation and Transposition of Drama*. Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1980.

Kanchuka Dharmasiri is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her areas of interest include theatre, particularly street theatre and Sri Lankan theatre, postcolonial studies, translation, travel writing, visual culture, and early Buddhist women's writing. Kanchuka is a translator and director. She has translated and directed plays such as Eugène Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* (The Bold Soprano) and Woody Allen's *God*.

i

ii

iii

iv

v

vi