

THE IACLALS JOURNAL

THE IACLALS JOURNAL  
Volume 8, 2022

Circulations, Mediations, Negotiations:  
New Perspectives on Translation from South Asia

Volume 8, 2022

Indian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies

Published by  
Pencraft International  
B-1/41 Ashok Vihar II, Delhi-110052  
ISSN 2395-1206



*Iaclals*

*The IACLALS Journal*  
*Volume 8 2022*

**Circulations, Mediations, Negotiations:  
New Perspectives on Translation from South Asia**

**Editors**  
**Kalyanee Rajan**  
**M Asaduddin**

**ISSN: 2395-1206**

**Association for Commonwealth Literature  
and Language Studies in India**

# *The IACLALS Journal*

(Blind Peer Reviewed)

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**Publisher**

Pencraft International

B-1/41, Ashok Vihar II

Delhi-110052

Phones:9810453841, 9910664817

E-mail: pencraftjain@gmail.com

**Printed at**

Sagar Color Scan

4, Ansari Road

Darya Ganj

New Delhi-110002

**For Advertisements**

Please contact the publisher

Pencraft International,

B-1/41, Ashok Vihar II

Delhi-110052

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## EDITORIAL

The act of translation which is integral to the dissemination of human knowledge over vast swaths of geography and history is no longer considered a simple literary or linguistic exercise of translating a text from one language to another. Rather, it now encompasses and evokes a range of speech acts of translating thoughts and emotions into words, sign and body language into verbal expression, translations to and from languages of the same family, translations into other language families, translating words into performance or multimedia texts, and/or viceversa. Carrying or bringing across a sense of equivalent time, history, place, nationality, culture, gender, religion, sexuality, caste, and class into another asymmetric linguistic or social terrain is no easy feat despite digital technologies making translations more accessible, prevalent and frantic every day. Translations involve transcreation, transmutation, adaptation, as well as interpretation. In contemporary times, when miscommunication, mistranslation and manipulation seem to prevail all around us in the world, the task of more authentic or better translations remains urgent for facilitating mutual understanding and communication.

Translation in South Asia is as unique as the region itself. South Asia as a region is both old as well as new, existing in an unbroken web of interconnections continuing since ancient times, framed by the ecological terrain of the Indian Plate and the Indian Ocean, as well as arriving anew from the more recent area studies departments of the West to encompass a joint gaze at countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Home to over 650 languages belonging to six notable language schools, namely, the Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Tai-Kadai, and Great Andamanese (Source:<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2021/spring/new-translation-south-asian-literature-translation-preview-notable-2021-titles-jenny>), the region is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse and rich in the world while sharing many customs and cultural practices with each other. The experience of colonialism was common among many peoples of the region. In fact, colonial modernity was largely negotiated in the region through translation when works of new/western knowledge were translated massively into the languages of the region. Conversely, classical texts from this region were translated into European languages by leading Indologists/Orientalists, leading to increased awareness in the West about the East, what Raymond Schwab termed as the 'Oriental Renaissance'.

So the question arises: is translation in South Asia an act of inter-cultural translation or intra-cultural translation? Inter-cultural translation is an act of retrieval wherein

marginalised writers and their works can be discovered by means of translation, particularly women writers belonging to marginalised communities who experience multiple marginalisations at various levels, right from the actual creative exercise to the publication of their texts. In a decolonised world, translation, transcreation and adaptation contribute majorly towards discovering and/or consolidating literary canons. In intra-cultural translations, linguistic chauvinism can play a role in marginalising not only a language but also a culture. Intra-cultural translations of texts between sister languages can help reach out to larger readerships. Inter- and intra-cultural self-translation exercises are often undertaken by bilingual writers and authors looking for larger outreach. In postcolonial times, the objectives of translation, whether inter-cultural or intra-cultural, should be to subvert the hegemony of the dominant/prestige languages and literatures and redress the asymmetry between dominant literatures and minor languages/literatures.

As has been suggested earlier, Translation Studies in recent times has expanded its canon to embrace diverse domains of learning such as Colonialism, Film Studies, Anthropology, Geography, Refugee/Migration Studies, Memory Studies, etc. This was signalled more than a decade ago by Maria Tymoczko in her book *Enlarging Translation: Empowering Translators*. The 22 articles included in this volume 8 of the IACLALS journal, which stem from the IACLALS Conference (online) in 2022, explore convergences and intersectionalities of Translation Studies with other modes, mediums and domains of scholarship. For example, when Satyajit Ray ‘translates’ Tagore’s *Noshto Neer* into his film *Charulata*, or the famous painter A R Chughtai ‘translates’ Ghalib’s verses into masterpieces of painting, or Marie Chouinard ‘translates’ Jérôme Bosch’s cluster of paintings known as *Les Jardin Des Délices* (Garden of Delights) into a masterpiece of choreography, we get to see how intermedial translation collapses boundaries imposed by different mediums and results in new interpretations and illumination of the ‘original text’. Moreover, South Asian literary cultures, particularly during the precolonial, premodern, preprint periods, exhibited ample instances of ‘translation’ from oral/aural to written, oral/written to mnemonical, verbal to visual, and vice versa. Translation, in these contexts, becomes a complex process that circulates, mediates, and negotiates between ideas scattered over a larger public sphere, which in turn also regulates their movements and accessibility within cultural realms. The volume underscores translation as a dynamic factor in the construction of a multimedial literary culture in South Asia. This volume is being published later than expected due to several unanticipated factors which were completely beyond our control. We would like to acknowledge and place on record the support received from members of the Editorial Board, the office-bearers of IACLALS, and the many contributors featured in this volume. We express our warm thanks and appreciation for Mr. Mohd Aqib for his crucial and expert copy-editing contribution which has helped this volume acquire a better, more wholesome shape. We also thank Mr. Anurag Jain of Pencraft International and his team of professionals for their unstinting support in bringing out this volume.

**Kalyanee Rajan**  
**MAsaduddin**

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# Fidelity and Ambiguity: A ‘Bad’ Translation of *Ganadevata*

Anandita Pan

## Abstract

A translation often locates itself within two contradictory ideas—fluency at the cost of the disappearance of the translator and translators’ claim for their creative intervention to highlight the actual intention of the source text and thereby deny the hegemony of the target text, which in all these cases is English. Venuti suggests that a translation succeeds as a translation only when it does not seem to be translated. Both Spivak and Niranjana, on the other hand, maintain that the translator needs to understand the true intention of the source text author and translate in a manner that would be resistant to the target language, which, in the case of English, carries a long history of colonial domination with it.

This paper focuses on Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s celebrated novel *Ganadevata* and its translation *Ganadevata: The Temple Pavilion* by Lila Ray. In the introduction to his novel, Bandyopadhyay explains how the fragmented condition of his contemporary Bengal, which resulted mostly from the western modernist-capitalist influence, had inspired him to write this novel. Originally written and published in two parts, *Chandimandap* and *Panchgram*, Bandyopadhyay later republished a combined version titled *Ganadevata* in 1967. Ray translated only the first part, i.e., *Chandimandap* as *Ganadevata: The Temple Pavilion*. In my paper, I would like to address this selective omission on the part of the translator, to examine whether it misleads the reader from the intention of the author or whether this ‘omission’ on the translator’s part makes the reader read between the lines and thereby discover the hidden message of the author.

**Keywords:** Translation, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, familiarisation, omission, homogenisation

## Introduction

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, in the introduction to his renowned novel, *Ganadevata*, explains how the fragmented condition of his contemporary Bengal, which resulted mostly from the western modernist-capitalist influence, had inspired

him to write this novel. The movement from village to city had destroyed the sense of community among the people, and Marxism, as Bandyopadhyay argues, could not find any solution for the people of India. He, therefore, writes this novel with a specific agenda of unifying the nation. In short, *Ganadevata* becomes a way of rebuilding the nationalist, anti-capitalist discourse.

Originally it was written and published as two books, *Chandimandap* and *Panchagram*. Later it was published as a single novel, combining both *Chandimandap* and *Panchagram*, and won the Jnanpith Award in 1967. Although the combined edition had already been published in 1967 (the translation appears in 1969), Lila Ray chooses only the first part for her translation, *Ganadevata: The Temple Pavilion*. As such, the translation of the novel seems to remain incomplete in certain ways because Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay had made some changes while combining the two parts to give a seamless flow to the novel. Ray's translation reduces the source text in terms of its size and skips the introduction provided by Bandyopadhyay where he lays out his aims and motives. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the translation is titled *Ganadevata: The Temple Pavilion*. Literally, 'temple pavilion' means 'Chandimandap' (the first part of the original novel). By adding the subtitle, *The Temple Pavilion*, as the translation of *Ganadevata*, one wonders whether the translator intends the readers to believe that it is the translation as a whole.

In my paper, I would like to examine whether this act of 'familiarising' the translation misleads the reader from the intention of the author or whether this very act of 'familiarisation' and 'omission' on the translator's part makes the reader read between the lines and thereby discover the hidden message of the author. The fact remains that the translator, despite translating every Bengali word into English, does succeed in preventing the translation from becoming 'readable' or 'fluent'. As such, this 'bad' translation makes the reader go back to the source text and the author to compare the two and find out the intention of the author. In this way, then the translation becomes a truly interventionist one, challenging the domination of the English language and culture from within.

### **Debating the Purpose of Translation**

A translation often locates itself within two contradictory ideas—fluency at the cost of the disappearance of the translator and translators' claim for their creative intervention to highlight the actual intention of the source text and thereby deny the hegemony of the target text, which in all these cases is English. Venuti suggests that a translation succeeds as a translation only when it does not seem to be translated. Both Spivak and Niranjana, on the other hand, maintain that the translator needs to understand the true intention of the source text author and translate in a manner that would be resistant to the target language, which, in the case of English, carries a long history of colonial domination with it.

Although Spivak argues that good and bad are flexible standards, one cannot deny that there are some expectations of the translator and the target language readers regarding the readability of a translation. The reader expects to be introduced to the source language culture through the translation. That is why when Lawrence Venuti begins his discussion on the quality of translation with Shapiro's comment that says, 'A good translation is like a pane of glass', he suggests that a translation succeeds as a translation only when it does not feel to be translated (Venuti 2004: 1). According to Venuti, a translation seems to have fulfilled the criteria of maintaining fidelity and transparency when 'it reads fluently when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not, in fact, a translation, but the "original"' (Venuti 2004: 14). He also adds, 'A fluent translation is written in English that is current ("modern") instead of archaic, that is widely used instead of specialised ("jargonisation"), and that is standard instead of colloquial ("slangy")' (Venuti 2004: 4).

On a similar note, Lipner maintains that the cultural and linguistic situations are the primary concerns during a translation and that a translation is expected to create a bridge between the two cultures, removing all spatial and temporal gaps between the source language and the target language. In the introduction to his translation of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*, Lipner (2005) writes:

It follows that translation as such has three innate characteristics: first, it is inherently possible, because human communication is inherently possible; second, it carries the mark of incommensurability—in so far as it must bridge personal, linguistic and cultural divides; and third, it is inherently creative, that is, the attempted reconciliation of the first two characteristics under optimal conditions produces a reflected other, a new authentic form of the original generated through the process of linguistic transaction. (112)

In the first instance, Lipner seems to suggest that languages share a commonality among themselves, the difference being in the universality of human emotions, which enable a target text reader to understand the substance of the source text. For Lipner, fidelity is a 'requisite' but not enough because a translator should "resist semantic closure" and save it from becoming a word-for-word translation by adding a creative dimension to it (115). Following Derrida, he believes a good translator needs to be a good reader who can overcome the boundaries of language and bring out the meanings hidden within it. A translation is thus not a mere copy of the source text but a 'friend' of it where the source text is embodied anew, marking the continuity of the production of a text, and determining that ideas are forever in flux (116).

Both Spivak (2004) and Niranjana (1992), on the other hand, especially regarding a third world text being translated into English, maintain that the translator needs to understand the true intention of the source text author and translate in a

manner that would be resistant to the target language, which, in the case of English, carries a long history of colonial domination with it. Hence, they aim to retain a certain amount of foreignness in the target text, which would preserve certain phrases and ideas pertaining to the specific culture of the source text language. Here, therefore, is a particular postcolonial agenda at work that demands the active participation of the readers by making the target text far from readable while at the same time maintaining fidelity to the source text by bringing out what the source language author wanted to convey. It seems there is a consensus among translation theorists that a translator must be a good reader. While Venuti claims that the result of such good reading, which amounts to the creation of a translation that looks like the original, comes at the cost of the translator's invisibility, Spivak assumes a departure from Venuti in that she does not keep the translator hidden. Rather, as we see in her translations of Mahasweta Devi, it is Spivak who is at the fore (often more than Devi herself). And it is Spivak who inaugurates Devi's initiation into the wider audience by translating her into English. However, she also takes a very dubious stance when she says that a translator must be *submissive* to the author—presuming an almost erotic relationship between them. But all these translators allude to the concept that a translation must be able to convey one culture to another without harming the basic structure of each. We are therefore introduced to several overlapping and opposing opinions with regards to the idea of a 'good' translation.

### **Translating with/for a Purpose: The Possibilities of Language**

The question then remains: does Ray's translation succeed in becoming a good translation? It is important to mention that it is difficult to arrive at any definitive conclusion because ambiguity is what makes translation studies all the more exciting. Rather, I intend to come with the following questions: Is this a fluent translation (in terms of Venuti)? If not, does it succeed in taking up some kind of agenda like Spivak and challenge the global hegemony of English? If we do agree that it is a bad translation, what might be the translator's intention in doing so? And more importantly, who is the translator writing for, and are the target language readers happy with her translation? With these questions and the so-called definitions of 'good' translations in mind, Lila Ray can be brought to the fore and critiqued as much as possible.

In the preface to *Ganadevata*, Bandyopadhyay writes how the novel began with the inspiration from Harekrishna Sahityaratna, who wanted him to write a novel for a magazine, *Bharatvarsha*, that would speak of a poverty-stricken village of Bengal fast eroding under the influence of modernity and capitalism. His novel reflects a specific agenda that one can relate to India's independence movement. The novel shows that the binaries of rich/poor not only construct hierarchies in terms of class but also presume stereotypes associated with them.

The handful of rich in the village are driven by the assumption that poor people would inevitably be immoral and unethical. *Ganadevata*, therefore, shows how the problem lies within our homes. But our inherent notions of 'good' and 'bad' remain highly conventional. Bandyopadhyay's novel appears with a particular mission that intends to purge the world not of the sinner but of sin because, as we see in *Ganadevata*, people have the capacity to change their lives if given a chance. Unfortunately, it is this opportunity that they never get. Caught either in the hands of cruel zamindars or the police, the poor villagers are blamed for every mishap that happens in the locality. As the noted critic Srikumar Bandyopadhyay (1992) argues, the otherwise dead and indifferent village that surrounds the Chandimandap comes to life when they fight with each other. Although most of the villagers belong to the poor farmer group, the reason for the disparity is money and greed. Through Debu Pandit, Bandyopadhyay portrays a picture of revolution against Srihari Pal, who destroys the morale of the village and even initiates hatred among the villagers. But Debu fails because of his extreme idealism and the lack of unity among the villagers. In its sequel, *Panchagram*, the author shows how, irrespective of religion, the situation continues. Tradition versus modernity, or rather, rich versus poor—this is what becomes the primary factor of the destruction of the villages.

If we consider that the translation occurs at two levels, first by the author and then by the translator, then the source text is the first level of translation because here Bandyopadhyay assumes the role of a translator who represents the picture of the Bengal village of his times. As both Lila Ray and Srikumar Bandyopadhyay claim, the effect the author creates through his novel makes the readers understand the source culture, and his powerful language remains highly influential on the readers.

#### **Of Omissions and Erasures: Towards a New Epistemology**

Lila Ray, in her translation of *Ganadevata* (as *The Temple Pavilion*), not only omits the preface, which elaborates the authorial intention, but also discards the second part of the novel, *Panchagram*, from her translation. Thus, here is a translation that fails to maintain fidelity at the very primary level. Since Bandyopadhyay had already published the novel as a whole (the translation was released in 1969), one wonders what led Ray to disregard the second part of the book, which, as Srikumar Bandyopadhyay claims, makes the issue more universal by bringing in an analogy with the Muslim community. There is a possibility that Ray is trying to avoid the Hindu-Muslim tension in her translation. But even then, it breaches all the factors of a good translation because, as the previous definitions argued, a 'good' translation is not only supposed to retain transparency by making the readers feel as if they are reading the original; it should also bring out the underlying meanings of a text. Rather than being suppressed by the fear of the

dominant political and social forces, a translation should lay bare those fissures. Moreover, here the source text itself claims to be resisting the dominant norms of its time. Hence, we may question why the translator intentionally fails to pass the writer's message when she translates it into English.

The very first instance of discomfort, while reading the translation, arises with the language. Following is an instance from the translation:

Aniruddha turned round and saw Chiru Pal standing behind the doctor and Debnath Ghosh. His anger turned into an instant fury. He cried, "A broom to you rich men! A broom over the head! A broom to you educated folk! I don't give a damn for any of you. I don't care. What can any of you do to me?" (Ray 1969: 58)

At first glance, this appears to be a direct word-to-word translation of the source language, which is written in colloquial Bengali, to English. One wonders how to interpret the phrase 'broom to you', which is a very culture-specific expression. Her translation, by creating a linguistic barrier, remains ambiguous and forces the readers to go back to the source text to unveil the meaning.

Moreover, she also succeeds in highlighting the inherent politicisation of identities in the translation. In her essay, 'Translating Regional Novels', Lila Ray propounds that a translator of regional novels must be deeply conscious of the 'social and religious events' of the source language text so that even if the translator is faced with 'many choices of equivalents in his vocabulary', he would be able to identify the right terms to represent them (Ray 1974: 32). Like Lipner's concept of 'friendship' and Spivak's concept of 'submissive' relationship between the source text author and the translator, Ray seems to suggest a 'kinship' at four levels: among the people within the source language culture, among the people of source language culture and the translator, among the translator and the readers, and finally among the source and target language cultures. That is why she invokes generic terms such as 'jyataima', 'bhai' and 'jaas', which may be understandable by Bengali readers who do not belong to the source language locality but share the same language and also by Indian readers who share some knowledge regarding Bengali rituals and practices. According to Ray, the use and retention of such terms in her translation also reflect the vibrancy of Bengali as a language that holds meaning for Bengali speakers across time, space and culture. As she writes: 'A translator has to find ways of conveying its quality' (33). In her description of different occupations, she translates 'kamar' and 'chhutor' to 'blacksmith' and 'carpenter' respectively, and defines 'bayan' as someone who deals with drums and leather works but, most importantly, belongs to a 'low caste' (Ray 1969: 54). A similar description is provided to the terms such as 'bauri' and 'dom'. Ray can be seen as intervening in the purpose of the Bengali original, where Bandyopadhyay often conflates caste with class. In the introduction to the source text, the author mentions that the state of the people is mostly the same—affected by class

discrimination. The distinction, or hierarchy, that exists within the village is determined by class and not caste. Ray, on the other hand, intentionally focuses on the caste identities that underlie the social fabric of Bengal. Such recognition is significant in the context of Bengal, where the early arrival of Marxist ideology created a sense of political awareness among the Bengali intelligentsia, who viewed oppression in terms of class and ignored/denied the existence of caste (Biswas 2017: 15). This intentional erasure served two purposes: incorporation of a larger section of people disadvantaged through class and construction of a progressive narrative with the Left party as the saviour. While the former ensured the number of votes during the elections, the latter portrayed Bengal and its intelligentsia at the vanguard of an alternative politics. Ray's translation can be seen as challenging this homogenisation by providing 'an alternative, subversive potential of the text, turn[s] it inside out to bring[s] its deconstructive factor to the fore' (Chaudhuri 1999: 2).

Lila Ray suggests that the 'new audience must be introduced to [the source language culture] by an overall adjustment of the text as a whole without the addition of material the author has not used. Notes or explanations, if unavoidable, must go into a glossary or supplement' (Ray 1974: 32). A reader's (of the target text) understanding hence depends wholly on the translator. Commenting on the intended readership of his translations, Sujit Mukherjee, in *Translation as Recovery*, says that he writes for English-speaking readers in India. He seeks 'to replace the target audience (originally the Bengali reader) not so much with the "English reader" but with the "reader in English"' (Mukherjee 2004: 40). This is perhaps true for Ray as well because *Ganadevata* demands a particular understanding of its culture not only from the translator but also from the reader. Hence, certain terms that remain very region-specific attest to their lack of equivalence in English.

The selection of English as the language of the translated text serves a crucial purpose here. According to Sujit Mukherjee, the translations of works from Indian languages into English have often served as link literature in India. Thus, although these interlingual translations introduced one Indian language text to another, translations into English ensured access to a wider audience. Being aware of the hegemony of the English language, 'which continues to hold such a position of authority in modern India that those who translate literary works into English somehow convince themselves that they are doing a favour to the Indian language writer by presenting him or her through translation to the wider world', Mukherjee also says that one needs to be careful that a translation brings over a 'culture represented by the language into which the text is being translated' (41). Moreover, the foreignness in the target text (as seen through Ray's retaining of Bengali terms) also helps preserve/promote culture-specific ideas of the source text language. Here we see a particular postcolonial agenda at work that demands the active participation of the readers by making the target text far from readable

while at the same time maintaining fidelity to the source text by bringing out what the source language author wanted to convey. The strategy of omission, linguistic unreadability resulting in a seemingly 'bad' translation, is therefore enabling because it makes the reader read between the lines and rethink the existing debates in a new light.

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# ***Indar Sabha: A Transitional Moment in Indian History; Its Print, Stage and Film Adaptations***

Ayesha Irfan

## **Abstract**

*Indar Sabha* is credited to be the first Urdu play. It has been translated into manifold Indian and foreign languages. Contradictory views prevail if Amanat was the court poet of Wajid Ali Shah and if he was commissioned to write this particular play. The plot is simple: On seeing a handsome young prince, the Shahzada Gulfam, asleep on his terrace, the Sabz Pari falls in love with him. Gulfam, while holding on to the leg of the throne of the Sabz Pari, reaches the court of Indar. Indar is informed of a human intervention in his abode. Full of fury, he casts the Sabz Pari out and entraps Gulfam in a well. The Sabz Pari, now in the garb of an ascetic, goes out in search of Gulfam. She impresses the king with her singing and eventually earns Gulfam as a reward. Amanat's play foregrounds how the North Indian folk theatre motivated the professional Urdu theatre from its initiation. Hindi poetic forms like basant, savan, holi, thumri, or chaubola were adapted by the Urdu theatre from the folk theatre. At the same time, the North Indian folk theatre also borrowed from the Urdu theatre of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, forms like ghazal, masnavi and qawwali that entered the popular terrain. Amanat's play is an exquisite blend of Urdu ghazals and Braj bhasha thumris that capture the relish of the Awadhi folk songs, with a plot borrowed from several famous Persian masnavis. This play in verse has no division into acts and scenes, and it is a charming marvel of song and dance connected by the theme of a story. *Indar Sabha* lacks the attributes of a modern drama, yet it became a 19<sup>th</sup>-century best-seller, and its numerous adaptations in print, on stage and in films created a performance phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Amanat, Indar Sabha, Sabz Pari, Gulfam, Awadh

The history of Urdu drama credited Agha Hasan Amanat Ali's *Indar Sabha* to be the first Urdu play until Masud Hasan Rizvi's research unravelled a Raas Lila play composed by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah that has made a significant

contribution to South Asian history. Shah has been credited with writing the first Urdu drama, 'Radha Kanhayya Ka Qissa'<sup>1</sup>. The text of this play is supplemented with proper stage directions, as a prerequisite in performance, as well as details like the costumes of the actors. Shah has captured and assimilated significant folk forms of Awadh like Raas Lila, holi, thumri, etc. Including this play and Amanat's *Indar Sabha* in his book *Urdu Drama and Stage* (1957), Rizvi has credited them with laying down the foundations of the Urdu stage. *Indar Sabha* might not be the first Urdu play, but this does not mitigate its historical significance, for this was the first drama that was performed for the popular stage of this period. Its popularity reached all the major towns and villages of Awadh. This was the first drama that was reprinted and published a number of times. It has been translated into manifold Indian and foreign languages and has countless film and stage adaptations that have attained international recognition.

*Indar Sabha* was published in 1853, and very soon, in 1857, the reign of the Nawab came to an inglorious end. A number of historians and literati have dwelled upon Shah's contribution in privileging and motivating the popular stage of this period. The patronage that the Nawabs of Awadh conferred on the classical dancers, musicians and instrumentalists helped in adding more flavour to the folk forms like Kathak, Raas Lila plays, thumri, and popular songs and dances of this period. Since the kings' administrative duties were disrupted by the British, Shah devoted his time towards cultivating the artistic activities that he was passionate about. He patronised Kathak, the distinctive Indo-Muslim style of dance. He also ornamented the classical forms like thumri and bharavi and composed poetry in several languages. He adapted the Persian-style romances (three masnavis) that he wrote and dramas based on the life of Sri Krishna for his own royal stage.

Shah, in his book *Ishq Nama*, has claimed to have staged the costliest Raas Lila that was ever played in history<sup>2</sup>. He built state-of-the-art theatres at Baradari and spent exorbitant amounts on the stage décor and costumes of the players. Shah made several innovations in Raas Lila, where the scenes of Kanhayya dancing with his gopis are depicted. When the *Raas Dhaari's*<sup>3</sup> or professional troupes of artists started staging other genres of plays, then these plays too were referred to as Rahasya's. We find that the printed editions of *Indar Sabha* bear the title of Rahasya<sup>4</sup> inscribed upon them. Shah, too, has referred to the dramatisations of his masnavis as Rahasya. Therefore, the word Rahasya acquired a generic meaning, and *Indar Sabha* also came to be known as Rahasya on the same account.

Rizvi, while highlighting the significance of the play *Indar Sabha*, quotes Omar and Ilahi from *Natak Sagar*:

The court during this period was a cradle of luxury and happiness...everyone was preoccupied with the idea that they should prop up a colourful presentation for their

colourful lord. This can be classified as a completely Indian opera in taste and was completed in 1270 Hijri (1853-1854) by Amanat. It was played with dance and music. (1957: 38, My English translation)

Contradictory views prevail over the fact of whether Amanat was the court poet of Shah and if he was commissioned by him to write this particular play in the style of an opera. Though two major critics, Abdul Halim Sharar and Rizvi, are of the opinion that if he was a court poet, then Shah would have made a reference to this in the books that he has written. Kathryn Hansen, on the other hand, feels that the Nawab's reputation was completely tarnished once Awadh fell to the British in 1857. Thereafter, 'the disgrace attached to the Nawab's court' (1998: 6) by the British, as well as the nationalists, that he spent more time in the harem rather than looking after the affairs of the state, would have been the reason for Amanat to distance himself from Shah's court. The instant popularity that this play achieved after its publication makes Hansen believe that he was probably commissioned by the Nawab to write this play. Rizvi and Afroz Taj attribute the elaborate song and dance sequences in this play to the Sanskritic tradition. Whereas Hansen believes that there could have been multiple influences upon this play. Besides Sanskritic plays, folk and court theatre, the opera form that was popular in Europe during this time could also have been a model for this play. Nawab and his court were familiar with the popular trends in Europe, and they must have witnessed the opera performed by the visiting European troupes. (6)

The plot of the story is simple. On seeing a handsome young prince, the Shahzada Gulfam, asleep on his terrace, the Sabz (i.e., Emerald) Pari (i.e., Fairy) falls in love with him, and while descending upon his garden on her flying throne, she makes love to him. Gulfam, while holding on to the leg of the throne of the Sabz Pari, reaches the court of Indar. When Indar learns of a human (Gulfam's) intervention in his abode, he is full of fury, and he casts the Sabz Pari out and entraps Gulfam in a well. The Sabz Pari, now in the garb of an ascetic, goes out in search of Gulfam. The Kala Dev informs Indar of a Jogan in the fairyland and her remarkable singing. The Dev now invites the Jogan to appear before Indar and entertain him with her amazing singing. Indar is captivated by her singing and, in turn, wants to reward her. She refuses all the awards that he bequeaths upon her, and in the end, she asks only for Gulfam from the king as a reward. The King now identifies the Sabz Pari, but since she had taken a promise from him that he would reward her with her heart's desire, he fulfils his promise.

