Philippine Postcolonial Hybrid in Translation: The Case of F. Sionil Jose's Po-on

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Introduction

In "Translation and the Postcolonial Experience: The Francophone North African Text," Samia Mehrez insightfully points out that postcolonial Francophone literature written by North African authors only reveal their full meaning when translated or decoded into a language belonging to their native context (128). While the article discusses preoccupations specific to her French post-colonial milieu, her observation pins down a singular characteristic found common in most postcolonial literary works: that beneath the layer inhabited by the colonial language used in the writing of the original (e.g., English or French) lie a local language and base culture needing reinterpretation or re-creation, ideally through a local translation. The same concern has been raised in the often-written-about works of Achebe, Tutuola, and Soyinka in West Africa and the works of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan in India, among others. In the Philippines, with a history akin to the above-cited regions, literary works written in English find themselves in a similar circumstance. This study looks into one novel in particular and examines it for its translational and "layered" quality. By doing so, it affirms the argument that the novel is hybrid. Klinger has argued that the linguistic hybridity normally found in cross-cultural literature is vulnerable to dilution, normalization, and erasure when translated into another language (2-52). Postcolonial texts are considered resistant literature, and the language used in

the text becomes the object of this resistance; if its hybrid quality is diluted, normalized or erased, this resistant quality expunges its nature as a postcolonial text.

Discussion

F. Sionil Jose's *Po-on* is a novel that has been translated into six different languages including Filipino. It tells of the trying and pernicious escape of the protagonist's family (four members die along the way) from their original land called Po-on, located in the north of the Philippines. This flight is a result of a sudden falling out of favor with the Spanish cleric controlling the town during Spanish colonial times. However, their eventual discovery of a land in which to start a new life signals a new kind of subjugation for their community, this time from the colonizing Americans. This novel is postcolonial not only because its story straddles the country's two colonial eras but also because it features aspects intrinsic to a postcolonial novel. Hybrid language, local metaphors, cultural allusions, mythical elements, historical figures, flora and fauna local to the Ilocos region and the Philippines as a whole abound in the narrative. I argue here that Jose's novel has a unique and layered texture; it contains semantic elements that a foreign reader unfamiliar with the novel's context is bound to miss. He also interweaves in the text languages like Spanish and Latin whose preservation is important in translation to highlight its overall distinctness and difference to English novels written from monolingual and monocultural sources. I will discuss the author's use of language, using the concept of hybridization: his use of Spanish, Latin and Ilocano and his inclusion of numerous cultural allusions and Filipino and Ilocano-specific myths and names in his narrative.

Discussing the paratext of the literature concerned is important especially when the inquiry involves looking into its context, purpose and target audience. The Solidaridad Publishing House published the original version of *Po-on* in 1984. The original contains a map of the Ilocos region but neither preface nor glossary of terms are attached to it, an indication that it was originally written for local readers. The Spanish version, *Anochecer* (2003), (meaning "dusk")

was translated by Carlos Milla Soler under the publishing house *Editorial Maeva* in Barcelona, Spain. It bears praises from the *Los Angeles Times* and from the Library Journal as written on its back cover. This indicates that the novel is a translation of the American edition titled as *Dusk* (1998), published and distributed by the Modern Library. Its front cover shows what seems like a painting of a landscape depicting tropical scenery: coconut trees, lush vines, a mountain and a bridge overlooking a tranquil river. It also has an eight-page-long introduction from Jose. (A translator's note is, however, absent). This supplement in the form of an introduction from the author is important as it provides the non-Filipino reader the context and cultural information necessary to understand the novel. It also reinforces the idea that Jose had to "translate" himself once again in the form of glossing in his introduction.

