



Padma Rangarajan

# Imperial Babel

Translation, Exoticism, and the Long Nineteenth Century

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LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

Padma Rangarajan

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Imperial Babel

## PREFACE

On a spring morning in 1816, a Malay unexpectedly wanders into the Lake District and Thomas de Quincey's Grasmere cottage. It is a delicate moment for the author, who fears that the exotic stranger's presence might alert the neighbors to his "Eastern" vice of opium eating. Baffled, and initially unable to communicate with his mysterious visitor, de Quincey finally hits on a solution: "my knowledge of the Oriental tongues is not remarkably extensive . . . [a]nd, as I had n[o] Malay dictionary . . . I addressed him in some lines from the *Iliad*; considering that, of such languages as I possessed, Greek, in point of longitude, came geographically nearest to an Oriental one. He worshipped me in a most devout manner, and replied in what I suppose was Malay."<sup>1</sup> Choosing as his communicative medium a text that recounts the domination of a powerful Eastern empire by its Western counterpart, de Quincey records the Malay's response as one of immediate, appropriate submission: in other words, as an excellent translation.

Several years before de Quincey's fateful encounter in the Lake District, *Asiatic Researches*, the publication of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, published *An Account of the Jains*, the first translated oral history of Jain practices. Its translator was one "Cavelly Boria," now recognized as Kaveli Venkata Borriah, one of three brothers working for Colonel Colin Mackenzie, a British surveyor and orientalist in Madras.<sup>2</sup> Although Mackenzie referred to the brothers somewhat dismissively as his "assistants," The Kavelis had a tremendous influence on Madras orientalists—Venkata's brother Lakshmaiah became the first Indian to be admitted to the Madras Literary Society—and *An Account of the Jains* is considered to be one of the earliest extant examples of Indian writing in English.<sup>3</sup> But Kaveli's role as translator

did not always survive his work's reproduction. An 1811 reprint of *An Account of the Jains* credits Mackenzie with "furnishing" the account, neatly sidestepping the issue of translation altogether, and even the original publication does not permit Kaveli full narrative control. Instead, H. T. Colebrooke, eminent orientalist and frequent contributor, paratextually informs the *Asiatic Researches* reader that "[t]he language of this translation has been *corrected*," presumably by himself.<sup>4</sup> Although the relationship between the Kaveli brothers and their British counterparts reveals productive and often-unacknowledged collaborations between native and European scholars, it also attests to the ways in which indigenous knowledge was required to don the carapace of Western annotation.

More recently, in 2006, Basim Mardan, an Iraqi writer and librarian, wrote a piece for the *New York Times* entitled "Lost after Translation," documenting his flight from the Middle East after he was threatened while working as an interpreter for coalition forces. Mardan remembers the moment he realized his life was in jeopardy as a chilling moment of translative misinterpretation. During a routine interrogation an Iraqi prisoner tells him, "You are all going to be killed," and Mardan recalls, "I thought he was referring to the Americans until he said, 'No I mean you.'"<sup>5</sup> With his translative work considered treasonous, and with little to no help from his employer, Mardan was forced to flee Baghdad after a series of escalating threats.<sup>6</sup> As the United States rushes to disengage from its multiple global conflicts, the ongoing travails of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani translators reveal the very real consequences of a discursive act that Lawrence Venuti has termed "the translator's invisibility," the fluency with which the translator vanishes behind the translated text, rendering the crucial act of translation unseen and, consequently, easily forgotten.<sup>7</sup>

These three stories, ranging across space and time, reveal a truth so obvious that it is perilously overlooked: that at the heart of every colonial encounter lies an act of translation. Translation has traditionally been assigned a secondary position in the literary marketplace as a derivative and, ideally, veiled process; contemporary copyright laws and publishing houses treat translation as adaptive and, unlike creative authorship, as merely "work made for hire."<sup>8</sup> Imperial conflicts (and the cultural encounters they necessarily engender) reveal its truer function as a locus of power. They do not create a new translative paradigm; rather, they illumine its persistent urgency. Translation in

the empire steps out of the shadows, however fleetingly, to allow us to consider its real political and cultural consequences.