This story is not an original idea of Amanat. He has borrowed from both the Hindustani and Persian sources. In the history of Hindu drama, this is a traditional and oft told tale that once in the celestial theatre of Indar, the drama

*Lakshmi Swayamvar* was being staged. Urvashi, one of the prominent apsaras of Indar, was playing the part of Laxmi. She committed a major error in delivering her dialogue that revealed the name of her human lover because of which she was eventually cast out of heaven into the world. Rizvi points out that Amanat has borrowed the plot of this play from the masnavi *Sehrul Bayan* and he acknowledges his debt by invoking the name of its composer Mir Hasan several times in the *Shahrah Indar Sabha* (Introduction to *Indar Sabha*). The fairyland for Rizvi was one myth with which each child of Urdu literature was familiar. Rizvi quotes from *Natak Sagar*: ‘Amanat has translated apsaras as fairies, Gandharv as Dev and Indarasan as fairyland. He has presented the Hindu and Muslim imagination with a new relish.’ (1957: 67)

Rizvi has cited Amanat (1957: 57, 120–1) saying that *Indar Sabha* had acquired a lot of popularity even before its publication, for after its completion it was read out to a crowd of audiences. Its popularity reached each corner of the state, and its songs and dialogues became popular. Within a span of one and a half years of its publication, it was dramatised for the purpose of the stage, and the play turned out to be more popular than the text itself. Several skilled dramatic troupes came up in Lucknow to perform the *Indar Sabha*. Similar dramatic troupes cropped up in other cities as well, in order to cater to the popularity of this play that was drawing large audiences.

Rizvi recalls how a prominent old person, Syed Raza Husain (1957: 133–4), residing in Lucknow, had narrated to him that in his youth he had seen four different versions of *Indar Sabha* being played in Lucknow at the same time, and they were not the same plays but different adaptations of the same play. So, *Indar Sabha* came to be associated with a particular genre of play that was played with a certain stage extravaganza, and these plays became popular not only amongst the elite audiences but also with the uneducated public of that time. The *Indar Sabha* of Amanat, when it was played, always carried the suffix of Amanat’s name to distinguish it from the other adaptations of *Indar Sabha* that were being staged. Similarly, the other plays of the genre of *Indar Sabha* also carried the name of the playwrights who produced these imitations of *Indar Sabha*, and their names too were suffixed to the play, for example, *Indar Sabha: Madari Lal*, *Indar Sabha: Jashn Paristan*, *Indar Sabha: Bazm Sulaiman*. Husain also narrated to Rizvi how an uneducated person had fleshed out a *nautanki* of this play that was played with special stage material, and this became extremely popular with the common public.

The court theatre was dismissed after the mutiny of 1857, but the stage adaptations of *Indar Sabha* created in the mind of the public an aura of Shah’s Lucknow. After the mutiny when Shah was exiled to Calcutta, the play continued to be popular among the people who looked at the monarchical past with a sense of nostalgia and viewed the royalty with awe and fascination.

Raja Indar, in their mind, was emblematic of this splendid phase of Indian history, and watching this play gave them a sense of a link with this exquisite past. If we look at the 19<sup>th</sup>-century popular culture, we find that this text managed to influence all the popular genres of its period, be it the innumerable print or stage adaptations or the film industry. Prominent critics of drama like Rizvi, Hansen and Taj consider this to be a landmark in literary history. To quote Hansen,

The courtly aesthetic with its opulent sets, costume, etiquette, diction and abundance of feminine beauty dominates the era, providing a point of identification initially for the pleasure-seeking nobility and eventually for spectators of more humble origins. (Hansen 1998: 9)

Probably the shows of *Indar Sabha* would not have been as costly as the stage of the Nawab, but they did remind the public of the grandeur and fashion at the court of the king during its time. Important adaptations of *Indar Sabha* listed by Rizvi include *Indar Sabha: Madari Lal, Farrukh Sabha, Rahat Sabha, Jashan Paristan, Hawai Majlis Jadid, Natak Jahangir, Bandar Sabha, Laila Majnoon, Tofa Dilkusha*, and *Basm Sulaiman*. Parsis of Mumbai also produced different adaptations of the same play that include *Jashn Paristan* and *Bazm Sulaiman, Nagar Sabha, Aashiq Sabha, Nature Sabha, Nishat Ishq, Masnavi Indar Sabha*, and *Curzon Sabha*. (1957 :119–30) Rozan, a German traveller, was so impressed with this book that he translated it into German, which was published in Germany in 1892.

Hansen has dwelled upon the popular perceptions of *Indar Sabha* that prevailed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and one of the most acceptable views was that Amanat was commissioned by the king to write this particular play. She cites the fact that this view was accepted by the prominent English-language historians of Urdu Literature (1998: 6): Ram Babu Saksena (1940), Annemarie Schimmel (1975) and Muhammad Sadiq (1984). In this regard she has quoted John Campbell Oman, a professor of Natural Science at Government College Lahore, who wrote in 1889, after viewing a performance of *Indar Sabha* in Anarkali, that ‘it was composed, it is said, by a Mussalman poet, by command of Wajid Ali Shah’ (Hansen 1998: 6). Hansen also quotes A. Yusuf Ali, who in an article for the Royal Society of Literature in London, called Shah and Amanat ‘co-founders of the modern school of Hindustani Drama’ (6). Hansen further impresses upon the idea:

The widespread perception of royal origins could be a significant factor in explaining the ‘*Indar Sabha*’s’ popularity, in so far as spectators believed they were beholding a direct link to the Awadh court and its hedonistic ambience. The famous drama enjoyed the reputation of offering something real, something historically verifiable about the monarchical past. Moreover, this was a past transformed, brought closer to the

audience by having crossed an imagined boundary between the court- where it had its putative origins- and the populace- where it was presently situated. (6)

Amanat's biggest achievement in this play is that he has foregrounded an exquisite blend of Urdu ghazals and Braj bhasha thumris, capturing the relish of the Awadhi folk songs with a plot borrowed from several famous Persian masnavis. This play in verse has no division into acts and scenes, and it is an exquisite marvel of song and dance connected by the theme of a story. *Indar Sabha* lacks the attributes of a modern drama, yet this text became a 19<sup>th</sup>-century best-seller, and its numerous adaptations created a performance phenomenon. Its innumerable print, stage and cinematic adaptations are a record in themselves. They remained popular for over 100 years and well into the modern period. The play was multiply reprinted in Urdu, transliterated into Hindi, Gujarati, Gurmukhi, and even Hebrew script, and translated and published in Tamil, Sinhala, Malay and German. The Parsi theatre companies that sprouted up after the mutiny carried it to all the parts of the subcontinent and outside, and a number of its imitations and adaptations became popular on stage.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, songs from the *Indar Sabha* were made into the first wax recordings, and thereafter it inspired a number of Bollywood films, including *Anarkali* and *Mughal-e-Azam*. Taj says that the film *Bobby* is a modern-day reincarnation of *Indar Sabha* (2007: 121). 'The *Indar Sabha* was thus both a landmark in the canons of literary history and a foundational moment in the evolution of popular culture' (79). Hansen has pointed out how *Indar Sabha* helped in the enrichment of popular culture and how this play encouraged transplanting the courtly styles of ghazal, thumri and Kathak into the popular milieu (1998: 9). In 1917, A. Yousuf Ali, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, reported that, '*Indar Sabha* still holds its own on the Hindustani stage after a run for 70 years, and its universal popularity is proved by the numerous but unsuccessful imitations made of it' (14).

Rizvi, Taj and Hansen attribute a significant role to this play in contributing to the public culture in India. With its performances staged in prominent Indian cities like Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Meerut, and Lahore, it became a popular spectacle of play and songs. When the theatres were modernised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the introduction of new stage machinery and lighting effects helped in adding more ocular and auditory pleasure to these performances. The performances of *Indar Sabha* toured the Indian subcontinent and abroad and gained immense popularity amongst their audiences.

Hansen identifies *Indar Sabha* as a work whose phenomenal success helps to elucidate the transformation in cultural consumption occurring towards the end of the 19th century. As an early example of the crossover

the drama quickly moved out of the courtly milieu to inhabit a large public domain. As it migrated the story moved across media, taking shape as a popularly printed text, a

stage drama, a rare book, a set of recorded songs and as a film. It navigated not only the distance from the provincial world of the Nawabs of Lucknow to cosmopolitan Bombay, it travelled across continents.... (displaying) a fluidity of format, it is centrally concerned with the elements of visual pleasure that underlay the texts wide circulation..... The transportation of the monarchical mise en scène to stages across the subcontinent and beyond extended the paradigm of royal consumption, establishing Urdu as the lingua franca of popular theatre and prefiguring the historical and mythological spectacle of the twentieth century cinemas. (2002: 77)

Similarly, Taj observes:

[what] distinguishes *Indar Sabha* from its court and ceremonial predecessors, which were rarely performed outside venues where they were created. The overnight popularity and rapid diffusion of Amanat's play set the industry standards for the theme, style, and performance practice of the nineteenth century public theatre. *Indar Sabha* helped to establish the modern mode of theatrical production by inspiring creation of permanent theatrical companies and the construction of public theatres. (2007: 7)

In another interesting observation regarding the contribution of *Indar Sabha*, Afroz Taj quotes Carla Petravich, who has analysed the case of Urdu literature and the construction of this 'mythic past'. The construction of Indian cultural history, according to Petravich, was obsessed with the notion of 'Mughal glory', and it placed its primary emphasis on the culture of the social and intellectual Muslim elites. Taj identifies that contrary to Petravich's assertion:

Amanat in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, participated in the transformation of this construction into a broader and more inclusive one. Specifically, *Indar Sabha* carries the mythic past beyond its association with the ruling Muslim elite to encompass a wider cultural space, and in doing so contributes to the emerging notion of a national identity, constructed of different but complimentary elements. (130)

A very profound symbol in Indian literature is that of the jogi, faqir, medicant, or a sanyasi. Besides being symbolic of spirituality, this figure of an ascetic also represents the person who has given up worldly pleasures and desires for a spiritual rejuvenation. At the centre of this play is also the character of a jogan. In this context, Hansen makes a very interesting observation from Gandhi's autobiography that Gandhi's role models that motivated him towards renunciation and encouraged him to adopt the role of a mahatma, or a jogi, for the cause of saving the nation could have been derived from the folk tradition or the Parsi theatre. Hansen quotes from Gandhi's autobiography, where he confesses that the play Raja Harishchandra inspired him:

To follow truth and go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through was the one ideal (the play) inspired in me. I literally believed in the story of Harishchandra. The thought of it all often made me weep. (qtd in Hansen 1992: 327)

Amanat has consciously upheld the multicultural values of our society by foregrounding multiple linguistic registers, an interesting assortment of

characters and themes that could encompass each class and section of society. In doing so, Amanat seems to be upholding the syncretism of our culture, or theme of unity in diversity, as an answer to the colonial policy of divide and rule. For Taj, '*Indar Sabha* offers a tour de force of the indigenous languages and traditions.' (2007: 169) He points out that Amanat's text is entirely vernacular and hybrid and offers an alternative to the dominant European cultural discourse.

Taj feels that Amanat consciously 'deconstructs the Hindu/Muslim or Indic/Persian polarity that was even then being adopted and affirmed for political reasons by the British as part of their "divide and rule" discourse..... *Indar Sabha* is laced with images and metaphors evoking the conscious construction of a multicultural, internally tolerant society.' (2007: 169). He speculates on the 'play's larger role in the late nineteenth century transformation of Hindi-Urdu literary discourse in reaction to the intensifying cultural colonialism on the part of the British.' (2007: 129)

Hansen too makes a similar observation. She comments:

Hindu and Muslim referents overlap as the king's identity slips between Indar, Krishna and Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. The language of the songs and verses moves back and forth easily between Urdu, Braj, Awadhi, and Khari Boli. Whether one chooses to think of the *Indar Sabha* as a self-consciously syncretic work or an unconscious reflection of the hybrid culture of Lucknow court, the distance between it and its sectarian antecedents- the Vaishnava drama and poetry, the Sufi allegories- is striking. (1998: 8)

Taj also reads in the play a concealed discourse of a revolution (2007: 171) rather than a call for direct resistance to the British imperialism, for the British, even during this time, were on the lookout for seditious material. (In 1867 the British also passed 'the Press and Registration of Books Act' and established a repository at the India Office Library that has a number of editions of *Indar Sabha*.) He says that the Basanti colour, besides being identified as the colour of the spring season, is also identified in the Hindu culture with the colour of protest. He recalls the legends associated with Shaheed Bhagat Singh and the song 'mera rang de Basanti chola' attributed to him in a similar revolutionary context. For example, this line by Pukhraj Pari:

Hain Jalva-e-tan se dar o divar Basanti  
Poshak jo pehna hai mera yar Basanti

A significant contribution of *Indar Sabha* was that it started a process of integrating the court and folk theatre that gave birth to a new theatre for the middle classes. This change in the role and function of theatre happened against the backdrop of a deeper socio-political and economic transformation happening in India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where there was a growth of learned and, at the same time, affluent class sections within the society. Braj, Awadhi,

Hindi, Urdu and Persian words, phrases and songs are simultaneously used by Amanat to give a local flavour to the text and also to remind us of the long history of sharing between Hindi and Urdu poetic traditions.

The play opens with a chorus followed by Raja Indar reciting a Doha-Chaubola. This simple Hindi poetic form was often used in nautanki theatre and the folk theatre of its time. It is composed of rhyming couplets. Taj makes another interesting observation as to how the North Indian folk theatre motivated the professional Urdu theatre from its initiation. Hindi poetic forms like basant, savan, holi, thumri, or chaubola were adapted by the Urdu theatre from the folk theatre. At the same time, the North Indian folk theatre also borrowed from the Urdu theatre of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the forms like the ghazal, masnavi and qawwali that were adapted by the folk theatre, whereby these classical forms now entered the domain of the popular. Since no published texts of swang-nautanki that predate the publication of *Indar Sabha* are available, in a way Amanat's text can help in familiarising us with the popular trends in the swang-nautanki too. The elaborate song, dance and music sequence in *Indar Sabha* appears to be drawn from the nautanki tradition.

*Indar Sabha* has often been compared to an opera, and it has been claimed that Shah had commissioned Amanat to write this play in the style of an opera. Though Taj feels that there is nothing in *Indar Sabha* that is not harmonious with its purely Indian origins or that appears to be copied from the European models. All the components of Amanat's play seem to have been derived entirely from the Indian tradition. The presence of Raja Indar links Amanat's play back to its Vedic sources. Not only in the Sanskrit theatre, the image of Indar and the musical assembly of God's finds innumerable references in Urdu literature too. A number of poets had compared the court of Shah to that of Indar before Amanat made this a subject of his drama.<sup>5</sup> The parallels between Sabz Pari and the story of Urvashi link this story to the Puranic sources. A remarkable contribution of this play is the availability of the written text; a thousand years had passed since the last Sanskrit drama was written and the Lila plays and nautanki and swang do not have a published text.

Amanat weaves a multicultural textile of melodious ragas, dramatic moods, semantic files, and fanciful characters and eagerly displays these charms before the zealous audiences. The play has an interesting list of characters representative of all the classes of society, and this must have struck a harmonious chord in the mind of the Indians coming to terms with the colonial preoccupation. The theme of unity in diversity in Indian society seems to be the solution that Amanat is offering against the colonial onslaught through this play.

Another aspect that both Hansen and Taj have dwelled upon in this play is Amanat's use of the trope of colours. The text of the play is permeated with the idea of colour. Hansen likens this pageant of colour to the barahmasa, a favourite song genre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century depicting 12 months of the year. She compares the serial performance of the fairies to the early Miss India contest, where they are being judged for their acting and singing at the same time (1998: 10). Taj compares this colourful trope to the rainbow of cultures, or the Indardhanush (2007: 168). The idea of colour permeates the text of Amanat's play. The multi-coloured fairies and the seasonal songs that they sing are emblematic of the colours associated with these seasons. The names of the four fairies are that of colours: Pukhraj (yellow), Nilam (blue), Lal (red), and Sabz (green), and these are also the names of the gemstones Topaz, Sapphire, Ruby, and Emerald, respectively. The Devs also bear the names of colour, Lal and Kala. Taj compares the colour trope used by Amanat to the notion of text as textile (2007: 129). Amanat dwells upon the details of the costumes of the fairies with the same vivid specificities that the Shah had done himself. The idea of colour also helps in highlighting the different language registers, verbal forms, musical ragas, moods, and rasas that are captured in our ragas and the classical Indian aesthetic theory.

The songs of *Indar Sabha* can be broadly divided into two large categories: the Lucknowite Urdu ghazals and an enchanting collection of melodies from folk and devotional genres popular in Braj and Awadh. The play itself is a delight in musical numbers and in the use of a variety of language registers. Amanat has accumulated together eight folk songs, or *geet*, 30 ghazals, eight semi-classical thumris, five *chhands* and 169 dialogues. Amanat has provided titles for each song indicating their genre in the play. Nearly all the songs, both instrumental and those accompanying the plot, are sung by women. The traditional folk-geet, or song collection, incorporated by Amanat includes basant, holi and savan that are popular seasonal songs, harvest songs and festival songs from our folk culture, and at the same time they are also representative of a particular mood, situation and season. The majority of these songs are in Braj Bhasha, or Awadhi, featuring images of Krishna flirting with his gopis (milkmaids), which relates them to the Vaishnavite tradition.

Amanat borrows from the Sanskritic tradition by incorporating different characters speaking in different dialects, indicating the different backgrounds that they come from. The swang-nautanki plays share this practice of distinguishing characters from various backgrounds by virtue of their different dialects. Amanat uses the ghazal/geet and choubola together, demonstrating rural and urban, rustic and sophisticated dialects that were popular in both rural and urban parts of Awadh. The dialogues and the ghazals are in a Persianised Urdu, characterising the language of the elites of Lucknow during

this time. In addition to using the vocabulary, grammar and syntax representing each dialect, Taj (2007: 134) points out that Amanat also follows the tradition of Amir Khusrau in using the Urdu script but spelling the words as they would be spoken by the speakers of the Hindi dialect. The play opens with a chorus followed by Chaubola sung by Indar.

Chaubola by King Indar while introducing himself:

Raja hun main qaum ka aur Indar mera naam  
Bin pariyan ki deed ke nahi mujhe aaram  
Mera Sangaldeep me mulko mulko raaj  
Jee mera hai chahata ke jalsa dekhu aaj

(Rizvi 1957: 191–2)

**Basant Songs:** The basant songs describe the time of the year when the world is ornamented with yellow flowers, and the arrival of the spring season is celebrated. This song captures the blooming orange flowers, the flowering yellow mustard and the marigold garlands being put together to be offered to the deity. The mango trees are in pollen, and the dhak and champa flowers are flowering.

Basant sung by Pukhraj Pari in dhun bahaar, welcoming the spring season:

Rut aaye basant ajab bahar  
Khile jard phul barvan ki daar  
Rut aaye  
Chutko kusum phule lagi sarso  
Papkat chalo gehu ki baar  
Rut aaye  
Har ke dwar mali ka chora  
Garwa darat gaindan ki baar  
Rut aaye  
Tesva phule ambva morane  
Champa ki rokh kalyan ki baar  
Rut aaye  
Gadva liye ‘Ustad’ ke dware,  
chalo sab sakhiya kar kar singar  
rut ai basant ajab bahar (193–4)

The couplet above also captures the practice of women carrying small pitchers decorated with the flowers as an offering to the temples during the spring season.

**Savan songs:** The savan songs concern the onset of the monsoon and the intensified longing of a woman for her absent lover. Savan is the fifth month of the Hindu calendar; its heavy rains are occasions for young women to play outside on swings, enjoying cool, wet relief after a long, hot summer. This song genre is closely associated with the Hindu *bhakti* tradition, in which the

human soul plays the role of the woman, yearning for her absent beloved or god, as the monsoon of life is passing. The following, sung by Lal Pari, is a good example of Savan style and content:

The Savan songs sung by Lal pari in the rainy season

bin piya ghata nahin bhave  
 reh reh dil rundho ave,  
 bijri ki chamak, tarpave darave  
 bin piya ghata nahi bhave  
*antarah:*  
 rut barkha ki ai re guiiyan  
 aj jiya ko kal nahin ave  
 mori or se yadin sajni,  
 ko-u us ko samjhave jave  
 bin piya ghata nahin bhave  
 Ka se kahu is muh bundan ma  
 Likh patiya jo padhave  
 Pitam ko koi bhari barkha me  
 Dai mari se milave lave  
 Bin piya ghata nahi bhave  
 Umad ghumad ke kari badariya  
 Mohe nahaq na satave  
 Koi pawan purvai se ja kaho  
 Aur mulk barsave jave  
 Bin piya ghata nahi bhave  
 Bhijat hun Aaasun ki bundan  
 Megha jhar na lagave  
 Pir 'Ustad' ko man ke apne.  
 Ban parbat par jave jave  
 Bin piya ghata nahi bhave (205-6)

Holi: Holi songs here are sung by Nilam Pari and Lal Pari.

In the Holi songs, Amanat has captured the flirtatious love play during the festival of Holi in Mathura, Brindavan, the birthplace of Krishna, where he dances and flirts with the milkmaids during the festival of colours. Amanat's drama contains no Raas dance like Wajid Ali Shah's plays, but his holi songs evoke the Braj tradition, where the singer calls Shyam, her dark beloved, or refers to him as savla, the dark one, terms that have long been associated with Krishna. Thus, indirectly, the Ras Lila tradition is carried on in *Indar Sabha*. The following excerpt from a holi sung by Lal Pari is representative of both the theme and language of *Indar Sabha's* holis:

Holi sung by Lal Pari:

Laj rakh le Shyam hamari,  
 Mai cheri hun tumhari  
 jaraa de samajh kar gaari

*Antara:*

abir gulal na mo par daro,  
nah maro pichkari  
adhi dehn sab dikh paregi  
sari bhijo-o nah sari  
Lakh kahi tum ek na mani  
Binti kar ke hari (207)

In this holi, we see the spelling, for example, of ‘jaraa’ (instead of Urdu ‘zaraa’), and the dialect pronunciation of ‘gaari’ for the more standard ‘gaali’.

Holi sung by Nilam Pari,

Kanha ko samjahat na koi  
Angiya rang me bhijoi  
Mori braj me pat khoi  
Aaj sakhi ham ghar ma ja ke  
Peet ki jaan ko roi  
Abeer ghulal churavan khatir  
Muh aasun se dhoi  
Badan mati me miloi (200)

**Thumri**

Thumris incorporated by Amanat draw upon the Vaishnavite Bhakti themes, and they often use the dialect prevalent in Braj or the Awadh region. This musical genre was also one of the favourites of Shah, and he also composed a number of thumris. The *thumri* genre demonstrates a preference for Braj or Awadhi Hindi vocabulary in contrast to the ghazal’s more Persianised Urdu. As a musical genre, it is considered semi-classical and associated closely with Kathak dance tradition and court musical functions.

Thumri sung by Nilam Pari

raja ji karo mo se batiyan re  
dil tarpat din ratiya re  
hamri or se tum se din din  
sautan jak e lagaiyan re  
jiyara darat tumhare rusan se  
dharkat hain mori chhatiya re  
daras ‘Ustad’ ka chahiye mahka  
likh ke patha diyo patiyen re (200)

Thumri sung by Pukhraj Pari

Aai hun sabha me chodh ke ghar  
Ka ho ke nahi mohe aaj khabar  
Cheri hun teri raja Indar  
Rakhna di rayen daya ki najar  
Sone ka baraje sees mukut

Rupaye ke takhat par bait nidar  
 Charo kono par lal late  
 Data ka karam rahe aath pahar  
 Saya rahe pir payambar ka  
 Maula ki sada rahe nek najar  
 Ustad ye kahe har se har dam  
 Duniya me rahe hajrat Akhtar (193)

In the last three lines here, Amanat has used the Muslim and the Hindu epithet for God, i.e., Maula, that is used for Allah and often also used for Hazrat Ali and Prophet Mohammad. The word 'Har' in the second last line is an epithet often used for Shiva. Akhtar is the pen name of Shah. Here, Amanat is conflating Indar with him.

### Ghazal

Ghazal was one of the genres that enjoyed popular appeal amongst the elite Lucknowites of Amanat's day. When the ghazal is performed as a song, it is customary to repeat some of the first couplets. The radif and qafiya (refrains and rhymes, respectively) endow the ghazal with melody. The ghazal draws upon the repertory of traditional images and themes.

Hota hai zamin par use khurshid ka dhokha  
 Surat jo kabhi dekhta hai mah tumhari

This couplet says that the moon on seeing the beloved thinks that the sun has descended upon the earth.

Ayan sindur ka tika nahi mehrab-e-abru mein  
 Chiragh us shama ru ne ain ka'abe men jalaya hai

Here, Amanat is juxtaposing symbols of both Hindu and Muslim cultural traditions. The Hindu women wear a bindi on their forehead, and Meharab is a traditional Muslim arch.

Similarly in another epithet he says:

Ae but tire siva nahi konain ki havas  
 Allah se karun to teri iltija karun

To cite another couplet:

Voh but ada se samne a kar jo baith jae  
 Ka'abe men bhi namaz ko apni qaza karun

Besides emphasising the Sufi tenet that all religions and paths lead to God, Amanat also delights in consciously bringing together both Hindu and Islamic traditional symbols. Here the idol and Ka'aba have been put together.

*Indar Sabha* contains 30 songs in the ghazal form, representative of the Urdu poetic tradition. Ghazals, according to custom, concentrate on the complaints of a scorned lover and his appeals to his cruel beloved for attention.

Takra ke sir ko jan nah dun main to kya karun?  
Kab tak firaq-e-yar ke sadme saha karun?

Experienced ghazal readers know that the most obvious meaning of a couplet is only the first layer; beneath this layer are always multiple levels of meanings. The ghazal is known for the scope of its ambiguity and multiple interpretations. Amanat's couplets often display layers of meaning that could well be political and even revolutionary. We know that Urdu poets often directed concealed attacks at their rulers veiled in the language of a rejected lover's complaints.

If we approach Amanat's text from this point of view, we find surprising possibilities of messages being crept past the colonial checkpoints in the guise of ornate wordplay. Taj cites the couplets given below as a sharp criticism of the excesses of the British rule that was acquiring a reputation of dishonesty and the abuse of its unwilling subjects by the 1850s.

Khayal aata hai dil ko shikvah e bedad kya kije  
Khuda se ae but-e kafir teri faryad kya kije

Lahu behta hai gahiro ka, hamara dam nikalta hai  
Gale par pherta khanjar nahin jallad kya kije?

The language register and style used by Amanat in this play exhibit all the classes of Awadh, from the common people to the aristocracy, and this accounted for its incredible popularity. This play is truly a milestone in literary history, for it set the theatre and later the Hindi film standard for theme, character, music, dance, and costumes. The Parsi theatre companies further popularised it by carrying different adaptations of this play to various corners of India and the world. Later, this play went on to influence the Bombay film industry. Besides the romantic plot and characters, Amanat Lakhnavi also bequeathed to the popular culture of theatre and the film industry the music and dance forms like Raas Lila and Kathak, ghazal, thumri, masnavi, and dastan. To conclude, it seems apt to quote from John Cadwell, a professor of Urdu at the University of North Carolina, who describes the impact of *Indar Sabha* as follows: 'It was amazing how this plant that was rooted and seeded in Lucknow suddenly became a forest that was spread all over South and South-East Asia.' (Yadav 2019)

### End Notes

1. 'Rādhā Kanhayyā kā Quissā was composed by Wajid Ali Shah in 1259 Hijri, or year 1843, and has been included in his book, *Banī*.

2. Ishq Nama Man̄oom, pp. 148–50, Wajid Ali Shah has made a claim to have staged the costliest Ras Lila.
3. Rās Dharī—professional troupes who play the Rās Līlā.
4. Rahasya is another word for the Ras Lila plays. Later this term came to be used for other plays that adapted the Lila tradition.
5. Rajab Ali Beg Saroor in *Fasana-e-Ajaib* (he has compared the court of Wajid Ali Shah to that of Indar, p. 21).

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# **‘His’ Film: Satyajit Ray’s Vision of *Pather Panchali***

**Bashabi Gogoi**

## **Abstract**

The relationship between literature and film has always fascinated readers, viewers and critics alike. India, with its rich cultural heritage, is a repository of a fine range of creative arts, including literature, music, dance forms, painting, architecture and sculpture. These different forms of the arts help in merging cultural and geographical boundaries and a movement towards a multicultural society. Although cinema is a relatively new medium, films have been made in India as early as anywhere else in the world. The Indian film is a byproduct of the cultural evolution of our country and its development has been nurtured by the dramatic, poetic and aesthetic traditions of its glorious civilisation. Adaptation has been central to the filmmaking process, and along with world cinema, has also been a mainstay in the Indian cinema context. Like their Western counterparts, the Indian filmmakers too have been continually inspired by books to craft their cinematic masterpieces. The contribution of Satyajit Ray in adapting stories into celluloid has singular importance in the Indian cinema context. Satyajit Ray is of the opinion that film making, although the ‘most physically demanding of all activities’, offers ‘rewards as nothing else does’. When he ventured into filmmaking, like many others before him, he too chose a literary classic to adapt into his first film. This paper will study how Ray adapts or ‘translates’ Bibhutibhusan Banerji’s *Pather Panchali*, an authentic and vividly touching portrayal of life in a Bengali Brahmin rural household, into his own cinematic masterpiece. It will analyse how Ray maintains the rambling quality of the novel in his film script; how the novel’s humanism, realism and lyricism convinced this ‘serious’ filmmaker to make a film mirroring the contemporary reality of his time. Ray had belief in the power of cinema to tell the truth convincingly, and even though it had nothing of the grandeur conspicuous in commercial films, Ray’s vision of the novel celebrates, in a very Wordsworthian manner, the little joys of life, and endures its tragedies too. The present paper will thus endeavour to study the interrelation between the two discourses—text and film—and discuss the profundity of the adaptation process through an analysis of Banerji’s novel and Ray’s film.

