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St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam, Kochi - 682 011  
(Affiliated to the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam)

## Translation as a Cross-Cultural Interface: A Study of the poems of Paula Gunn Allen

Tessy Anthony C\*

In a narrow sense translation is interlingual, or translation is translating from one language into another. But in a broad sense translation is a translation of cultures, translating from one culture to another. When a translator translates he is facilitating a cross-cultural interface. It is an advantage if he is bilingual. To translate whether you are bilingual or not, you have to be bicultural. Translation conveys so much of one culture to another culture. As Godfrey Lienhardt in his essay "Modes of Thought" opines that translation is "the translating of one culture into terms intelligible to another (Cited in Niranjana 1992 - 47). And for this kind of translation, language is used as a cross-cultural tool that helps empowerment. Paula Gunn Allen translates the Native American Laguna culture to a wider audience to avoid erasure. She writes in English without losing the Laguna flavour. After all language carries a cultural baggage. Translation is like cooking, an experienced cook will add her own flavour. Paula Gunn Allen does just this. She uses English and adds her very own Laguna Native American flavour to it.

The tool the translator uses is language, which makes him more empowered. But very often a kind of inequality of languages arises between the source language text and the target language text. But Paula Gum Allen writes only in English. The power to wield language and to encapsulate culture through it is empowerment, since knowledge of this culture can enrich us. It is the translator who is the facilitator who connects a highly inspired story to an uninspired reader. He gives us a glimpse of a new culture. Translations can transcend the barriers of language and link up cultures that deserve to be linked up.

In the postcolonial scene the colonized imbibes a certain power, which in his encounters with the mainstream he experiences and realizes that the English language can be used as a tool to represent himself far from mainstream representation. This is what happens in Said's Orientalism too (looking at the East through the eyes of the white man), whereas as a part of decolonising the colonized has decided to use language as a tool to write back to the

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\* Dept. of English,  
St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam

center and educate them about what the colonized sees. After all hegemony is ensured where ideology secures its power through consent. She wants to bring about change in the thinking patterns of the mainstream before it is too concrete. It is the closest translation that we can reach when done by a writer who is bicultural. For translation is a matter of translating cultures.

Paula Gunn Allen is a Native American woman writer, who uses language as a tool for cross-cultural interface and empowerment. She is bicultural. And the stance she takes in her addressal of issues is that of the Native American English-speaking hybrid. She is a spokeswoman for Native Indian traditions. She faces double colonization. In her encounters with the mainstream she feels marginalized both racially and as a woman. And this leads to cultural translation. Translation is a process of decolonisation for her. No two people read alike. And a woman certainly reads differently. A Native American woman writer who sees America, as her natural home obviously doesn't approve of the mainstream stereotypes of an Indian. Just as land was colonized, women were colonized by patriarchy, and the Natives by foreigners. Paula Gunn Allen educates the mainstream of the rich cultural traditions, which the mainstream has plundered and is trying to wipe out. She uses language as a tool to empower herself (and us) of the rich Native Indian culture. To many, translation may be a second order representation but to Gunn Allen she is the author translating her very own culture. Lawrence Venuti rightly said "The aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar;" (1995 :18) She fights erasure and welcomes us into a world of rich Native Indian culture by translating the nuances of the language and the culture.

When a Native American feels alienated what a Native American means is that it is more cultural. It is the differences that cause angst. An outsider never gets an insight of what the Native Indian's alienated state is like as he feels it. We see the Native American only through the Western gaze. So when we think of a Native Indian we tend to think of a traditional one. The Indian as a noble savage, dressed in hides and feathers with a painted face. We see only the bloodthirsty warriors, Indian cowboys and the demure squaws. But these stereotypes are not the real Indians. And the ones that have survived are half-breeds and who feel alienated. They suffer from a sense of loss of land, cultural values and traditions. They have been robbed of land, and forced to acculturate. To avoid erasure they have to

translate themselves. And this can be done well only by a person belonging to their own culture, and with access to mainstream culture that is someone who is bicultural in this case.