In her theory about translation, Tymoczko focuses on drawing parallels between the products of a postcolonial writer and a translator, going as far as discussing it as a virtual oxymoron: not only do these postcolonial literary works need translation, postcolonial "originals" seem to "be translations" or "translations of themselves":

> …both involve similar representations and transpositions of language and cultures, both types of writing show similar formal patterns. In straddling two cultures, postcolonial writers, like translators, mediate cultural difference by means of a common variety of techniques. On the textual level, for example, both postcolonial texts and translations often show deviations from the standard receiving language: perturbations in lexis (including imported lexical items, unusual collocations, non-standard frequency distributions, variant semantic fields and neologisms), unusual syntax and defamiliarized language, including unexpected metaphors and unusual turns of speech. (2000, 147)

The writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o articulates a similar observation albeit in a more bemoaned manner (cited in Kachru 209). He argues that African thought in postcolonial literature has been "imprisoned in the foreign languages of its ex-colonizers". The

sentiment expressed in this quote echoes Mehrez's observation that in postcolonial novels, one will find a hidden layer that needs prodding out of a metaphorical "cage" for its full significance to be revealed. Garcia similarly claims the same for Filipino authors writing in English (100), citing that these writers "translate from a plurality of linguistic and cultural registers" when they write in English and that their end-product, while it mimics actual Philippine local scenes, are actually "translational" by virtue of the language used in describing them (101). He challenges the accuracy and the logic behind the category "realism" as it is applied to Philippine English literature. In effect, the postcolonial writer is faced with a double task: the creation of the task and the translation of his culture and language. Tymoczko thus points out that

> The problem of information load in both translations and postcolonial writing is not restricted to unfamiliar cultural material such as customs, history or myth, and material culture. Even proper names if they present unfamiliar phonemes or foreign phonemic sequences can cause problems for the receptor audience of both post-colonial literature and literary translations, while finding ways to transpose the semantic meanings of names may be of concern to both the writer and translator. Similarly, transposing the literary genres, forms, proverbs and metaphors of the source culture will be equally problematic to translators and post-colonial writers alike. (2000, 30-31)

The inclusion of this cultural material and a language foreign to the monolingual English reader results in a creative product called hybrid. The definitions of a hybrid text are uncannily similar to the above descriptions of postcolonial texts. According to Simon, "hybrid texts" are those that display "translation effects": dissonances, interferences, disparate vocabulary, a lack of cohesion, unconventional syntax, a certain "weakness" or "deterritorialization" (50). Meanwhile, Mehrez explains that postcolonial works are called hybrid "because of the culturo-linguistic layering which exists within them" (121). In Jose's novel, we get a glimpse of this when, for example, the parents of the protagonist, Mayang and Ba-ac, have the following conversation:

> "I am speaking to you, **Old Woman**," Ba-ac said, his voice rising. "I ask again, how many chickens and eggs have we sent to the new priest while you let your son starve?"
>
> "Ay, **Old Man**, you haven't learned," Mayang chided him. (Jose 9)

The English reader will find it unusual to hear a married couple call the other "Old Woman" and "Old Man". The words are capitalized as in proper nouns signifying unique referents, a strategy that seems to indicate that another meaning resides beyond the reference to the ages of the speakers. Readers who are knowledgeable of the Ilocano culture and language, however, would recognize these as wordplay of the Ilocano words *Baket y Lakay* which mean old men and women but are also are used as forms of address and terms of endearment by married couples. In fact, all the other couples in the narrative refer to their partners in the same way. This interpretation is validated by Lilia Antonio's (1998) use of the original terms in Ilocano in her Filipino translation of the novel:

> "Kinakausap kita, **Baket**," ang wika ni Ba-ac na lumalakas ang boses. "Tinatanong kita, ilang manok at itlog ang ipinadala mo sa bagong pari habang nagugutom ang iyong mga anak?"
>
> "Ay, **Lakay**, hindi ka na natuto," ang pasumbat na sagot ni Mayang. (22)

Antonio's translation do not have to deal with a layer of coined English words to access the author's intended meanings. It represents hybridity, since the terms "Old Man" and "Old Woman" feature a "culturo-linguistic" layer that the reader must be sensitive to. This example highlights Jose's double role as translator and writer and demonstrates the complexity of postcolonial literatures. Villareal discusses this phenomenon by using a concept called the "overheard": "What makes Philippine literatures *into* English distinct is a strong overheard to which the translator and the reader/audience must listen. She defines the term, "overheard" as "the underlying culture of the vernaculars and the folk that must… surface in the translation" (15).

The following discussion involves representative subtextual references, cultural allusions and the multiple languages that appear in the novel to illustrate the "culturo-linguistic layering" that characterizes it.