**Keywords:** film adaptation, Satyajit Ray, *Pather Panchali*

## I

The relationship between literature and film has always fascinated readers, viewers and critics alike. India, with its rich cultural heritage, is a repository of a fine range of creative arts, including literature, music, dance forms, painting, architecture, and sculpture. These different forms of the arts help in merging cultural and geographical boundaries and a movement towards a multicultural society. Although cinema *per se* had its origins in the Western world, it is by no means a Western phenomenon only. When the magic of the moving pictures mesmerised awestruck audiences in the West, it had also started to make its foray into the East, including Asia and, more particularly, into the Indian subcontinent. In fact, after proving their cinematic brilliance in the West, the Lumière brothers came to India and showcased their first cinematographic venture in Bombay in July 1896; the venue was Watson's Hotel, which is today's Esplanade Mansion, and this screening marked a beginning of sorts for Indian cinema. The event was much publicised as 'The Marvel of the Century', 'The Wonder of the World', and 'Living Photographic Pictures in Life-sized Reproductions'. Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatavdekar (popularly known as Save Dada), who was present during the screening, was so inspired by this sensational innovation of the Lumière brothers that he purchased a movie camera from London with which he made his first attempt at producing cinematographic films in Bombay. He thus shot the first film ever by an Indian in 1899 and called it *The Wrestlers*. The credit for the introduction and spread of cinema in India, therefore, goes to the enterprising Lumière brothers, who proved to be a source of creative inspiration and courage to a growing breed of Indian filmmakers.

According to Christian Metz, 'whatever other uses the cinema might have found, it is as a story-teller that it found its greatest power and its largest audience' (qtd. in McFarlane 1996: 12). The Indian film is a by-product of the cultural evolution of our country, and its development has been nurtured by the dramatic, poetic and aesthetic traditions of its glorious civilisation. Adaptation has been central to the filmmaking process and along with world cinema, has also been a mainstay in Indian cinema. Like their Western counterparts, the Indian filmmaker too has been continually inspired by books to craft their cinematic masterpieces. The contribution of Satyajit Ray in adapting stories into celluloid has singular importance in the Indian cinema context. Ray is of the opinion that filmmaking, although the 'most physically demanding of all activities', offers 'rewards as nothing else does'. When he ventured into filmmaking, like many others before him, he too chose a literary classic to adapt into his first film. This paper will study how Ray adapts or 'translates' Bibhutibhusan Banerji's *Pather Panchali*, an authentic and vividly

touching portrayal of life in a Bengali Brahmin rural household, into his own cinematic masterpiece. It will analyse how Ray maintains the rambling quality of the novel in his film script and how the novel's humanism, realism and lyricism convinced this 'serious' filmmaker to make a film mirroring the contemporary reality of his time. Ray had belief in the power of cinema to tell the truth convincingly, and even though it had nothing of the grandeur conspicuous in commercial films, Ray's vision of the novel celebrates, in a very Wordsworthian manner, the little joys of life and endures its tragedies too. The present paper will thus endeavour to study the interrelation between the two discourses—text and film—and discuss the profundity of the adaptation process through an analysis of Banerji's novel and Ray's film.

## II

As mentioned earlier, films have been made in India as early as anywhere in the world, albeit with lesser technical paraphernalia. Although cinema is a relatively new medium, an art form of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would also not be incorrect to state that it has its genesis in the aural and visual form of entertainment that had existed thousands of years before in the ancient civilisations of the world. Today, India produces the largest number of films in the world, and these films have overcome geographical and cultural barriers to be watched and appreciated in many countries of the world. Indian cinema has completed more than 100 years of its existence, and throughout this long history, has seen both technological and stylistic changes. Ray, while talking about the 'rewards' that filmmaking offers, also cautions that cinema needs to be 'saved' by writers.

Words are not enough. Words need the backing of action, or there is no revolution. And the only action that counts is that which a film maker calls into play by snapping out his word of command in his own particular field of battle. If his victory, and of many others like him, restore even a little of the dignity a great art form has lost, only then can we talk of having a revolution (Ray 1993: 15).

While deliberating on the topic of the advent of cinema in Indian entertainment history, it will be remiss on our part if we do not mention Bharata Muni's epic treatise on dramaturgy, titled the *Natyashastra*. Often called the fifth Veda, the treatise is an 'encyclopaedic work covering every aspect of theatrical representation' (Garga 2005: 166). It would not be incorrect to say that cinema derives much from the principles stated in the *Natyashastra*. The early Indian cinema turned to the mythologies, legends and epics as the basis to recreate on screen stories that were familiar to most of the people. There was a wealth of material for the Indian filmmaker in these sources, and the faith of the people could be banked upon to bring in commercial benefits, as the general

Indian populace is greatly influenced by the mythologies. These mythological narratives were imbued with certain social messages that sought to make a relevant impact on contemporary society. These films also gave Indian cinema its unique identity.

The very first Indian full-length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, was made by the father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke, in 1913, which was inspired by the Sanskrit epics. Even though it was a silent film, it was hugely successful. Literature gave a sense of 'respectability' to cinema as an art form because, as Garga comments, 'to the bulk of the intelligentsia, who was never quite convinced of the validity of film as an art, Shakespeare and Moliere were any day preferable to the acrobatics of Miss Pearl White' (156). Besides Puranic and epic literature, early Indian film drew heavily from Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Victor Hugo and other Western classics, which provided the grist for the adaptation mill. Later filmmakers turned to the vast multiplicity of Indian literary works, both vernacular and English, for stories to adapt for the screen. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Munshi Premchand, R. K. Narayan, and Bhisham Sahni are some of the writers whom filmmakers have favoured for translating their stories in a semiotically different medium. The frailties of human life and the complexities of human relationships, the relationship between man and nature, and the universality of human emotions have forever been favoured by filmmakers as subjects for their films.

The relationship between literature and cinema has been fraught with tension from the beginning because it is an established fact that to retain each and every aspect of a literary work in its celluloid adaptation is a rather difficult task. Sometimes, even the smallest detail of a literary work can fire the imagination of a creative director who finds novelty in it and therefore might wish to discard the rest to mould his own take on the story. Inspiration and creativity are arbitrary and know no boundaries. The most significant aspect of well-crafted adaptations is that even a non-reading audience is initiated into the world of literature without their conscious knowledge.

Indian filmmakers, while adapting literature into film, may have to pander to certain exclusive criteria that are very typically Indian. The audience for Indian films mostly comprises the great Indian family, and therefore, most films are made *for* the family to be watched *with* the family. This also obviously guarantees a vast spectrum of the audience. Indian cinema is also conspicuous for its inclusion of music, song and dance sequences, which are responsible for much of its popularity. This is obviously because the Indian film is made for different kinds of target audiences and also draws from a different aesthetic tradition. That is why the song and dance routine is an integral part of the Indian cinema experience and also sometimes serves as a narrative tool to

forward the plot. The songs may be performed by the actors or may be 'enacted by a source other than any of the fictional characters' (Vasudevan 2000: 395). These songs proffer an 'insight into the emotional attitude of individual characters and the wider cultural and even mythic significance of certain actions and events'. It is often the case that a film may have long faded from public memory, but its songs still live on in the hearts of the people. The Indian film experience can thus be 'compared to a collective dream that mirrors the values and aspirations of the masses', and therefore is 'a useful instrument for understanding society' (Roberge 1992: 186).

### III

Such is the aura of Ray as an auteur that film enthusiasts and connoisseurs would agree that 'Satyajit Ray is Indian cinema' (Raghavendra 2009: 57). While Akira Kurosawa was making waves with his new-age cinema in Japan, Ray emerged as a neo-realist force to reckon with in India. He had started his career in advertising as a graphic designer, and when he decided to become a filmmaker, he chose Bibhutibhusan Banerji's *Pather Panchali*. Ray's metier was making films, and the plethora of awards that he has won bears testimony to his profound knowledge of the art of filmmaking. Indian cinema can be said to have 'arrived' in the international cinema firmament, particularly in Europe and America, with Ray's films, which came to be appreciated by the masses and intelligentsia alike; the man himself was hailed as an 'artiste of uncommon talent and perception' (Garga 2005: 209). Ray has his own reason for choosing *Pather Panchali*, or *Song of the Little Road*, for his debut as director.

I chose *Pather Panchali* for the lyrical qualities that made it a great book: its humanism, its lyricism, and its ring of truth. I knew I had to do a lot of pruning and reshaping...but at the same time I felt that to cast the thing into a mould of cut- and dried- narrative would be wrong. The script had to retain some of the rambling quality of the novel because that in itself contained a clue to the feel of authenticity: life in a poor Bengali village does ramble (Ray 1993: 33).

In fact, when asked what had inspired him to make the film, Ray remarked quirkily that 'the simplest answer would of course be that it is one of the most filmable of all Bengali novels' (2013: 9). At a first reading, it seems that the story does not have much of a plot; the 'feeble' storyline is interspersed with autobiographical elements of the author's own rural background, giving it a realistic touch. The story also apparently glorifies and romanticises poverty, with the characters in a perpetual state of deprivation and want. But this 'rambling' story chronicling the family ties and tribulations of a poor rural family consisting of a father, a mother, their two children, and an old aunt in

an intimate manner has managed to capture the imagination of its readers from the time it was first serialised in a Bengali magazine and has been able to retain its critical and popular success since then. At a time when the Bengali filmmaker was preoccupied with making films with clichéd storylines, like mythologies, devotional films, or melodramas, Ray, being a ‘serious’ filmmaker, opted for the road less trodden and made neo-realist films that mirrored the contemporary reality of his time. He therefore went ahead with the making of *Pather Panchali* even at the risk of being called esoteric, because he was convinced with the story at hand and also with his own vision. He has documented the different facets of the cinematic craft, including the problems that a filmmaker faces, particularly a Bengali filmmaker, in his perceptive and reflective study, *Our Films, Their Films*. Ray’s belief in the power of cinema to tell the truth and tell it convincingly can be evinced from what he has to say about the story.

This story (*Pather Panchali*) says true things about India. That was enough for me. It had the quality of truth, the quality that always impresses me, whenever I see it, as I have seen it in films such as *Nanook*, *Louisiana Story*, *Earth* and *The Southerner* (qtd. in Garga 2005: 209).

The production went through several hiccups, most importantly the lack of adequate funds, which resulted in ‘long periods of enforced idleness’. But he was undeterred, ‘because I had great faith in my story, in its seeming artless simplicity and in the appeal of its very recognisable, human characters’ (Ray 1993: 41). Ray’s unfamiliarity with the rural milieu also complicated matters, but he claims to have been a good deal educated about ‘life in a Bengali village ... its soil, its season, its trees and forests and flowers’ (qtd. in Garga 2005: 215) after he was done making the film. By giving a picture of the social environment, landscape, behaviour, dress, and mannerism of a particular place and culture, the film is also a semiotically aesthetic expression of that particular period in history. Perhaps Ray also knew that even when a film ‘leaves its regional moorings and rises to a plane of universal gestures and universal emotions’, it is bound to ‘work’ (Ray 1993: 12), mainly because of the universality of human emotions. He was vindicated when the film, sponsored by the government of West Bengal, performed unexpectedly well at the box office. It is an axiomatic truth that Bengali culture, landscape and locale are a leitmotif in Ray’s films, which are perceived in two other films of his trilogy, *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (1959), that he made with equal consummate skill, but it is for *Pather Panchali* (1955) that he is best remembered. The film has an understated appeal and has nothing of the grandeur that is conspicuous in the present-day films; the joys and sorrows are seen through the wondrous eyes of the two children of the family, little Apu and his elder sister Durga.

## IV

The fidelity question is a dicey issue for any filmmaker, but the intelligent ones among the breed will always be guided by the principle to look for those elements in the text that will make for an interesting viewing and also match up to the audience's expectations, irrespective of the fact whether the film is *wholly* faithful to the original or not. In appropriating the meaning from an earlier text, the odds are that a 'faithful-to-the-letter' adaptation may turn out to be a disjointed and perplexing one for the audience. Fidelity, for film theorist Robert Stam, is a 'chimaera', because like other theorists, he too believes that in adaptation, 'it is questionable whether strict fidelity is even possible' (2000: 55). Another pertinent, but rather practical, aspect that Stam mentions while talking about fidelity in novel-to-film adaptation is that in the transition from a 'single-track' verbal medium to a 'multi-track medium', there is a world of change involved. To elaborate further, he says that there is a huge difference in the cost and method of production of a novel and a film. While writing a novel is an individual project, producing and making a film is a collaborative effort, involving a number of people, cast and crew included (56). Ray also comments that if there is only 'mere recounting of incidents', then 'it would be a translation faithful to the letter and not to the spirit'. Transformation, Ray believes, is 'inevitable', therefore, even with all its omissions, the audience appreciated *Pather Panchali* because it 'closely conformed to what people liked in the book' (2013: 11).

The novel is a classic *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age story illustrating the growing up of Apu, the son, from childhood naivety to a conscious understanding of the privations that beset human life and also the ways of the world. The story is not a regular 'love story'; this is rather a story *about* love: love for the family, love for nature's many moods, a love that triumphs regardless of adversity. The translators of the novel say that 'in spite of its episodic structure and its occasional abrupt transitions from one incident to another, it is emotionally coherent, and its narrative is integrated about the children in their village' (Bandopadhyay 2013: xiv). Apu and Durga, in spite of their hardship, are content in their own microcosmic world; sitting under a tree eating guavas, running across a field of *kaash* blossoms to catch their first sight of a train, viewing pictures of an 'exotic' world through a bioscope, watching a *jatra* performance, or frolicking in the monsoon rain. The signs of the imminent monsoon can be seen in the lotus leaves being ruffled by the rising wind as they flip their edges, the water bugs skipping over the pond surface and the tall coconut trees swaying furiously in the wind, as the smell of rain in the air grows by the minute. I say 'smell' because Ray's depiction of this particular scene with the use of sound and music is such that the

authenticity of nature's moods is perfectly revealed in tandem with the description in the text. Looked at objectively, his mise-en-scenes are strikingly poignant without being overly sentimental. Their impoverished state is momentarily forgotten as Durga dances with delirious joy in the first monsoon showers; as she twirls around in the rain, the huge drops pelt her frail body, drenching her completely. The haunting music of Ravi Shankar crescendos as the rain increases in intensity. The joyful mood here is underscored with a hint of foreboding. The scene, though visually stimulating, has a deeper connotation. The dichotomy is such that the rain, which provides succour and brings new life, is also a cause of death and devastation for many. Durga contracts pneumonia, and in the absence of proper medical facilities, dies an untimely death. Although here her death is an immediate consequence of getting wet in the rain, in the novel, the cause of death is inconclusive as it takes place much later, after the fever has left her frail body; the village doctor attributes it to 'heart failure'. The rain in Ray's hands 'becomes a symbol of nature's bounty and of its horror, helping to further a discourse on the diversity of nature's attributes' (Raghavendra 2009: 59). The beautiful epitaph for Durga in the novel would have been difficult to render on screen, something which can be internalised only when we read the text.

From time to time the hand of eternity breaks through the blue veil of the heavens and beckons to a child, and the little one, no longer willing to wait, tears itself away from the breast of Mother Earth and is lost for ever down a road that knows no returning. In that dark evening hour of her sick and restless life Durga had heard those summons, and leaving the paths she loved so well, she commenced a new journey, down a highway her feet had not trodden before (Bandopadhyay 2013: 291).

The film is a perfect example of realistic cinema shot on location, and the characters, including Harihar and Sarbojaya, parents of Apu and Durga, and Harihar's old crone of an aunt, Indir Thakrun, are also very believable, playing their parts with effortless élan. In fact, along with Ray's astute direction, it is the actors also who deserve credit for making the adaptation visually accessible to a non-Bengali audience. The film, because of its natural realism, was even extolled as 'the best human document of the year' when it was screened at the Cannes Film Festival. With its attention to detail, 'the novel is a classic of naturalism, and Ray was more concerned with recreating its ambience on the screen than with "interpreting" it' (Raghavendra 2009: 59). As Marie Seton says in her 'portrait' of Ray as a director:

... Ray's capacity to convey "even half-formed thought or feeling, a passing fancy" which, even before sub-titled, made *Pather Panchali* understandable to people who did not know the Bengali language. People were able to feel the universality of the ineffectual man of optimism always chasing rainbows, or sunk in despondent apathy,

and the stoic woman holding things together despite her constant edginess. It was not necessary to understand each word, for the tones in Karuna Banerji's voice spoke for all the world's harassed women (Seton 1972: 105).

Ray, being a meticulous filmmaker, in his own words, uses characters and settings he is familiar with while writing a story. In fact, he was opposed to the idea of making a film of R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, mainly because he was not accustomed to the South Indian way of life. It is, however, a different matter that later on the film adaptation of the novel was set against an entirely different backdrop. Being born and brought up in an urban environment, he had to tread carefully while filming *Pather Panchali*, because, as mentioned earlier, he lacked 'firsthand acquaintance with the milieu of the story'. But finally he was able to 'fathom the mysteries of "atmosphere"' in an authentic Bengali village and thus impress his film with the 'ring of truth' (Ray 1993: 33). That Ray is a perfectionist can be perceived when we see how precisely he depicts the locale and delineates his characters within a short span of time, something for which the novelist Bandopadhyay devotes so many pages of print. His craft of adaptation is characterised by a predilection for only those aspects of a story that he finds 'attractive', leaving out or moulding the 'unsatisfactory' ones according to his whim. He shows least concern for 'purists who rage at departure from the original' because a change of medium necessitates taking certain liberties with the original (Ray 1993: 64). Thus, in this film too, Ray restructured some of the incidents, including the ending, for the sake of a cinematic impact. In his own words, 'he may borrow his material, but he must colour it with his own experience of the medium. Then, and only then, will the completed film be his own...' (Ray 2013: 13). In adapting the film for the screen, he tried to 'combine the relaxed quality of the original with the tightness called for by the exigencies of the conventional feature film' (Ray 2013: 79). His principal focus was the vicissitudes of the indigent family rather than a detailed depiction of the rural way of life. At the end of the novel we see the family leaving for greener pastures on a train, and Apu looks out the window tearfully saying his farewell to his dead sister, his home and his village; he also forlornly reminisces about his sister's unfulfilled wish to see a train. Ray also concludes his film at this very juncture, but here we have the family leaving their dilapidated hut on a rickety bullock cart instead of a train in search of a better life. But the dramatic impact is sustained for our eyes remain riveted on the screen as a snake slithers furtively across the threshold of the abandoned dwelling, reiterating the belief that snakes make their homes in houses deserted by humans.

Besides *Pather Panchali*, Ray has been quite partial to Rabindranath Tagore's novels and short stories for adapting into films, for instance, *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) and *Charulata*, which have strong women

protagonists. The latter, based on the Tagore novella *Noshto Neer*, ‘exemplifies the great potential that cinema can offer over ordinary expression in literature’ (Mandal 2005: 49). The ennui seeping into the life of the young housewife Charu and her yearning for a freedom from this loneliness is suggested evocatively through Ray’s use of visual imagery in very little screen time.

## V

*Pather Panchali* has, however, not escaped criticism. The actor and Member of Parliament, Nargis, had slammed Ray on the ground that films like *Pather Panchali* are popular abroad because ‘people there want to see India in an abject condition’ because ‘that is the image they have of our country, and a film that confirms that image seems to be authentic’. She further commented that Ray makes these kinds of films projecting Indian poverty in order to ‘win awards’ (Rajadhyaksha 2016: 67). Ray himself had doubts whether a Western audience would ‘care for a downbeat tale of poverty in a remote Indian village’ (Ray 2013: 71), but ultimately his apprehensions were proved wrong.

Ray, in his cinematic ventures, put great emphasis on realism and psychological insight. His cinema was coloured by its visual poetry, and he preferred on-location outdoor shooting rather than studio sets. He, with his sensitive knowledge of human nature, handpicked his actors from amongst common people instead of recruiting seasoned professionals. He can therefore be credited with creating an internationally recognised, realistic and artistic cinema in India. Even with the wherewithal that filmmakers today have at their disposal, there are very few who can match the genius of Ray’s filmmaking. However, there are some who make cinema a pleasant and thought-provoking experience that does provide a silver lining in an otherwise bleak scenario.

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# Invoking the Figure of *Rishi* Tolstoy: Early Reception of Leo Tolstoy in the Assamese Language

Bidyut Sagar Boruah

## Abstract

In the early 1920s, Haliram Deka published two biographical sketches of the Russian author Leo Tolstoy in an Assamese monthly, *Chetona*. This article provides a reading of these sketches as the key texts in introducing Tolstoy as a religious-spiritual figure to the Assamese public arena, almost overshadowing other aesthetic and critical considerations regarding the author's oeuvre. While Deka focused on the evolution and articulations of Tolstoy's spiritual thoughts, referring to him as *rishi*, he was, however, interested to contextualise Tolstoy's urge toward spirituality not only in individual terms but also vis-à-vis the political situation in his contemporary Russia. Deka was, in fact, eager to draw broader universal socio-political implications of Tolstoy's thoughts. In this context, the article argues that Deka implicitly provided a clarification of the Gandhian logic of *ahimsa* by way of engaging with Tolstoy. Finally, one can suggest that Deka's invocation of Tolstoy was coterminous with the Assamese intelligentsia's broader attempts to deal with the dilemmas of the emergent mass politics during the pivotal moment of Assam's growing engagement with the anti-colonial Indian nationalism.

**Keywords:** Translation; Reception; Authorial figure; Anti-colonial nationalism; Gandhian concepts

During 1921-1922, an Assamese monthly, *Chetona* published, in serialised form, Haliram Deka's translation of Leo Tolstoy's tract 'What is Religion and Wherein Lies its Essence?'. Deka, then a student in Calcutta, did not know Russian, and one can assume that his translation was a relay translation from the English translation by Aylmer Maude.<sup>1</sup> Deka also published two short write-ups on Tolstoy in the June 1921 and February-March 1922 issues of

the same magazine—titled ‘Count Tolstoy Aru Bidrohi Dal’ (Count Tolstoy and the Revolutionaries) and ‘Jiwan Samasya’ (Life Questions). The translated tract and the write-ups introduced Tolstoy essentially as a spiritual figure to the Assamese reading public. Arguably, the early reception of the literary Tolstoy in Assamese was overdetermined by the appreciation of the religious-philosophical aspect of the renowned author. All the early Assamese translations of Tolstoy’s literary works—leading up to the translated anthology of stories *Tolstoyar Sadhu (Tales of Tolstoy)* by Surendra Mohan Das in 1939—were from the stories and tales from the late career of Tolstoy with embedded moral messages. By reading closely Haliram Deka’s words, this article intends to show how a particular implication of the spiritual-religious figure of the author was raised as a response to the unfolding socio-political context of the anti-colonial movement. Arguably, Leo Tolstoy’s early reception in the Assamese public arena was intrinsic to the pivotal moment of colonial Assam’s growing engagement with the political scenario of anti-colonial Indian nationalism.

#### ***The Gandhian context for evoking Tolstoy***

Indeed, the early reception of Tolstoy as a spiritual figure, even overshadowing his long, illustrious literary career, was not unique to the Assamese print arena. A bird’s-eye view of Tolstoy’s appearance in the English and vernacular press in British India at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows us that the Indian intelligentsia considered Tolstoy overwhelmingly in terms of his religious-philosophical positions.<sup>2</sup> Tolstoy’s professed transformation as a Christian anarchist in the 1880s drew global attention, even influencing groups and individuals across continents.<sup>3</sup> In the Indian context, Indian publicists and thinkers—intrigued and inspired by Tolstoy’s interest in Indic philosophies as well as his anti-imperialist position—held personal correspondence, usually asking for his opinion on the Indian situation. Such correspondences were duly circulated in the Indian media as well, adding to the author’s spiritual aura.<sup>4</sup> The evocation of the spiritual Tolstoy in the Assamese print arena was certainly related to this global and pan-Indian context. However, it ultimately owed much to Mahatma Gandhi’s engagement with the author and the Gandhian turn in the Indian political scene. As the Brahmaputra valley — somewhat aloof from the pan-Indian political scene until then—was swept across by the mass political appeal of the Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi’s leadership and aura were recognised unanimously by the Assamese middle-class elite. However, the *raison d’être* for the philosophy of *ahimsa* was grasped only in a sketchy manner. As we will notice, Haliram Deka’s write-ups on Tolstoy constituted a significant moment in articulating the philosophical and political implications of the Gandhian concept to the wider reading public.

As Gandhi plunged into political action in South Africa and subsequently in British India, increasingly in the form of mass politics—unlike Tolstoy’s non-involvement with any mass action, he differed significantly from the Russian anarchist both philosophically and politically.<sup>5</sup> However, Gandhi used to acknowledge the formative influence of Tolstoy in unambiguous terms throughout his life. In the preface to his seminal text *Hind Swaraj*, he mentioned Tolstoy as one of his teachers (Gandhi 1997: 6). Concurrently, in the context of reprinting Tolstoy’s *Letter to A Hindu* in *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi professed himself to be a humble follower of the great teacher (136). More significantly, among the books listed in the appendices of *Hind Swaraj* to pursue the readers for further reading, works by Tolstoy counted the most with six texts (120). It is noteworthy that *Hind Swaraj* appeared in Assamese through Ratnakanta Barkakoti’s translation in 1921 at the height of the Non-Cooperation Movement. One can say that the Gandhian mediation broadened the scope of the engagement with Tolstoy initiated by earlier Indian publicists, in fact far exceeding the Tolstoyan paradigm in political terms. That *Chetona* was one of the earliest magazines in Assamese to publish Tolstoy’s philosophical work in translation and write-ups on Tolstoy cannot be divested from the Gandhian intervention. Published just a few months before the Non-Cooperation Movement, *Chetona* emerged as a platform to advocate the cause of participating in the national anti-colonial movement under Gandhi’s leadership. The appearance of Tolstoy was part of this very process. The two write-ups by Haliram Deka published in *Chetona* not only emphasised the spiritual-moral aspect of Tolstoy, but they also hinted at the significance of his moral position in contemporary political terms. We will notice that even as Deka reiterated similar figuration of spiritual Tolstoy in both the write-ups, he shifted from an individualist interpretation to a social one in between the two write-ups.

#### ***Non-violence and love as ethical imperatives of the individual***

The first write-up, ‘Count Tolstoy Aru Bidrohi Dal’, was a translation of a section from C.F. Andrews’ article ‘The Problem of Ahimsa’ published in the May 1921 issue of the *Modern Review*. The title essentially evoked the Gandhian connotation for the contemporary reader. It was also noteworthy that the association with Gandhi was one of the intimate friendships that Andrews nurtured through his deep concern for India’s freedom and social reform. It was also not a mere coincident that Andrews presided over the 1923 session of Asam Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Student Association), whose leadership played a pivotal role in the Assamese middle class’s turn toward anti-colonial politics. *Chetona*, whose mercurial editor Ambikagiri Raychoudhury was part of the young nationalists, too, used to publish occasionally Andrews’ viewpoints, usually as an interpreter of the Non-

Cooperation Movement and its philosophical orientation. In the article published in the *Modern Review*, Andrews was grappling with the essentiality of the Gandhian *ahimsa* in socio-political terms—though translating and situating it neatly in the conceptual frame of non-violence. Without going into the philosophical genealogy and broader implications of *ahimsa*, we can consider that non-violence did carry the political implications of the Gandhian concept, as Gandhi applied it in relation to the mode of passive resistance. However, as the article focused more on the broader geo-political implications of non-violence, Andrew did not refer to Gandhi or his thoughts beyond the connotative gesture of the title.

Rather, the article, written during a visit to Shanti Niketan, began with an anecdotal reference to Rabindranath Tagore—another one of Andrews' intimate friends. The anecdote referred to an incident during the poet's travel to Japan to point out his refutation of the creed of violence. Andrews, then, ruminated upon the destructive effects of violence as exemplified by the experience of the First World War and the subsequent geo-political situation in the imperial world order. It was in the context of the devastating impact of the war across continents that he located the particular case of the Russian experience. According to Andrews, the interference by the Allied Powers resulted in a new militarism—'the Russian Revolutionary Soviet movement'. It was in the context of the contemporary world ravaged by war and the tendency towards militarism that Andrews hoped for spiritual 'weapons' that could match people's prayer for peace. As such, the Tolstoyan anecdote provided the occasion to think about a moral response to the problematic of violence.