*Imperial Babel* critiques the intellectual discourse of the British Empire by examining the role of translation in relation to colonial literature and policy in the nineteenth century. Recognizing translation as a fundamental colonial praxis, I argue that the intellectual exchange between East and West stimulated by eighteenth-century translations of Eastern texts into European languages compels a reconsideration of the history of orientalist studies and its relationship to nineteenth-century British culture, as translation's persistent presence in colonial literature allows us new insight into its complex cultural aftereffects. In reinstating translation's place at the heart of imperial exchange, this book suggests that the British colonial experience was haunted by the fate of what was considered, in nineteenth-century biblical historiography, the first world empire: that "city of confusion" symbolized by its unfinished tower. As the British sifted through an ever-expanding tangle of languages, customs, and people, their translative policies undergirded a central question: what kind of empire was this to be? The biblical Babel was corrupt and despotic, a tyrannical homogeneity undone by divine wrath into linguistic multiplicity. As the British self-consciously began trying to ensure that theirs would be an empire for the good, they debated what they considered the obvious benefits of English versus its possible corruption and corrupting effects, keenly aware that the language that might unite the empire could also be its undoing.

In considering the production of translation in social rather than strictly formal terms, *Imperial Babel* is indebted to recent developments in translation studies that have opened the field to new cultural and historical considerations. This move has opened space for a critique of translation's function in the empire, revealing exchanges of power and knowledge long neglected, demanding we take into account the terms under which translations are produced. It is, for example, surely helpful to know that Colin Mackenzie was not merely a surveyor but also an officer in the East India Company who took part in the storming of Seringapatam (Srirangapattinam) in 1799, the military victory that effectively secured South India for the British. The current interest in translation's semantic fluidity, however, also compels us to consider the ways in which translations (and their reception) may prove resistant to the conditions of their production. It

is this negotiation of context and meaning, history and language, that forms the basis of my study.

While the new emphasis on historical condition has spurred invaluable studies of translation in the postcolony, this research too often adopts a reductive view of nineteenth-century colonial translation, an oversight that contradicts current scholarly interest in an emergent imperial Romanticism whose complexities are still in the process of being traced. By merging this revitalized interest in the complexities of nineteenth-century colonialism with the theoretical shifts of translation studies, *Imperial Babel* argues that we have not yet taken colonial translation under serious consideration. Thus I consider translation theory, colonial projects that engaged questions of translation, and the integration (through narrative and paratext) of translation into colonial fiction. Searching for translation's trace enables both a broader, more complex understanding of the work of translation in imperial culture as well as a more nuanced understanding of the dialectical relationship between colonial policy and nineteenth-century fiction.

*Imperial Babel* is a story told from multiple perspectives: political, linguistic, and literary. These are not treated as separate fields of study but as a dense network through which Britain's territorial outposts—primarily India, in this instance—came to be defined and represented. Early colonial history requires this kind of thick reading, as the men and women who ventured out to administer these colonies often played multiple, seemingly incompatible roles as bureaucrats, linguists, ethnographers, missionaries, and poets (or as travel writers, reformists, and brides). This confluence of administrative, ideological, and aesthetic purposes resulted in a potent relationship between theory and practice: translation helped shape the administrative and imaginative course of empire, and the (translated) intellectual fruits of conquest helped direct European theories of language and culture. Reflecting the results of this symbiosis, literature plays a crucial role as both repository and crucible for the real and imagined translation of the colonial periphery to the metropole.

