

From ‘Against Interpretation’ to ‘The Death of the Author’: From Excess to Erasure: Rethinking Interpretation in Translation

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to evaluate the theory of imposition of the reader by interpreting a text, developed by Susan Sontag in her essay ‘Against Interpretation’ juxtaposing the idea of ‘The Death of the Author’ by Roland Barthes advocating the reader to be rendered with the choice of freedom to interpret the text. Against the argument of Sontag “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings” (Sontag 2009: 16), Roland Barthes declares, “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text . . .” (Barthes 1988: 149). It is attempted to make a comparative study of both the theoretical essays, opposite to each other in their meanings, in view of Translation Studies. Along the lines of the linguistic theories developed by Nida, Chomsky, Catford and others, it is argued that the role of the language is also more important to interpret a text. In view of the concept of ‘The Death of the Author’, a reader’s response theory, Translation is a reader-centric interpretive activity and the translator as a reader challenges the traditional authorial authority. The research paper concludes with the argument that no extreme, either of the two displayed in these two essays, is possible, hence, the balance is required for both to read and translate any literary text.

Keywords: ‘Against Interpretation’, ‘The Death of the Author’, language, translation, fidelity

(1) Introduction:

In a traditional way, translation has been considered an act of interpretation with a view to fidelity to the Source Language Text by applying equivalences and authorial intention into the Target Language Text reasonably. The translator is here treated as the carrier / transmitter of the original meaning, already pre-existing in a Source Language Text, encoded by the author due to his/her right to be imaginative and coin. The introduction of the new critical theories in the 20th century have unsettled the traditional belief. The critical creations, of Walter Benjamin, Umberto Eco, George Steiner, Chomsky and others are read along with the two opposite critical views of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, drive compulsion to rethink meaning i.e. translation as an interpretive act, however to be acted responsibly than a simple act of meaning transfer.

Susan Sontag, through her essay 'Against Interpretation' projects a powerful criticism of the obsessed modern criticism with the extreme policy of various possible interpretations of the works of art. The subjective interpretation, Sontag argues, always functions as the dominance of reader's intellectual mind. Sontag's assertion that "interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art" by the reader-critic claims the resistance to those critical practices that offer the privilege to criticism / critics over the contents of the work of art / artists (Sontag 2009: 15). Indirectly, Sontag has challenged the field of Translation Studies due to its over emphasis on the semantic clarity neglecting the formal aspects of the Source Language Text in the Target Language Text. She asserts, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (Sontag 2009: 23). Her attempt to replace hermeneutics with an "erotics of art" means when one approaches a work art, one has to focus on its sensory experience rather than attempting in vain to decode the hidden message.

Opposite to the argument made by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, by his essay 'The Death of the Author', projects the rejection of the dominance of the authorial authority. Barthes declares that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" allowing full freedom to a reader-critic and a reader-translator and simultaneously challenging / rejecting what we call the very idea of originality (Barthes 1988: 145). By arguing that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text", Barthes outrightly rejects the authorial authority offering independence to the reader-translator (Barthes 1988: 148). Thus, looking at these theories together, one finds that they the translation is shifted between the two critical extremes—the extreme limit to interpret and that of eradicating the author extremely. Sontag usurps the freedom of the translator in an extreme outright way whereas Barthes offers him/her

the extreme freedom rejecting not only the authorial authority but also making the translator free from the tyranny of the author.

(2) Synopsis of 'Against Interpretation':

Against the modern criticism, Susan Sontag in her essay 'Against Interpretation', argues that the modern criticism reduces the significance of the work of art to (hidden) meanings only. Prioritizing the aesthetic experience over the interpretation, Sontag argues that the formal sensuous aspects of the text are also significant. Interpretation is, according to Sontag, is a type of violent act because it is a type of 'revenge' taken by an 'intellect' on the art" (Sontag 2009: 15). Various interpretations of a work of art may result into the abstract, absence of vitality, meanings. When a critic searches for an exact meaning, real meaning of a text, the work of art loses its complexity.