It is noteworthy that while translating parts of Andrews' article, Deka did not include the anecdotal reference to Tagore and the elaboration on the World War and the Russian context. Deka's translation focused only on the line-by-line reproduction of the Tolstoyan anecdote. One can assume that Deka must have considered that the Russian context was implicit in the Tolstoyan anecdote itself. While the anecdote to Tagore helped Andrews to build up his rumination on non-violence, Deka's act of editing out the whole section immediately situated the reader in the argumentative zone over competing views on violence and non-violence. It is noteworthy that Andrews too reproduced the Tolstoyan anecdote from another source in the English language. He reproduced an abridged version of a more elaborate transcript of a conversation between members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and Tolstoy. Andrews came across the transcript in its English translation titled 'Tolstoy and Revolution' in the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1921 issue of an American magazine, *The Living Age*. In the long transcript presented in *The Living Age*, the revolutionaries—throughout the conversation—tried to justify their method of violence vis-à-vis the historic condition of Russian feudalism and the situation of the working class in Russia.

As such, the reader could get a broader appraisal of the Russian Revolution from the point of view of the Socialist Revolutionaries. Of course, the transcript was presented to emphasise the Tolstoyan philosophy of non-violence. Andrews, obedient to this intentional reading of the transcript, abridged the response of the revolutionaries—thus providing only a snapshot of the revolutionary politics in the Russian context. The Assamese translation of Deka further abridged the Russian context, as we have already mentioned that it did not go into the context of the World War as explained by Andrews. Deka's Assamese version was also not categorical in naming the faction of revolutionaries—thus totally avoiding a historicised context.

In Haliram Deka's reproduction of the anecdote, Tolstoy's wish to hold a conversation with the revolutionaries occurred as he came across their pamphlet and was disturbed by its proclamation, 'inspire hatred in people's minds—that is our great duty'. The conversation was presented in a dialogic form, focusing upon Tolstoy's belief in love and non-violence against the revolutionaries' steadfast belief in the violent method of uprooting the government. In the very beginning, Tolstoy emphasised the capacity of love as inherent to human nature, drawing attention to different religions' consensus over such an opinion. Tolstoy went on to pronounce that it was sinful to go against such doctrines of love. He asked the revolutionaries not only to forsake their violent method of rebellion; he also asked them to sever any ties with the unjust government. According to Tolstoy, it was the only way to root out the dictatorial regime. It is interesting to note that this conversation—supposedly held in 1908—had a certain similarity of viewpoint to *A Letter to a Hindu*. In fact, Tolstoy's suggestion of radical non-action to anti-colonial Indians can just be transposed to his conversation with the Russian revolutionaries—'Do not resist the evil-doer and take no part in doing so, either in the violent deeds of the administration, in the law courts, in the collection of taxes, or, above all, in soldiering, and no one in the world will be able to enslave you.' (Srinivasa Murthy 1987: 55). The revolutionaries in the conversation pointed out the impossibility of following such a proposition in individual terms, as they were individually tied to the existing regime for their livelihood. On the cue of this personal dilemma, Tolstoy took forward the discussion towards the issue of individual morality. Referring to Christ's proposition that anyone following him should be ready to give up personal and familial ties, Tolstoy admonished the rebels for their failure to rise above personal and familial interests—thus failing to listen to their conscience. Christ was indeed central to Tolstoy's argument, as he professed his belief in human beings' capacity to love their neighbour and God. One can say that Tolstoy emphasised a universalising tendency of love, contrasting it with the divisive aspect of hatred. Ultimately, he rejected the very practicality of the tactic of violence, pointing out the high

probability of retaliation. While retaliating against the provocation of hatred by the rebels, the government could also spread the message of hatred among the peasants. In terms of Tolstoy's moral thinking, the multiplication of hatred in such infective ways presented an ethical problem. When the revolutionaries considered Tolstoy's proposition as an act of futile self-sacrifice, Tolstoy situated this very possibility in close terms with Christ's act of sacrifice. He pointed out that it was only due to the crucifixion of Christ that Tolstoy himself and thousands like him throughout history turned into disciples of Christ. In response to the insistence of the rebels about the futility of passivity in bringing any substantial change, Tolstoy emphasised an understanding of history as a narrative of human moral progress. Eventually, Tolstoy presented his own life as an example of the eventuality of change through love. He said that by learning to consider everyone as equal and with love, he had attained a unique sense of joy in his heart. It was a path supported by the sages and intellectuals of different ages. He reiterated that true joy resided only in love and sacrifice. One can notice that while the revolutionaries were speaking in terms of collectivity, the write-up presented in a positive light Tolstoyan belief in moral individuality as the source of change. At the end of the conversation—which, of course, ended without any resolution—the revolutionaries left Tolstoy's house with the words that they would think about what he had said.

Interestingly, contrary to the transcript in *The Living Age*, Andrew added certain dramatisation in his abridged English reproduction. Unavailable in the transcript form, he imagined in his words the animated space of the conversation by referring to gestures, expressions, and emotions. Towards the end, as the revolutionaries drew attention to the futility of the Doukhobor's anarchist pacifism, Andrews claimed that it was hurtful for Tolstoy as he was involved in helping them against the persecution by the Russian state and the church. As a result, Tolstoy became agitated, though he overcame his emotions at the time of bidding adieu to the revolutionaries. In Andrews's words, 'All his excitement had vanished and he was like a child' (1921: 568). Haliram Deka followed this dramatised ending of Andrews—though with a difference. According to him, Tolstoy did not feel anger or disgust against the rebels, and calmness returned to his being. Tolstoy was shown embodying the very personal disciplining act in this regard. The reference to the childlike attitude was avoided in Deka's Assamese translation, thus focusing distinctively on the sage-like calmness.

### ***Transference of the individual morality to the socio-political***

In the second piece, 'Jiwan-Samasya' (Life Questions)—published in the February-March 1922 issue of the magazine—Haliram Deka again emphasised the spiritual figure of Tolstoy, though he referred to his status as a significant name in world literature. The write-up mentioned that due to his ideas, thinking,

religiosity, and grandeur, many considered him to be a *rishi*—a sage—of the modern era. To consider someone as *rishi* also entailed a narrativisation of the process of attaining such a stature, which the write-up endeavoured to achieve faithfully. The major part of the write-up was a narration of Tolstoy's life that focused on his spiritual transformation. Dekha started from the very beginning—namely, a folly-ridden young man's early attainment of literary fame. Accordingly, literary fame made Tolstoy concentrate more on literary creativity, forsaking his involvement with military enterprises. However, it was a supposedly sudden turn toward philosophical curiosity, which built up the arc of the write-up:

Suddenly in his mind, an indomitable desire for knowledge has arisen. For so many years, he wrote so many words and read so many books. But, he never had a thirst for knowledge of this nature. Questions arose in his mind, 'What is life? For whom is life? For what purpose is this life? Who did give us life? What is the aim? What is my relationship with life?' (Deka 1922: 220).

In his urge to search for answers, Tolstoy gave up his earlier life of luxury and debauchery as well as his wealth. Subsequently, the narrative followed the predictable arc of conflict and resolution. Though the write-up did not provide any clue whether Dekha read Tolstoy's *A Confession* or came across its summary in any other form, his narrativisation was built upon elements that could be noticed in Tolstoy's spiritual memoir—his depression, confusion, reading of religious scriptures, and so on. Dekha also pointed out the subsequent predicament of Tolstoy, as the Orthodox Church in Russia excommunicated him.

Even as Haliram Dekha presented the familiar narrative of Tolstoy's transformation into a spiritual figure, Dekha significantly moved forward from the glorification of the individual figure to the socio-political domain in the last part of the write-up. The earlier write-up, 'Count Tolstoy aru Bidrohi Dal', was more focused on showcasing the Tolstoyan belief in love and non-violence. While it entailed the claim that these attributes could challenge the repressive regime of the Tsar, it remained an abstract proposition faithfully reiterating the radical non-action of Tolstoy. As such, the write-up was an affirmation of individual morality. But, in 'Jiwan Samasya', Dekha's final aim appeared to be the socio-political contextualisation of the spiritual articulation. He developed this last aspect of the write-up by bringing in the issue of similarity between Tolstoyan thoughts and the Hindu Upanishadic philosophy. According to Dekha, Tolstoy came to believe that all human beings were equal and that the purpose of life was to turn every human being into part of a collective by following the universal principle of love. Dekha equated this Tolstoyan proposition with the Upanishadic reference to the oneness of every being—an oneness that resulted from a universally present *ananda* or joy. Dekha further related the concept of *ananda* with love while carefully distancing

love from any connotation of sensuality. Deka then brought this concept into the contemporary context by proclaiming that it was love that was bringing forth the resurrection of India. He equated love with the path of non-violence. He claimed that by treading the path of love and non-violence, India would show the world its effectiveness. The path of non-violence would cause transformative progress in the soul of even the most brutal enemy, as the enemy's eyes could be opened with the light of truth. In this final instance, Deka's write-up indeed arrived at the contemporary political scene, whereby non-violence did not remain a mere individual moral force. The entangled reality of Gandhian politics came to the fore in this last articulation—first, the acceptance of the mass characteristics of the Indian anti-colonial movement; and secondly, non-violence as a social ethic that could discipline the mass people in the path of passive resistance.

### **Coda**

In this final assertion of the mass political movement, one can consider that Haliram Deka moved away from the solitary figure of the spiritual Tolstoy. As already mentioned, Tolstoy's religious articulations hardly moved towards an affirmative acceptance of mass action. However, it was the very last shift—initiated by equating Tolstoy's proposition with that of Upanishadic philosophy—that completely cemented the evocation of *rishi*hood in the first part of the write-up. The concept of the *rishi*—as the seer of truth—had been a part of the spiritualised anti-colonial political domain, as one could observe the many figurations of it during colonial times. Tolstoy was invoked in this very term in *Chetona's* pages to assert the Gandhian movement.

### **End Notes**

1. See Maude 1903: 288-337.
2. For an overview of Tolstoy's reception in English newspapers, see Balasubramanian 2011, 'Leo Tolstoy from 1901–2010 in Two Leading English-Language Newspapers in India'.
3. For a study of the Tolstoyans influenced by the religious turn of Tolstoy, see Alston 2014, *Tolstoy and His Disciples*.
4. See Shifman 1969, especially chapters 4, 5, and 6.
5. For a detailed analysis of how Gandhi adopted and differed from Tolstoy, see Chatterjee 1986: 100–2; Hartnett 2020: 277–8; Hunt 1996: 262–3.

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# Translating Strangeness: Understanding Naiyer Masud's Fiction

Fuzail Asar Siddiqi

## Abstract

The Urdu short story of the Progressive Writers' Movement is marked by an obsession with social realism, with problems of poverty and suffering, with all the ugliness of the issues of the real world. However, post-Progressive literature turns towards the uncanny and the fantastic, the greatest exponent of which is Naiyer Masud (1936–2017), who is also known to be the first translator of Kafka into Urdu and also introduces the Kafkaesque to Urdu literature. Masud's stories eschew the traditional fixation with social reality in the genre of the short story to explore a world that is not guided by reason but through sensation. It concerns itself with the emotional and psychological experience of the world by negotiating with a reality that is not as simple and real, so to speak, as one might observe through reason. Masud is concerned with the strangeness of our realities, with the coincidences and patterns of the so-called random happenings, to suggest that the world we see is not necessarily the world we inhabit. For Masud, what becomes important is not the larger grand narrative of history but the palimpsestic nature of the human experience, which, in the act of narration, creates an experience of strangeness for the reader. The suggestion in Masud's stories is that the effect of strangeness through the narrative is necessary to be able to translate the inchoateness of the experience of being human. This paper aims to analyse why Masud translates the Kafkaesque into Urdu and how, through his stories, he attempts to make clear the untranslatable nature of human experience.

**Keywords:** Progressive Writers' Movement, social realism, Kafka, Naiyer Masud, Urdu Short Story

The publication of the Urdu short-story collection *Angaaray* in 1932 by four young writers, Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, Ahmed Ali, and Mahmuduzzafar, which was subsequently banned by the British Government in March 1933, set the template for a whole host of writers that were later a part of the

Progressive Writers' Movement. The Progressive Movement was a defining moment of the Urdu short story and kept the focus on the problems of the real world, so to speak, on issues of poverty and suffering, disease and discrimination, and the like. However, the period after independence saw a shift away from a realist mode of writing towards a psychological interrogation of characters and events. Both Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (1992: 433) and Muhammad Umar Memon (2014) give credit to Sa'adat Hasan Manto to some extent as attempting to bring about a change in the tenor and form of the Urdu short story. For Faruqi, 'his [Manto's] last story 'Phundne' (Tassels), which deals with the inner conflicts of a character, although written in 1955, reads as though it came from the seventies. Manto's example inspired all later writers who wrote in the "abstract" mode' (1992: 433).

The Urdu short story in the late 1950s and 1960s marks a dramatic shift towards internal struggles and psychological interrogation of the characters. For Sukrita Paul Kumar, the 'absence of a sustaining society actually caused the fragmentation of the psyche, which could no longer be presented through traditional fiction wherein the image of the order and harmony was maintained consistently' (Kumar 1990: 13–4). Critics such as Paul Kumar and G. C. Narang rightly understand that post-partition violence was the trigger in some ways of the dismantling of the genre of the short story, which was forced to alter its mode of expression to one that would align with the disarray of the human psyche after such violence. The form, therefore, must also gain prominence to accurately articulate or at least mirror the disorder of modern life, as Narang states:

To such writers, form is no more an extension of content. It is not the storiness of the story that is important, but its atmosphere, its focus and concentration. Unnecessary details are being squeezed out. Furthermore, it is no longer necessary, they feel, to maintain the conventional ordering of materials in time and space. Stories employing broken narrative, intricate symbolism, uncommon and abstract syntax and expression are common (Narang 1973: 130).

A whole host of writers in the 1960s, such as Surendar Prakash, Khalida Asghar, Enver Sajjad, and the like, altered the mode of the short story to shift the focus away from real-world problems to questions of being and existence, of reality and unreality, of the strange and the uncanny. Their attempt was to 'translate', so to speak, a strangeness that they believed was a part of human existence, which was beyond comprehension but yet was very much a part of the world they believed they inhabited. Their questions were about the nature of being that required interrogation and translation into a simpler idiom if possible.

This paper attempts to analyse some short stories of Naiyer Masud, whose collections were published from 1984 onwards but who was writing from the 1970s itself and is also known for his translations of Kafka's short fiction

in 1978. This paper attempts to argue that, as both a translator and a writer, Masud's understanding of the task of the translation attempts to think beyond the binaries of fidelity and freedom to suggest that at the heart of the enterprise of translation is the commonality of human experience that exists beyond the scope of linguistic, political, and cultural comprehensibility.

Baqar Mehdi rightly claims that till the beginnings of the *nai kahani* in Hindi and the *naya afsana* in Urdu (the new story) from around the late 1950s to the decade of the 1960s, the 'short stories in Urdu remained enclosed in the traditional pattern. That is, it had a beginning, then an unfolding of anecdote or an incident leading to a climax, and then the final stroke' (1976: 26). Masud's stories in his first collection, *Seemiya* (The Occult), in 1984, are an attempt to think anew this mode of representation of reality through fiction. Unlike the Progressives, Masud's literary project does not believe in the possibility of representation of human experience, in parts or in totality; on the contrary, he is almost a believer in the sheer untranslatability of human experience into language. This is also the caveat of Memon, who desists the reader of Masud from the search for meaning: 'Our generic expectations from the short story proceed from the premise that objects have meaning, rather than that they are beings, to be accessed through feelings more than by intellect' (Memon 2015: xvii). Following Memon, then, if there is nothing as such in terms of concrete meaning to Masud, what then is the literary project of Masud, and why is it even translated then?

Even in his choice of translations of Kafka's short fiction in 1978, called *Kafka ke Afsane* (Stories of Kafka), Masud chose to translate texts that hint towards the need to realise that the older ways of looking at the world must be discarded for newer modes of perception. In the short translations of Kafka's stories, such as 'Ek choti si kahani' (a small story), 'Libaas' (clothes), 'Darakht' (trees), 'Red Indian Hone Ki Khwaish' (The wish to be a red Indian), Masud finds in Kafka a writer oriented towards the strangeness of life that perhaps were his own inclinations. More importantly, the idiom of expression that Masud was looking for was missing in Urdu literature, as he claims in his interview with Sagaree Sengupta, so much so that he even passed his first story itself as not an original but a translation from Persian. A short example from Kafka's 'The Desire to be a Red Indian' should suffice to highlight Masud's attraction towards him as a writer:

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone (Kafka 2021).

Masud's choice of translating these smaller works highlights his affinity to a mode of writing that seemed similar to his own rather than a simple import of

the Kafkaesque, considering the fact that the translations in Urdu of Kafka came much after he had already published his first story in 1971. The strangeness that Kafka exhibits mirrors the same kind of anxiety with appearance and reality that Masud's own protagonists deal with. Masud's stories are also concerned with both the nature of reality and also the way it is presented. Masud, in an interview with Asif Farrukhi makes this clear when he says, 'The days of strict realism are over. As for abstraction and ambiguity—I personally don't care for them ... I attempted something straddling both: reality, yes, but not naked' (Masud 2015: 648).

Masud attempts to tamper with both the language and the form of the short story, which perhaps is critical in creating effects of strangeness that are the only things that are translatable when the meanings of the stories themselves are unclear. Firstly, his Urdu prose is trimmed down to the bare fundamentals, what Memon, his translator, refers to as prose without the 'slightest trace of fustian rhetoric, so stark in its suppression of qualifiers it unsettles the mind. Hardly any idioms or verbal pyrotechnics of any kind' (2015: xii). John Kenneth Muse also agrees and says, 'One can find his stories in Finnish or French, English or Urdu, yet in any language they feel disorienting less as translations from a foreign tongue than as missives from the uncanny, private world of Naiyer Masud' (Muse 2006: 3). This lack of idiomatic expression is necessary to 'suppress spatial and temporal specificity' (Masud 2015: 650), removing the 'storiness' of the short story from attempting to represent a particular socio-political location, primarily because Masud's concern is not social or historical verisimilitude. His focus is on the uncanny nature of human life, uncanny in the very specific Freudian use of the term.

Freud's discussion in the essay 'The Uncanny' is a take on the discussion by Ernst Jentsch done earlier. Freud disagrees with Jentsch's theorisation of the uncanny as 'intellectual uncertainty' and quotes Schelling to highlight what the uncanny relates to: "'Unheimlich" is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... hidden and secret and has become visible' (Schelling quoted in Freud 2022: 4). Through an etymological analysis of the word *heimlich* (familiar), Freud realises that at one level, the opposite *unheimlich* (uncanny) and *heimlich* both mean the same thing. The uncanny, therefore, seems for Freud a return of the familiar as unfamiliar, which causes feelings of anxiety and dread. Masud's stories too are the destabilising of familiar reality; his stories suggest that the surety about the nature of the world, a characteristic of the Progressives, is not really the world he thinks exists. In the title story 'Seemiya', the occultist who is trying to conjure up a rain cloud mocks this very certainty and translatability of our immediate existence: 'Knowledge is nothing, newcomer. The essential thing is to be familiar. Because of our own lack of knowledge, we call it knowledge' (Masud 2015: 120). It

is the hubristic belief in the certainty of our understanding of our world and its translatability in comprehensible terms that becomes an object of mockery in some ways for Masud, whose characters, like the occultist in 'Seemiya', eventually go mad after realising their folly in attempting to translate the untranslatable nature of the world we inhabit.

With respect to the form, there is a complete disregard for generic expectations, where meanings and narrative threads are continuously left incomplete, and while his stories are autonomous in relation to each other, especially the five stories in *Seemiya*, they are nonetheless part of a larger constellation of meaning-to-be. For example, his first story, 'Ojhal' (from Sanskrit meaning 'hidden', also perhaps an echo of Freud's uncanny itself), or translated into English as 'Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire', begins where the last story, 'Maskan' or 'Resting Place', ends. Memon calls the collection a novel in stories, suggesting that there is more to the individual stories when viewed in totality, a commentary as well as on the nature of human experience. There is the reoccurrence of multiple images and tropes in all stories, such as the lone cloud that the occultist tries to conjure through magic in the eponymous 'Seemiya', which figures in the 'Snake Catcher' too, the woman with black lustrous hair who is chased by the narrator of 'Obscure Domains' until she drowns in the river, who is referenced in detail again by the narrator of 'Seemiya'. Images of crabs, scales and lions appear in 'Obscure Domains' and 'Snake Catcher' and reappear again in other stories with slight variations, but hinting at the same object merely viewed by different narrators in different ways. These overlapping experiences and images hint towards the palimpsestic nature of all human life, which is not dictated by any logical system but rather occurs without any scheme or pattern. This, along with the temporal and spatial obfuscation that are a part of the stories, according to John K. Muse, 'refuse to sit still under cultural and generic labels' (2006: 4), which is a hint towards the untranslatability of human experience through set generic modes. The explication of the strangeness of human existence requires a language and mode that need to be taken to their breaking point to highlight the sheer impossibility of faithfully representing reality as such.

Moreover, in some ways, the translations of the words of the stories themselves, quite ironically, are unable to translate the close affinity that Masud creates between seemingly opposite emotions of fear and desire in his first story. For example, in the original Urdu, the fear and desire of the first story, 'Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire' or 'Ojhal', are more alliteratively similar than they are in English. Fear and Desire, or 'Khauf' and 'Khwaish', hint towards a closer connection of these seemingly contradictory emotional responses than can be translated in English, bringing into focus the cracks

within the literary endeavour to translate Masud's project of untranslatability. Both through the use of language and the form of the short stories, Masud's emphasis on the destabilisation of the edifice of human certainty forces the reader to contemplate the surety of the world and modes of expression that they inhabit and use.

The first story, 'Ojhal' (tr. 'Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire'), becomes emblematic of the failure of pure expressivity. It begins with a visitor who has come to the house of an old man who has gone silent. However, the main story is narrated by this silent old man who is an inspector of houses and talks about his surreal encounters, both with houses and sexual relations with women. His stories are not about explaining the human condition but rather about being mute spectators to the strangeness of existence. This is set forth right in the beginning of the collection *Seemiya*, where the two narrators both struggle with articulation, the first one being involuntary hesitation and the second a voluntary silence. The first one realises that his 'speech was a shortcoming', and the main narrator paradoxically begins his story by saying: 'I have given up talking' (Masud 2015: 5–6). The impetus for giving up talking comes from the strangeness of incidents that are inexplicable, and hence he chooses silence over articulation. Even in a later story, 'Sheesha Ghat' of the collection *The Myna from Peacock Garden*, we are presented with a narrator who can barely utter a word, and in the end, is witness to a death but cannot articulate what happens. The suggestion is that without the ability for absolute expressivity, there is a denial of the veracity of a single human reality. The belief of the early Progressives, and their importing of the interior monologue/stream of consciousness mode from Joyce and the like, assumed a level of translatability of experience through language, even if it is a fractured one through the mode of the interior monologue or the stream of consciousness.

However, Masud's dislike of pure expressivity/translatability of human experience is also clear in the way some of his stories seem to be narrated by child narrators, who refuse to view the world in totality and are rather concerned with minute details of settings and nature. Sagaree Sengupta says: 'Masud's adult narrators consider the whole house; his child characters gaze at and dwell on cornices, stairs, a doorway, a tree—in keeping with Yi-Fu Tuan's human-geographical generalisation that "... [the] young child's world ... is animated and consists of vivid, sharply delineated objects in a weakly structured space"' (1998: 82). This skewed viewing of the world suggests the need to look at the same reality through different eyes, adult and child, because in the end, neither of Masud's protagonists has any idea about why the world is the way it is. Masud's take on his view of the world becomes aptly clear in stories like 'The Successor', where the supernatural concept of

the jinn of Islamic thought is shown to be part of the human experience. The focus of 'The Successor' is on a particular girl who is supposedly taken over by a jinn, a supernatural male figure, who inhabits a young girl's body, and there is a constant struggle between the girl and the jinn to take control. The story ends with the girl confronting the narrator, who had married her for an extremely brief period and then abandoned her, and the fright of the narrator, who watches the jinn attempting to take control. The story does not answer any questions regarding the nature of the girl's illness or the supernatural, but rather suggests, in a Shakespearean line of thought, that there are indeed more things in heaven and earth than can be dreamt of in philosophy. The split personality of the girl remains beyond the realm of translation into a simpler idiom and sums up Masud's belief that the world we see and the world we inhabit will most likely never be understood by the rational mind.

Yet, the question arises, why translate and write about human experience, which one thinks is untranslatable? The circular nature of the pattern of *Seemiya*, where the first story's beginning and the last story's ending are the same, points towards a largely non-functional search for meaning, where the journey brings one back to the starting point. Perhaps this can be best summed up by Frederick R. Karl, the author of an exhaustive critical biography of Franz Kafka:

'What's Kafkaesque,' he said in an interview in his Manhattan apartment, 'is when you enter a surreal world in which all your control patterns, all your plans, the whole way in which you have configured your own behavior, begins to fall to pieces, when you find yourself against a force that does not lend itself to the way you perceive the world.

'You don't give up, you don't lie down and die. What you do is struggle against this with all of your equipment, with whatever you have. But of course you don't stand a chance. That's Kafkaesque' (qtd. in Edwards 1991).

Perhaps this is Masud's task, and maybe the task of any modern translator too: the movement towards meaning, without the guarantee of the expectation of meaning, almost following the absurdist Beckettian dictum "I can't go on, I'll go on" (Beckett 2010: 135).

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# **Orientalist Worldview, Translation and Indigenous Identity Affirmation in the British Colonial Punjab: The Case of Translations of Ernest Trumpp and Max Arthur Macauliffe in Late-19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Punjab**

**Guntasha K. Tulsi**

## **Abstract**

This paper begins with the description of the influence of the colonial missionary movement in terms of its extent as well as its impact on native languages and literatures of 19th-century colonial India. This observation then takes one to the efforts of the British administration in a similar direction with regard to their gradual designing of a socio-cultural policy, which enabled them to undergo a detailed analysis and study of the indigenous languages and literatures of India so as to be able to frame policies that were acceptable and moderate as per the interests and beliefs of the members of local communities.

Translation was one such tool that rendered it convenient for the members of British administration to calibrate a colonialist framework. It enabled the possibility of sponsored translation efforts from English to the local languages and vice versa. The fact that missionary effort had made possible the availability of grammars, dictionaries, treatises, lexical, and prose materials in Indian vernacular languages only aided the translation efforts of the colonial administration. Also, the fact that some of the social and cultural reformers of the mid-19th century were passionate bilinguals facilitated the translation machinery devised by the colonial apparatus.

This paper shall analyse the specific case of this Orientalist exercise done in the case of British colonial Punjab towards the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when sponsored efforts were

made to arrange the translation of Sikh scriptures by the colonial administration. The efforts of Ernest Trumpp (1828–1885) and M. Arthur Macauliffe (1838–1913) were commissioned in this direction. These were also in congruence with a boom in Orientalist scholarship and interest in the British colonial Punjab and its languages and culture. Some noteworthy efforts of Orientalist scholars like G.W. Leitner (1840–99) and G.A. Grierson (1851–1941) shall be mentioned in this regard, while simultaneously looking at the translation efforts of scholars like Trumpp and Macauliffe, as opening the door to a new form of native-colonial interaction at the turn of the century.

**Keywords:** translation, orientalism, colonial India, indigenous identity, Sikh scriptures

As an act of complex cultural negotiation, translation extends the reachability of distinctive discourses while also investing a set of significant responsibilities on the translator and his/her knowledge of the source and the target language. In the backdrop of colonialism and dissemination of imperial policies, this process/act assumed an altogether complex and somewhat ambiguous dimension. While ordinarily, the process of translation involves conversion from Source Language (SL) into Target Language (TL) and a responsibility towards the original in the act of reading and interpretation, the nuance radically transformed under the shadow of the unfolding of colonial policies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The colonial administration of the Indian subcontinent and the procedures associated with it is one such example. Before the process of complete political and administrative annexation of the Indian subcontinent (this was as late as the year 1857), the missionary effort had begun to exercise a considerable influence on the native psyche from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The founding of Fort William College and the Serampore Mission (both established in the year 1800) became defining events in what would explain the extent and influence of missionary effort in the subcontinent and its influence on indigenous literatures and the culture of translation in determining the nuances of native-colonial interaction.