Because of my focus on translation's conceptual dissemination, I structure *Imperial Babel* around a series of argumentative nodes. The project begins in the late eighteenth century, when new linguistic theories established the role of place and time in the evolution of languages, recasting translation as a vital but possibly treacherous mode of cultural transformation. Translation thus conceived was



initially aligned with colonial governance, but the two soon diverged. Tracing the history of orientalist translation through the nineteenth century, I track how shifting colonial policies and an increasing resistance toward certain modes of colonial translation reflected a growing unease with translation's cultural implications. Romantic colonial translation was primarily one of Eastern texts into European languages, but the shift over the century to the translation of Western texts into Eastern languages raised crucial concerns over the possibility and desirability of colonial cosmopolitanism. Could the British make Englishmen out of the world? Or would the world end up corrupting Britishness?

While my focus is on British orientalists and authors, the stories of the Kaveli brothers and Basim Mardan demonstrate the indivisibility of these kinds of narratives from any account of imperial knowledge production. Translation naturally lends itself to collaboration, but it also hews to dominant modes of power. If, as successive chapters demonstrate, the processes of colonial translation may have resisted the political conditions that produced them, then the reactions of British and (especially) native readers to these translations proved even more unpredictable. This book cannot hope to comprehensively address the role of native collaborators and assistants and their diverse responses (both translative and political) to colonial translative practice, but it does gesture to the inherently discursive—even when appropriative—nature of translation, which, even more than original writing, demands an audience.

In order to demonstrate the evolving nature of imperial knowledge acquisition, the project is roughly divided into two parts: the second and third chapters focus largely on the early nineteenth century and the final two chapters explore the legacy of Romantic orientalism in the Victorian period.

My first chapter situates the idea of translation theoretically and historically in the late eighteenth century, when the emergence of comparative linguistics changed the way people thought about language, translation, and culture. This new linguistics had a symbiotic relationship to colonial expansion, as evinced by the crucial role of translation in both. As translations in hitherto indecipherable languages became available to a European audience, fiction set in the East demonstrated a preoccupation with translation that was manifested in both narrative and paratext. Drawing on Gottfried von Herder's theory of "radical difference," or fundamental human diversity, I use

this early linguistic history to critique contemporary postcolonial responses to nineteenth-century translation and to situate translation in relation to that paradigmatic site of colonial intellectual power: the imperial archive.

The second chapter offers a transvalued theory of exoticism as an alternative discourse to Saidian orientalism. I argue that pseudotranslated oriental tales—works of fiction that, bolstered with scholarly paratext, assume the guise of real translations—constitute a genre whose multifaceted and complex response to the East has not been fully acknowledged. Looking at three such texts—William Beckford's *Vathek* (1789), Robert Southey's *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), and Lord Byron's *The Giaour* (1815)—I consider the ways in which these tales are in dialogue not only with varying representations of the East but also with each other. Through their discourse we can trace the rise and inevitable decay of Romantic exoticism.

The potential radicalism of the oriental tale may, as I argue in the third chapter, exist even more advantageously in its more elusive counterpart, the oriental novel. My analysis of two of these novels, Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary* (1811) and Phebe Gibbes's *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789), examines how interracial romance is used as an allegorical framework through which to consider the efficacy of cultural translation. In these novels' shared interest in both spiritual and subjective transformation—which I identify as a Romantic *meta-noia*—they illumine the larger problems of cultural translation that gripped the subcontinent during the education debates of the early nineteenth century.

The fourth chapter considers the changing dynamics of nineteenth-century orientalist scholarship through an examination of two of its most famous translators: Sir William Jones and Max Müller. Because Jones was the most famous and influential of the early orientalist translators, his work is increasingly a site of ideological controversy as critics wrestle with his legacy as both imperial administrator and Anglo-Indian aesthete. Using his poetry, particularly the *Hindoo Hymns*, for insight into both his translative and administrative policies, I argue that this literature is the crucial bridge between the seeming opposition between his aesthetics and politics. In the wake of Jones, as British exoticism seemed to vanish in the face of Victorian imperial triumph, I uncover its aftereffects in the late nineteenth-century orientalism of Max Müller. Few literary scholars have ever written about Müller, even though his research into the roots of Aryanism

had a profound impact on Victorian culture. My analysis focuses on Müller's attempts to revive an earlier orientalist interest in Indian culture during an era of deep cultural and racial suspicion, and on the influence of his and Jones's work in two of the blockbusters of Victorian poetry: Edward FitzGerald's *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859) and Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879).