A striking feature in Jose's incorporation of the Ilocano flavor into the novel is his characters' names and also places, such as *Ba-ac, An-no, Bit-tik, Po-on*. The presence of hyphens and double consonants and vowels in these names are strong representations of the Ilocano language, distinct for their geminate phonetics. *Ba-ac, An-no, Bit-tik, Simang* are also forms of local appropriation of the Christian full names: *An-no* from Mariano, *Istak* from Eustaquio, *Bit-tik* from Silvestre, *Orang* from Leonora, etc. This feature of locally recreating the effects of the colonial is conspicuously hybrid.

There is also a representation of a distinct Ilocano oral culture. Jose could not stress the importance of oral culture enough among the Ilocanos: "Much poetry in our part of the world is either chanted, sung or recited publicly" (cited in Bernad 243). In the novel, the *pasyon,* the *dallot* and the *dung-aw* are featured. In Chapter 2, when the first husband of the main female character, Dalin, dies, the protagonist, Istak, accompanies her to his burial and performs a ritual that includes a prayer in Latin. The widow soon after breaks into a cadenced declamation, simply explained in the novel as the ¨wail of the widow":

> This was the end, this was the end, and Dalin crumpled on her knees and cried silently at first, then she took a deep breath, and softly, as if in a whisper so that her voice would not travel, she started the wail of the widow.
>
> Ay, I am now alone,
> Cover to the pot,
> Useless without you.
> What have you left,
> Salt on my lips,
> Darkness in my mind. (25)

This verbal performance in Ilocano culture is actually called *dung-ao* or *dung-aw*, a burial chanting tradition practiced and defined

as "a tearful lamentation uttered by the bereaved as a litany of grief" (Roces). More examples of strong Ilocano presence in the novel include the scenes where characters sing the *pamulinawen,* a purportedly pre-hispanic Ilocano song, the family performing the *dallot*, a wedding-related extemporaneous chant, the intermittent appearance of characters drinking the *basi*, the emblematic Ilocano drink, and the several references to the traditional Ilocano weaving practice. One also cannot escape the author's inclusion of local mythical stories. The novel mentions *Lam-ang*, the Ilocano superhero of the epic *Biag ni Lam-ang*, without a clear account of his character and history. This epic is distinctively Ilocano and is believed to be a product of the region's pre-hispanic oral culture. In the Chapter 10, Diego Silang, the Ilocano revolutionary leader appears to the protagonist and his brother a hundred years after his time as an ancestral spirit (130). Diego Silang is the quintessential Ilocano leader who, in 1762, was assassinated for leading a revolt against forced labor and excessive tribute imposed by the Spanish colonial administration.

The reader will likewise not miss the ubiquitous mention of local trees like acacia, *sagat, dalipawen*, camachile and marunggay, which seem to me a reference to the Ilocano and Filipino fascination with trees, and the feared unknown spirits and supernaturals residing in them:

> It was a big house roofed with tile and its wide yard was dominated by a balete tree, massive and brooding, a perpetual abode of spirits endowed with an awesome talisman. Its trunk was three, four times the size of a cart wheel… the thick veins coiled around it, fat as pythons, thrust upwards and merged with each other, forming, a dark mantle, a pall, of vivid green. (114)

The novel is abundant in culture-specific imagery, as exemplified in the opening lines of the Chapter 1, where Philippine tropical twilight is evocatively depicted:

> Dusk is the day's most blessed hour; it is the time when the spirits of darkness drift slowly down the bright domain. The

> acacia leaves droop, the fowl stop their cackling and fly to the boughs of the guava trees to roost, and the light starts to fade and the shapes of trees and houses and even the motion of people seem shrouded in darkness. (7)

Tropical vegetation is amply featured, such as:

> He had planted three species - *kiling* for fences, *siitan* which was thorny for size and strength, *bayog* which, when cut into strips while still tender, would make good twine… (126)

Linguistic layering is also a feature of the novel: Latin, Spanish, Tagalog, and Ilocano figure intermittently in the English narrative. For example, "They would join the many others, the **mal vivir** who had fled the ilokos whenever there was a revolt or crime against the Spaniards**"** (126) and "He had had his fill of the 'la sopa boba'" (36). There are instances where English, Filipino, and Spanish merge in one sentence, for example: "They had paused in the shade of a *lomboy* tree and across the expanse of fallow land were the houses of a *sitio* where Ba-ac said his cousins live" (76), while unusual syntax can be found in sentences such as: "Istak often felt like this about the day's end. ***If he were in Cabugaw still***…he would be going up the musty flight of adobe to the belfry" (7). Unusual metaphors also are on occasion observed, for example, "He was as pale as a banana stalk" (9) and "his rage was as big as a house" (60).