In Fort William College, for instance, scholars such as William Carey (1761–1834) and John Gilchrist (1759–1841) facilitated the translation of materials from Indian regional languages like Sanskrit, Bengali, Persian, Urdu, Tamil, etc. into English. Though the college was established for the general education of the civil servants, it became one of the most important academic institutions in pre-independent India, where the British and the Indian scholars worked together.

Sisir Kumar Das, in his eruditely put-together work, *History of Indian Literature—1800-1910: Western Impact, Indian Response*, observes that this institution gave new direction to philological research in the area of Indian languages and literature and led to a range of ‘prose writing experiments in Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, and Urdu’ (70). This also became a focal point of

research and participation by many Indian scholars as well. Amongst its most prominent scholars was J.B. Gilchrist—a passionate linguist, educationist and thinker—also the first principal of Fort William College. He contributed passionately to the development of a body of literature for Urdu, Hindi and Hindustani and also wrote numerous books, dictionaries and grammar treatises. Fort William College also contributed immensely to the generation of pedagogic materials in regional languages, especially Braj, Marathi, Punjabi, Kannada, Oriya, and Telugu.

The institution combined teaching of Indian languages with training in conventions of classical languages, linguistic learning and foregrounding of the Indian knowledge systems. Apart from Indian languages and related training for the civil servants, this institution carried forth an organised study of disciplines such as English classics, botany, astronomy, history, political economy, and geography. It tapped the simultaneous mushrooming of printing presses to effectively contribute to the already expanding scholarship on India's regional languages. The phenomena of the print expansion, beginning from Bengal, progressively led to an increase and greater dissemination in the number of grammar treatises, pedagogic materials, publications, and text-book material all across the subcontinent.

Similarly, the Asiatic Society founded by Sir William Jones in the year 1784 gave an impetus to activities and literary and cultural work in the direction of translation and comparative literature. In fact, following the discoveries of Nathaniel Halhed and William Jones on the affinity of Sanskrit to Greek and Latin, a large number of Sanskrit dictionaries and grammars were produced, first in India and then increasingly in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Noticeably, the most organised missionary effort was to translate the Bible and Christian scriptures into various Indian languages. It also facilitated the setting up of print stations across various coastal regions of the Indian subcontinent. The impulse of 'educating' and 'proselytising' the native and the local population suited the clear objectives of missionary effort. This incidentally found a resonance in what the British administration also intended to achieve as a part of its larger colonial agenda of bringing the Indian subcontinent under its social, political and cultural control.

These mission stations did become the most significant contributors to the growth and expansion of English as well as vernacular education and print activity in 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial India. Sam Nesamony, in his insightful study 'Missionaries, Literacy and Intellectual Consciousness in South Travancore' (published in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 77, 2016, p.651–64), mentions that the establishment of Protestant missionaries also laid the foundation for modern education in the subcontinent in a distinctive way. Their admission and inclusion of the underprivileged led to many hundreds

of thousands getting attracted towards them, and this also became a point of genuine empowerment for the local communities in India. The fact that these missionary institutions continued to give a lot of emphasis to the education in the vernaculars and Indian regional languages made them unique and intrinsically participative in the century-long process of transformative progress of the Indian mind.

In a related context, the founding and the establishment of the Serampore Mission (by the three Christian missionaries of the Baptist Mission, namely, Joshua Marshman, William Ward and William Carey) became an important development in relation to the Oriental quest for knowledge and the necessity of sustained efforts in the field of publication and translation. Eventually, it was the work by the Serampore Mission in connection to translation and preservation in India's varied languages that led to a major facilitation of its vernacular and regional prose and educational traditions by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

Here, it should be noted that though the Serampore Mission's engagement with the sacred scriptures and their regional translations, or generation of the Orientalist knowledge systems, was done to primarily suit their religious agenda of propagation of teachings of the Gospel and conversion to Christianity, the fact cannot be ignored that it led to the generation of dictionaries, grammar books, treatises, and manuals within India's linguistic traditions. As per Das, the Serampore Mission translated and printed the Christian scriptures 'in Avdhi, Baloochi, Bhageli, Bikaneri, Garowali, Jaypuri, Khasi, Kumayuni, Konkani, Marwari, Multani, Palpa, and various other lesser-known dialects and languages.' (27). Also, it did become productive in bringing to the fore the first significant translations of the Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

While the Serampore Mission was one of the initial most defining printing presses set up by the missionaries, it gradually paved the way for the establishment of print infrastructure in different parts of the country, mainly along the coastal areas of the subcontinent. Functioning mainly between the years of 1800 and 1837, the 'Serampore Mission Press, grew into a massive organisation, the greatest type of foundry in Asia.' (32-3)

What the missionaries then did, with the aid of imperial administration, was put in place a structured mechanism of print and education, which initiated the gradual process of standardisation of regional languages in 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. Translation from Indian languages into European (notably, English) and vice versa constituted an intrinsic part of this phenomenon. In this context, it should be noted that translation and its connection to imperial policy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a complex and an imbricated one. In his brilliantly written essay, 'Translating Science, Translating Empire: The Power of Language in

Colonial North India', Michael S. Dodson makes some pertinent observations about translation and the colonial Indian context.

As per Dodson, while, as per one school of thought, the act of translating Indian regional literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterised as that of European imperialism and control, it has nevertheless been 'identified as important for resources it provided in construction of representation of colonised as Europe's "civilised other"' (2005: 815). Furthermore, Dodson mentions the case of Bernard Cohn, who has persuasively demonstrated the point about codification of South Asian languages in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century serving to convert indigenous forms of textualised knowledge into instruments of colonial control.

Writings of men such as William Jones, H.T. Colebrook, Charles Wilkins, and William Carey significantly institutionalised a specific way of writing about India's language and people. In her insightfully written essay, 'Translations into English' (from A.K. Mehrotra's *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*), Arshia Sattar observes that 'history of the translation of Indian literature into English can roughly be divided into three periods: early Orientalism, the Indian awakening and the post-independence enterprise' (366). In fact, 'by the 1830s, a number of religious and literary texts had been translated into English', amongst which were Rammohun Roy's translations of the Upanishads. Earlier to that, in 1813, seminal members of the Asiatic Society published a translation of Kalidasa's *Meghdhuta*. In addition to translations of classical and religious texts, there did emerge translations of folk literature as well.

There were also instances of journals like *Indian Antiquary* carrying 'translations' of folk-tales from Punjab and various parts of Central India (Sattar 2000: 372). In spite of the early Orientalist emphasis on translation of the classics, the focus in the later part of the century shifted to translation of vernacular language literatures. In the aftermath of British annexation of the Punjab province in the year 1849, the Orientalist emphasis on translation activity and support to vernacular identities took a rather fascinating dimension. Firstly, it should be noted that the British undertook a structured process of reform and administrative modernisation of the Punjab province after its annexation.

This included a revamping of Punjab's urban structure, its irrigation and power systems, and also bringing forth an agricultural and infrastructural modernisation. As H.S. Oberoi has observed in his defining work, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, there was an introduction of railways, telegraphs, postage facilities, printing presses, new market towns, and establishment of canal colonies. Significance of old divisions was eroded, and gradually, a new pattern of administration and modernisation set in, which impacted the social, legal and judicial arena (Oberoi 1994: 45–50). Alongside the political and

administrative modernisation of the province, the British administration facilitated socio-cultural and educational modernisation as well.

It expedited the efforts initiated by members of the missionary movement, like the Ludhiana Mission press and other Presbyterian factions, so as to mobilise the publication of Punjabi grammar and the first English-Punjabi dictionary. Gradually then, through the combined support of the Christian missions and British imperial administrators, the press became seminal in leading to the building of associated print support systems such as schools, libraries, and retail networks.<sup>3</sup>

The British administration also set in a system of educational modernisation that consisted of experimenting with the Anglo-vernacular model of teaching at the primary and the secondary level. It also played a leading role in the founding of educational institutions, such as the chain of Khalsa colleges in Punjab, during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In all these endeavours, British administration and colonial officials' utilisation of the practice and policy of translation indeed played a seminal role. Here, what should also be observed is that the British administrative modernisation and political strategies, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, also depended on cultural negotiation with the ways and lives of indigenous communities.

The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Indian context was also one of social and religious reform and a spirit of awakening amongst the local communities. With organised reform movements such as the Aligarh Movement amongst the Muslim community, Singh Sabha amongst the members of the Sikh community and Arya Samaj pioneered by the Hindus, it became imperative for the British administration to appease the local communities and to also empathise with their indigenous cultures. For this purpose, many sustained efforts began to be carried out, which witnessed members of the colonial administration becoming extremely involved with the way of life, language and traditions of the local communities.

In the case of the Sikh community, one of the earliest cases was that of educationist G.W. Leitner (1840–99), the founder of the Government College of Lahore (1864) and the University of Punjab (1882). He was also behind the founding of many indigenous schools, libraries, and institutions. A linguist and a scholar par excellence, he took a deep interest in affairs related to local languages and developments within indigenous education. Leitner used the aid of surveys, first-hand primary research and personal experience with the people of the province to argue for the case of indigenous education in Punjab. In his pioneering work titled *History of Indigenous Education in the Punjab since Annexation and in 1892*, he made a case for the same in the light of the uniqueness of the Indian educational scenario and lamented at the state, where the 'educational despondency' of the country has been aggravated by the fact

that 'official influence has been brought to drive away or to suppress the indigenous school' (1971: 20).

While having done first-hand primary research on Punjab's villages, he mapped the influence of indigenous education from Punjab extending up to Delhi. As per him, 'to *Maulvis* and *Pandits*, combining Oriental learning with Western science, I look as the most suitable priests and teachers of the future...' (81). Leitner's extensive awareness of the Indian knowledge systems, foregrounding the importance of participation by the local communities and founding of Anjuman-i-Punjab (a voluntary society that aimed at the development and consolidation of vernacular languages and literatures of Punjab), led to his priceless contribution in the exploration of deep and intricate connections between translation, indigenous knowledge systems and vernacular education.

This is in light of Edward Said's significant theorisation about the Orient in his path-breaking work, *Orientalism* (1978). As per Said, the organised practices related to Orientalism led to the production of scholarship, an increase in the number and quantity of editing and translation of local-language manuscripts, and research and commentary on the Orient with an empathetic and involved perspective. As per him:

Orientalism organised itself systematically as the acquisition of Oriental material and its regulated dissemination as a form of specialised knowledge. . . By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Orient had become, as Disraeli said, a career, one in which one could remake and restore not only the Orient but also oneself. (165–6)

The creation of a 'textual' and a 'contemplative' tradition facilitated decision-making in administrative, economic and military matters. It is in this light that the efforts of German translator, scholar and Orientalist, Ernest Trumpp (1828–1885), in connection to the translation of the Sikh scriptures in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century British colonial Punjab, make up for an interesting study.

Trumpp arrived in colonial Punjab in 1869 and was commissioned the task of translating the Sikh scriptures. Trumpp was the first linguist and scholar who reminded the Punjabis about the seriousness of the Punjabi language (in the Gurumukhi script) with reference to an existing corpus of Sikh literature and why it should be considered in the capacity of being the national language of Punjab. It was this call by Trumpp that was taken seriously by the Singh Sabha intellectuals after 1873, and the Punjabi language in the Gurumukhi script indeed became an important issue for them, as also reflected in their numerous manifestoes and documents. As per renowned scholar Nazer Singh's observation in his seminal work *Essays in History and Historiography*:

It was this project which threw up the question: What was Sikhism? As a matter of fact, leading Sikhs of Lahore and Amritsar were asked to define their relationships both with Kukaism and Hinduism. (69–70)

In fact, it was due to the efforts of scholars like Trumpp that Punjabi and the teaching of the Guru Granth were introduced at Oriental College, Lahore (1877–78) by Leitner, and the propagation of Punjabi also became an important agenda for the Singh Sabha luminaries.<sup>4</sup> However, there have been significantly vocal claims about how Trumpp's efforts were quite insincere and an insult to the members of the community.

A detailed reference of Trumpp's translation and especially his 'Introductory Note' to the same also points to some extremely crucial observations about the ambiguous placement of translation in relationship to the colonial enterprise. In the Preface and Introductory remarks to his translation of the Sikh scriptures, Trumpp adopts a dismissive tone about Sikh religion, culture, history, and identity. He mentions that despite his knowledge of the modern Indian vernaculars, it became next to impossible for him to translate such a 'difficult book...'. (Preface: v)<sup>5</sup> However, he takes a linguistic and philological view in expressing the problems which he faces, some of which being absence of a suitable translation machinery, challenges faced due to inter-communal (Hindu-Sikh) rivalry and individual effort required to carry elaborate annotations and translation.

In a rather condescending tone, he mentions the Sikh Granth to be 'shallow in the extreme' with 'dark and perplexing language' and notes that for the Occidentals, it is the 'most painful and almost stupefying task to read even a single Rag' (Trumpp 1877: 8). It is also interesting to note how Trumpp's 1877 translated edition combines philological research, linguistic training and the complexity of the translation enterprise with an exercise carried out in comparative literature. The edition was the first commissioned administrative enterprise on the Sikh scriptures and should be accredited with initiating a discourse that did not exist prior to it. It also combines an extensive translation of readings from the Sikh hagiographic tradition (or the *janamsakhis*), general commentary and transliteration of lines from Sikh prayers.

Arvind Pal S. Mandair, in one of the best written critical scholarships in this area (his essay, titled 'The Emergence of Modern 'Sikh Theology': Reassessing the Passage of Ideas from Trumpp to Bhâi Vîr Singh') observes:

Trumpp's demarcation of conceptual boundaries for the study of Sikhism predicted a framework which future interpreters could contest but never remain outside of... While Trumpp's opponents could dismiss his work on account of its purported basis and inaccuracies, what they were unable to dismiss is the fact that Trumpp managed to shift ground of future discourse on Sikh scriptures... (260)

Trumpp's efforts led to Punjabi (in the Gurumukhi script) finding an important place in discussions of the administration and academic space of the newly established institutions like the newly established Khalsa College (Amritsar) and Oriental College (Lahore).

The Indological efforts of scholars like G.A. Grierson (1851–1941), as reflected in his broad and synoptic *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903–28), became a product of this culture of a boom in Orientalist enterprise and investment of seriousness to a detailed investigation and analysis of native languages and cultures of the subcontinent. Grierson, for instance, travelled widely and carried out the most extensive linguistic and socio-cultural exercise on speeches and conventions of the indigenous communities. These developments were happening in the backdrop of greater investments being made in the field of vernacular education at the primary and the secondary level; newer developments taking place in connection to language and (Sikh) identity and a sense of community consciousness making itself felt like never before also stemming from developments related to the events of the Singh Sabha Movement (1873).

In fact, the translated efforts of Max Arthur Macauliffe (1838–1913) taking their final shape as *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors* (in six volumes), can be viewed both in continuation to and as a contestation of Trumpp's efforts. Unlike Trumpp, Macauliffe's starting point was a reverence for Sikh religion and culture. While Trumpp's efforts were largely isolated, Macauliffe actually deployed the assistance and collaboration of an extensive array of Sikh scholars and theologians (also including some extremely renowned ones like Pratap Singh Giani). His efforts were also an outcome of Singh Sabha's reverence for his respect for the Sikh religion and their dissatisfaction with Trumpp's translations.

He focussed more on the spiritual side of his endeavour and made the rare effort of consulting Sikh theologians to check the quality of the translation. As per his own words from the 'Preface' to his translation, he tried to keep his language as 'simple' as was possibly desired by the reformers of the time and through a 'necessary solemnity and form' (Macauliffe 1909: xxx). Like Trumpp, Macauliffe's translations too reflect an interest in both Sikh hagiographic and prayer tradition, but on comparing the two translations, one can sense a greater involvement and spiritedness on the part of Macauliffe's. This possibly also became the reason for his translations, done at the turn of the century, to be considered as the next significant milestone in Orientalist enterprise and its contribution to the development in native-colonial interaction.

The case of both the translated efforts of Ernest Trumpp and Macauliffe—the differences in their ambition, orientation and linguistic perspective notwithstanding—testifies to the evolution and sophistication of a critical Indological enterprise, wherein translation not just assumed the dimensions of a significant cultural and intellectual enterprise but also paved the way for the commingling of identities, the admixture of discourses, and the cross-fertilisation of distinct sensibilities. It also initiated a mutual spirit of respect

and dialogue between the Occident and the Orient, which stood as being reflective and dissenting, both at the same time.

### End Note

1. Nathaniel Halhed (1751-1830), an Orientalist and a scholar in the field of comparative literature, was one of the pioneering figures in translating seminal Indian texts into English. These included renditions of the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, and translation of the Hindu legal code as *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776); see [https://theodora.com/encyclopedia/h/nathaniel\\_brassey\\_halhed.html#google\\_vignette](https://theodora.com/encyclopedia/h/nathaniel_brassey_halhed.html#google_vignette).
2. The Serampore Mission was a printing press established on a massive scale in Serampore—a city in Bengal—which was under Danish protection between the years of 1755 and 1845.
3. Details paraphrased from a reading of Davis Emmett's *Press and Politics in British Western Punjab*, p. 9-13.
4. This detail has been paraphrased from my doctoral thesis titled, 'Colonial Modernisation and Indigenous Identity Formation: An Analysis of Sikh Education in Sikh Journals (1900-1920)', p. 158. (Tulsi, Guntasha K., Unpublished Thesis, 2016, Centre of English Studies, JNU)
5. I have consulted the Taylor & Francis edition of the Trumpp's translation of the *Adi Granth*. Full details in the References section.

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# **Contacting Otherness via Travel: Theorising Translation in Vandana Singh's Story 'Sailing the Antarsa'**

**Indrani Dasgupta**

## **Abstract**

How do we translate the other—marginalised subjectivities, aliens, plants, nonhumans, and machines? Taking this query as the starting premise, this paper discusses the science fiction short story, 'Sailing the Antarsa' by Vandana Singh, in light of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identified translation as, 'an intimate act of reading' (180). While translation has often been read as border crossing and engaging with mobility, displacement and conquest, Singh's story of forming kinships and interconnections figures not only as a matter of becoming but, as Avishek Ganguly claimed, as a translational activity that refuses the dualisms of identifiable and non-identifiable rejects the universalising logic of globalisation to focalise our understanding of planetarity (2019). Not coding translation as only a linguistic activity, Singh's story dramatises the planetary paradigm. Borrowing from Ganguly's reading of translation as a 'limit, an experience of the impossible and an intimation of the ethical' (2019), Singh's story confronts the liberal humanist politics of human exceptionalism and the dualisms that frame our world to expand our consciousness towards other species. Focusing on translation as an act of reading, on forging connections via the act of reading, this paper's focus on planetarity is underpinned in Singh's story as an instance of postcolonial 'affective sociality' (Blackman 2008). Reading translation in terms of planetarity, this paper asserts that an imperative to render a 'common world' (Mbembe 2019), without reducing it to sameness, is being attuned to the practices of the affective turn. Translation, in this paper, directs our attention to its dynamic nature and simultaneously to its untranslatability that threatens the idea of the autonomy of the human species.

**Keywords:** Planetarity, Vandana Singh, translation, untranslatability, megatext

Vandana Singh's short story 'Sailing the Antarsa' (2018) opens with a rhetorical question that shapes and informs the premise of this paper:

This breeze wafts through you and me, through planets and suns, like we are nothing. How to catch it, know it, befriend it? This sea, the Antarsa, is like no other sea. It washes the whole universe, as far as we can tell, and the ordinary matter such as we are made of is transparent to it. So how is it that I can ride the Antarsa current, as I am doing now, steering my little spacecraft so far from Dhara and its moon? (2018: 170).

This question mused upon by the protagonist, who, I argue, functions also as the translator of this story, Mayha, dramatises the core problem and activity of a translator. Mayha's reflective musings on how to read cultural ethos when it is diametrically different from one's familiar 'ordinary matter' are similar to what has troubled and fascinated translators over the last few decades. Since the 1990s, translational practice of doing justice to culturally different and varying social ethos has animated the field of Translation Studies. Moving beyond the usual understanding of translation practice as an inter-linguistic affair to reading it as closely aligned with socio-political implications, Translation Studies has exponentially grown since the cultural turn.<sup>1</sup>

Mayha's insistent probing of her journey and her continual evaluation of different acts of kinship direct our attention to multiple methods of translation and how they become 'visible in the first place, accessible to our imaginations' (Jameson 1977: 875). The primary purpose of this paper is to explore what forms and practices of translation are visible and accessible and particularly envisaged where 'Antarsa is like no other sea'? That translation entails travel and is cast as being unmoored to a specific geographical location has long been noted by critics (Asad 1986; Bassnett 1993; Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Cronin 2000a; Cronin 200b). What Mayha's journey and quest in traversing this 'Antarsa' uncovers and unpacks is how diverse and 'new forms of engagement' (Gunew 2020: 75) situate and embed the human. Thus, enabling the formation of 'planetary' interconnections with different species, matter, organisms, and what is cumulatively spoken of as the nonhuman. Mayha's journey across space and time, outside of known environs, to find her ancestors who had travelled to another distant planet, re-envisioning how humans interact with nonhumans in 'relation to space and time (national time, colonial time, deep time)' (*ibid.*: 75).

One of the 'megatexts' that Damien Broderick (1995: 59) spoke about as defining science fiction narratives was the figuration of aliens.<sup>2</sup> Identifying the essential characteristic of an alien entity as being 'something other than man' (1987: 6), George E. Slusser and Eric V. Rabkin read the alien in terms of 'man's need to designate something that is genuinely outside himself, something that is truly nonman, that has no initial relation to man except for the fact that it has no relation' (*ibid.*).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this definitional framework

of aliens as contrary to man is outlined in light of Alexander Pope's maxim that 'the bliss of man ... is not to think or beyond mankind' (cited Slusser and Rabkin 1987: 6)—emphasising that man is both the subject and object of all our investigations. Slusser and Rabkin's formulation of aliens pointedly dramatises two elements that continue to structure global societies and their foundational values. Firstly, the superior status of 'man' enunciates the representational and not merely the 'figural'<sup>4</sup> element of humankind and human civilisation ethos. Secondly, this hierarchical positioning of 'man' involves the automatic obfuscation and marginalisation of women, children, non-Western subjectivities, and cultures and a mechanical obliteration of nonhuman subjectivities like animals, plants and machines—ecology in general—in any scholarly discussion of importance. This innate desire of man to know something entirely different and outside of humanist epistemic and discursive logic is read by Slusser and Rabkin as a self-serving, narcissistic desire to know oneself, as only by knowing and sensing something other than oneself can one study and learn about oneself better. However, this desire is read in this essay differently and not merely in terms of a self-serving mechanism.

Even as the principle of otherness and difference undergirding self-versus-alien/others/outside has often operated as a critical principle in imperial conquest narratives and functioned as symptomatic of the fretted relationship between coloniser and colonised, in this essay, this desire is read as travelling beyond oneself/epistemic borders to connect and enable affective communion with others. This translational practice is denominated as a kind of affective exchange, which is opposed to the commodified transactions governed by globalising tendencies. The ever-accelerating rhythms of late capitalist modernity have shrunk the world to an almost homogenised semantic space. However, globalisation as the 'same system of exchange everywhere' (Spivak 2003: 72) has inevitably served to intensify social and political inequalities and has globally escalated multiple forms of violence undergirded by capitalist forms of consumerism, proliferation and accumulation.<sup>5</sup> Even as translation as a travelling motif beyond one's discursive boundaries has often involved acts of epistemic violence by subduing and marginalising the voice of the other, there is another translational practice that refuses to be subsumed in any kind of power matrix.

The primary argument of this essay revolves around how the story of Mayha's translation is an expression of this alternate translational practice. Identifying this alternate methodology as affective planetary translation, the discussion of Mayha's journey in Vandana Singh's short story 'Sailing the Antarsa' registers an opening towards the other to redraw the very idea of human thus, reinvigorating the dynamics of ethical activism by employing the mechanism of planetarity, which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as the 'overwrit[ing] [of] the globe' (2003: 72).

To begin our discussion on Singh's story of Mayha's quest as being simultaneously one of desire and longing and also a commitment towards 'leaning already into the next field, the future participle' (Moure 2009: 117), a brief commentary on how translation is 'intending the planetary' (Ganguly 2019) and enunciating an affective relationality will be highlighted.

### **Trans-Affective Acts: A Form of Planetary Reading**

In recent decades, translation practice has emerged as a key operational term in global politics and imaginaries. Marie Tymoczko rightly states that translation is more than inter-linguistic transfers of ideas and meaning. She clearly states the need to move beyond the Westernised perceptions on translation and be aware of how regional, vernacular forms of knowledge are prefigured as universal propositions. In the wake of the increasing global flow of ideas and commodities undergirded by consumerist markets and exchange values, Tymoczko observes that translation activities have taken centre stage in literary, economic and political enterprises (2007: 3-4). However, when such monolithic and totalitarian systems are underway, noticeable against the backdrop of increasing globalisation, reading such translational acts becomes culturally and politically significant. In particular, questions such as what happens to the role of the translator and how does a translation theorist navigate such different spaces become crucial. How can a translator move beyond the colonialist/neo-imperialist paradigm of socio-political binaries and hierarchisation, negotiate the pitfalls of 'domestication' and 'foreignization' and enunciate an ethical politics where local is neither appropriated as part of the global nor cast as entirely outside the global paradigm? How to conceptualise an affective translation that validates 'difference' without resorting to exoticism or fetishism based on dominant or newer power symmetries? Marked by historical, political contingencies and asymmetrical power matrices, translation is anything but an innocent or neutral activity, and a translator's role cannot merely be defined as 'standing "between" in the transfer process' (Tymoczko 2007: 7). Instead, the translator's role is invested with ethical and political implications of far-reaching consequences.<sup>6</sup> This ethical dimension of translation is advanced, I argue, via its affective modality, which enables the planetary form of entanglements to be verbalised.

Douglas Robinson dramatises the task of a translator as one who has to continually negotiate between the contrasting tendencies of 'receptivity and dogmatism' (2020: 100). Foregrounding how 'domestication' can suggest 'anti-colonial forms of resistance' when 'undertaken by the colonised', Robinson also shows how 'domestication' practices in translation can express 'impos[ition] of hegemonic target-cultural norms' while 'foreignization' can evoke respect for others and register a call for 'ethics of difference' (ibid.:

100). Simultaneously, Robinson states, ‘foreignization’ ‘mobilises a sympathetic ethics of identification with the (formerly) colonised Other as a new power identity’ (*ibid.*:100).<sup>7</sup> The divergent claims of oneness and difference on translation become complicated in the wake of global forms of relationality. Even as globalisation instantiates new forms of community and ‘capture[s] a simultaneity of social experience’ (Song 2011: 555), it is nevertheless marked by violence. Moreover, such a form of violence wholly pushes off the Global South to the margins of history and politics. Thus, the monolithic valuation of global social relations silences and consumes non-Euro-American subjectivities and cultures within the logic of the capital. This has invariably led scholars like Theo Hermans to identify with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s usage of ‘thick translation’ as a crucial framework to understand the implications of postcolonial translation studies. However, Robinson is uncertain whether Appiah’s translational strategy can hold off for long against hegemonic critical power networks, even as he believes it can begin the process of enabling equitable transactions.

While agreeing with Robinson and Hermans that ‘thick translation’ provides a *potentially* strategic framework of ‘double dislocation’, which can simultaneously navigate ‘alien methodology and vocabulary’ and ‘own vocabulary’ (Hermans 2003: 386; emphasis added), I argue that Appiah’s framework fails to offer an adequate understanding of how to draw the ‘experience of the impossible’ (Spivak; cited Ganguly 2019: np). Consequently, in this essay, translation figures as an instance of affective planetary modality. This modality can be framed as, Susan Gunew states, ‘various traditions and alternative epistemologies that might yield valuable new forms of thinking’ (2020: 76) to generate awareness of intimacy and fashion ‘affective sociality’ with the other (Blackman 2008: 26). Blackman identifies affective sociality as framing a ‘radical relationality that open[s] out the subject to being continually permeable to the influence of others’ (*ibid.*: 26). This relationality opened by translation offers what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in ‘politics of translation’ defines as an ‘intimate act of reading’ wherein the ‘translator earns permission to transgress in the trace from the other—before memory—in the closest places of the self’ (1993: 180). Spivak’s intimacy involves both permission and transgression, which negates the boundedness, exceptionalism and autonomy of the human subject. The oscillation between permission and transgression is what Mayha’s intimate travel as translation includes and which discloses an ‘affective atmosphere’ that even as it is inscribed on the body, is nonetheless found ‘indeterminate’ (Anderson 2009: 79-80). Reading this indeterminacy as ‘invoke[ing] a sense of possibility’ (Tan 2013: 6), Singh’s story involves more than transaction to entail entanglements between species leading to *anthropos* being de-centred (Braidotti 2013) and consequently,

displacing and dismantling different forms of violence and gendered and racist discriminatory political stances.