As Chapter 4 traces how the anthropological borders excavated by both Jones and Müller narrowed over time, the fifth chapter focuses on the evolving discomfort over the implications of cultural translation. As the nineteenth century progressed, colonial translation moved away from an aesthetic cosmopolitanism to focus increasingly on the effects of cultural pollution and “bad” translation, or mimicry. Setting Elizabeth Hamilton's *The Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1798) against Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books* (1894) and F. Anstey's *Babu Hurree Bungsho Jaberjee, B.A.* (1898), I argue that the hybrid figure of the “baboo”—an Indian who mimics British customs and mannerisms—appears as a representative of unease over the translation of Britishness and its possible pollution as it came into contact with colonial cultures. Westernized natives are often characterized as “funky”—cowards, in nineteenth-century parlance—but they are also unsettling, and their racial, linguistic funkiness presents an unnerving challenge to the fantasies of British cultural supremacy that I examine in these novels and, in an epilogue, in a brief sampling of colonial lexicons.

With these chapters I hope to rewrite the history of colonial translation in light of its diffuse cultural aftereffects. In doing so, I also recalibrate our understanding of the dynamics of Romantic imperialism, as well as the relationship between early and late nineteenth-century orientalist translation. Translation and adaptation are more complex than a simple act of appropriation, as the nineteenth-century British writer, translating other cultures into English, must wrestle with how England may itself be transformed. Throughout the book, I emphasize translation's role as a form of mediation between two languages and cultures that is irreducible to either celebration or condemnation. We must bear witness to the violence on the ground that underwrites translation in colonial spaces, but we should also remain open to the irresolution of translation, its unfixed nature, and its ability to transform the colonizer as well as the colonized, the translated language and the translator's language.

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CHAPTER ONE

# Translation's Trace

Say what one will of the inadequacy of translation, it remains one of the most important and valuable of concerns in the whole of world affairs

J. W. VON GOETHE TO THOMAS CARLYLE

[T]hou didst inherit  
My true sense (for the time then) in my spirit;  
And I, inuisible, went prompting thee,  
To those fayre Greenes where thou didst english me

GEORGE CHAPMAN, *Euthymiae Raptus*

Let us begin by returning briefly to that meeting in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* between de Quincey and the Malay. It is an episode commonly critiqued for the dubious gift of opium the author bestows on his exotic guest, but as I've already suggested, thinking critically about de Quincey's wielding of *The Iliad* reveals a scene whose negotiation of power is as dependent on linguistic signification as it is on psychotropics. Opium eating brings the Englishman and Malay into uncomfortable proximity, but Greek acts as both a bridge between opposing cultures and a signifier of vast and impenetrable distance. De Quincey's decision to use *The Iliad* seems like the arcane whim of an overenthusiastic classical scholar, but his argument for Greek's geographical and thus linguistic mediality echoed the emergent linguistic theories of the period that form the subject of this chapter.

Searching for translation's trace in literary history, as in this moment from *Confessions*, is an elusive task. And it is a practice that seems particularly antithetical to our assumptions of Romanticism's privileging of spontaneity and originality. The most famous pronouncement on translation in the Romantic era is Percy Shelley's comparison of the inefficacy of poetic translation to the alchemic impossibility of deriving the properties of a violet from a crucible: a harsh axiomatic

summation of translation's perceived impotency.<sup>1</sup> Yet British Romanticism was not only materially dependent on translation, it was also witness to a revolution in language that placed translation at the center of an ongoing debate over the changing definitions of authorship, language, imagination, and culture. Locating that history not only provides a crucial backdrop for the developing politics of translation during the period but also allows us to contextualize contemporary theorizations of the relationship between translation and colonization to which this chapter later returns. A full accounting of the Romantic language revolution is beyond the scope of this study, but a brief consideration of its origin and influences is vital to understanding the period's engagement with questions of national culture and history.