Paula Gunn Allen does exactly this. Though she is a Laguna she is more comfortable in English. Gunn Allen is a Native American writer who speaks and writes in English. She tries to educate mainstream audience about Native American themes. Her works reveal the rich native Indian culture she hails from. On her mother's side she is a Laguna. They are a "mother right" culture. That is not of course matriarchal, but matrilineal (descent). To the mainstream, matriarchal means something else i.e. feminist. She traces her descent from her matrilineal side. What makes her an Indian is her turn of mind. She doesn't speak Laguna but reflects Laguna culture in the English language. She thinks like a Laguna but talks and writes in English. She states that "You learn what your language means by the subtle signals- behavioral and inflectionary and environmental- signals that you get from your primary raisers, that is my mother and my grandmother, who lived right next door. So I was raised by Laguna women. They spoke English. But what they spoke meant something else from what the accepted majority would expect. The associations and understandings and expectations about a statement are very different. They understand the world based on their Laguna culture (an interview with Paula Gunn Allen 7). Sometimes it is quite frustrating to express her predicament. When she translates she feels the difficulty of communicating to the mainstream what she has accepted and understood. She remembers her mother telling her over and over again "Never forget that you're Indian" (Cited from *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Vol 84 p.45). She was never reminded to remember she was part Indian.

Normally when you translate a culture you always communicate the power hegemony, as the mainstream would like it to be. Gum Allen resists representation by representing culture, as she knows it to be. Her writings are authentic representations because she writes from the experiential level. At the level of an ordinary translation there is no authentic transfer of values and feelings. But in bicultural translation the very crux is authenticity. But Paula Gunn Allen represents the Laguna Sioux culture and its power structures, which may not be acceptable to the mainstream. There is a different idea about women aging. The older you get the more respect you get. She says she was proud of the first few gray hairs that she had. Because when

you are old you are more valuable. Others are supposed to listen to you. The Native tribes were proud of their gray hair and wrinkles. The fear of growing old is there in several cultures. As opposed to this the Americans spend time dyeing their hair and going for face lifts. Thus Paula Gunn Allen uses her compositions as cultural preservatives of unique experiences. More than translating Gunn Allen is actually transplanting culture.

Paula Gunn Allen, who is bicultural, by giving vent to her feelings, attempts to unfold the richness of Native American culture. By expressing and asserting the differences of her culture in her works (in English) she is resisting effectively both colonization and genocide of the imagination. The perceptions of Indians should not be denied to Indians. It is best for an Indian to express his perceptions of his own culture than for an outsider to do so. The gaze of the outsider would be unable to cover the underpinnings of that culture. In the opening lines of her essay "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Indian Literature" she says that,

Literature is a facet of culture, Its significance can be best understood in terms of its culture, and its purpose is meaningful only when the assumptions it is based on are understood and accepted. It is not much of a problem for a person raised in that culture to see the culture's literature. He is from birth familiar with the assumptions that underlie both his culture and its literature and art. (1)

By translation, we are translating a culture from one language into another. What we are trying to do is domesticate the Laguna culture. And the best person to do it is a person who is bicultural. The closest translation would be, by a person belonging to the same culture into another culture. What we are doing is not a mechanical verbatim translation but a culture-generating process. But it must be remembered that a translation can always create blocks yet be enabling. When you translate a work you put across the riches of that culture, emotional, psychological, social and religious belief systems. All these are transplanted using language as a tool. The practice of translation has an increasing significance in the postcolonial context. The colonized, in their attempt to decolonise, hope for the transfer of power from one to another. Getting to know about unknown people is their motive. This is not a verbatim (previously already made) translation from one language

to another but a cultural translation. In the cultural sphere decolonisation is the slowest in making its impact. However much you try to assert your identity you cant erase the English language, which is a legacy of the white man. We claim to decolonise ourselves by saying we use English, differently than the West.