### **Affective Ship Sets Sail to Translate the Planetary**

Vandana Singh's short story 'Sailing the Antarsa' was first published in the anthology *The Other Half of the Sky* (2013), edited by Anthena Andreadis and Kay Holt, and subsequently republished in the periodical *Forever*, edited by Neil Clarke (2015), and the anthology *The Final Frontier*, edited by Neil Clarke (2018), and Singh's anthology titled *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories* (2018)<sup>8</sup>. It combines storytelling, hard science dynamics and a materiality that runs counter to the politics of globalisation. Set in an uncertain future on a planet that resembles Earth and yet is different—Dhara—the story both retrospectively travels centuries in the past while simultaneously forging towards the future. For a simplistic understanding of how this coming-of-age story works, one can chart the story into two thematic thrusts where the first thematic thrust underscores the forming influences that governed Mayha's scientific attitude and translational approach. The second thrust vitalises how Mayha identifies the influence of the story of Moon-woman and Devtaru on her journey and hence, prefigures her journey as an instance of a 'translated person' (Robinson 1994).

Mayha's story follows the structural framework of the *Bildungsroman* narrative and is like other stories in Singh's anthology, *Ambiguity Machines*, concerned with redrawing the world in a kind of interconnectedness that reshapes our contemporary world, informed by the neo-colonial paradigm. The narrative begins *in medias res* with Mayha, the protagonist, on a long intergalactic journey to Asthan—a distant planet—to find her long-lost ancestors, who had also travelled to newer extraterrestrial planets around the same time as her ancestors had travelled to Dhara. Mayha recounts how her ancestors, four centuries before, had travelled to another planet—Dhara—and how this planet had offered refuge to her ancestors from the cold and the long journey. In time, both the native inhabitants and the strangers to Dhara had learnt to accommodate and adapt themselves to their newer environment: '[i]ts living beings adjusted and made room, and in turn we changed ourselves to accommodate them' (Singh 2018: 171). This cohabitation and interconnectedness enunciated a new valuation of 'home' where Mayha's ancestors, even though 'far from humanity's original home', found kinships—'a brother, a sister, a mother' (*ibid.*:171).

Mayha has been travelling towards the Asthan galactic system for eight long years, holed up inside the cryo-chamber of the ship, and when she finds herself roused from her sleep by the sentient AI ship. She becomes aware of other presences and organisms floating in the vast space but initially cannot

make any sense of them. In the meanwhile, she reminisces about her life lived on planet Dhara. A foundational moment in the lives of all Dhara inhabitants and a kind of training programme for all children of Dhara involves becoming acquainted with devtaru, the massive tree, which is described by Mayha as ‘perhaps what a tree would dream of, if a tree could dream’ (Singh 2018: 178). When her aunt chaperones the thirteen-year-old Mayha to seek kinships among all—plants, the whole forest and the devtaru—she finds herself listening once again to the myth of devtaru and the moon-woman. Moon-woman lived in the forest and learnt to become consciously aware of the ‘thoughts’ of the forest (Singh 2018: 179). She found a pod on one of the trunks of devtaru and knew instantly that she had to climb inside the pod to know and feel the sentient presence of devtaru. Inside the pod were mossy tendrils and other organisms, and when suddenly the pod cracked open, she fell to the ground. However, after living with the devtaru for a hundred years, the moon-woman, now an older woman, refused to leave devtaru’s side in spite of its imminent collapse. She again climbed back inside a massive pod, and this time, the dying devtaru’s pod carried this older woman to the moon after a slight detour. The sister of this older woman, who used to visit her often, realised that devtaru’s children (pods were kind of buds of this tree) grow on the moon, and her sister, the moon-woman, was in a happy space. The myth of devtaru and moon-woman culturally shapes the inhabitants of Dhara and registers ‘a different becoming’ (Singh 2018: 172). Min Hyoung Song described becoming ‘as a participle, to describe a person or a thing, enhances the sense that person and milieu are of one piece, a total belonging that shows one to be at complete ease where one happens to find oneself. But the other usage of the word, as a gerund, denotes the sense that such a belonging is elusive, something that always slips into the future and out of grasp (2011:564). In Mayha’s case, both these explanations find a mention with her close kinship with devtaru and other species, her long-lost ancestors’ conversion into another species and her own gradual conversion to something entirely different and yet one that she believes will express the love of Dhara’s forests, suns, and mountains. What Mayha’s translational activity entails is a continual mixing and also contamination of myths, stories, spaces, bodies, and gestures, suggesting that Mayha’s affective planetary translation is similar to Antarsa, currently washing down and flowing through every species and space and as ‘interact[ing] with one another, passing through a sentient body, urgently and synaptically’ (Williams and Marinkova 2015:76).

The legend of devtaru and the fond memories of relationships with her birth mother and other caretakers, her lovers Vik and Laharis, sustained Mayha throughout her long intergalactic journey, where she found making friends with loneliness. The enunciation of loneliness provides a glimpse of how we

all seemingly feel comfortable around familiar, established meanings and actions. What affective planetary translation enacts is similar to what Amitav Ghosh in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* discusses as the 'uncanny'. Ghosh describes the uncanny as 'changes' that 'are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien'. Instead, 'uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from... the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors' (2017: 30). Meanwhile, she realises that other organisms resembling the Biblical whale—Leviathan—and floating by her side are composed of altmatter. Mayha finds herself fascinated by the presence of other organisms, smaller fish-like creatures, after the long ordeal of loneliness. She now realises that altmatter, which used to change the course of the moon pods and which she had managed to navigate after strict allegiance to scientific principles, was not unusual but far more common than the matter that washed inside her and other Dhara inhabitants. The confrontation of altmatter and Antarsa current creates a highly fragile and turbulent atmosphere, which Mayha realises must have been impossible for her long-lost kin to survive in the Asthan system. Amidst this realisation, she finds herself pushed into one of the moons of the Asthan system. Here, she comes across a cave where she finds a sculpted figure of a female standing at the prow of a ship. Here, also smaller fish-like creatures inhabited the cave. Slowly, it dawns upon Mayha that this statue must have been fashioned by her long-lost ancestors, and these fish-like creatures were once human. The story ends with Mayha's awareness that she is changing 'from ancient, ordinary matter to the new kind' (Singh 2018: 208).

Mayha's sailing into the vast universe, I argue, is akin to a translational practice where borders, geographies and subjectivities are all 'fluid and permeable' (Williams and Marinkova 2015: 74). Mayha learns that the moon-woman's journey to the moon entailed a remaking of human exceptionalism and realises being human 'is to be intended toward the other' (Spivak 2003: 73). The 'slow conversion' (Singh 2018: 208) and the adaptability that Mayha found in the Asthan system in the fish-like creatures, and who she understands were her long-lost ancestors' descendants, emerges as an instance of ethical postcolonial translation. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's reflection on 'cultural turn' in translation studies, Robinson describes this postcolonial translation as focusing on the 'translator less as a heroic mediator across linguistic and cultural lines and more as a migrant, a "translated person" whose physical body bears the brunt of movement in time and space' (109). Mayha becomes the moon-woman of legend with her gradual conversion to another matter and yet carrying forward 'the love of [her] kin, and the forests and seas and mountains of Dhara, [and which as believes,] will have some heft, some

weight, in making [her] whoever [she] will be' (Singh 2018: 208). The translator, Mayha emerges, what Tobias During described, 'not as a "go-between", but of a "get-between" someone who does not simply bring and take, but who literally gets in the middle' (Ribeiro 2004: 192)

Mayha's relating her slow conversion as an amalgamation of alt matter with Dhara's ordinary matter and identifying how every species is interconnected foregrounds a 'corporeal opening to the other' (Tan 2013: 10), which is what this essay defines as affective planetary translation. Mayha's 'sailing' is a translational enactment that is plural, messy and [includes] mutable relations' (Lisle 2021: 438). Simultaneously, the opening up of portals by planetary consciousness enables the provision of multispecies justice to be practiced in our quotidian social lives and facilitates ethical activism established on a politics of care, and 'kinship' or what counts as 'home' 'is based on the assumption that each person, human or otherwise, has a right to exist, a right to agency... This means that to live truly in the world, we must constantly adjust to other beings, as they adjust to us' (Singh 2018: 179).

### Conclusion

Mayha's affective translational planetarity allows us to tap into and shows what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms as an 'epistemic shift' (1999:86). This 'epistemic shift' moves beyond West's conceptualisation of travel, nature and humanness to enunciate a non-Western formulation of translation as an affective practice that explores the notion of planetarity as a means to rethink kinships, home and belonging and even rethink Indian science fiction narratives differently. What planetarity entails is a kind of incalculability, an (im)possibility that, as Spivak explained, 'is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan' (2003: 72). The untranslatability and the incommensurability, which prefigure as a crucial framework in Mayha's affective translational planetary exchange, emerge as a critical intervention in resisting Euro-American globalising tendencies. Even as we never will conclusively know either moon-woman's nature of dwelling on the moon, nor shall we figure out what shape Mayha's slow conversion led to and whether she ever managed to cross the Antarsa back to Dhara, Mayha's journey in its enactment of Walter Benjamin's 'impossible necessity' (Bermann and Wood 2006: 89), foregrounds affective as mobile, traversing legends and myths and yet belonging to the here and the now. Mayha's affective translational planetary is an always-in-process modality, which is 'perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another' (Anderson 2009: 79–80). Planetarity envisions the self in terms of a performative gesture as transgressing 'beyond "the already constituted"' (Moire's *Gestures*; cited in Williams and Marinkova 2015: 74). Additionally,

planetarity is 'not rooted in the soil or soil's versions' (*ibid.*:74) and only moving 'towards an *elsewhere*' (*ibid.*: 74). Mayha's journey is literally and conceptually happening 'elsewhere' but one that is not conceived spatially or temporally but cast as a mode of translation that identifies 'the capacity to be, to live and to become' (Tan 2013: 2).

The question of translating aliens with which we began the essay takes on a metadiscursive form when we realise that Indian science fiction is typically understood as an alien form to the Anglo-centric framework of science fiction imaginaries. For a genre defined by Uppinder Mehan as being 'as western as Coca-cola and computers' (1998:54), it becomes necessary to identify what translates into this cognitively fantastic genre, which speaks both to the world audiences and to local communities. The glimpses of translation as an affective 'planetary mode of intending' (Spivak; cited in Ganguly 2019: np) offered by Singh's story of 'Sailing the Antarsa' emerge in its use of particularly Indian myths and linguistic usages like Asthan (roughly translated as astha or hope), devtaru (resembling the ancient folklore of kaplavriksha), Dhara and Antarsa as not merely performing a kind of anti-colonial gesture of domesticating SF as Mehan described. What this story vitalises is a kind of postcolonial ethics where stories never simply replace one centre with another, and yet the old meanings do not hold as Mayha's friend Parin's parting gift is destroyed. Here, stories become crucial, as Donna Haraway states: '[i]t matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties' (2016: 12). The world literature that Mayha's story performs is neither comparable to the world or the globe but 'learn[s] to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (Haraway 2016: 1).

### **Endnotes**

1. See Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere 1998 for theorisation on the 'cultural turn' in translation studies.
2. Damien Broderick extends Christine Brooke-Rose's 'megastory (1992) in terms of megatexts that could potentially express the 'mutually imbricated sf texts' (1995:59) science fiction narratives' potential themes and motifs. Brooke-Rose's megastory sought to offer science fiction narratives as supplementing the realistic and historical dimensions of our world, albeit in an exaggerated fashion.
3. See also Huntington 1996: 21.

4. Figural, a term deployed by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure*, entails a loss during the 'process of signification' and suggests that what can be 'seen' cannot be 'read', identifying that meaning-making entails merely a perspective and not wholly what is out there ([1971] trans. Hudek and Lydon 2011:3). In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson describes figurability as the juxtaposition of imagination/artistic and rationally represented.
5. See Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (2007) for his views on how ever-expanding tendencies of globalisation have led to an agglomeration of precarity, particularly in urban areas (2007: 33–34)
6. See the introduction by Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (2006) on the ethical implications of translation practice.
7. See Lawrence Venuti for one of the first critical expositions on these terms (1995; 1998).
8. In this essay, Vandana Singh's anthology will be used for reference.

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# **Mediating Tolerance, Seeking Hospitality, Breeding Rebellion: Examining the Various Cultural Negotiations of Maharaja Duleep Singh**

**Ishita Sareen**

## **Abstract**

This paper will read the forced, free, and in-between cultural negotiations of the last Maharaja of Lahore, Maharaja Duleep Singh, to analyse the limits of tolerance and belongingness as he adapted and translated himself across multiple spatial-cultural peregrinations. At the age of five, he signed over Punjab, to the British becoming Victoria's 'poor deposed Indian prince'; in exile as the first Sikh settler, he converted to Christianity; as the Black Prince of Perthshire, he was co-opted into Scottish squirearchy, and with his financially motivated obedience to the Empire, he collaborated (fruitlessly) with the Russians, reconverted to Sikhism, and then died in Paris, stateless and clanless, but with Victoria's forgiveness. Reading these spatial-cultural arbitrations as unstable political negotiations for tolerance and hospitality, the paper will be guided by Kant's identification of hospitality as right, Derrida's theorisation of conditional and unconditional hospitality, Habermas' reconstruction of tolerance around a constitutional democracy, and Badiou's conception of love and its intractability with politics. The paper will argue that Singh's mediation of Christian-English tolerance and quest for belonging reflects Derridean hostipitality, antithetically enclosing hostility within hospitality. His life ultimately transcribes the aporia at the heart of hospitality (and tolerance)<sup>2</sup>, where the possibility of belonging is contingent on conditions, exclusions, and closures. Hostipitality breeds rebellion and resentment, souring the guest-host binary, further complicating Singh's confused love for a culture fast devouring his own. 172 years after his death, such a reading of his life is more current than ever in our fractal present, where it is emblematic of national outrage over citizenship and belonging against metastasising colonial dependencies.

**Keywords:** Sikhism, tolerance, hostipitality, democracy, citizenship

### Introduction

Hospitality relates to the crossing of borders and thresholds, how we set them up, and how they spill into each other. It is a rhetorical virtue, practiced differently during war and in peace, an unsettled notion without a universal value. The life of an outsider<sup>3</sup>, in this case, Maharaja Duleep Singh, offers the perfect testing ground for philosophical thought on tolerance and hospitality. Though this paper understands Singh's life through ontological concerns, it also recognises that the stranger becomes stranger through embodied encounters. The search for hospitality by Singh involves gratitude and obedience for a conditional acceptance culminating in a bitter severance. The paper refers to a variety of sources, but chiefly to Navtej Sarna's *The Exile* (2008), a novel on the life of Maharaja Duleep Singh. The choice of fiction was dictated by the necessity to tease the marrow of Singh's life by relying on a carefully researched narrative to weave my own.

### Mediating Tolerance: Close but not too close

For Kant, hospitality is a right 'of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives on someone else's territory' (Kant 1991: 105). Hospitality is a cosmopolitan guarantee to build 'perpetual peace'. That is how it is extended to a young Singh by his guardians, as the price for peace after the bloody Anglo-Sikh Wars. The yearning to belong haunts the stranger from the start, and integration is contingent on his precarious position at 'the inside/outside divide', further informed by 'familiarity or alienation' from the host (Fotou 2016: 19). The demand for a new identity by the stranger risks disturbance, involving a one-sided recognition of the stranger by the host. Singh seeks ingratiation, and with the introduction of nightly Bible reading, he gradually and almost unknowingly switches his allegiance to Christianity, imbibing its chief tenets of tolerance, hospitality, and charity. Login is happy to note that his ward showed 'self-denial' and 'self-restraint' (Sarna 2008: 117) and was regularly helping a 'hundred destitutes' in the area, a prospect that seems to him 'much better than feeding hordes of Brahmins' (116). The impulse and its motivation<sup>4</sup> are both projected onto the child-guest whose proclamation is legitimised via playground activities such as having tea with his English playmates, thus breaking his caste (128). With his 'strong mind', it is said that he himself decided not to be 'fooled' by the 'empty meaningless rituals' taught by the Hindu Pandit<sup>5</sup> (129). Sir John Login, his appointed guardian, writes that he made 'all the right noises', securing himself from accusations of proselytisation<sup>6</sup> (130). By patient degrees, Login ensures Singh's complicity to the point that it becomes difficult to ascertain as to why and how Duleep was influenced towards Christianity<sup>7</sup>. Singh struggles to remember differently; he was too eager to please and 'ready to oblige' his hosts in those days<sup>8</sup>.

The converted boy emerges as a translated man upon his baptism in the Ganga, Mrs. Login's clever 'holy dimension' to the mix (146), ensuring the appearance of religious cosmopolitanism. The veneer of hospitality is further maintained on Singh's face, shining with 'sincerity, commitment, honesty'—Christian virtues that he had been taught (146). At the time, his sole motivation in seeking hospitality is acceptance, and after his conversion, he feels welcomed into Login's family. Reading his conversion as a translation of affiliation, his new affiliates accompany him to church, including him in society. He no longer feels like an outsider; 'I was no longer on test' (147). His otherness is mediated through tolerance, earlier contingent on his conversion, and post hoc, his 'tractable character, gentle disposition, and pleasing ways' ensured an Other who was happy to play the host, 'happy to be *allowed* to eat and dress and speak like the English, to meet the Queen!' (147; emphasis added). Welcomed with compliance, gratitude forms an inevitable part of the hospitality; 'I learnt not to be a nuisance and to show gratitude for being put on a leash and fed well' (100).

Kant thinks of the stranger as an enemy, replete with risk and threatening to endanger the host and his culture. Fotou argues that Kantian hospitality is underlined by a master/slave narrative, furthering a punitive closure to the risk of the Other<sup>9</sup>. But in opposition, Duleep is eager to adopt the new and forget the old, pushing away Indian playmates who could not be his 'equals, at [his] lessons or on the field'<sup>10</sup> (119). By implication, he thinks of the British playmates as his equals, allows his obedience to be co-opted, and raises himself by proxy to the level of the host, disturbing the master/slave undercurrent identified by Fatou. His indoctrination is concomitant with an avowal of other facets of the host culture, to which he is constantly exposed via playmates and gifts<sup>11</sup>. He is 'keen to speak English like Tommy Scott and Robby Carshore' and adopt their 'uncomplicated carefree attitude', 'play cricket and football' and even the 'shorts, shorts and stockings' they wore (119). Desiring to be a 'well-instructed English gentleman' (132), he falls in love with 'the way [his friends] spoke, their polite, diffident manner, the way they said sorry and thank you' (141). Later, as the Black Prince of Suffolk, he wants Elveden to be a complete English estate<sup>12</sup>, opening up his hospitality and gaming grounds to the best of English society.

Fotou further extends the lordship/bondage, observing that debates around hospitality are 'entrapped' in an 'economic circle of provision and profit'<sup>13</sup> (2016: 187). He is caught in a similar crossfire between integration and othering perpetuated by the host, accepting the implicit threat of violence brought on by his strangeness. However, Singh is a notably visible Other, a permanent presence at all parties and receptions, a noticeable part of Victoria's court, and, most of all, a visible reminder of the Crown's successful fruition of 'the white man's burden'<sup>14</sup>.

### Seeking Hospitality: Hospitable Hostility

Derridean hospitality supplies Kantian shortcomings, namely the complicit acceptance of implied violence and the subjection of the other to domination and rule of the self<sup>15</sup>. Derrida proposes that ‘let us say yes to *who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*’ following ‘*The law of unlimited hospitality*’ as against ‘the laws (in the plural)’ which are ‘conditioned and conditional’ stretching across ‘the family, civil society, and the State’ (2000: 77; emphasis original). Unconditionality seems ‘illegal, transgressive, outside the law’, poised at the cusp of becoming ‘abstract, utopian, illusory’ but is saved by conditionality, which translates it into an ‘effective, concrete, determined’ force<sup>16</sup> (77–78).

Hospitality, in Singh’s case too, is full of insinuations and motivations. On his journey to becoming Macaulay’s elite go-between, part of a ‘class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect’ (Sarna 2008: 117), it is hoped that Singh’s conversion to Christianity would serve as an example for other native princes, to bend rather than break. The Crown’s hospitality is similarly tempered with coloniality. He is a ‘loyal subject’ and a ‘fine specimen’ to show off to her court (152). This special bond<sup>17</sup> is best demonstrated in the famous portrait by Winterhalter where Singh wears a miniature of Victoria in ‘diamonds’ around his neck and another on his finger<sup>18</sup> (Sarna 2008: 152; Ballantyne 2006: 89). It is pertinent to note that earlier, he had often called the Queen ‘Mrs. Fagin’, ‘the receiver of stolen goods, stolen kingdoms, stolen jewels’ (Sarna 2008: 151). Mistrustful but still trying to find what ‘warmth’ he could (152), he soon becomes a part of the Queen’s family, especially growing close to her son Leopold, who suffered from haemophilia. Hospitality is reciprocated since Victoria acts as godmother to many of his children (Ballantyne 2006: 90). Singh adds his own shades to the portrait of the oriental prince, telling Victoria that he was glad to be away from the violence of his people, renouncing his own culture for admission into another. Victoria’s hospitality opens other doors, and Singh soon assimilates himself into cultural subgroups, residing in Castle Menzies in Scotland, relishing his title of the Black Prince of Perthshire, ‘walking the moors in a kilt’<sup>19</sup> (Sarna 2008: 159).

According to Kant, the stranger is deemed hostile if he fails to ‘behave in a peaceable manner’ (1991: 106). Some violence is thus expected but goes unacknowledged. Within Derridean hospitality, the stranger can acknowledge and actively resist this violence, its pain, and its sadness. Singh also acknowledges this violence: ‘My mother told me of everything that I lost before I could understand what was mine by right’ (Sarna 2008: 7). Older and wiser, he is full of regrets: ‘This is all I have got from the English all my life—toys, playthings, baubles’ (100). The impossible purity of unconditionality

is realised through conditional existence, *the* law through the laws, but here represented by poorly-implemented legal guarantees, contextualised within an incalculable future-to-come. Habermas puts it simply: 'There can be no inclusion without exclusion'<sup>20</sup> (2006: 198).

The laws of conditional hospitality will always fall short of the impossible standards of unconditional hospitality; the stranger is welcome at home or abroad only if he meets certain conditions; thus, the unconditional becomes 'inscribed' in the conditional (Fotou 2016: 201). The 'antimony' or 'aporia' emerges when the two tragically collide when *the* law micrifies the *laws*. Aporetic hospitality, like the unpredictable future that Derrida so favours<sup>21</sup>, is a 'hospitality-to-come' that is simultaneously impossible<sup>22</sup> and possible (2006: 208). Since tolerance is premised on an assertion of sovereignty by the host, what makes tolerance possible also limits its possibility, making tolerance a political negotiation – a hospitable relationship that was always hostile.

The hostility within hospitality, what Derrida has termed 'hostipitality', is full of obligations that hold the stranger and host hostage. The duty of the host towards the stranger produces hostility in the stranger, who is under the constant obligation of the host and his house. The host is held hostage by the symbolic recognition of stranger-as-guest, trapped in his role to expect obedience<sup>23</sup>. For Dalhousie and co., he is a boy-king, treated 'with kindness' but 'not raised into more importance than really attached to him' (Sarna 2008: 117). Inclusion, yes, but not too much to avoid rapacious ambition and demands for more than can be promised to a stranger. Colonial bias informs many decisions made for Singh, such as the oriental matchmaking between Princes Gowramma and Singh that the Queen and Logins push for. Built on relative 'similarities' of exile, of religion, and of the Queen's favour between the Princess Gowramma, the daughter of the exiled King of Coorg, and Singh, the proposed match would have delighted everyone; 'all consciences would have been salved' (159). At the same time, his romantic attachment to a young relative from Sir Login's side is not taken lightly. The bounds of hospitality crisscross many thresholds of his life, but imperial condescension does not allow for Singh to translate himself by matching with one of their own; this is the limit of tolerance for the host, disclosing simultaneously the limits of intolerance.

Singh is only granted the Kantian 'right to association', which does not originate from a free spirit of brotherhood but a 'spirit of toleration' contingent on adherence to the morality and ethicality of society<sup>24</sup> (Fotou 2016: 58). He cannot trade in commerce; his estates are set to be sold after his death<sup>25</sup>—he cannot be one with the society. The process of re-identification is one-sided, and Kant's thesis is proven when loyalty turns into bitterness, leading us to conclude like Derrida that unconditionality is indeed an impossible truth.

Indoctrination turns insidious as an older Singh regrets his ignorance of ‘all the truths’ of his Machiavellian guardians (Sarna 2008: 146). Hostipitality exists in the aporetic demonstration of its limit—pure hospitality, pure ethics, and complete inclusion are limited by their own (im)possibility, for the other will no longer be the other if truly included, and the threshold once abolished will leave no home to enter or abandon<sup>26</sup>.

Hospitality and justice, argues Fotou, are the ‘two sides of the same deconstructive coin’ (2016: 23). Hospitality is doubly contested, by the laws that democratically legitimise standards of hospitality and also by the impossible law of unconditional hospitality. Singh poses a challenge as to the skewed translation of colonial hospitality and its skewed foundation on a careful system of reward and punishment<sup>27</sup>. The old carrot-and-stick policy comes into play in the beginning, with the taking away of the Koh-i-Noor from the Maharaja of Lahore and its offering to the Queen as a bribe to turn a blind eye towards the unjustified annexation of Punjab<sup>28</sup>. The same gem, cut, recast, brilliant but smaller, is shown to Singh, who at first thinks of this spectacle as a reward for ‘becoming a good Christian’<sup>29</sup> but soon feels ‘demeaned’ (Sarna 2008: 153). The bounds of courtesy expected by the guest are broken, sowing the seeds of anarchy. Made into a token again, Singh makes a gift of it to the Queen—a proxy for the hospitality that he now expects after this ‘preposterous’ gesture of ‘royal magnanimity’ (154), capturing Victoria in her role as host and casting himself forever as her servile subject. The Koh-i-Noor expects and demands loyalty; its journey has many affective translations—it is a reward for Singh, an award for Dalhousie, a bribe for the Queen, a symbol of a stranger’s obedience, and, most of all, an emissary for hospitality. Near the end, Singh wonders if he could have translated its pricelessness into *better* hospitality and more love, for ‘a few sunny days, a few happy conversations, some justice, a fair enquiry’ and a ‘journey to Punjab’ (178). The injustice that emerges derives from a failure of laws of humanity and pure ethics<sup>30</sup>, allowing the stranger to challenge the foundational nature of hospitality, which Singh does by fomenting rebellion.

### **Breeding Rebellion: The Bitter Fruits of Hostipitality**

What happens when the stranger does not return the ‘generosity’ of the host? What happens when Singh complains, resists, and rebels?<sup>31</sup> The British government hinders Singh’s rebellious journey back home to immunise itself, as governments are wont to do by securing borders, balancing the economy, and stabilising leadership<sup>32</sup>. Fotou writes that self-immunisation often involves ‘self-closure’ through the exclusion of foreigners and Others, ironically producing within itself ‘the outside dangers it tries to pre-empt’ (2016: 206). Thresholds are like borders, from which ‘one passes from reaction to response’

and on to 'responsibility', the limit between hospitality and no hospitality (qtd. in Fotou 2016: 189). Their arbitrariness and messy nature are similar to the transgressive and often overlapping cultural negotiations of Singh as he translates himself across his various peregrinations.

A double irony pervades the Maharaja's case, for, at the cusp of the inside/outside divide, he is cheated by the unjust denial of his pension and simultaneously forbidden to return to India or move outside for fear of inciting a mutiny-like rebellion. His return to Sikhism sours the connection between guest and host. Usually read as an act to negate the Crown, to 'embarrass the government' and lever 'financial security'<sup>33</sup>, Singh's taking of the *pahul*<sup>34</sup> coincides with the resignation of his stipend under the Treaty of Lahore and eventual relocation to Paris (Ballantyne 2006: 94). He sees 'life's regrets standing around [his] bed, like faceless men in black robes, haunting [him]...' (Sarna 2008: 202). He feels extremely insulted by the British refusal to abide by the terms of the Treaty of Lahore<sup>35</sup>, feeling that 'truth was on my side, but justice was not'<sup>36</sup> (172) and no amount of 'appealing' to the 'Englishman's nobility and generosity and sense of justice' changed anything<sup>37</sup> (172).