The habit to make a critical analysis of a text in the modern time depends more largely on interpretive way. Due to the more emphasis on interpretation in this modern habit, the literary text is merely turned into ideals only. She says, "Interpretation in our own time, . . . is even more complex (Sontag 2009: 14), though she quotes, "Nietzsche (rightly) says, 'There are no facts, only interpretations'" (Sontag 2009: 13). She opposes the distinction between the 'form' and the 'content' of the text. Form is not an ornament for the meaning but it is meaning in itself. She rightly says, ". . . we have learned to call "form" is separated off from something we have learned to call "content," and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory" (Sontag 2009: 12).

"What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of interpretation" (Sontag 2009: 13). By writing this, Sontag argues that to interpret a work by extracting content with reference to an interpretation is to misunderstand the work of art. One must enter into, "erotics of art" rather than interpretation of an art (Sontag 2009: 23). This way to read a text will lead the reader not to interpret but to have a sensory experience of a work of art, thus unlimiting / freeing the literary text from the bond of the reader.

(3) Synopsis of 'The Death of the Author':

The most discussed and focussed upon the essay, similar to that of Susan Sontag's, is 'The Death of the Author' by Roland Barthes. Against the essay of Sontag, this essay challenges the traditional authority of the author / creator of the text offering freedom to a reader / critic of the work of art. There is nothing like fixed meaning in a text. The meaning of a work of art invariably changes in every reading having no fixities in itself. It is the reader who enlivens the text which loses its meaning on the death of the author. The tradition of

interpreting a text taking into consideration the intention of the author, the biography, the historical context and the source of the text limits the plurality of meanings inherently available in the text.

The idea of the author is dismantled when Barthes says, "Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (Barthes 1988: 145). The very quotation of Barthes rejects the monopoly of the author, creating a space where there is a scope and space both for multiple interpretations. The author is the explanation of the text traditionally. The traditional criticism assumes that the text-writer has some hidden meaning behind it that has to be decoded and it can be decoded knowing the intention of the author only. Criticizing this traditional tendency, Barthes writes, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit. . ." on any given text (Barthes 1988: 148). Thus, Barthes here attempts the text to be made free from the hold of its creator. The meaning of the text cannot pre-exist in the mind of the author but rather is produced in the very act of reading. The writer is, according to Roland Barthes, a "scriptor" rather than an author (Barthes 1988: 147). The 'scriptor' of the text does not pre-exist, but rather, "The modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text" (Barthes 1988: 149).

This 'scriptor' while creating the text, according to Barthes, assembles the language which is already in the use. This view of Barthes makes every literary work a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 1988: 148). The application of this view of Roland Barthes takes away the very idea of originality from the work of art creating the concept of intertextuality. The very thought of intertextuality shapes the idea that every text rests on the other for getting interpreted, not on an individual genius. The concluding statement of Barthes replaces the author by the reader to interpret the text. To quote Barthes, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 1988: 149). By stating this, perhaps Roland Barthes does not try to disown the author of his significance but the act of production of meaning is shifted from the author, the writer of the text, to the reader of the text.

(4) Translation: An Act of Interpretation:

The translator cannot translate a text without interpreting it. The act of translation thus turns out to be the transfer of meaning rather than anything else. This thinking establishes the relationship between the translation and interpretation. If the translator follows the very concept of Susan Sontag, he cannot translate. If the translator follows the concept of Roland Barthes, he will do injustice to the Source Language Text by over-interpreting a text. This leads to the dichotomy of fidelity and freedom and word-for-word and sense-for-sense translation. This binary leads to the fundamental question: can a translator translate without interpreting?

Translation is no longer looked at a linguistic operation only but as a negotiation of meaning between the two texts—Source Language Text and Target Language Text. Out of many comments made by translation critics on translation as an act of interpretation, a few are noted here. According to Umberto Eco, “Every interpretation is a response to a text” (Eco 1990: 6). This view of Eco makes translation a type of specific form of interpretation done by the translator. Friedrich Schleiermacher has linked the act of translation with interpretation.