Language of a half-breed is a half-breed language. Even though you use the English language to get on in the world and to reach a wide audience the culture reflected by each writer will be his regional or national one. It is not sentence structure alone that is a pointer but thought structure that she means. There is so much the English language cannot express because it is male, not tribal, and not spiritual enough. For a bicultural writer the problem is whether or not the thought is accurate. When you think in Laguna and write in English there is certainly a gap, which is to be appropriately filled to make accurate meaning. Sometimes it is okay with you but others accept an extended or different meaning to it. English is a language that has a linear move. But Indian languages appear to be "talking like in circles" actually thought is structured in accretive bursts.

When you translate into English you get romantic. She is not a feminist she says, but her ideas can make you think and feel so. As has been mentioned earlier, the Laguna culture is a 'mother right' culture. This is difficult for an outsider to understand. She was brought up to believe that women are strong and not silly and weak. But it was mainstream culture that made her aware that women are victims of patriarchal domination. The Native Indian tribes are all different in their cultural practices, yet they don't try to merge. They tolerate each other's presence. Regarding land, they see the mountain for what it is, they see the plains for what it is. Still, they don't expect one to be the other. "We have different consciousnesses, because we have different bodies. We need each other; but only if we recognize the validity of our own way, and therefore the validity of other person's way, are we ever going to be able to actually function together" (*CLC* Vol 84 19). This has helped her in looking at the balance of genders. We need each other if only we see the balance of genders. Laguna God is a woman.

Popular imagination constructs an exotic Indian, and a bicultural identity can represent only a mixed bag of experiences. What the mainstream wants is a romantic, silent and dead Indian. But what Gunn Allen wants is to resist this representation. This is racism where the mainstream sees only what it

wants. The very history of America begins with the Indians. If you write what the mainstream want to hear you are accepted. But she defies erasure. In "Recuerdo" which means recovering, she reflects on her memories. She wants to go back and put together her memories of a tribal past from her tribal consciousness, which she is obsessed with. She reveals a breed's memory and a breed's hope no longer warmed by family campfires, she misses. She realizes her mission since nothing is left behind of an old lost culture. The Natives are bereft of readers. So she maintains parts of her culture and reveals this in her works.

Tomorrow I will go back and climb the endless mesas  
Of my home. I will seek thistles drying in the wind,  
Pocket bright bits of obsidian and fragments  
Old potters left behind (*Shadow Country* 105)

She wants us to trace the Native American experience. And even we understand only the fractured meaning within ourselves.

Translation for Paula Gunn Allen, means translation of myths. In *Shadow Country* she looks at Native American myth and Indian modernism. She tries to unmask the empowering myth of the spider Woman a creative being of her own devising. Spider woman is seen as a Creator not as a victim. Spider woman has control of her life. In the poem "Grandmother" Gunn Allen speaks of a speaker mending a rug that the grandmother made. The grand mother is the spider that weaves the strands/ of her body...into creation. According to Laguna tradition women are foregrounded. The Creator is a Great Mother often identified in English translation as Thought or Thinking woman. She is also called the Grandmother spider. Grandmother spider creates things by thinking of them and naming them. This suggests creation, continuity and preservation. The traditional pueblo practices are division of labour. In pueblo practices, the conventional gender based division of labour is subverted. Works like weaving and story-telling were connected to men and house construction to women. Grandmother spider stands for the female Great Mother. P G Alien is to mend the tear and reweave the gap, regarding the erasure of women and the erasure of traditions. It is difficult to say who predominates- men or women but both are literally interlocked like the warp and the woof in a piece of cloth. She expresses that she has been nursed in a different tribal culture on the Laguna Reservation and has encountered mainstream culture later in life. Hence through her works she relives the rich past:

After her

The women and the men weave blankets into tales of life

Memoirs of light and ladders,

Infinity-eyes, and rain.