Violence is to be expected, but it has already occurred, becoming both the cause and effect of severing hospitality. His eyes opened by the 'ill-treatment' by supposedly 'good Christian' hosts, he now seeks to negate his youthful compliance<sup>38</sup>. He rekindles the imaginary stabiliser of the unpartitioned Punjabi place, free of the bloodshed and treachery experienced after the death of his father. By re-accepting the true god, his old god, he believes that the greater his travails as an outsider, the more his countrymen would love him, dignifying him as a 'true Sikh', a real 'martyr' (191). Closed in at the periphery, he is caught in the indivisible *limen* of the threshold between hospitality and no hospitality; 'the condition of possibility of inclusion and tolerance is simultaneously their limit' (Thomassen 2006: 448).

Fotou argues that an absence of any ethics of hospitality results in the further negation of the already 'unheard' Other (2016: 191); Derrida also writes of this 'strange experience' of transgression, 'through which you die abroad, and not always at all as you would have wanted' (2000:87). For Singh, death is but a transgressive translation of his tragic life—similarly occurring in an alien land, alone, in penury. Sarna contrasts Duleep's solitary death against the death of Ranjit Singh, who died surrounded by love, brethren, and prayers, with even birds falling silent to mourn the Lion of Punjab. Despite the friction caused by Duleep's rebellion, Victoria sends a representative and a commemorative wreath of immortelles to his funeral in 1893 (Ballantyne 2006: 90). In naming, addressing, and mourning Singh after his death, Victoria manages to re-extend hospitality to the Other (Fotou 2016: 192). Singh nevertheless cautions his son, Victor, about his bad hosts, 'They owe us a

kingdom' (Sarna 2008: 245). Near the end, Alexander and Anand note the continuity of the conflict of belongingness, with Singh wishing to 'die with his hand upon the Bible' (278–9). For Duleep, death is freedom; it is the only place where the British Empire cannot reach<sup>39</sup>, restoring his sovereignty, held captive for so long.

Habermas concentrates on grounding tolerance within a 'constitutional patriotism' (2006: 95)<sup>40</sup> where limits of tolerance are decided by public deliberation such that tolerance 'emerges from the parties' mutual recognition as equal partners'<sup>41</sup> (206). Post such changes to polity, the stranger can be valued as a 'legal and political idea' over other 'particular' forms of belonging—thus, circumventing the hostility enshrined in hospitality through a discursive democracy (Morris 2006: 238). But what happens in the case of biased leadership and dysfunctional laws? Desperately homesick and almost bankrupt, Singh rejects Christianity following alienation by the host. Insulted at the indifference and hypocrisy shown by those he considered to be fair and just<sup>42</sup> and denied any method to appeal in court, he gives up. Thomassen similarly writes of the 'relative validity' of legal rules, where validation is dependent on 'the conditionality of an ethical perspective' (Thomassen 2006: 445). Fragmented, weathered, and exhausted, his decision to live economically is the beginning of his resistance; 'The truth was that it no longer seemed the right thing to do to keep the rank of a Prince and sell pheasant eggs' (Sarna 2008: 186). Singh feels his losses poignantly, the loss of 'a religion, a people, a way of life. Everything that could be home' (185).

Habermas notes the distinction between toleration, the 'asymmetrical relation' between the political state and ethical minority, and tolerance, relationships amongst different ethical subgroups (2006: 451). In his movement from toleration to tolerance, Singh's conversion to Christianity not only emerges as a decision made out of obedience and reaction to his immediate environment but also as a motivation to shift from a relation of hierarchy (toleration) to equality (tolerance) by adopting the views of the Christian ethical subgroup. British society of the time is marked by Christian contamination of the centre, prioritising the ethical and the religious over legal limits. As such, Singh's mediation of Christian tolerance both 'centres and decentres', including him but also binding 'ethical differences in a hierarchical relationship to the political community' (Thomassen 2006: 452). Again, it is the asymmetry of toleration that engenders the acceptance of tolerance; in Habermas too, aporetically, exclusion permits inclusion.

Habermas ignores that legal thresholds are sometimes dysfunctional, 'with different sovereign identities assigning moral responsibility to others rather than themselves' (Fotou 2016: 193). A 'volitional moment' (Thomassen 2006: 445) enters the fray where he is cheated of his just and legal rights to property

and compensation and his freedoms are curtailed. Ultimately, the host turns hostile, and the guest, always an outsider, is turned out of the culture he had adopted. It is strange that when a guest leaves, the host forbids his return despite his own bad hosting. Singh is forbidden to return for fear of sparking further resistance. He is additionally motivated by a persistent idea that the homeland, his country, and people, would welcome him without question. Home is better (also more just and hospitable) than abroad is a perpetual leitmotif in Sarna's narrative, with Singh's associates like Thakur Singh Sandhawalia, telling him that, 'All of Punjab was waiting [for his return], from Lahore to Delhi, in all the towns and villages'<sup>43</sup> (Sarna 2008: 203). He takes the *pahul* in Aden, and 'cuts all the ropes' (205). Free of his family and the obligations of the guest, he sets out alone—not to seek hospitality, but to breed rebellion, signing off his letters as 'a rebel now in earnest'<sup>44</sup> (Ballantyne 2006: 94). Hoping for an alliance, he approaches Russia, France, and even Egypt, but though treated hospitably<sup>45</sup>, not one accedes to his request to launch a rebellion (Alexander and Anand 1980: 230–234). The crisis of identity deepens as he introduces himself as 'the sovereign of the Sikh nation' (238) and moves from one grand scheme to another, imaginatively building a 'series of coordinated uprisings' by Indian princes and the army<sup>46</sup> (Ballantyne 2006: 94), always falling through due to a lack of finance and the empty promises from home.

### **Love: At Home and Abroad**

At all times, but especially as a mature adult, Singh feels a lack of love, recognition, and respect, which he resolutely believes will be unconditionally extended to him by his 'own' people, his homeland. For Singh, intolerance abroad seemingly translates into unconditional hospitality back home, underscored by a desire to deliver a 'right royal slap' to his erstwhile hosts (Sarna 2008: 191). Unconditional hospitality constitutes a 'hyperbolic hospitality' (Fotou 2016: 197), easy to visualise, impossible to execute. As a young king, on his way to Landour in Mussoorie, he finds 'recognition, love, expectation' (Sarna 2008: 139) from Punjabis gathered in Benares. On a short visit to India in 1863, he faces an onslaught of affective encounters, with 'banyan trees... swaying in the warm breeze', smells, and colours he had not seen in England (168). Haunted by belonging, he soon realises that home is ultimately not the safe, welcoming haven he thought he remembered<sup>47</sup>. He is a 'puppet' (66) for the British and a poster boy for the nationalist movement, who, upon learning of his potential return in 1883, 'seized' the chance and circulated pamphlets titled 'Maharaja Dalip Singh ki Jai' (Victory to Maharaja Dalip Singh) (Ballantyne 2006: 98). But true or pure hospitality can only exist in a 'vacuum of incentives' (Fotou 2016: 198), existing at an open/no-border,

unmotivated by good or bad, right or wrong, open to everyone and every risk, bringing forth pure justice and complete fairness. Hospitality at home is as conditional as outside it; his re-acceptance in India hinges on changes both of personality and circumstance—requiring Singh to re-embrace Sikhism, raise funds, and incite rebellion nationwide.

His crisis of belonging, exacerbated by difference and exemplified through his constant efforts to gain approval, follows his capacity to live and love throughout his life. Conditional hospitality never translates into unconditional love, but love attaches itself to Singh in other ways, through proxy parents, in the loyalty and fidelity of servants, and, most of all, in his attachment to his first wife. The closest he comes to Badiou's formulation of love as a 'truth procedure', which involves knowing the truth about two as one, is in his many declarations of love for his first wife, Bamba Muller, Arabic-speaking, part-Ethiopian, and part-German<sup>48</sup>. He calls her 'the only true comfort of my life' from whom he demands too much—'duty and passion in equal measure'<sup>49</sup> (Sarna 2008: 227). Singh admits that though she loved him and 'put up with [his] troubles', as she had 'vowed', he is less than faithful<sup>50</sup>.

Lady Login thinks of Singh as her own son (9), believing that the Lord gave her strength 'to witness the miracle of the prince finding our true faith' (9). But this recognition is tinged by Singh's oriental identity, though she understands that he was a 'loving soul, unjustly treated' (9). Nevertheless, Singh reciprocates the emotion, somewhat protractedly. Upon Login's death, he exclaims, 'I have lost my father!' (174) building a memorial in 'red and grey granite and white marble' at Elveden<sup>51</sup> (175). Arur Singh, a lifelong servant and valet, also professes his unconditional love and support to his maharaja. The lack of hospitality does take a toll on Singh, for he wishes to adopt Arur as a son but does not come close to reciprocating Arur's devotion<sup>52</sup> (221).

### Conclusion

What we are left with are 'political negotiations' of the 'conditions' of tolerance, peregrinations that overlap and contaminate but do not dissolve the aporia. Singh articulates himself through transgressive activities across borders, via cultural negotiations of tolerance and hospitality, and through religious translations and re-translations. He continues to renegotiate and rearticulate his cultural inclinations across various progressions of tolerance and hospitality, transmuting his self and enabling reinterpretations of his life almost two centuries after his death. These complex circulations also inform negotiations amongst the subversion of equality and liberty by democratic autocracies today, ending up 'producing, reproducing and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm'<sup>53</sup> (Derrida 2003: 99). But Derrida's open society nevertheless connects life 'with danger and the unforeseen', resisting the revolt of the

elites in the name of the powerless (Appadurai) and the use of democratic instruments to perjure sovereignty. Being open to the to-come is necessary and relevant; to open up to possibilities beyond the expected violence of hospitality is to develop an affirmative ethical hospitality that translates the moral into the ethical<sup>54</sup>.

### End Notes

1. Alexander and Anand 1980: 11.
2. The aporia of tolerance, that is the possibility of tolerance is also its limit, cannot be resolved by substitution with another concept, like hospitality. Derrida's conceptualisation of hospitality as unconditional and pure suffers from the same limits, where hospitality is simultaneously unconditional and conditional. Both tolerance and hospitality display the same irresolvable aporia. Thomassen goes even further to argue that 'any alternative to tolerance is marked by the same aporias that beset tolerance' (2006: 457).
3. In this paper, the words host, self, state, and master are used interchangeably, as are outsider, guest, stranger, slave, foreigner, and other. In essence, the binary of the host-guest is reflected in the master/lordship connotation outlined by Fatou as well as the etymological interrelationships of 'host' and 'guest' for Derrida, who uses the ambivalence of the French 'hôte' to refer to both at once.
4. Login's well-documented file on this conversion records Bhajan Lal's testimony as 'no Englishman ever talked to him of religion', absolving the host of suspicion. The Dewan similarly exonerates Login of any involvement, claiming that Login allowed immense 'religious freedom' to Singh (Sarna 2008: 128).
5. His transfer of religious allegiance is primarily driven by the fallacies he deciphers in the 'fantastic and incredible' mythological tales narrated by the Pandit, a part of his religiously diverse entourage (Sarna 2008: 122).
6. A curious contrast to current claustropolitan cultururation is the intermixing of religions, through people, rituals, and celebrations, that permeates Singh's time. Tolerance for religious 'others', retrospectively viewed through the lens of religious partitions and riots in post-independence India, is present everywhere in Lahore. Duleep ascends to the throne with a 'raj tilak', composed of 'saffron and white rice' (Sarna 2008: 66). When he is exiled to Fatehgarh, Login ensures a similar mix of religious advocates, with a Hindu pandit, Muslim attendants, Sikh soldiers, and Login's personal choice of Bhajan Lal, a Hindu educated at the American mission school in Farrukhabad, with 'deep sympathy for our [Christian] faith' though he ate and dressed like a Brahmin (119).
7. An accompanying narrative disparity occurs throughout *The Exile*, especially visible in the dissimilitude between Login and Singh's accounts. Login's entries are certain that Singh's countrymen had given up on him while Singh's accounts, perhaps coloured by the bitterness of his later years, often hark back to an imagined inclusive home-world to which he truly belongs. Login writes that

none of the Sikh granthis from Lahore wanted to accompany their exiled Maharaja to Fatehgarh; 'The Sikh granthis didn't even pretend that they wanted to come' (Sarna 2008: 130). In another entry, he writes of the 'clever and devious' Mangla suspecting her of colluding with Rani Jindan (137). For Singh, the absence of granthis is not worrisome, and he remembers Mangla fondly as a maternal figure from his childhood. Such narrative differences occur frequently in *The Exile*, between Singh and other characters, ensuring that no account is read as completely authentic or reliable. Love and belonging for one is full of a clever deviousness for another.

8. In reality, Duleep's announcement to embrace Christianity spreads like wildfire, with the Pandit claiming that the 'godless Englishmen' had turned his young head (Sarna 2008: 124). A drunk Sikh servant laments the lack of Sikh granthis in Fatehgarh, 'The Maharaja is a Sikh, he should be told of our gurus, of what they have written, of what we are' (125).
9. Cixous further points out that for Kant, hospitality is a universal *human* right; 'the non-human, the animal, for example, is excluded. So be it. No cat in my house then? And gods?' citing deficiencies of Kantian thought, especially as it pertains to 'actual, concrete hospitality' (qtd. in Still 2005: 94).
10. Further alienation from his culture ensues when a majority of servants, relics of Singh's past and legacy, are sent back to Lahore after Singh's conversion, ostensibly to ensure that the Maharaja 'grew up in the manner that we [the Logins] wanted' (Sarna 2008: 132).
11. Lady Login notably sent the young King a copy of *The Boy's Own Book*, a book of games for boys that a young Duleep cherished and often referred to (Sarna 2008: 117).
12. However, with a 'little' slice of Lahore, 'to feed [his] fancy, or perhaps to console [himself]' (Sarna 2008: 181).
13. Though her arguments largely pertain to the humanitarian refugee crisis in recent times, her point applies equally to Singh's situation.
14. In 1899, Rudyard Kipling poetically expressed the need for the US to embrace 'the white man's burden', as Europe and Britain had done earlier (Kipling). As a hymn to imperialism, the poet believes it is the white man's mission to civilise the rest of the world, where men resembling 'half devil and half child' were waiting to see 'the light' (Kipling).
15. Kant ignores the break between *the* law and the laws; his theorisation of legal hospitality neglects the pure hospitality of *the* law of unconditionality, which is 'a lawless law' (Derrida 2000: 78). For Kant, hospitality is motivated by duty, but for Derrida, it must be unmotivated, unaware of the risk or reward the stranger may bring.
16. Pure hospitality is impossible, but unconditionality allows us to concentrate on actual, concrete dangers of hospitality.
17. Victoria's happiness at her 'loyal subject' (Sarna 2008: 153) earned Login his knighthood. Login writes that the Queen always remembered Singh's birthday,

- marking it with gifts—‘a thoroughbred hunter, a dog, an excellent timepiece’, among others (154).
18. Victoria extends a hospitable welcome to Duleep, reflecting in her journal: ‘He is extremely handsome and speaks English perfectly and has a pretty, graceful and dignified manner’ (qtd. in Ballantyne 2006: 89).
  19. And ‘hawking and shooting to his heart’s content’ (Sarna 2008: 159).
  20. As Thomassen writes less circuitously, ‘exclusion and conditionality help constitute a space of inclusion and equality’ (2006: 447).
  21. Derrida not only expects violence; he refuses to plan for it, citing the ‘messianic hope’ offered by an unpredictable ‘future-to-come’ (1994:81). For him, predictability is dangerous; the closing off of borders is usually concomitant with state violence against the Other, equating the Other with peril and precarity. A predictable future is built on certainty of response, with the threshold of responsibility turned towards the state rather than the stranger/Other. As such, such calculated decisions frequently usher in violence, sometimes as totalising as the ‘totalising perception of the Other’ that inform these calculations (Fatou 2016: 202–203). On the other hand, viewed from the possibility of an open future, the Other need not be perilous, argues Fotou; the hospitable future is ‘open to any possible futures’ (16).
  22. Fotou writes that when Derrida mentions the ‘impossible’, he ‘actively’ considers it as possible and ‘invites us to do the same’ (2016:15).
  23. Hospitality is ‘a right, a duty, an obligation’ on the condition that the host ‘maintains his own authority *in his own home*...the being-oneself in one’s own home’ which is ‘the condition of the gift of hospitality’ (Derrida 2006: 211). ‘The one inviting becomes almost the hostage of the one invited, of the guest, the hostage of the one he receives, the one who keeps him at home’ (217–218). Or, as Thomassen puts it simply, ‘the sovereignty of the tolerating party ‘becomes *almost* the hostage of the one’ tolerated’ (2016: 455; emphasis original).
  24. As a stranger, he is only entitled to a ‘right of visitation and association’ (Kant 1991: 106) grounded in ‘social responsibility and universal morality’ (Kim qtd. in Fotou 2016: 57).
  25. He obediently lives the life he had been taught to live and love, ‘the life of an Englishman of rank’ (Sarna 2008: 184). But soon he grows contrite when the government not only holds him hostage to this rank but also refuses to ‘support the dignity and scale’ of life they had ‘encouraged’ him to adopt (194).
  26. The inclusion of the Other in all her Other-ed glory is impossible, for ‘she cannot be included or tolerated *and* remain wholly her’ (Thomassen 2016: 455; emphasis original).
  27. There are other instances of reward and punishment too. Rani Jindan, weak and blind and no longer a threat, is rewarded with the return of her jewels after she agrees to leave India in 1861. Consisting of more than three thousand pieces, the jewels are shipped in twenty-one boxes on a steamship to Britain (Sarna 2008:

- 168). During the same journey, Singh is not permitted to go beyond the east side of the Yamuna; 'always a prisoner, always on a leash' (165). Further violence is threatened by the powerful against his countrymen if he betrays orders; Lord Canning cautions him that they do not wish to 'punish or restrain people whose sentiments may be aroused' on seeing Singh (165).
28. Unjustified since the state was under British protection at the time. The British, with the patience only humongous imperial empires possess, took advantage of the bloodshed and familial strife that befell the *gaddi* (seat) of Ranjit Singh in the decade after his death to wage a war. On the conclusion of the second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849, they annexed Punjab.
  29. He hopes that 'maybe not just the diamond' but all else it symbolised, ultimately his connection with his mighty forefathers, would also be returned (Sarna 2008: 153).
  30. Pure ethics recognise the other 'as the absolute *unlike*', 'nonrecognizable, indeed as unrecognizable, beyond all knowledge, all cognition and all recognition' (Derrida qtd. in Thomassen 2006: 455). Pure ethics are always made possible through conditionality; pure tolerance or inclusion does not exist.
  31. An accompanying question could also be why does he need to rebel? Why should the Other not accept the violence that accompanies hospitality, grin and bear it? Fatou argues that a challenge must be advanced to avoid the worst violence, 'the totalising violence against the Other' (2016: 193), already aggravated by the 'skewed structure' of the Self/Object binary that informs philosophical thought on hospitality and tolerance. Though her primary concern is the humanitarian refugee crisis, her claim that worst violence poses an 'infinite' threat in its 'destruction and annihilation' is significant in understanding the Maharaja's motivation for rebellion—a worst violence premised at his descendants, who would be bereft of their father's estate and home, money and status after his death (Sarna 2008: 194).
  32. Derrida uses the scientific understanding of autoimmunity to philosophically analogise an attack on the body and on its immune system, this attack-from-within opening up the body to the incalculability of a stranger's risk (Fatou 2016: 188). Habermas also theorises similarly that a 'militant democracy' 'prepared to defend itself' (qtd. in Thomassen 2006: 448) can be rationally talked out of it through public deliberation of 'free and equal citizens' (448). But for Derrida, the solution is aporetic; democratic defences can only be bolstered by limiting democracy, via exclusion and intolerance.
  33. His renunciation is to foremost register his 'bitter complaint' against restrictions on his movement in India (Sarna 2008: 200).
  34. A Khalsa right of initiation into Sikhism.
  35. The Maharaja wanted that his private property, held in security by the British, should be returned to him. He also wanted his pension to continue after his death and for him to have the agency to allot it as per his wishes to relatives and children. He did not want his estates to be sold after death, which the British

- were adamant on. Though he died in poverty in Paris, Elveden was sold, seemingly to pay off the Maharaja's high debts.
36. 'Fairness and justice! I was always told these were the essential qualities of the English' (Sarna 2008: 159).
  37. Singh's faith in fairness and justice as a guarantee of British democracy erodes as he faces the reality of what he had lost through his quiet acquiescence to the subtle inducements of an English life. Arur also writes that the maharaja was reduced to 'Arguments, justifications, pleasing for money' for many years (Sarna 2008: 185).
  38. 'My renunciation of Christianity would shake the Crown, I thought; it would amount to a negation of an achievement that they had long touted—an oriental prince who had found the Right Way' (Sarna 2008: 191).
  39. 'Always a prisoner, always on a leash. But this can only be till my death. Beyond that, even the British Empire cannot reach (Sarna 2008: 165).
  40. Habermas believes that tolerance, deemed conditional, religious, and retributive, is nevertheless redeemable if the paradoxes of arbitrariness (limits of tolerance are decided authoritatively) and paternalism (tolerance as an act of mercy) are resolved. He proposes to resolve such unilateralism by introducing rational limits of intolerance and fixing its paternalistic asymmetry by grounding tolerance in the harmony of democratic public dialogue (Thomassen 2006: 439–440). Thomassen's deconstruction of Habermas' rational reconstruction establishes that Habermas is unable to provide a 'rational foundation' for tolerance and also unable to settle the paradoxes of arbitrariness and paternalism.
  41. To elaborate further, the reason-driven self-legislation of free and equal citizens creates an atmosphere where the 'self' understood here as 'the subject of the democratic community' is diffused in the various inter-subjectivities of deliberation (Thomassen 2006: 449). But again, Habermas presupposes certain principles of tolerance at the outset; the limit between tolerance and intolerance is only justified when 'certain conditions and exclusions'—that is, intolerance—are 'set down in advance' and always lie 'beyond' justificatory deliberations (449). Thomassen thus points to the aporetic limits in Habermas, even after the latter claims to have solved it via rational reconstruction.
  42. 'He had been taught to believe, that all Englishmen, all Christians are fair and just' (Sarna 2008: 185).
  43. He also comes to believe that he is the deliverer of freedom to the Sikhs and all of India, foretold in a prophecy made by the last Guru. The prophecy foretold the rise of a man who would be exiled from his kingdom, marry a Christian wife, suffer persecution and poverty, but would return to Punjab and lead his people to freedom (Sarna 2008: 190).
  44. It is interesting to note that he seethes in anger at being called 'disloyal' (Sarna 2008: 200) to the Crown, believing himself to be a revolutionary, 'I was fighting against injustice; I was not being disloyal to my Sovereign' (200). Lady Login

- also admitted that ‘clumsy policies’ had not only heightened Singh’s sense of ‘indignity and injury’ but were turning ‘a perfectly loyal subject into a rebel’ (189).
45. In Kiev for some bitter winter months, he is fondly remembered as the ‘Indian Prince’ (Sarna 2008: 233).
  46. In Aden, he forms something resembling a government-in-exile, even appointing General Carrol-Tevis (a spy for the foreign office) as his chief of staff (Sarna 2008: 207). Days are spent daydreaming of ‘elaborate plans’ for a ‘Grand Army of Freedom’, while in reality, Singh is reduced to selling his jewels to finance his life (235).
  47. After Duleep’s ascension, Mangla, his childhood nurse, writes, ‘Who cares for a five-year-old, even if he is a Maharaja?’ (Sarna 2008: 66) When he signs away his kingdom, he realises things are different, and ‘people [had] stopped giving [him] importance’ (104).
  48. Early on, Singh had realised that an Indian wife ‘will no longer do’ (Sarna 2008: 175), seeking to ingratiate himself within the host culture through the irreversible Christian ceremony of marriage.
  49. Lady Login finds the marriage strange at first: ‘To go in search of a wife, carry out a courtship in the middle of a funeral voyage!’ (Sarna 2008: 178).
  50. He forms many liaisons, notably with his second wife, Ada Wetherill, mistress-turned-second-wife, and not only tolerates but forgives ‘her ignorance, her selfishness, her expenses’, all the while yearning for ‘her kisses, her embraces’ (Sarna 2008: 212).
  51. He tells Lady Login, ‘...but I wish you to know that should anything happen to me while I am there [in India], my will is made and the children provided for’ (Sarna 2008: 175).
  52. He is incarcerated for two years in Bengal for his involvement in Singh’s rebellious plot. Upon his release, he goes back to Singh in Paris.
  53. Fatou points out that terrorism, especially in home-schooled terrorists, often emerges from democratically sanctioned freedoms of free speech and right to expression.
  54. The current push-back policy of the state, coupled with hyper-control of borders and covert detention centres, is in contrast to the cosmopolitan rhetoric of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, or the world is one global family, espoused by the same government. Justice, true and fair, belongs to the incalculable future-to-come, reigning within the irresolvable aporia, unconditional and pure, made impossible by its possibility.

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# *Duvidha*: A Woman's Subjectivity from Text to Screen

Kalplata

## Abstract

Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* (*Dilemma*, 1973) is a cinematic adaptation of a magical realist story by the same name by Rajasthani author Vijaydan Detha. It depicts the inner dilemma of a bride who accepts a ghost as her husband in place of her real husband, who leaves for a five-year-long business trip a day after their wedding. After five years, she must choose between the Ghost and her real husband. Mani Kaul interprets the bride's dilemma with the help of two primary cinematic forms, image and sound. In this cinematic translation of the subjective self of a woman, Mani Kaul is profoundly informed by the cinematic style and philosophy of Robert Bresson, the French filmmaker of the 1950s. This paper, firstly, reads the expression of feminine subjectivity in Vijaydan Detha's story *Duvidha*. Secondly, it analyses its translation in Mani Kaul's film by the same name. While reading the cinematic translation, it focuses mainly on two cinematic styles of the director, the close-ups and the voice-over. Kaul combines these two techniques to create a cinematic world of "stillness". With minimal camera movement and a monotonous voice-over, Mani Kaul discourages the audience from identifying with the characters on the screen. This paper studies Mani Kaul's interpretation of a woman's dilemma on-screen with the engagement of minimal cinematic forms and, at the same time, questions the director's minimalistic style: whether this style resulted from strategic weakness or a conscious choice.

**Keywords:** woman, subjectivity, text, screen, close-ups, voice-over.

Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* (1973) is based on a short story written by Vijayadan Detha of the same name; he translates into screen Detha's retelling of Rajasthani folktale of a woman's story. Kaul reinterprets *Duvidha*; a strictly faithful interpretation. Lachhi is a newly wedded bride whose beauty mesmerises a ghost. When he sees that Lachhi's husband is leaving for a

five-year business trip a day after their wedding, he grabs this opportunity to live with Lachhi by taking her husband's shape. He enters Lachhi's household, tells the truth to her, and lives there for four years only to be ousted treacherously by the villagers at the end. Henceforth, Lachhi does not have the choice but to live a sad and loveless life with her real husband.

This paper analyses the cinematic translation of Detha's *Duvidha* by Mani Kaul, a pioneer of the Indian New Wave Cinema. This paper also discusses Kaul's cinematic inspiration from Robert Bresson's style, a French New Wave cinema pioneer.

### **Faithful and Innovative**

While Mani Kaul transforms literary form into cinematic form, he remains faithful to the former. As a screenplay writer of *Duvidha*, Kaul picks the exact lines from the story; whenever he cannot do so, he paraphrases it. Thus, Kaul does not add to the story, nor does he modify it. He takes each paragraph of the story, identifies the core action, and gives it a cinematic life. This cinematic transformation is mainly based on the technique of close-ups and voice-over. The film has minimal dialogue; Kaul uses Rajasthani folk music and the voice-over to communicate to the audience. This paper will analyse the cinematic translation of this short story into a film. For reference, we have taken the Hindi translation of Detha's story *Duvidha*. As in Robert Bresson movies, music acts as an instrument to give information in Kaul's *Duvidha*. On the subject of 'Bresson and Music', Donald Richie says:

Bresson therefore subsequently avoided music as "accompaniment, support or reinforcement," and began to use it more as "information," in the same way as other sounds were used, so that it was no longer, as he prescribed in his *Notes*, a "powerful modifier and even destroyer of the real, like alcohol or dope." (1977: 299)

In his cinematic endeavour, Kaul has the added responsibility to contextualise his story so that the audience understands better the upcoming developments in the film. However, Kaul has a more serious concern than mere contextualising the story in the Rajasthani background. He wants to present a Rajasthani folk tale and wishes to represent Detha's love and affinity with the Rajasthani culture as closely as possible. The Rajasthani background is the heart of the story that beats throughout the narrative. Kaul is keen on capturing this beat; this keenness comes alive in the opening credit of the story, where the Rajasthani folk music presents the preface of the story; the opening credits start with a still image of a lamp in a window and a woman. The opening credits then run the names of the people involved in making the film with intermittent still images taken from the film itself. One of the striking images is the close-up of hands opening the mouth of the waterskin as if they want to

show the audience what is inside that bag; the waterskin is an integral part of the film narrative that the audience discovers later in the film. Kaul's framing of hand in a close-up resembles Robert Bresson's framing of hand in his film *L'Argent* (1983). Tony Pipolo says:

Because the film is about money, the strategy of exchange, manifest especially in these initial sequences, (...) The variety of exchanges ranges from the immediately apparent to the abstract. Virtually every exchange of money is in close-up, framing each person's hand: (2010: 339)

Another feature that is noteworthy in the film is that Kaul runs the names of the people involved in the cinematic transformation of Detha's story in palm leaf manuscript-like pages to take back the audience to the 'older times'; to tell the audience that they are henceforth going to watch a story that is not contemporary without specifying the period.