#### RADICAL DIFFERENCE

George Steiner's seminal study of translation, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, identifies four eras of translation. The first, which he associates with the codification of translation technique, begins in antiquity and ends with the publication of the most comprehensive study of translation principles in English: Alexander Fraser Tytler Woodhouselee's *Treatise on the Principles of English Translation* (1791). The second period, which Steiner identifies with the philosophizing of translation, runs through the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth. The third and fourth, from the 1940s–1960s and from the 1960s until the present, are concerned with machine translation and then a reversion to hermeneutic studies of translation, respectively. Complicating Steiner's epochal scale, studies like Mary Helen McMurrin's *The Spread of Novels . . . in the Eighteenth Century* usefully reveal the scale and complexity of translative theory in the eighteenth century, a period of conflicting and overlapping theories of language that coalesced around attempts to discover a universal grammar and a pre-Babelian language of Men.<sup>2</sup> This refinement of Steiner's broad generalizations does not, however, conflict with his assessment that the late eighteenth century witnessed a "decisive turn in language studies."<sup>3</sup>

This "decisive turn" meant moving away from theories of linguistic universality toward ones emphasizing linguistic difference. In England, this approach was most famously championed in Horne Tooke's *The Diversions of Purley* (1786). Tooke espoused a materialist philosophy that reduced language to essential verbs and nouns as the



signifiers of sensory experience, and claimed that through etymological research the corruptions of language could be stripped away to reveal their original purity.<sup>4</sup> The influence of Tooke's language theories on radical politics is the subject of ongoing critical interest but by the mid-nineteenth century the mechanics (if not the philosophy) of Tookian empiricism had been debunked by comparative linguistics, a theory closely aligned with German intellectualism, particularly the work of Johann Herder, Wilhelm Humboldt, and Friedrich von Schlegel.<sup>5</sup> Hans Aarsleff, author of the influential *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, argues that the popularity of Tooke's materialism essentially blocked the spread of comparative linguistics to Britain until the 1830s, after which Tooke's influence waned and this new linguistic theory was finally accepted. In contrast, this chapter demonstrates how Aarsleff's linear teleology simplifies important connections between Tookian empiricism and German comparatism and underestimates the (albeit indirect) influence that comparative philologists had on British Romantic culture.

Of those many early comparative linguists, Herder deserves special notice because his theory of language was distilled into his other, broadly influential musings on politics, theology, and literature. Upending the popular Enlightenment theorization of "ideas" as the origin of meaning (in John Locke's work, for example), Herder proffered a quasi-empirical theory of linguistics that, quite radically, posited language as a prerequisite for thought: meaning now resided in word usage, whose careful study was a prerequisite for both a faithful and emotive textual interpretation. Dismissing the universality of David Hume and Voltaire, Herder argued instead that language arose organically from particular geographical and historical conditions and, accordingly, varied widely across time and space: in a typical argument he insisted that because the economy of the "Hebrews" was heavily dependent on livestock, their vocabulary was intrinsically more bucolic and rich "in names of natural things" than the more mercantilist German.<sup>6</sup> Because thoughts were now guided by a language formed from reactions to a particular time and space, Herder's recognition of language difference expanded to posit a fundamental human diversity, or "radical difference," which filtered down into his and his followers' subsequent theories of history, ethnology, and nationalism. Radical difference was central to Herder's understanding of essential (i.e., etymologically provable) linguistic and, in turn, cultural divergence. As language became, in effect, the key to cultural