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## The Bhagavad-Gita: Lost in Translation?

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# The Researched Argument

*Research in progress for ENGL 2332: World Literature I*

Faculty Mentor: W. Scott Cheney, Ph.D.

The following paper represents work produced by a student in a World Literature I course at Collin College. Students read a selection of texts that survey world literature from the ancient world through the sixteenth century. Because the researched argument requires students to not only read the assigned piece of literature but also to enter into the scholarly conversation about that work in academic journals, successful students like Marie Peteuil find themselves producing advanced writing that shows early preparation for upper-division courses and potential for graduate-level work in the discipline. Students have to analyze and interpret texts on various levels, and this essay represents high-level critical thinking and countless hours of hard work.

Marie Peteuil's essay documents research on the Bhagavad-Gita and contributes her own ideas to the conversation found in those academic articles. Her essay illustrates relevant research on the text while bringing her argument into the contemporary world of translation studies by interrogating common assumptions about translations of well-known texts and revealing the necessity for multiple translations that provide a spectrum of meanings for readers. She also effectively counters common arguments that are suspicious of the need for new translations when others already exist. This paper is not a typical research paper or merely a summary of a famous text; instead, Marie makes an intriguing argument about translations that students and scholars alike will find valuable.

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ENGL 2332

W. Scott Cheney

5 December 2019

### The Bhagavad-Gita: Lost in Translation?

With so many translations of literary classics available today, readers can easily become overwhelmed when trying to pick a translation. Whether an ancient text like the Bible or a more modern text like Shakespeare, there are a multitude of translations in different languages, oftentimes called “modernizations” of text. Sometimes though, translations do not always prove to have the intended meaning of the original piece. One example of this is the Bhagavad-Gita. In Kenneth Valpey’s review of two new translations from 2007 and 2008, he states that “by juxtaposing these two Gita versions...the Bhagavad-Gita becomes situated and resituated in different contexts of readership” (259). In his article, Valpey addresses how comparing translations of the Bhagavad-Gita allows the reader to understand the deeper meanings within the text using different contexts in the translators’ perspectives. These different perspectives challenge readers to ask more questions as they try to understand what the original piece accomplishes, which arguably gives them a deeper understanding of the text. Of course, average readers may not spend the time to look at several translations of the same text, leaving them vulnerable to translations created for personal gain at the expense of the author’s intent. Although some argue newer translations are not beneficial to the reader, more evidence suggests readers who seek out multiple

translations better experience the text's complexities and gain a deeper meaning from the piece.

Many scholars research the importance of translating text, and two important articles demonstrate this academic conversation. One is Urmila Patil's review of a new translation by Gavin Flood and Charles Martin called *The Bhagavad-Gita: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticisms*. Patil's review was published in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* and specifically examines translations by people of various backgrounds. Throughout the article, Patil comments on how these new and different translations allow for distinct understandings of the text due to the experiences of the translator. Patil suggests the translator's background and personal life experiences subconsciously influence how he or she decides to interpret and translate the document. Patil also raises the point that "the Gita was understood not so much through what it brought to the readers as through what the readers brought to it," meaning, the readers are there to tell the story just as much as the authors and translators (165). She believes without the reader, the text itself would not have meaning because its audience helps form that interpretation. Patil argues the importance of different translations in helping the reader to think critically to gain the best possible experience from the piece.

However, Kenneth Valpey's "Found in Translation: Revisiting the Bhagavad-Gita in the 21st Century—A Review Essay" from the *Journal of Hindu Studies* mentions that while there are benefits to different translations, it could also be argued there is no need for the new translations because of the drive to push an agenda or make a profit from existing translations. These political motivations are most evident when he states that "such publications [are seen] as, at best, amusing efforts to interpret the text according

to the translator's personal agenda, or at worst, as a futile misuse of the modern language to crassly ignore the subtleties of the original language, historical context, or philosophical finesse" (Valpey 258). He proposes that reading a translation causes readers to lose some important moments in the original text and that translators today may not be looking at the translation to spread deeper knowledge to a wider audience, but to spread their own views. In other cases, Valpey contends these "translators" use these new translations to easily make a profit, and that in today's society new translations have become more of a commodity instead of the art form they were once considered (259).

One way to address the concerns of Valpey and Patil is to closely analyze the text to understand how the translators' word choices affect the interpretation. There are several ways a reader could go about analyzing the text; however, one way that forces the reader to dig deep for connections is through "The Method" (Rosenwasser and Stephen 25). The Method is a strategy for analyzing a text by looking at repetitions of words or ideas to draw conclusions from them. This allows readers to gain a more thoughtful interpretation of what they are reading. When applied by a reader, this analytical approach may be extremely important in a text like the Bhagavad-Gita due to the age and the religious connections associated with the text. For example, in chapter one of the Bhagavad-Gita, Arjuna states "with the family destroyed, its eternal laws must perish; and when they perish, lawlessness overwhelms the whole family"; "Such intermingling sends to hell its family and its destroyers"; and "It grieves [him] that as [they] intend to murder [their] relatives in [their] greed for pleasures, kingdoms, [they] are fixed on doing evil" (Flood and Martin 8). These three quotations hold many

repetitions of words and ideas in the text. A form of “family” is mentioned four times throughout these excerpts, which suggests the importance of family and culture to Arjuna because of its emphasis throughout the text. Another intriguing repetition in these excerpts is the idea of death, which is first addressed through euphemisms and then in a negative light with the term, “murder.” This repetition is interesting because the first few excerpts sound like something Arjuna was constantly told as a child, yet the final excerpt seems to truly feel like something Arjuna has come to believe on his own.

