

Translation, Orientalism and Virtuality: English and French translations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Śakuntalā* 1784-1884

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ABSTRACT

For decades, Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* has been at the forefront of the study of East-West cultural encounter. Said draws mostly on novels, travel accounts, anthropological documents and similar writings to explore the discursive consolidation of texts that acquire power to represent the Orient. Translation, which is the primal site of exchange between Western Orientalists and the East, is rather treated as a given concept, and no substantial theoretical consideration is developed in Said's work to explain the critical role of translation in Orientalism. A number of studies on translation and its relations to Orientalism have tackled the issue from different angles, mostly showing a degree of skepticism towards the political overtone of postcolonial discourse; for example, Figueira (1991) and Cannon (1990). The political and ideological implication of Orientalism in the practice of translation tends to be interpreted in terms of Lawrence Venuti's polarising paradigm of 'domestication' in which the original's features are 'distorted' due to the translator's appropriation of the original, or 'foreignisation' in which translator makes the text appear alien and remote. The absence of critical studies of the concept of Orientalism in translation, or for that matter of the relationship between Edward Said's notion of Orientalism and translation, means there is a lack of clarity regarding Orientalist translation. Furthermore, while postcolonial translation theory may provide a useful paradigm for reading power relations in the translations between hegemonic and subordinate cultures, it has largely overlooked an important issue raised by Said in *Orientalism*, namely the notion of the institutionalisation of knowledge, a significant factor to why the discursive representation of the Orient acquires power through institutionally certified knowledge.

The present thesis proposes a new concept called 'Virtuality' to explain the phenomenon of Orientalist translation in the late eighteenth to nineteenth century. 'Virtuality' is a concept that entails the notion of potentiality, or virtual reality, virtue and power. Drawing on the notion of 'sufficiency', it throws light on translation in Orientalism as a process that seeks to produce a version that has sufficient virtue to represent, or even replace, the original. Virtuality means there is no need for direct contact with the East, as the mediation by Orientalists proves them to be adequate proxies. In this thesis, virtuality is applied to the study of English and French translations of two well-known Sanskrit literary works — the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and *Śakuntalā* — from 1784 to 1884. The methodological tools deployed in this thesis to highlight the virtuality of translation in Orientalism are taken from Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts namely symbolic capital, symbolic power, distinction and misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), Gérard Genette's paratextuality and Allan Bell's audience design. This set of methodological tools taken from sociology, linguistics,

intertextuality and sociolinguistics, provides a new reading of Orientalist translation which emphasises the process whereby Orientalists struggle for legitimacy in representing the Orient in their translations.

KEYWORDS: British and French orientalism, Edward W. Said, nineteenth-century imperialism, orientalism, paratextuality, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, postcolonial translation theory, Sanskrit literature in translation, systemic functional grammar.

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