“Violets in a Crucible” – Translating the Orient

Violets in a Crucible is an international colloquium, organized jointly by the Université Grenoble Alpes and the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, focused on cultural exchanges through translation and rewriting of texts from oriental languages into European languages and vice-versa. Does the medium shape the message? Or does the message impact on the medium? Grenoble University, in partnership with the JNU would like to explore the dynamics of shifting mediums as men and women attempt to come to terms with the curse of Babel.

The title, as well as the central thesis, was inspired by the following beautiful lines by P.B. Shelley: “Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower – and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.” (Shelley, A Defence of Poetry)

The questions explored during the colloquium will be the following: to what extent can translation/rewriting be considered a key, unlocking doors to unknown cultures? Does the translating/rewriting of texts lead to a cultural transfer, or does it lead to cultural distortion/cum/transformation?

In this colloquium, we will be looking at the translations of Oriental texts into European languages and translations of European texts into Oriental languages from the 18th century to the present day. How successful are these translations, who were these men and women who chose to translate the East for the West and the West for the East, and most importantly, what was the impact of these cultural mediators on Europe/the Orient? Did the plant spring again from its seed and bear flowers – or was the curse of Babel insurmountable?

To 16th century Europe the Orient was an unknown space. Few Europeans had made the long and hazardous journey by sea or land, and fewer still made the effort to learn Oriental languages. Nonetheless, Oriental languages attracted Europeans – partly for trade – and partly as a way to unlock the cultural treasures of the East. As these translated texts made their way back to Europe, they were retranslated into other European languages, thus undeniably influencing European thought and culture.

From Antoine Galland, who turned the collection of stories generally known as the Alf laila wa laila into Les Mille et Une Nuits to Sir William Jones’ English translation of Kalidasa’s play Abhijnanasakuntala, the antiquarians and linguists who translated or rewrote Oriental folklore and literature charmed 18th century Europe, creating a fascination for the East which lasted well into the 19th century, profoundly affecting the great Romantic Movements in
Europe. In this colloquium, we would like to research this intellectual ferment which has changed the face of European culture, and continues to do so in the 21st century. We aim to look at translations not only as genuine literary products with their own intrinsic literary merit, but also their impact on European cultures and civilizations and vice-versa.

Themes/Workshops

- **Migrations, frontiers and cultural exchanges**: “Can thoughts transcend places of their origin? Or do places leave their imprint on thought in such a way as to call into question the idea of purely abstract categories?” (Dipesh Chakrabarty). Clearly, thought processes cannot be limited by geographical barriers, and the cultural interface necessarily passes through language. How does the fact of transposing a text from one medium to another affect a given culture? The notion of ‘medium’ is taken in its broadest sense, and the following areas will be explored:
  - The socio-linguistic impact (for example, the immense impact of Galland’s work on European languages);
  - The cultural impact (for example, Orientalism and the European romantic writers in Germany, France, Great Britain)

- **Translation – A Passageway between East and West?** Translation/rewriting, is inevitably a ‘hybrid’ construction, created by multiple cultural references, which raises the question of its relationship to the canonical ‘original’ texts. Is it a case of mimesis or refraction or reterritorialisation? How do textual representations express the reality of a given culture and its development through socio-economic context, history, sciences, and how do translators in their role of cultural interface cope with differing cultural codes?
  - Theory: early methodologies: e.g. William Jones translating Sanskrit into Latin, and then into English. The eighteenth century practice of bowdlerizing; transmitting unknown cultural/religious/mythological references to another culture. Comparing early methodologies of translation with contemporary techniques.
  - Translating of texts into mediums more easily accessible: dance, drama, song. Does this lead to a ‘vulgarization’ of ‘learned’ texts, or did the new mediums revitalize culture, reducing the artificial rift between ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ culture?

- **Political and social movements in the colonial and post-colonial periods**: can transposition of culture from one medium to another be a means of both colonial power and subversion of power? By ‘culture’, we mean the arts and other manifestations of intellectual achievement; we include ideas, concepts, and writings. This point is crucial because if culture is the most elegant means of transmission of hegemonic discursive practices, culture is also a powerful instrument of resistance.
- The link between translation and politics will be explored (for example, translation as an official policy to sustain the hegemony of the colonizing country.)
- Biblical translations into indigenous languages to further Missionary aims

➢ Computational linguistics and translation – the 21st century challenge: the use of computer assisted translation software is explored in this workshop. Up to what point can computational linguistics, which relies on observation and scientific experimentation, be used in the intangible art of cultural transfer? Language translation industries are generally articulated around morphological, syntactic and semantic systems. Would such an approach be productive or problematic when applied to:

- Language as an extension of cultural codes?
- The infinite variety of verbal expressions?
- Minor languages?