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Going Beyond Translation: The Transcreation and Cultural Reimagining of The Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

This paper examines a transcreation of The Bhagavad Gita in The Legend of Bagger Vance, a novel by Stephen Pressfield (1995) and a Hollywood film (2000). The novel's plot presents an adaptive appropriation of the Gita: recontextualized within a game of Golf, it seems to imbue the Gita with various creative interventions. Pressfield's novel was eventually made into a film by Robert Redford, starring Will Smith, Matt Damon and J. Michael Moncrief. It is possible to look at processes of textual transfers in two ways: on the one hand, they show the transfer of texts across cultures and languages, which has been commonplace in postcolonial times and in multilingual cultures like the Indian subcontinent. On the other hand, they also show the transformation, perhaps even the watering down, of a significant, philosophical and scriptural text like the Gita into a casual, playful work. At best, LoBV emerges as a creatively re-contextualized, parabolic work. At the same time, it also raises questions about the nature of textual transfer, the presence of the transferer in the text, and the rebirth of texts in varied contexts. To observe these issues, the paper will be divided into three parts: the first part overviews Ramanujan's theory of retelling; the second part discusses the presence of that theory in the context of the Gita and its transcreated version, exemplified in LoBV; and the third part offers our considerations.

Keywords: The Bhagavad Gita, textual transfers, translation, transcreation, culture, multilingual, Indian subcontinent

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Introduction

The concepts of translation and transcreation are central to the movement of texts across cultural, linguistic, and temporal boundaries, demonstrating how narratives resonate with new audiences while preserving their "original" content.[1] It becomes important at the outset to clarify how these terms are presumed in this paper. Translation, while focusing on linguistic fidelity, attempts to convey the exact meaning of the source text in the target language, whereas transcreation implicitly includes cultural adaptation and creative reimagining, especially in literary and mythological works. As texts cross boundaries, they encounter diverse interpretative frameworks, often leading to shifts in meaning, tone, or emphasis. Mutating between translation and transcreation, textual transfers enrich the narrative through their fluidity, but they also raise critical questions about fidelity, authenticity, and the potential for misrepresentation.

Why and how do texts like *The Bhagavad Gita* transform as they are transferred to other languages and cultures? With focus on the English *Gita* (Patton, 2008), how does it stand when juxtaposed to a transcreation in the form of a Hollywood film, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000)? Even as the *Gita* becomes more accessible to the global, postmodern, (or American) reader (or viewer, in this case), what happens to its contextual content, philosophical depth, and representational value in its transfer? To address these questions, this paper will examine the processes of textual transfers in a multilingual culture in the Indian subcontinent, noticing its distinction from other western or non-multilingual milieux.

Placed within the field of Translation Studies, it examines the two "texts" – the English translation of the *Gita* (Patton, 2008) and the Hollywood film, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) – through the understanding of textual transfer as presented by A.K. Ramanujan and other scholars. The paper uses the methodology of comparing Laurie Patton's English translation of the *Gita* with the film LoBV, and draws out the transcreative aspects in the latter. The paper is divided into three parts: the first part overviews Ramanujan's theory of retelling; the second part discusses presence of that theory in the context of the *Gita* and its transcreated version, exemplified in LoBV; and the third part offers our considerations.

The significance of this study is two-fold. On the one hand, it offers a perspective to view transfers of Indian texts like the *Gita* into English as processes that occur commonly in a multilingual milieu. And secondly, it presents a dialectic that shows the transferred text as drawing closer to the contemporary, global reader, as well as breaking away from the "original" textual context.

1. Textual transfers in the Indian context

[1] The notion of an "original" text is contentious, particularly in the traditions of oral literature, where texts are passed orally through generations. It is also contentious in Translation Studies when texts are interpreted individually and conveyed through a different language. Hence, "original" will be used within inverted commas.

In the case of sacred or philosophical texts like *The Bhagavad Gita*, John Barton (2022) makes a comment that could be applied to both, the Bible and the *Gita*: Scripture, he says, has been encountered almost entirely in languages other than those in which it was written, and its translators have been among the principal agents in mediating its message to readers and hearers, even in shaping what that message is (7). In fact, in the case of the *Gita*, Dorothy Figuera (2023) has shown how, when reading its English rendering, the element of its translation is completely overlooked.

When texts from the Indian subcontinent are reinterpreted for western/non-Indian audiences, as in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, they carry traces of their "original" cultural and ideological contexts but in a considerably altered, perhaps even watered down, form. Such transformations provoke an examination of those traces, seldom evident in ethical considerations, plot, structure, characterization or various culture-specific constructs. In other words, the processes of transfer illuminate broader issues in inter-cultural communication, such as the tension between preserving the source culture's integrity on the one hand, while also making the text accessible and meaningful to a global audience, on the other.

