

Mother Teresa - A Totalitarian Leader? Translating Religious Poetry

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Abstract: *The concept of totalitarianism can be approached from different perspectives. The idea that totalitarianism can do good is not new, nor that a totalitarian leader can have a good influence. But can Mother Teresa be regarded as a totalitarian leader who dedicated her entire life helping others? In this case we do not speak about a totalitarian state but a totalitarian world as she persuaded those who have to help those who don't as she put it when awarded the Nobel prize in 1979: “the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers and of all those who feel unwanted, unloved and uncared for throughout society” [1] (see the reference section at the end). The paper focuses on translating religious poetry, analyzing a poem attributed to Mother Teresa. The poem encompasses Mother Teresa tenets of life synthesizing her beliefs although she was not the author but due to her appreciation the poem became famous worldwide.*

Key words: *totalitarianism, Mother Teresa, translation strategies, religious poetry, non-equivalence*

Background

The concept of totalitarianism has been perceived from various perspectives. Numerous research, articles, books and doctoral theses have been dedicated to the study of the ways human beings can be manipulated and mobilized through the use of fear and the role the totalitarianism plays in the pursuit for extreme solutions. The definition of the concept of totalitarianism is too restrictive, defining it as “a political system where the state recognizes no limits to its authority and strives to regulate every aspect of public and private life whenever feasible” [2]. But can a political system or leader who uses the power to manipulate people, can they use the same power to do good? In this respect can Mother Teresa be considered a powerful leader having a positive impact upon the lives of numerous people? Mother Teresa lived her life helping the poor and the needy, wasting her energy in order to make another human being feel better. She advocated for simplicity, altruism and love. Due to her faith and compassion she could see and understand even the most humbled human being. Her love and dedication offered with so much generosity brought her worldwide recognition and in 1979 when she won the Nobel Peace Prize. Loving those in pain and those in need was her way of fighting against a selfish and unscrupulous world, her main weapons being generosity and love. During her life she managed to influence the life of numerous people, she gained the confidence and support of the pope and other philanthropists all over the world. She left numerous inspiring words and advice that are still being quoted nowadays. The poem (see annex) became famous after it was found written on the wall of her children's home in Calcutta. Mother Teresa's version was believed to be an adaptation (re-written in a more spiritual manner) of Kent M. Keith's “The Paradoxical Commandments” published in 1968. She liked the poem so much that she decided to have it written on the wall at the entrance of the orphanage she set up in Calcutta. When Kent M. Keith [3] found out, he was overwhelmed and stunned as he put it: “Mother Teresa thought that the Paradoxical Commandments were important enough to put up on the wall of her children's home. That really hit me. I wanted to laugh, and cry, and shout—and I was getting chills up and down my spine. Perhaps it hit me hard because I had a lot of respect for Mother Teresa, and perhaps because I knew something about children's homes. Whatever the reason, it had a huge impact on me. That was when I decided to speak and write about the Paradoxical Commandments again, thirty years after I first wrote them”. This poem that captured Mother Teresa's attention encompasses the credo that should guide a person's life, using simple words so that anyone can understand. The poem has already been translated in numerous languages. The internet provides several Romanian versions as well but we chose the one translated by Larisa Cheran [4]. The task of the translator in general was formulated by Tytler back in 1791 and his opinion is shared even nowadays by numerous linguists. Thus according to his opinion the task of

the translator is to accomplish a translation” in which the merit of the original is so completely transfused into another language, as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work” [5]. In translating poetry, the task of the translator is even more challenging as he/she should pay special attention to the rendering of the musicality of the verse and also the power of suggestion not to mention the poetic effects.