Stating that “Hermeneutics is the art of understanding”, Schleiermacher considers the role of the translator / reader even better than the author (Schleiermacher 1998: 5). He states, “The task is to understand the text at first as well and then even better than its author” (Schleiermacher 1998:18-19).

The very idea of the translation has been broadened when Schleiermacher says, “Every person is, as it were, a living translation” (Schleiermacher 1998: 44). Commenting on the role and relationship between the translator and the author, Schleiermacher says, “Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him” (Schleiermacher 2004: 49). While emphasizing the role of interpretation, Schleiermacher accepts that in order to understand a text, the reader / translator has to enter into the psychological world of the author of the text. This makes translation an act of entering the horizon of the author, going beyond the text. George Steiner says, “To understand is to interpret. To hear significance is to translate” (Steiner 1975: 12). Steiner, destroying the difference between the reading and translation, says understanding of the text itself is an act of translation.

In his essay, “The Task of the Translator”, Walter Benjamin does not claim that the translator transfers the communication. He says that the text is reborn in the afterlife when he makes a statement, “A translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife” (Benjamin 1968: 71). Perhaps, Benjamin considers the translated version of the text as an afterlife of the Source Language Text. This makes translation an interpretive act that discovers the potential of the text rather than duplicating the literal meaning of the Source Language Text. Umberto Eco considers translation an activity of negotiation. He states, “Translation is always a process of negotiation” (Eco 1990 :57). Translation involves a type of negotiation between two cultures, two or more interpretations and semiotic issues. When translation is considered an act of the translator’s interpretation, it outrightly rejects the very idea of fidelity. To quote Roman Jakobson here who said, “Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey” (Jakobson 1959: 116). The differences of

linguistic structural aspects enforce the translator to take his stand as to which aspect of meaning he wants to foreground.

Lawrence Venuti considers the translator 'invisible' traditionally, if the text is best translated according to the fidelity to the Source Language Text and 'visible' if the translation follows the theory of foreignization advocated by him. He states, "Translation is an interpretive act that shapes cultural identities" (Venuti 2008: 19). His two concepts of domestication and foreignization state that the translator has to make a choice by an act of interpretation. To him, every translation has to be a type of interpretive production of the culture possessed by the Source Language Text.

Though the translation is an interpretive act as justified by the comments made above, it still leads a question whether a perfect translation is possible. The answer to the question lies in the nature of translation itself as an interpretive task. The possibility of multiple layers of interpretations leads to no translation a perfect one. George Steiner has rightly observed, "No two languages, no two cultures, ever offer identical social realities" (Steiner 1998: 24). The same thought about translation as an interpretive invention of a translator is nourished by Octavio Paz when he says, "Every translation is an invention and so it constitutes a unique text" (Paz 1962: 162). These views of translation critics establish the common consensus that translation is not the reproduction but rather the reinterpretation of the Source Language Text. However, in the very act of translation, the losses and the gains are bound to be present due to selection and creation.

(5) Balancing the Opposite Extremes of Excess and Erasure:

When both the concepts of Susan Sontag through 'Against Interpretation' and Roland Barthes through 'The Death of the Author' are attempted to submerge, what emerges are the two extremes of 'excess' military disciplined strictness of Sontag and 'erasure' of authorial authority advocated by the extreme liberty to a translator. The first one throws a light on the dangers of interpretive excess and the later throws a light on the erasure done by the licenced translator. The discipline of Translation Studies, sandwiched between these two extremes, must balance for aesthetic value and interpretative plurality.