After her I sit on my laddered rain bearing rug

And mend the tear with string. (Explicator 1992 Vol 50:4, 247)

Native Indians don't have a sense of chronological time. Time is not linear or chronological for them. So there is a block in understanding of their culture. In the poem "Grandmother" she is reweaving a gap of the tear. Being bicultural she is trying to mend the tear of a lost tradition. Where English is a medium to express Indian culture she is aware of the gap in translating a culture and the thought process involved and is trying to mend the tear. The warp and weft of weaving is strands of Indian and English culture. Both are important but when not understood there are gaps, which make Gunn Allen, feel alienated. Cultural literacy (here in Laguna) is required to be able to translate. Even the collective unconscious comes to the forefront to help her to translate her culture. When you translate a work you put across the riches of that culture. The tribe has norms. But what do those norms mean to her a bicultural identity. There are songs to be sung and dances and language to be learnt and customs to be followed. But then they become meaningless in her personal context because she is unable to be Indian unable not to be Indian. She is not fully at home in both worlds. She expresses her anger, anguish and dislocation more easily than many others. These Native American writers are victims of terrible stresses. They go on a guilt trip of a lost culture and express it in their works. They are victims of forces utterly beyond their control.

Language is a weapon to express the self, caught between two cultures. Through language they try to delve deep into a lost tradition. Paula Gunn Allen in "The Sacred Hoop" says, "Literature must of necessity express and articulate the deepest perceptions, relationships, and attitudes of a culture, whether it does so deliberately or accidentally" (24). Paula Gunn Allen has fixed a mission for herself to make known the unknown Laguna culture and salvage them from erasure. Anthropology does this kind of translation "The problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think... begins to appear largely as one of translation, of making the coherence primitive thought as in the language it really lives in, as clear as possible in



our own. In understanding or translating the “coherence” of primitive thought, says Godfrey Lienhardt, we mediate between their habits of thought, which we have acquired with them, and those of our own society; in doing so, it is not finally some mysterious ‘primitive philosophy’ that we are exploring but the further potentialities of our own thought and language. (Cited in Niranjana 1992 p.69)

Excerpts from mails received from Paula Gunn Allen:

1. Date: Thursday, September 16, 2004 5:49 am

“I’m not Gunn from my mother nor Allen from my father, first off. Spider... means... in two Native American traditions. There are as many Native nations, languages, and traditions (in North America) as there are in all of Asia, China, India, and all the rest including Europe! (which is a part of the Asian Continent, after all). Second, name and blood have nothing in common here. So my name could be Percy Ames Simpson and I could be American Indian of one nation or another. Colonizers change our names. So does marriage. So does.... As William Shakespeare said, “What’s in a name.... A rose by any other would smell as sweet” What should my name be if I was the kind of Indian you think is the correct kind? Maybe Princess Paleface. ....I haven ‘t even BEGUN to scratch the surface about our names... That’s why I and many others have written so many books; to help the people of the world understand.... Thank you for your interest, ....”

Paula Gunn Allen 1184 N. Main St. 12A Ft. Bragg CA 95437  
707.961-1199. shimanna@mcn.org

2. Date: Wednesday, October 6, 2004 6:41 am

“There is no idea that women or men should dominate...or at least that’s true for most Lagunas today. But many individuals can get involved in power struggles within a given family, marriage, or in Pueblo organizations such as the Tribal Council etc. ... One difference between American Indian traditions and others is that we are exhorted to respect the elders and to help them rather than make demands on them.

It is important to remember that the Pueblos have been living side by side with Europeans...first the Spanish then the Anglos ("Americans") for five hundred years, so much that I write is about traditional mores at Keres Pueblos such as Laguna and Acoma. Other pueblos count descent via the father's clan. It is most important to understand that CLAN systems don't work like family systems in any way. This being so the way power is distributed is unlike that in "standard" modern cultures, even in those where clan affiliation is determined by paternal clan ties rather than maternal clan ties. It's all very complex, which is why I write books. .... Sincerely,

Paula Gunn Allen, Emerita Professor 1184 N. Main St. 12A Pt. Bragg CA  
95437 707.961-1199 shimanna@mcn.org

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