Material and methods

Poetry displays according to Petrescu [6] the highest degree of untranslability. Therefore when translating poetry besides the task of rendering the meaning and logical structure of the source language text, the translator should also take into consideration the importance of rendering the emotional content and should ensure that his/her version would have the same effect as the original upon the reader. Besides preserving the line and punctuation format, the translator faces another challenge: rendering the metaphors. Translating poetry in general and religious poetry in particular from other languages into Romanian brings considerable contribution to enriching the Romanian vocabulary first of all. Different translation strategies can be applied when translating poetry. We do not intend to be exhaustive on this topic as various theories have been competing for supremacy. Nevertheless we mention Lefevere’s classification of strategies quoted by Bassnett-Mcguire [7]. Thus he distinguishes between *phonemic translation* (that reproduces the source language sound in the target language), *literal translation* (with the emphasis put on word-for-word translation impairs both the sense and syntax of the original), *metrical translation* (focused mainly on rendering the metre of the original), *poetry into prose* (which impairs the sense, communicative value and the syntax), *rhymed translation* (Lefevere being against this translation strategy as it distorts the original), *blank verse translation* (Lefevere mentions the restrictions imposed by this translation strategy but also the greater accuracy it may allow) and *interpretation* (in this category being included the versions having the same source language substance but different form).

Discussions

Larisa Cheran (although not a specialist as she declared) did her best to render the meaning of the source language text into Romanian without paying special attention to the structure of the stanzas and prosodic elements. Nevertheless several changes occurred in the structure of the Romanian version. For instance if we consider the first line: *People are often unreasonable, illogical and self centred* translated by *Oamenii nu sunt întotdeauna rezonabili/Uneori se comportă illogic, irațional și atât de egoist...* At first glance we notice that the English line was translated by two Romanian lines. The so-called negative personality adjective *self-centred* from the English version was rendered by the adjective that has similar poetical effect upon the Romanian readers. The adjective *unreasonable* was rendered by *rezonabili* and a verb in the negative. In English *unreasonable* means *going beyond what is fair, acceptable or sensible* [9] and its Romanian equivalent is *nerealist* when it refers to behaviour [8]. The author provides two adjectives with similar meanings in order to render the rhetorical effect of the original which is a case of non-equivalence and a semantic gain but were used to enhance the poetical effect of the original. Another case of non-equivalence can be identified in the following example: *be kind anyway* which was translated by *poartă-te întotdeauna la fel de bine*, in order to avoid ambiguity in the Romanian and to clarify the meaning of the original. For *people may cheat you*, the author preferred a personal interpretation of the original (being a case of non-equivalence and might be accused of semantic gain) *Oamenii te vor înșela și vor profita, râzând de bunătatea ta...* Also the adjective *frank* was rendered by *ai inimă deschisă* which is also a case of non-equivalence but the preferred variant paraphrases the meaning of the original term: *plain and honest and not trying to hide the truth*. [9] *Give the world the best you've got anyway* was rendered by: *Nu contează, irosește-te cât poți de bine*, although the verb *ai irosi* has the meaning of wasting but it was used to enhance the poetical

effect of the original. The last two lines were rendered by four lines in Romanian. Even if the author might be accused of semantic gain she preferred to use the appellative [+MALE] *frate* due to the semantic effect it may have upon the reader. *In the final analysis* was rendered by: *adevărul e simplu* which might be regarded as a distant rendering of the original being mainly a personal interpretation. The last term of the verse: *anyway* was rendered by *Și numai asta contează cu adevărat!* Besides the semantic gain the author focused mainly on the rhetorical effect.