(5.1) The Concept of 'Excess' by Susan Sontag:

The reader of Susan Sontag's essay 'Against Interpretation' always faces the extremist view of Sontag about her anxiety of overproduction of the meaning. The reduction of a work of art in the modern criticism to ideas only, symbols only and messages only impair and impoverish the text by submerging its sensuous qualities. She may sound to some reader very much harsh in the use of the words when she considers interpretation a type of the 'revenge'

taken by an ‘intellect’ reader on the heart of the writer (Sontag 2009: 15). She considers interpretation as a type of violence done to the Source Language Text since the act of interpretation replaces the work of art with its paraphrase. To shift an art from the traditional historical mentality, one must make a move to “erotics of art” (Sontag 2009: 23). The ‘erotics of art’ according to Sontag is that one must read the work of art for its sensory experience. She very strictly indicates the function of criticism when she says, “The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*” (Sontag 2009: 22-23).

(5.2) The Concept of ‘Erasure of Authorial Authority’ by Roland Barthes:

Completely opposite in the concept of Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes offers the excess of liberty to the translator-reader which may even hamper the act of translation. The essay by Barthes liberates interpretation rather than blocking / resisting it. He doesn’t want the author only to be the sole producer of the meaning. This liberty, according to Barthes, has to be had by the reader-translator. Therefore, he considers “writing” no more to be the authorial voice but every reader’s voice. If the meaning of the text is to be deciphered by the intention of the author, then how can one say that the text is reproduced in the reading itself? Barthes has attempted to break the hierarchy / monopoly of the author imposed on the very activity of interpretation. To prove this, he famously has said that to interpret a text as intended by the author, it is an act “to impose a limit on that text” (Barthes 2009: 149). The very process of decentralization of the meaning will make it plural and open-ended.

(5.3) Uncommon grounds:

To conceptualize both of them uncommonly, they differ in their treatment of interpretation. Sontag desires to limit the interpretation whereas Barthes desires to make it free, more liberal. Barthes wants to distribute the authority of interpreting even with the reader-translator, thereby making the author die, whereas Sontag doesn’t want the authorial authority to die but to somehow survive and sustain centralized. The first wants limited interpretation whereas the later free interpretation. Rather than to emphasize the interpretive meaning, Sontag focuses on the sensuous experience to retrieve while reading the work of art whereas Barthes makes a work of art intertextual due to its dependency on the other text for sharing the linguistic stratagem. Lastly, Sontag is worried about the moral ethical part with reference to the work of art as to say what interpretation does to art. Barthes tries to make the text free from bourgeois ideology of its creator thus, breaking the relationship between the master (author) and the slave (reader) who has to obey each order of his master dependently.

(5.4) Balancing the Opposite Extremes: Common Grounds:

Though very few, but both of the critics, i.e. Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, have some ground of thinking where they at least meet commonly. Sontag criticized the traditional criticism where the text is reduced to 'some' meaning reducing the work of art to 'content' only while rejecting its 'formal aspects'. Barthes criticized the authority of the author to liberate the reader. Sontag desires to make the text free from the shackle of the reader whereas Barthes desires the text to be free from the shackle of the author, thus, both of them are common from the interpretive view of the text. It is not unfair to say that both of them do not accept the ideology of the 'fixed' meaning of any work of art. According to Sontag, no text can hide the message beneath its surface whereas according to Barthes, the meaning of the text does not and cannot originate from the intention of the author.

As it is inevitable for the reader to interpret a text for its understanding and relish, it is as well significant for translator to interpret a text while translating it. The question is: If the translator does not translate the meaning then what does s/he translate? Language? What is the use of the language if the language fails to decode the meaning? In order to apply these opposite extreme views of both the 20th century critics, to the praxis of translation, the translator must strike the balance. The balanced close reading of both these concepts do not juxtapose both of them but rather make them complementary to each other decoding the danger of interpretation. Sontag doesn't allow the translator to forgo the form during translation and Barthes legitimates the right of the translator as an interpreter of the Source Language Text. Bringing them together on a common ground may produce an epitome where the text is neither woven into the fixed meaning nor left on vivid interpretive chaos. This balance turns out to be more significant in Translation Studies. According to Sontag's red signal, excess in interpretation risks the authorial ideological code embedded into the Source Language Text whereas, according to Barthes, the blind fidelity to the Source Language Text restricts the translator to recreate the text. The translation has to, therefore, respect the aesthetic form and receive the interpretive plurality.