The manner in which the story is told is similar to the Ilocano belief of how a shaman is transformed. Ventura notes that "they undergo some form of psychic visitation, they have paranormal dreams, they hear otherworldly voices, and they fall grievously ill and recover through divine intervention." Similarly, Istak is transformed from being an "ordinary person" into a shaman/faith healer or albularyo *(Pampamayan in Ilocano).*

Analysis

I shall present some representative analysis of the Spanish translation.

Original:

> "I am speaking to you, **Old Woman**," Ba-ac said, his voice rising. "I ask again, how many chickens and eggs have we sent to the new priest while you let your son starve?"
>
> **Ay, Old Man**, you haven't learned," Mayang chided him. (9)

Translation:

> *"Te hablo a ti **mujer**- dijo Ba-ac levantando aún más la voz--. Te lo vuelvo a preguntar: ¿cuántas pollos y huevos has mandado al cura nuevo mientras matas de hambre a tus hijos?"*
>
> "Ay, **marido**, nunca aprenderás!¨ (29)

The original terms *baket* and *lakay* have double meanings: old man/woman and/or husband/wife. Jose may have used the terms Old Man/Woman in the original because the context is already giving away their married state, and therefore, no loss of meaning takes place. In the Spanish translation, *mujer* and *marido* only mean wife and husband, and they are only used when referring to each other in the third person, never in the vocative case. This translation is highly unusual and may have been used by the translator to preserve the irony in the couple's conversation. However, when used as a direct address in Spanish, *mujer* creates a pejorative effect, adding an unintended tension to the dialogue.

Original:

> In the grass that surrounded the yard, crickets started again and a gecko in the buri palm announced itself, its "tek-ka" keen as a whip in the still air. (18)

Translation:

> *En la hierba alrededor del patio, los grillos empezaron a cantar otra vez y un geco se anunció en el burí, su chirrido cortante como un látigo en el aire quieto.* (40)

Geckos are lizards found in warm climates like the Philippines. In Spanish they have the *lagartija,* lizards endemic in Spain. They are different from the Philippine gecko in that they do not produce the sound the latter does. Philippine lizards or "tuko" in Filipino, are called *tek-ka* in Ilocano, which are sound words or onomatopeia in both local languages. The inclusion of *tek-ka* in the translation evokes a distinct local sound as well as underscores the Ilocano language's proclivity to stress consonants. Onomatopeia is also a splendid way in which the postcolonial writer can draw attention to the difference in his/her source culture, not to mention the unique texture it adds to the creative work.

In the following quote, we find a case of code-switching that is unique to the novel:

Original:

> After dinner, in the early evenings, he would indulge in his only vice—a glass of *tinto dulce* which Istak served. He had caught Istak once tasting the wine and he had roared with his only expletive: *"Carajo!"* but had, perhaps, immediately felt so miserable at having to scold his favorite acolyte, he gave the Young man instead one glass—one full glass—to sip in his presence." (52)

The presence of Spanish code switching is essential because it reflects the time period, the colonial atmosphere, in which the story is set. The colonial friar speaking in Spanish and the presence of the imported colonial drink are well represented when spoken in the colonial language. How does one translate this code switching when the transfer is done in Spanish? Soler's translation omitted this distinction as the original lines in Spanish were merged into the translated text.

Original:

> How does Death come? Dalin, *Ave maria, purisima*—a rod of black catching a glint of sun, the hole- the big black hole, Dalin, *Ama mi adda ca sadi langit,* the spark of fire, the thunder and the massive hammer, oh the black, black pain, the blackness, Dalin… Dalin… (54)

Translation:

> ¿Cómo llega la muerte? Dalin, Ave María purísima… un tubo negro capturando un destello de sol, el orificio…, el orifice grande y negro Dalin, *Ama mi adda ca sa langit,* el fogonazo, el estruendo y el descomunal mazazo, oh, el dolor negro, negro, la negrura, Dalin, Dalin… (54)