Conclusions

If we consider Mother Teresa from the perspective of a totalitarian leader we should mention that she did not have a massive cult of personality, on the contrary she was very modest, simplicity being one of her main characteristics. She determined people worldwide become more generous by setting an example of compassion and generosity. The very few that disagreed and made their opinion public were not regarded as traitors; instead their attacks were overlooked with wisdom and understanding. In any totalitarian state, the totalitarian leader is also the head of the military force wearing a uniform. Mother Teresa's uniform was the simple white cotton Indian sari with three blue stripes symbolizing her three vows that of chastity, poverty and obedience. If a totalitarian leader believes that the human being is unworthy of his respect or consideration, Mother Teresa thought that those who were hungry or homeless or crippled or even the lepers and the ostracised deserved her utmost attention. If a totalitarian leader encourages and maintains a climate of fear, Mother Teresa advocated for love and generosity and compassion. Metaphorically speaking Mother Teresa can be regarded as a totalitarian leader: her state was the entire world; her well-defined purpose was treating the ones afflicted with diseases, the poor and the unwanted with dignity and love, striving to improve their living conditions, her methods were wholehearted love, compassion and generosity. She was never very fond of elaborated speeches, she preferred simple words. The poem that she liked so much uses simple, unelaborated vocabulary so that the message it conveys to be easily understood. When rendering the meaning of the source language text, the translator's main focus was to create similar poetic effects upon the Romanian readers, employing mainly the literal translation strategy and therefore the word-for-word translation distorting sometimes the syntax of the original. Moreover being a religious poem, the Romanian version is focused on rendering the message of the source language text and less on the prosodic elements in order to avoid ambiguities. This poem should be regarded as an urge to meditate, maybe each of us should consider the moral duty of striving to improve the human condition.

Annex

"Anyway"	„Răspuns la toate întrebările"
People are often unreasonable, illogical and self centred. Forgive them anyway.	Oamenii nu sunt întotdeauna rezonabili Uneori se comportă illogic, irațional și atât de egoist... Nu contează, iartă-i oricum.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.	Dacă te porți omeneste cu ei, Te acuză că ai un motiv ascuns... Nu contează, poartă-te întotdeauna la fel de bine.
If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies. Succeed anyway.	Dacă ai o carieră de succes, Îți vei câștiga mulți prieteni falși și chiar mai mulți dușmani sinceri... Nu contează, tu mergi pe drumul tău.
If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you. Be honest and frank anyway.	Dacă ești onest și ai inimă deschisă, Oamenii te vor înșela și vor profita, râzând de bunătatea ta... Nu contează, tu fii onest și bun întotdeauna.

"Anyway"	„Răspuns la toate întrebările"
What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight. Build anyway.	Îți irosești viața construind ceva Care poate fi distrus peste noapte... Nu contează, construiește oricum.
If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous. Be happy anyway.	Dacă ai găsit pacea și fericirea, Mulți vor fi invidioși pe tine... Nu contează, fii cât se poate de senin și fericit.
The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow. Do good anyway.	Binele pe care-l faci azi Va fi sigur uitat mâine, Nu contează, fă-l oricum, întotdeauna.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough. Give the world the best you've got anyway.	Dă lumii tot ce poți mai bun Și chiar dacă n-o să fie niciodată de-ajuns... Nu contează, irosește-te cât poți de bine.
You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God. It was never between you and them anyway.	Frate, adevărul e simplu, Totul pe lumea asta e între tine și Dumnezeu N-a fost niciodată între tine și ei. Și numai asta contează cu adevărat!
(http://dbooth.org/guat2000/small/teresa/htm)	(Translated by Larisa Cheran, published in Formula As, XX, no 928 (29), 23-30 VII 2010)

Notes

- [1] <http://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/ijls/new/vol3iss1/marques/marques.htm>
 [2] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totalitarianism>
 [3] www.kentmkeith.com/mother_teresa.html
 [4] poem translated by Larisa Cheran, published in Formula As, XX, no 928 (29), 23-30 VII 2010, p.21
 [5] Apud Croitoru, E., Interpretation and Translation. Porto-Franco, Galați, 1996 (p.19)
 [6] Petrescu, C., Traducerea între teorie și realizare poetică. Excelsior, Timișoara, 2000, (p.94)
 [7] Bassnett-Mcguire, S., Translation Studies. Routledge, New York, 1991 (p.81)
 [8] Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, Longman, 2003 (p. 518, 1467)
 [9] Concise Oxford Lingua English-Romanian Dictionary, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009 (p.722)

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