(6) Conclusion: Some Key Observations:

The debate raised in this research paper between Susan Sontag's warning against interpretive excess and Roland Barthes' attempt to eradicate the authorial authority discloses the necessary tension lying at the heart of the modern criticism. In the ground of balance, the literary work of art always remains open having no fixities of interpretation and uncontrolled liberty at the hand of the translator-reader enabling him/her a responsible interpreter. In the study of the text or translation of the text, the balance permits the meaning to emerge out of the

exchange of thoughts / dialogues between the translator-reader and the text, form and content and singularity and plurality of the meaning. The real service to criticism for both types of readers, the reader and the translator, is to allow the text to speak, not to silence the text by smothering it in its meaning.

Every translation has to pass through liberty and responsibility. Umberto Eco maintains, "Every interpretation is a response to a text, but not every response is an arbitrary one" (Eco 1990: 6). Eco answers Sontag and Barthes stating in his book *The Limits of Interpretation* that interpretation of a text is a 'response to a text' and hence it is essential, not violent. In another book, *Experiences in Translation*, Eco states, "A translation is always an interpretation, but it is not an interpretation without limits" (Eco 2001: 57). Here, Eco maintains that translation cannot be free from interpretation however it has some 'limits' also. Even Roland Barthes's quote, "A text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash" (Barthes 1988: 149). Roland Barthes controls the view of Sontag in the first part of this statement when he says, "A text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning" where as in the later part of the same quotation, he allows some liberty to the translator-reader.

While reading Sontag and Barthes together, their arguments, do not reject interpretation but, demand the moral and ethical restraint in the act of translation. The argument made by Viktor Shklovsky blends the views of both, "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (Shklovsky 1965: 12). Viewing similarly to Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin strikes, "No translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original" (Benjamin 1968: 73). The point is, can one translate a literary text completely, when Paul Valery argues, "A poem is never finished, only abandoned" leaving a chance for a translator to translate it completely (Valéry 1958: 54).

The view of Maurice Blanchot leads one to believe that a work of art cannot have the final explanation. To him, "Literature begins when literature becomes a question" (Blanchot 1995: 300). Sontag's idea of against interpretation is stabilized in the argument made by Blanchot that literature destabilizes any scope of certainty allowing it to be interpreted with textual plurality and intertextuality. Blanchot thus views literature not only as literature to be relished only once but rather as an ongoing process unsettling the reader in every reading of it. Stanley Fish rightly notes, "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing" (Fish 1980: 327). Meaning of the given work of art merges in the process of reading. The earnest urge of Sontag to readers and translators is to prioritize sensory experience over the

meaning of the text. She puts the idea thus, “Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all” (Sontag 2009: 22).

Abhinavagupta, an Indian critic, offering his views on *rasa* theory, possibly equal to that of Sontag, states that the meaning of a literary text is not to be interpreted / understood but realized / experienced as *rasa*—the form of an aesthetic relish, done by the *sahradaya* (sensitive) reader. However, his view on *dhvani* (suggestion) is explicit with Roland Barthes’ view when he says, as cited by Manmohan Ghosh, “That which is suggested is the soul of poetry” (*Dhvanyāloka* 1951: I.4).

Noting Walter Benjamin who said that the “original undergoes a change”, it can be noticed that the meaning does not reside in the author alone, nor it get dissolved into the chaos of interpretation but rather survives through responsibly serious transformational act (Benjamin 1968: 73). Translation renews the meaning, does not appropriate the same, however, it observes the textual aesthetic integrity. It is in this balance, between the excess of interpretation and the erasure of the authorial authority, the act of translation remains honest and faithful to the text itself. Thus, translation becomes, in this balanced view, a responsible interpretive action acted by the translator—neither violent interpretation nor out of control freedom.

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