In this regard, Ramanujan (1991) and other scholars like Leavitt (2006), Gopinathan (2006), and Trivedi (1993) among others, have expounded upon the differentness in the processes and forms of translation within a multilingual culture, particularly when compared with monolingual ones. They write about the "rebirth" of works when they are transferred across languages and regions. They also discuss how linguistic transfers and creative interventions are inevitable in textual traditions, specifically oral traditions, in the multilingual subcontinent.

Within such scholarship, Ramanujan's theory of "retelling" of stories as a cultural practice highlights the multiple versions of Indian epics, where each version reflects the teller's context while attempting to preserve the story itself. His view that "there is no original *Ramayana*", but only various retellings of it (Ramanujan, 1991), validates the presence of transfers inherent in the Indian narrative tradition, which values storytelling as a dynamic, creative, and response-oriented act. This theory could apply seamlessly to the *Mahabharata* as well. Ramanujan's essay claims that retelling is an expected offshoot of textual transfers in multilingual cultures. If viewed thus, retellings make creative interventions – both linguistic and contextual – ordinary. Trivedi, reiterating this view, asserts a starkly different model of translation in a multilingual milieu for Translation Studies to consider (2006, 106). In the introduction to *Postcolonial Translation* (1999), Trivedi uses a brilliant metaphor to describe translation in the Indian multilingual context: a re-formational act of textual transfer is "comparable perhaps with the process by which an ancient banyan tree sends down branches which then in turn take root all around it and comprise an intertwined family of trees" (10). In a multilingual environment, therefore, the boundaries between texts and their (creatively) transferred forms begin to blur like the banyan and its roots.

Further, Ramanujan also discusses repetition of stories as speech acts that create a pattern in Indian literature: "I'd suggest that the central structuring principle of the epic is a certain kind of repetition. What occurs only once does not allow us to talk of structure" (1991,421). Extending Ramanujan's ideas of patterns and structure to textual transfers, scholars such as Richman (1991) and Leavitt (2006) note that stories are repeated in their transmission and reborn into new versions when retold.

Since retelling is intrinsic to multilingual culture, Ramanujan goes on to argue that each retelling, even as it differs from the "original," is shaped by its cultural, linguistic, and temporal contexts, creating multiple, yet equally valid, versions of a single story. Retelling, which can occur when the teller has internalized the story, allows re-imagining it through the lens of experiences, cultural contexts, and linguistic metaphors. This process ensures that the narrative not only resonates with its new audiences/readers as well as with its source text, but also reflects the individuality of the teller/transferer, thus making each retelling a unique act of creation.

In a similar fashion, multiple versions of the same story are evident within the *Mahabharata* too. For instance, the epic is presented as retold by Sage Vaishampayana, a disciple of Ved Vyasa. Vaishampayana's version, recited at the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya, highlights the layered nature of Indian narratives: it is not the direct version from Vyasa but one filtered through Vaishampayana's interpretation. This recursive storytelling underscores Ramanujan's idea that narratives are not fixed but inherently adaptable, allowing storytellers to emphasize themes relevant to their audience (1999). However, such retellings carry both benefits and risks. Vaishampayana's creative intervention brought the *Mahabharata* closer to its audience by tailoring it to the cultural significance of Janamejaya's context. Yet, this retelling likely diverged from Vyasa's original composition, illustrating how creative liberties can also distance a narrative from its source.

2. Translation Studies, *The Bhagavad Gita*, and *The Legend of Bagger Vance*

Etymologically, the term transcreation merges "translation" and "creation" together. David Katan explains transcreation as 'innovative intervention designed to maximize impact while closely recreating the underlying essence and feel of the original' (Carreira, 498-499). That is, transcreations are innovative, creative approaches to a textual transfer, and are designed with the intention to increase impact. At the same time, they retain some trace of the "original" (Dsouza, 2024). So, though the transcreator's creativity is visible in the transcreation, the "original" text is also evident in it, even if partially veiled. Transcreation is different from translation, in that transcreation calls for creativity and innovation in the transfer of the text. It is a trans-disciplinary, multidimensional activity coexisting with linguistic transfer, and present in various cultural disciplines. Unlike an equivalent, exact translation, a transcreation takes an imaginative leap through the reader-interpreter's comprehension, personal contexts and unconventional connotations.