The intra-sentential code switching in the above passage is through three languages: English, Spanish and Ilocano. The phenomenon of translation and conversion brought about by colonialism converges here. It evokes Rafael´s theorization of the native appropriating Catholic traditional prayers. The representation of these prayers in different languages is instrumental in conjuring the effects of the colonial religion in the Filipino psyche and language. The Spanish translation preserves the Ilocano phrase, but the Spanish reader would not easily understand what it means. To inform that it is a prayer like *Ave María,* a footnote or glossing by explicitation would complete the translation. As Prasad observes:

> Code-switching, for example, may be used to reveal the regional identity of the speaker, thus enabling the speaker to establish kinship if the listener belongs to the same region. Code-switching can also be used to reveal class and religion… Code-switching may be used in a conversation to establish affinity with one or more persons while excluding others who do not belong to this linguistic group or class. (47)

An example of this is as follows:

> Istak followed Don Jacinto across the polished hall to the *azotea* beyond, and to an open door that led to a large room... The Great Man wore a white cotton shirt that hung loosely about him as if it was too big. Though young he looked wasted and had a sickly pallor. He was poring over papers, shaking his head and cursing his breath. Istak could make out the "*sin verguenzas*" as they erupted almost in a steady stream.

> "I hope it is not bad news, Apolinario," Don Jacinto **said in Spanish.**
>
> The Cripple did not even look up from what he was reading. "It is always bad news now, Jacinto, he said, also in Spanish. "We are facing a superior enemy, as you very well know, with far more resources than the Spaniards. And still we haven't learned. Our generals are quarreling. No discipline!" (158)

The scene informs the reader of the main character Istak's cognizance of the vocabulary as that from a higher social class, i.e., the Spanish and the Spanish-speaking elite. We are informed of his sudden inclusion in a world otherwise incomprehensible to a non-Spanish speaker. The italicization of the original foreign words is also recommended to preserve and make distinctive the intention of the original.

The following scene is an important example of difference, because one cannot imagine how a non-Filipino reader can grasp its significance, given the bizarre picture it portrays:

> "Why did you leave the Ilokos, Apo?" It was a question he should not have asked. Did the old man also kill a priest or a Spanish officer like his father did?
>
> "I am Diego Silang," the old man replied quietly and firmly.
>
> To Bit-tik's incredulous look, the old man had an answer: "You're thinking, I am an old fool. How can I be Diego Silang when he died long ago? **But his spirit lives and it came to me, became me.** They are all gone who joined me in the grandchildren. (131)

Who is Diego Silang, what is his significance and why is he a sudden spirit haunting or invading a living person's body? The Filipino reader understands this picture but how does translation carry the same understanding to the reader of the translated version? This scene is uncannily similar to a real account of an interview involving the author Jose and an American journalist, David Sturtevant, as related by Rafael. In a joint interview with Pedro Calosa, leader of a peasant uprising, Calosa said: "The personalities of Rizal,

Bonifacio, and Felipe Salvador appeared before me… I know Rizal's personality as well. He helped me escape… My body stayed, but my personality escaped" (8-10). Rafael explains this phenomenon: "Calosa's recollection of haunting serves to place events in the past relation to spirits who are free to cross boundaries that separate the living from the dead" (12). This unique feature displays an interesting and different Filipino interpretation to spirits moving about in numerous temporal spaces.

Conclusion

Sam Vaughan, American editor of Jose's Rosales novels for Random House and Modern Library, relates that he remembered having asked Jose an important question: How did he like to be edited? Vaughan summarized his response as: "Do with it what you will, but please do not make me less Filipino." (qtd in Thumboo 185). Safeguarding the autochthonous character of the novel entails the hybridization of his text and highlighting its distinctiveness. Klinger claims that the translator's active involvement in revealing the layers of a hybrid text necessitates an awareness of the relationship between cultural identity and linguistic hybridity, which would result in a careful consideration of shifts in meaning that the translation might produce (183). As Bandia suggests, the failure to conserve and preserve the multi-layered language of the original text leads to textual poverty in postcolonial literature. The homogenization of the linguistic features of postcolonial texts like *Po-on* leads to the defeat of its main purpose, which is to become a resistant text that highlights "difference" and emancipation from the original and colonizing language (221). Finally, as Simon also claims, "While the hybrid text affirms the dividedness of identity, often becoming an expression of loss and disorientation, it can also become a powerful and emancipatory place for the writer to occupy" (50).

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