Though one cannot rely on one section of a text to gain the full meaning of a piece, Valpey encourages his readers to understand how important it is for the reader to look at the text as a whole just as much as looking at individual pieces by saying, “While a ‘fixed’ Sanskrit text is rendered a certain way in one translation, a given verse or the text as a whole might well be rendered differently” (262). In Barbara Stoler Miller’s translation, the same excerpt from chapter one reads, “When the family is ruined, the timeless laws of duty perish; and when duty is lost, chaos overwhelms the family” (26). While there are only a few seemingly minute changes in word choice between the two translations, there are at least seven major differences that potentially evoke divergent meanings and feelings in their audiences. Take, for example, Flood and Martin’s choice to use “eternal laws” while Miller chooses “timeless laws.” Arguably, the difference in word choice is minimal, but eternal holds a more infinite and definite time than timeless does. Venturing out and actively looking for the differences across the translations allows readers to broaden their knowledge of the Bhagavad-Gita to create a more elevated and nuanced knowledge of the text. While the Method usually focuses on one

text, this strategy allows readers to look for deeper meanings and can even lead to more complex comparisons of the two translations.

To fully understand the Bhagavad-Gita, readers need to see varied perspectives to gain more nuanced meanings from the text. Translators with divergent backgrounds (including scholars, teachers, or religious leaders) may have more knowledge about a piece of literature, and looking at translations and supplementary material from them engages readers and allows them to dig deeper. Patil states, “The juxtaposition of these three [translations] is also a subtle reminder that the act of reading a primary text, especially a religious text, must never be an isolated but a complex and continuous hermeneutical process drawing upon external references” (167). Patil means that one cannot fully understand something as complex as the Bhagavad-Gita without gaining background knowledge and reading translations from various sources, highlighting the need for several translations of the document from different perspectives. This claim amplifies the point that different perspectives help the audience gain a better understanding. This is also important because the way one person says something may make more sense to the reader than the way someone else says it, even when they are talking about the same thing. Reading different pieces of text allows the reader to resonate with the text in a way that would not have been possible without the proper translations.

Additionally, because of globalization and modern society, newer translations may provide a more current view of what the text is hoping to accomplish. Miller discusses in her Translator Note that “when encountering the literature of a foreign culture, especially as complex as that of India, our tendency is to make generalizations”

(15). She explains that this tendency provides challenges to the translator to ensure the accuracy of the culture to which the Bhagavad-Gita belongs. When the text was first written, the world was still in its early days of civilization, and without the various technologies available today, most regions of the world were isolated. There was a time when one would not know what was going on in other parts of the world, and early translations of the text may have been more difficult to understand because the reader was not equipped to fully understand the practices of that geographic society. The translations themselves would not have been able to reach a wide audience as they have today either, which hinders other societies from learning from the mistakes and successes of the other cultures. Valpey asserts that “These editions may also speak about how, by its very (re-translated) content, the Gita fosters an aspiration for de-contextualization (or universalization) as an important component of its popularity” (259). The Bhagavad-Gita touches on relevant topics, including the morality of war; however, due to the early isolation of the different regions, that would not have been as easily understood then. Valpey also brings up the point that the English language preserves “dharma, yoga, brahman, as these terms have become established words in the English lexicon and are so multi-faced in their meanings,” which shows just how much globalization can help us to understand each other (262). This new understanding highlights the need for more translations to be made from a perspective that takes into account the society it is catering to.

However, some researchers argue newer translations are not necessary to better understand the text, and instead are only created so the translator can make a profit, whether economic or ideological. This argument comes from the idea that each of the

translations brings the same point across because it is coming from the same original text. They also argue that because the translators are trying to interpret the text based on their “personal agenda,” they are just trying to manipulate the reader into believing their views, which suggests that these translations cannot be considered reliable translations (Valpey 258). However, this is a weak argument since these inferior translations are the exception. Most translations are written by experts and provide more insight into the topics discussed in the text. As Patil states, different translations “offer the readers a diverse and rich interpretive aid in uncovering some significant textual, historical, conceptual, and political layers surrounding the Gita” (167). These aids allow the reader to understand every aspect of the text, not just the basic concepts. While some argue there is not a true need for multiple translations to gain deeper interpretations, this research shows that in the case of the Bhagavad-Gita, it is highly beneficial to look at several translations to ensure the best interpretation of the text is reached.

Reading various translations of a text will equip readers to fully understand the text that they are reading, gaining a more positive experience from the work. Because the Bhagavad-Gita is a historical and religious text, readers who read multiple translations have a better sense of the intricacy of older languages, which can truly only be discovered by repeatedly engaging the same piece of literature. Going back to the differences between Miller and the Flood and Martin translations, readers will see another example of how simple word choice affects the overall experience of the text. For example, Miller’s translation reads “My limbs sink, my mouth is parched, my body trembles, the hair bristles on my flesh” (24), which gives the reader the sense that

Arjuna is tired and weak. However, the Flood and Martin text uses more dramatic language, stating, "I am unstrung; my limbs collapse beneath me, and my mouth is dry, there is trembling in my body, and my hair rises, bristling" (6). While neither translation is wrong, they do emphasize separate points in the text. The Flood and Martin translation emphasizes a mental weakness with "unstrung" that Miller does not address in her translation. This idea is not seen in other translations by Swami P. or Stephen Mitchell; however, in their "translator notes" they describe Arjuna as being astonished, in despair, and full of pity. Therefore, it seems Flood and Martin have chosen to take a creative license with their translation, inserting their analysis of the character directly into the translation. Had the reader only read the Flood and Martin version, they would miss this important discrepancy. Multiple translations give readers the opportunity to dig deeper into the literature, to grasp the original meanings better, and to better understand the cultures that are unfamiliar to them.

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