Stretching Ramanujan's notion further, retellings are more than acts of repetition that create a pattern; retellings are creative reinterpretations that could be perceived as allowing stories to remain relevant in their addressing of socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts of their audiences. Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have been retold countless times in diverse forms, as they still are. Consider the classical Sanskrit plays by Kalidasa (circa 5th century CE) or modern feminist interpretations like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). These retellings incorporate regional influences too, such as the Tamil poet Kamban's *Kamba Ramayanam* (circa 12th century), which adds a Dravidian perspective to the *Ramayana*, or Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* (circa 16th century), which adapts the *Ramayana* into the Awadhi dialect and the devotional Bhakti tradition (Richman, 1991).

Similarly, *The Bhagavad Gita* too has inspired many, as it gets transferred, adapted and appropriated. One notable example is Steven Pressfield's *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, a novel and subsequent film that transcreates *The Bhagavad Gita* into the setting of 1920s America, framing it within the world of golf. Here, the spiritual guidance of Lord Krishna is embodied in the character of Bagger Vance (an alteration of the Indian word "Bhagavan" or God), a mystical caddy who helps the protagonist, Ranulph Junah (or R. Junah, which is an alteration of the name Arjuna), rediscover his purpose and inner peace. By embedding the *Gita's* central themes of dharma (often understood as duty) and self-realization into a modern narrative, Pressfield demonstrates how transcreation allows ancient wisdom to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries. This adaptation could be viewed in two ways at least: on the one hand, it can be perceived as diminishing the *Gita*'s message by appropriating it to a sport; on the other hand, it could also be perceived as exemplifying how the tradition of retelling through transcreation ensures the relevance of canonical texts by re-imagining their messages in ways that resonate with contemporary or international sensibilities.

The plot could be summarized thus: A golf pro, R. Junah, is made to confront the demons that haunt him by forcing him into a situation wherein he is forced to return to the game. This also reignites his passion for the woman he once loved but abandoned. Eventually, he finds his golf game, consequently affirming his moral center. But he does not do any of it alone. Complicit in his redemptive and re-conciliatory sojourn is the mysterious Bagger Vance, an unshaven nomadic man who appears out of nowhere in the middle of the night, offering his services as a caddie for merely $5 a day and a pair of R. Junah's old golf shoes. The golf match, hyped up to parallel the war in *Gita*, ends in a gentlemanly three-way tie, and Bagger Vance leaves as mysteriously as he came.

The parallels between the novel/film and the *Gita* are quite evident. Note these citations from the novel:

> "Consider the swing itself," he said. "Its existence metaphorically, I mean. It has no objective reality of its own, no existence at all save when our bodies create it, and yet who can deny that it exists, independently of our bodies, as if on another plane of reality."

> "Am I hearing you right sir?... Are you equating the swing with the soul, with the Authentic Soul?"
>
> "I prefer the word Self," Bagger Vance said. "The Authentic Self. I believe this is the reason for the endless fascination of golf. The game is a metaphor for the soul's search for its true ground and identity... The search for the Authentic Swing is a parallel to the search for the Self." (Pressfield, 69-70)

Similarly, the *Gita* states:

> The self is not born nor does it ever die. Once it has been, this self will never cease to be again. Unborn, eternal, continuing from the old, the self is not killed when the body is killed. (*The Bhagavad Gita*, 2: 20)

Bagger Vance, the mystical guide in the story, embodies Krishna's role as the spiritual mentor, offering wisdom that is deeply rooted in the teachings of the *Gita*. For instance, Vance's emphasis on finding the "authentic swing" parallels Krishna's guidance on discovering one's true purpose or dharma. Just as Krishna teaches Arjuna to transcend his doubts and focus on his duty without attachment to the fruits of his actions, Vance advises R. Junah to play the game with a focus on the present moment and inner alignment rather than external outcomes. Vance also explains the cause for confusion, quite like Krishna does in the *Gita*:

> "Over time," Bagger says, "the world can rob us of that swing. It gets buried inside us, in all our wouldas, couldas and shouldas."(LoBV, the film, 00:50:42) [2]

Again, the *Gita* states:

> The Self, confused by the idea of an 'I', thus thinks, 'I am the doer.' (*The Bhagavad Gita*, 3: 27)

Following Krishna's advice to Arjuna, Bagger Vance turns the game field and the golf course into the battlefield of R. Junah's life. As Vance implies, and as the *Gita* makes clear, one must overcome conditioning by gaining mastery over the mind, senses and memories. The *Gita* says,

> For the one who has conquered the self by the self, the self is a friend. For the one who has not, the self would be in rivalry, like an enemy. (*The Bhagavad Gita*, 6.5-6)

According to the *Gita*, Arjuna must learn to conquer his Self in order to attain victory. According to LoBV, Bagger Vance encourages R. Junah to overcome his internal conflicts and align his mind, body, and spirit, mirroring Krishna's discourse on self-control and equanimity. Similar to Arjuna, R. Junah also has two choices: "to float along with the material conception of life, or to swim upstream to spiritual enlightenment" (Segrave, 2021). Vance encourages R. Junah to embrace the latter when he says "Time for you to come out of the shadows, Junah" (LoBV, the film, 01:40:49), indicating which choice he wants him to take.

[2] Quotations from the movie are cited as hour, minute and second. So, in this case for instance, the citation occurs in the film at 0 hour, 50 minutes and 42 seconds.

Furthermore, Vance goes on to explain that the game of golf is a reflection of life itself, quite like the Gita where war is a reflection of the battle of life. LoBV echoes the *Gita's* holistic worldview that every action, when performed with awareness and detachment, automatically leads to a path of spiritual development (*The Bhagavad Gita*, 18.10).

The Legend of Bagger Vance thus exemplifies *The Bhagavad Gita* through its philosophical underpinnings and character dynamics, interchanging the teachings of Krishna and Arjuna into a modern context. Bagger Vance represents Krishna, the divine guide, who aids R. Junah, a representation of Arjuna, in overcoming his inner turmoil and rediscovering his purpose. The line, "You ain't alone in this, Junuh. I'm right here with ya. I've been here all along" (01:41:05), mirrors Krishna's constant reassurance to Arjuna, emphasizing the eternal presence of divine guidance and inner strength:

> With your mind on me, be devoted to me; sacrifice to me, and bow with reverence to me. Joined in this way, with me as the highest goal - you will come to me alone. (*The Bhagavad Gita*, 9.34)

The golf course serves as a metaphorical Kurukshetra, where R. Junah confronts his fears and self-doubt, reflecting Arjuna's struggle on the battlefield. The film's themes of self-realization, detachment from outcomes, and alignment with one's dharma resonate deeply with the core teachings of *The Bhagavad Gita*, making it a compelling example of how ancient spiritual philosophies can be retold and adapted across cultures and contexts.

3. Considerations

Based on our readings of the texts and scholarship within Translation Studies, particularly in the multilingual milieu, we present the following considerations:

a) By reinterpreting the teachings of *The Bhagavad Gita* through the lens of a sports drama, LoBV exemplifies how the *Gita*'s universal messages of self-realization, mindfulness, and duty can be re-contextualized to engage audiences far removed from its original cultural and religious milieu. This adaptation re-imagines the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna within a modern, Western context, inviting viewers to explore profound philosophical insights about overcoming inner struggles and finding purpose.
b) However, such re-contextualizations raise critical questions about cultural appropriation and the challenges of preserving the nuances of the "original" text. While transcreation allows cultural accessibility and relevance, it also risks altering the philosophical depth of the source. This

highlights the delicate balance between innovation and fidelity in adapting sacred texts for contemporary audiences. It is no wonder, then, that:

> the National Council of Hindu Temples has voiced its worries over a misrepresentation of their ideas and religious conception ("Hindus Upset," 2000; "Holy Shot," 2000), given the posited connection Pressfield puts between "Bhagavan" (Lord Krishna) and "Bagger Vance"… (Stroud 2011, 11)

Thus, LoBV, in its migration to a different culture, context and domain, breaks away from the prototype, and yet continues to remind one of the *Gita* in its theme, plot and characterisation.

c) Textual transfers allow storytellers to adapt moral, religious, or political ideas to different contexts. As a result, transcreation often challenges dominant narratives. Similar instances are evident in contemporary works that give voice to sidelined characters, like Kavita Kane's *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019), which reexamines Ahalya, a minor yet morally complex figure from the *Ramayana*. Transcreations thus function as powerful tools for both cultural preservation and progressive re-imagining, underscoring their enduring relevance in global literary traditions. As a process, transcreation mirrors the contexts of new audiences/readers, and reflects the individuality of the teller/transferer, thus making each act of creation and a unique retelling.

Conclusion**:**

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated that processes of textual transfers can be viewed in two ways: on the one hand, they show the transfer of texts across cultures and languages, which has been a common practice in postcolonial times and in multilingual cultures. On the other hand, textual transfers also show the disempowerment of a significant, philosophical and scriptural text like the *Gita* into a perfunctory, playful work. Through the transcreation of the *Gita*, LoBV presents itself as a creatively recontextualized parable. At the same time, it also distances from the *Gita* in its contextual, form-al, linguistic and re-imagined character.

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