Kaul transforms the subjective experience of a woman portrayed in Detha's *Duvidha* in the form of a summary of the principal actions, playing with the story's chronological order without changing or bringing a radical change to it. Thus, Kaul's *Duvidha* does not experiment with the story-telling technique in the cinematic platform; rather, his originality lies in capturing and transforming the literary style of Detha's expression that is his own. While doing so, Kaul creates a cinematic presentation that reciprocates Detha's work and, at the same time, ensures his position in the category of *auteur* and his cinema as *auteur's cinema*, making him one of the pioneers of the New Wave cinema in India.

### **Actions and its cinematic transformation**

Kaul wants to respect the length of Detha's story; it is a short story, so is the length of Kaul's *Duvidha*. Kaul presents *Duvidha* in a 79-minute-long feature film that is comparatively shorter than most Indian feature films, even if we consider the Indian Parallel cinema. Kaul focuses on the crux of the story; he picks up the core of each paragraph and then retells it in his cinematic language and grammar. For Kaul, *Duvidha's* narrative uses imagery and music to convey the story's context; he uses sound, mainly in voice-over and minimal dialogues, to focus on the principal actions.

While Detha's story begins in a traditional way by presenting the background in which the ghost in the tree sees the bride, his preoccupation is not to direct the audience into a specific direction of the storyline; thus, the narrative language is not suggestive; instead, he attracts the reader to enter the magical world of a folktale. The reader begins this magical journey and flows with the narrative without knowing what to expect. On the other hand, Kaul prefers to give hints regarding the plot of the story from the very beginning. In the

opening credits, Kaul presents the audience with the images of the woman who plays the protagonist in the film; in between, he does run the names of the people involved in the making of the film only to show later some more images from the film, which would come much later in the film, related to the turning points in the film's narrative. Thus, Kaul's focus is to present the essentials of the film, and for this objective, he chooses a few images from the film to summarise the movie. Once the opening credits end, the audience musters to know the story's details and connect the dots between the images shown. The images shown are as follows:

1. The image of a lamp in a window
2. The image of the woman protagonist without a veil, with a veil and lying on the bed mainly portrays her face and thus, capturing her subjective experience.
3. The close-up of the hands opens the mouth of the waterskin.

The above three series of images act as the keywords of the film's narrative. The image of the lamp in a window hints at the unravelling of a story that is going to take place in the interiors of the house. The images of the woman capture mainly the inner subjective self of the woman and then tell the audience that they are going to watch a story of a woman of this house; a story where the woman feels 'imprisoned', the lying image of the woman projects her loneliness in the captivity of the four walls of this house. Later, when the audience is presented with details, they get acquainted with the reality that the woman is alone, living with a secret that she must not reveal if she has to live life as she wants. In a way, she has stolen this happiness from the outside world, and she must remain silent if she wants to live in the bliss of the married life even if she is aware that this moment of bliss is short-lived. The third image is later revealed as the turning point in the film narrative, as this is the point where the Ghost, the reason for the woman's bliss throughout the film, is captured in the waterskin forever; this is the moment indicating the definitive end to the romantic relationship between the lover (Ghost) and the woman. When the woman's real husband announces this cruel act, she does not react. She realises that her short-lived bliss has ended, and now she does not have any other choice but to live a life of submissiveness to her husband and his family. Her silenced self is again captured by Kaul in a series of close-ups of the woman's face and her hands with henna announcing a change, a new beginning in her life where she would be forced to forget, suppress, and ignore her real self and would always project and play a role of a married woman accorded and prescribed by the society. She would now merely 'perform' the role of a married woman without the indulgence of her emotion, a convenient arrangement for a woman in a patriarchal society where she is an object and denied all subjective experience. The woman remains silent to

the news of the capture of the Ghost in the waterskin even if she feels immense pain in Detha's narrative as well as in Kaul's cinematic retelling.

In another sequence, Kaul's intention to foretell the audience about the incoming incident surfaces in the film. In Detha's narrative, the people of the village bind the two lookalike men to take to the king to get justice because they could not decide who the woman's real husband was among these two men. On the way to the king's court, they meet a shepherd who offers to solve the problem at his level. In Detha's narrative, the reader meets the Shepherd at the same time as the other people of the village. The spatio-temporal representation in Detha's narrative does not play with the chronological order of the events, whereas Kaul chooses to announce beforehand that the group of people heading towards the king's court would be meeting the Shepherd, who would then offer to resolve the issue. In Kaul's narrative, the Shepherd then appears and asks the two men to fulfil three tasks to prove their truthfulness.

#### **Representation of passage of time in Detha and Kaul's *Duvidha***

The blissful time spent with the ghost in Detha's narrative is expressed explicitly with words. The writer gives a detailed portrayal of the blissful nights and days in a paragraph, and in the very next, he reveals that the woman gets pregnant. Detha's passage of four years is swift, the duration of four years occupying merely two paragraphs. Kaul portrays the passage of four years with the change of daytime and the change of the weather. The swift and blissful passage of time is represented in the woman's swinging in the swing. The to-and-fro movement of the swing mirrors the swift passage of time as experienced by the woman. Later, Kaul picks the dialogue from Detha's narrative where the woman is speaking with the Ghost and wondering if the marriage procession had not taken repose under the tree and if the Ghost had not seen her as a bride on that day, she could not imagine how she would have spent the four years.

In this sequence, the family celebrates the good news of the pregnancy by distributing jaggery to the village people. Once again, Kaul remains minimalistic in his style. He restricts the distribution of jaggery to the representation of the bowl of jaggery, where the audience can only see the hands that are distributing it and the hands that are receiving it with a voice in the background asking the people to take the jaggery one by one. Kaul captures this sequence with an overhead camera setup. Though Detha also mentions in his narrative that the couple gave a substantial amount in charity, Kaul chooses not to mention it in his film. It is noteworthy that Kaul decides again to reverse the chronological order of the announcement of pregnancy and the distribution of jaggery to the villagers. Kaul does not show the woman as

pregnant and then the distribution of jaggery. He instead prefers to reveal the good news of pregnancy slowly. Firstly, he shows the woman lying on the bed with her back towards the audience. Thus the audience does not get a clear idea of why she is lying down. This scene is followed immediately by the scene where there is a big bowl of jaggery, hands distributing it and the other hands on the opposite side receiving the jaggery in turns. This scene is followed by the woman lying on the bed on her back, and the audience can see that she is heavily pregnant. Kaul's juxtaposition of the above images to create a new meaning imbibes Robert Bresson's viewpoint on the cinematic image. Robert Bresson says:

An image must be transformed by contact with other images, as is color by contact with other colors. A blue is not the same blue beside a green, a yellow, a red. No art without transformation. (1977: 5)

In Detha's narrative, the event of the distribution of jaggery happens in the third month of the woman's pregnancy. However, Kaul decides to cut short the whole episode of the woman's pregnancy by concentrating on the last months of the pregnancy rather than narrating what happened firstly in the third month of the pregnancy and then what happens in the seventh month of the pregnancy. The reversing of the chronological order, where Kaul chooses first to show the effect and then the cause, facilitates him further in his minimalistic style. By doing so, Kaul, at the same time, invokes the audience's participation in the film-watching process. While Detha and Kaul both rely on the traditional layout where the story begins with the initial situation, the disturbing element, the action, the outcome, and the final situation, Kaul chooses to experiment with the cinematic mechanism to present the same. He often reverses the chronological sequence of presenting the otherwise chronological events in the narrative. Kaul, thus, succeeds in invoking the audience's participation even in his 'still' cinema. Kaul's camera remains still so that the audience can participate actively and enter the cinematic thread. Kaul's film, like Robert Bresson films, is demanding. About demanding nature, vis-à-vis Bresson films Joseph Cunneen says:

(...) his work is demanding and that it contradicts the assumptions with which most of us were indoctrinated when we started going to movies (2004: 178)

While playing slightly with the chronological order of the narrative layout, Mani Kaul remains strictly faithful to Detha's original text. His cinematic paraphrasing is based heavily on close-ups, still images and voice-over. Kaul translates on screen the details that are left for imagination and interpretation in Detha's text: the beauty of the newlywed bride, her decorated veil, the red bindi on her forehead, and her unspoken passion and anguish. While informing

himself with the cinematic style of Robert Bresson, Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* makes a conscious decision to frame an Indian folktale within Indian aesthetics, thus embodying western cinematic style with an Indian soul.

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# From Oral to Page to Stage/Screen and Back: Intermedial Translation and Recodification in the Holi Folk and Film Songs

Meghal Karki

## Abstract

This paper shall make an attempt to untangle the intricacies of intermedial translation when it comes to Kumaoni Holi congregations, or *baithaks*, as they are called. Holi in Kumaon is a three-month-long musical affair, and a wide motley of songs are sung during the same, ranging from articulations of love, longing and belonging to spiritual introspection. The Holi *baithaks* emerge as an interesting site of simultaneous and multifarious translations and shall form a central area of concern in this paper. Like all South Asian cultures, Kumaon was not exempt from translations of the oral and the aural into the written. Kumaoni Holi folk songs have been recorded copiously, and new pamphlets emerge every year, with new mutations and additions. The participants at the *baithaks* often consult these pamphlets while singing or while preparing for the same, thus weaving a complex, multi-directional translation process that renews itself every year. How do these translations from the voice to the page to the stage and back impact Kumaoni Holi *baithaks*? How do we understand the selection process in the Holi pamphlets? Several pamphlets also feature popular Bollywood Holi songs such as 'Rang Barse' and 'Hori Khele Raghuvēera', which were in turn derived from folk melodies and translated and linguistically tweaked for the screen. This leads one to question: how does the complex, multi-layered and intertextual relationship between folk songs and Bollywood emerge in these *baithaks*?

**Keywords:** intermediality, folk songs, Hindi film songs, Holi, translation

The theory, practice and discipline of translation have transformed significantly over the last several years. From occupying a minor corner of applied linguistics and literary studies (Bassnett 1998: 124), it has now evolved into a discipline in its

own right. Translation is no longer seen as a rigid and mechanical activity, based on notions of equivalence and fidelity to the source text. Rather, translation is now seen as a creative, critical activity that deals with complex questions of power relations and cultural perceptions of audiences and is now turning to questions of non-verbal communication, ethics, postcolonial studies, and ethnography, along with a significant increase in self-reflexibility (Snell-Hornby 2009). A significant development in the field is the idea of intermedial translations, or translations from one medium to another, such as from print to the screen or the stage, or from a novel to the movie screen, to give a few examples. The paper shall adopt intermedial translations as a central concern and analyse the phenomenon through two veins: the layered and simultaneous translation from the oral to the written in Kumaoni Holi *baithaks* through performances and Holi folk song pamphlets and through the standardisation of Holi folk rhythms in Hindi films by focusing on select film songs and Holi folk song pamphlets. Moreover, the paper shall also weigh in on the different ways in which recent revisions of the concept of translation and its elasticity render themselves critical for research in the field of folklore and folklore translation, for ‘folk narratives and songs have always crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries’ (Roth 1998: 243).

### **The Oral to the Page to the Stage and Back: Simultaneous Translations in Kumaoni *Baithaks* and Holi Folk Song Pamphlets**

A festival of licence, joy, carnivalesque inversion, and an exuberant celebration of the onset of spring, Holi is celebrated with fervour across the country. Each region has its own unique way of celebrating Holi, with a wide array of rituals and customs associated with the same. In Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, Holi is also celebrated by a wide motley of folk songs, ranging from articulations of love, longing and belonging to spiritual introspection, in congregations called *baithaks*. In Kumaon, *baithaks* begin in mid-December (*Poush*), during the harsh winter months when darkness descends early and work is scant as a means of entertainment around a fire, with folk songs of spirituality and religiosity in the praise of Hindu deities. The festival blossoms in tandem with nature, and as Basant Panchami arrives, the folk form, Khari holi, emerges as a jocular, raunchy, and sensuous celebration with playful folk songs of love, longing and belonging, with numerous references to Radha-Krishna. The third form, Mahilaholi, combines the rituals and forms of both Khari and Baithaki Holi and includes dramatic performances with masks and is a dynamic site not only for subversion and female expression but also for jokes. The three forms of Holi *baithaks* thus have their own rituals and atmosphere, but all reside within the liminal scapes of the festival of Holi. Apart from being a site of subversion, ritual and celebration, the *baithaks* in Kumaon also emerge as an interesting site of simultaneous and multifarious translations that take place across different mediums.

The arrival of print technology contributed towards the copious recording of oral literature into print across the world, and the process itself has revealed to be complicated and fraught with gaps and concerns about the recording process. Across South Asia, and in colonies across the world, the process was heralded under colonial administrations, with different aims and objectives in mind. Ganesh Devy argues that new norms of literature were introduced when Indian languages were introduced to the print medium by the colonial enterprise, which privileged 'the written over the oral and bringing in the idea that a literary text needs to be essentially monolingual' (Devy 2017: 20). He goes on to argue that the languages that had not been placed within the print technology came to be seen as 'inferior' languages (Devy 2017: 20). These skewed dynamics played a role in the creation of Indian states post-Independence, wherein if a language had a script and had printed literature in it, it was given a geographical zone, while languages that did not have the same were not allocated one, despite having a rich repository of oral literature (Devy 2017: 20).

In the United Provinces, an administrative region bordering Kumaun, the arrival of print technology stimulated new expressions of vernacular literature, and local languages adapted themselves to new commercial forms (Gupta 2001: 33). Holi pamphlets emerged as the cultural expression of the people of the country in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and retained high circulation numbers despite the efforts of the reformist movement to suppress their obscene content and expression. Charu Gupta has conducted a long and in-depth study of the resilience of Holi pamphlets in the face of rigorous attempts at restricting circulation and argues that their cheap prices, continuous demand, limitless patronage through print, and their thin sizes ensured that they not only thrived but flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Gupta 2001: 105–6). Not much has changed since then, as Holi pamphlets continue to be printed on thin, cheap and colourful paper and are priced at around 30–50 rupees per pamphlet, and new ones emerge every year, with new titles that attract buyers. Holi pamphlets are available for sale across the year in Uttarakhand, but their numbers surge as the month of *Poush* emerges, and they line bookstalls, footpaths and even grocery stores till the day of Holi emerges. Songs of blessings that are sung at the beginning of all *baithaks*, songs of love and longing for the beloved, songs about Radha-Krishna, songs of female complaint and anguish, and songs of joy and celebration for Holi and *devar-bhabhi* songs all find a place in these slim volumes.

The songs are often compiled by amateur *holiyars*, or those who sing Holi, and often by teachers and lovers of music. Sometimes accompanied by prefaces from compilers, but mostly not, the Holi pamphlets contain a prodigious variety of songs. As Holi lasts three months in Kumaun, and is characterised by different songs for different stages of the same, Holi pamphlets become a useful record and repertoire of songs that most *holiyars* consult while singing them. While



veteran *holyars* may not consult these pamphlets, most *baithaks* always have one or two pamphlets for those not as well-versed in the form of the folk song. This can also be found particularly in the diaspora population of Kumaon, in areas where the tradition of Holi *baithaks* has emerged recently. Where does translation come up in this, then? How do these translations from the voice to the page to the stage and back impact Kumaoni Holi *baithaks*? How do we understand the selection process in the Holi pamphlets? The paper proposes that Holi *baithaks* are a rich site of continuous intermedial translations. The songs are usually recorded and then transcribed in pamphlets after the compilers hear them at *baithaks*. Participants of *baithaks* in turn buy these pamphlets and refer to them while singing in *baithaks*. While it may seem to be a dual translation, Holi *baithaks* are in fact a multi-directional, circuitous process of translation from the aural/oral tradition to the page and back, which creates interesting and intersecting dynamics that renew every year with the publication of new Holi pamphlets.

### **The Folk Song, the Hindi Film Industry and Back: Translating Folk Songs to Film Songs**

Holi has regularly appeared on film and in music videos, as the visual appeal of the festival and its licentiousness are combined with the exuberance it elicits in participants to create a particularly successful combination, both in the box office and in the popular imagination. No other festival in India finds a place on the screen like Holi, and this representation has been around since the early beginnings of the Hindi film industry. Interestingly, most movies show Holi through music, adding an additional aural and musical appeal to its rich visuality of colours. From

movies released in the 1940s, such as *Aurat*, to more recent movies such as *Yeh Jawani Hai Deewani* (2013) to Coldplay's music video for their song *Hymn for the Weekend* (2016), Holi's stunning visuality has lent its charm to several genres in visual culture. Mimansa Shekhar charts out the depiction of Holi songs in Hindi films and demonstrates how Holi has been used as comic relief, a light-hearted relief from the intensity of plot ('Holi Aayi Re Kanhai' in *Mother India*, 'Holi ke Din' in *Sholay*), and a narrative device ('Piya Sang Khelo Hori' in *Phagun*). Movies have also highlighted how sexual harassment and abuse run rampant under the garb of celebration and licentiousness during Holi, through songs such as 'Ang Se Ang Lagana' in the movie *Darr*, wherein the anonymity of Holi is utilised while stalking, and the movie *Damini*, in which Meenakshi Sheshadari, who plays the lead actress, witnesses the rape of her maid by her brother-in-law and his friends during Holi. Depictions such as these are rare, and Holi is more often than not seen as a visually appealing depiction of love, enjoyment, fun, and celebration ('Balam Pichkari' in *Yeh Jawani Hai Deewani*, 'Hori Khele Raghuvēera' in *Baghban*). Most Holi film songs have been adapted from folk songs, but this paper contends that this process should be seen as translation, as the folk song is tweaked and modified, and inflections of dialects are diminished to make these songs consumable to a larger portion of the population.

While both folk expressions and the Hindi film industry are clubbed under the category of popular culture in India, the relationship is particularly complex. Simi Malhotra examines this problem of terminology and argues that folk expressions espouse alterity and a sense of counter-publics and stand on the side of resistance, which is often in contradistinction to what may be thought of as official or normative culture, which stands on the side of affirmation (Malhotra 2017: 46–7). This leaves us in a double bind, wherein distinctions between the two are blurred, and yet they remain distinct. If one examines the development of the Hindi film industry in India and its relationship to folk music from across the country, the early stages of the film industry drew directly from folk rhythms, especially those of North India (Anantharaman 2008: 14). There are many movies, such as *Aurat* (1940), having the song titled 'Jamuna Tat Shyam Khelen Holi', wherein the Holi folk song is sung by a collectivity and preserves the linguistic inflections of Braj and the form of the folk song, wherein a single line is repeated multiple times. Similarly, the iconic 'Hori Khele Raghuvēera', made famous by Amitabh Bachchan's baritone in the movie *Baghban*, is also drawn from an old Bhojpuri folk song, which was included in the movie because Bachchan and his father used to regularly hum the song and retains the linguistic cadence of the dialect. The folk song has several variations, and the version given below is widely regarded to be one of the oldest Holi songs still in circulation.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Hori kheele raghuveera Awadh mein, Hori<br>kheele raghuveera Awadh mein | Ram plays Hori in Awadh, Ram plays Hori<br>in Awadh,                        |
| Kahe haath kanak pichkari, kanakpichkari                                | Who has a golden pichkari in his hands?                                     |
| Kaheke haath abeera, Awadh mein Hori<br>kheele raghuveera               | Whose hands are full of coloured powder?<br>Ram plays Hori in Awadh         |
| Ram ji ke haath kanak pichkari,   | Ram has a golden pichkari in his hands,                                     |
| Lachiman haath abeera, Awadh mein Hori<br>kheele raghuveera             | And Laxman has hands filled with coloured<br>powder Ram plays Hori in Awadh |
| (Joshi 17)  |   |

Similarly, the iconic ‘Rang Barse’ from the movie *Silsila* has embedded itself thoroughly into the popular imagination of Holi. It is sung voraciously across the country and played repeatedly during the festival and is irrevocably tied to Bachchan’s baritone. While Harivansh Rai Bachchan is credited as the lyricist, the song draws from folk songs and bhajans sung in various parts of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan, and several versions of the same are available. The first written record of the *bhajan* can be attributed to Mirabai, and her version has been translated below, but the *bhajan* has been adapted to include several deities and has numerous forms with similar lyrics. Composer Debajyoti Mishra wanted to use the bhajan in *Curzoner Kalom*, a Bengali film, but he discovered that there were copyright issues regarding the same and added that ‘the film number (“Rang Barse” from *Silsila*) was tweaked around to fit into the script, but the bhajan was popular among people down the generations’ (2020).

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Rang barse o meeran, bhawan main rang<br>barse        | The colours rain, O Meera, colours rain on<br>your house                 |
| Kun e meeratero mandir chinayo,<br>kunchinyoterodevro | Who has constructed your house, O Meera,<br>who constructed your temple? |
| Rang barse o meeran, bhawan main rang<br>barse.       | The colours rain, O Meera, colours rain on<br>your house                 |
| (Tatwavedi 2021: 63)                                  | (Translated by Sunita Kaushik)   |

Several articles in newspapers, books and websites have also drawn attention to this phenomenon, but the song has not been translated in them. Here, Mirabai’s

devotion to Krishna in the *bhajan* is translated into a sensual, consumable melody that, combined with the stunning visuals and acting, has embedded itself into the popular imagination so thoroughly that it has now returned to a folkloric status. Harish Trivedi maintains that Bachchan's choice to sing these songs ('Rang Barse' and 'Holi Khele Raghuvēera' when it comes to Holi, and 'Khae Ke Paan Bana Raaswaala' in general) at the peak of his career 'added both to their popularity and to Bachchan's own authenticity as an actor who had actually grown up in the Hindi heartland' (Trivedi 2006: 68). However, the Haryanvi and Marwadi dialects and languages, only comprehensible to a section of the population, are divested in favour of Hindi with inflections of its more well-known dialects, Braj and Awadhi. When viewed from the traditional notion of translation, this process would not qualify as one. Moreover, the process of recording oral narratives, songs and tales into the written is usually seen as transcription, but Roth introduces a critical difference when he argues that 'collectors and scholars who transcribed oral texts have, wittingly or unwittingly, regularly translated these texts from dialects or sociolects into a Standard or national language' (Roth 1998: 246).

Apart from being intermedial, this form of translation can also be called intracultural translation, which Roth describes as the 'recodification of folklore texts within the same language or between very similar languages within the same cultural environment' (Roth 1998: 246). The cultural and linguistic landscape and makeup of India also presents challenges, as translation between dialects particularly has become so habitual that there is a 'culture of translating' (Roth 1998: 246). He goes on to argue that there is a startling difference between folklore translation and literary translation and maintains that the translator merely creates yet another variant of a tale or song, which is then gradually assimilated to the style and worldview of the recipient culture (Roth 1998: 245). He further argues that

subsuming translation under 're-creation' or 'modification' does not do justice to the specific competences and to the achievements of the translator who, by virtue of his linguistic skills and through a process of poetic creation, makes foreign worlds accessible and intelligible. He achieves this by replacing unfamiliar sounds and concepts with familiar ones, by re-telling and re-writing, by altering and adapting, and, if necessary, by reducing and adding (246)

Cinema till the 1960s and 1970s certainly incorporated folk rhythms as they were or modified them slightly; cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to draw from folk music, but instead of reproducing the folk song as it is, it continues to mutate through remixes as it transverses mediums and is translated into the screen. For example, 'Balam Pichkari' from *Yeh Jawani Hai Deewani* (2013) is also drawn from a folk song, wherein the lyrics are sung by a folk singer, in dialect, before the song takes over in Hindi and is transformed and translated by the

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Balam Pichkari jo tune mujhe maari, toh bole<br>re zamana kharabi ho gayi     | When my beloved drenches me with a<br>pichkari, then society says that the times are<br>bad  |
| Mere anga raja jo tera rang laaga, toh seedhi<br>saadhi chori sharabi ho gayi | When the colours that you smear me with<br>touch my body, then a simple girl is drunk  |
|   | (Translated and transcribed from ‘Balam<br>Pichkari Full Song With Lyrics Yeh Jawaani<br>Hai Deewani   Ranbir Kapoor, Deepika<br>Padukone’ 0:00–00:18) |

lyricist. The song begins with a folk singer singing the song in the dialect before Vishal Dadlani and Shalmali Kholgade take over.

This leads one to a critical juncture in the field of folkloristics and begs us to ask an age-old question: what is the line between appreciation of folklore and its various genres and appropriation? What makes ‘Rang Barse’ and ‘Holi Khele Raghuvra’ different from ‘Balam Pichkari’? Despite extensive research, the folk singer’s name is not found as she is not acknowledged anywhere, and her voice does not appear in the film at all and only in the lyric video uploaded on YouTube. The erasure of the folk artist’s identity and the cultural context as the folk song is translated and adapted into a film song not only makes a folklorist uncomfortable but also makes us question the ways in which the category of the folk has been deployed in cinema over time. Moreover, Trivedi makes a valuable point when he highlights the fact that Bachchan actually grew up in the Hindi heartland and carried these rhythms with him into the Hindi film industry but falls into a trap that most academics fall into by mentioning his ‘authenticity’. The label must be questioned and avoided in order to avoid falling into the trap of authentic representations and searching for originals rather than focusing on questions about the ways in which folk songs can travel, the patterns of difference and repetition, and the transmutations that occur throughout the process, among several other questions. Another question must be asked, and that is, who are the folk? Alan Dundes, in an exhaustive essay titled ‘Who Are the Folk?’ examines the discipline of folkloristics and definitions of the ‘folk’ and highlights the numerous ways in which they are regressive and limited and comes up with multiple ways of categorisation (Dundes 1980: 3–5). For Dundes, folk is any group or groups, composed of more than two people, who harbour a common core of traditions, foster a sense of group identity, and share something in common that be language, religion, family, ethnicity and race, or anything else (Dundes 1980: 6, 16). Dundes’ definitions of the folk are expansive, inclusive and flexible, as he believes that the formation of new groups leads to the development of new folklore that may draw

from different genres. Going by Dundes' ideas, the female folk singer, certainly a member of the 'folk' community, is nevertheless exploited in 'Balam Pichkari', because she is not given any credit or recognition, and the culture from which she draws is appropriated to lend a rustic touch to the song, embedding it in the hybridised genres that fuse folk music with Indo-western composition that has ruled the Hindi film industry over the last few decades. On the other hand, Bachchan, as someone who grew up in the Hindi heartland, was subsumed in the rhythms of the songs and used to hum them himself before they were even brought to film, and is consequently a member of the folk. Moreover, the decision to not translate the word 'Hori' from the indigenous dialect into the standardised urban Hindi, 'Holi', highlights the critical differences, and the slim lines, that lie between appreciation and appropriation when folk songs are translated into film songs that appeal to a larger audience.

### **Conclusion**

Kumaoni Holi *baithaks* are not immune to the immense popularity of these songs, and they find their way into *baithaks*. While several bemoan the way Hindi cinema and its songs are creeping into Kumaoni Holi, a circuitous, multi-layered, and multi-dimensional relationship is revealed. The folk song is translated from the medium of oral to the film screen, wherein it gains mass appeal and is sung widely across the *baithaks*. Since several collectors of folk songs document and record the songs sung at *baithaks* and then publish various pamphlets, songs such as 'Rang Barse' (included in *Khari Holi Sangrah*, collected by Madan Singh Bisht, a teacher, and *Phagunke Phuhar*, collected by Ramesh Chandra Punetha) and 'Holi Kheele Raghuvēera' have found their way into several of these pamphlets. The folk song travels to the page and to the screen and stage and returns to the aural/oral and back to the page, traversing modalities and mediums. While Holi pamphlets contain different versions of 'Holi Kheele Raghuvēera' (*Kumaoni Mahila Holi Sangrah*, collected by Gopal Dutt Joshi), the song from the movie is the one that is sung more often than not in the *baithaks*, creating a multi-directional translation process that renews constantly. What is lost in these translations? While the other versions of the bhajans and the folk songs continue to be a part of the pamphlets in print, they are not sung and slip away from the *baithaks* as the film song attains greater popularity. Tutomoni Das highlights a similar phenomenon in Assam, wherein only 'Rang Barse' is now remembered and sung during Holi, while Assamese Holi folk songs, such as the one given below, are increasingly being forgotten from collective memory (Das 2020: 7421-2)

However, this does not mean that folk music has not initiated its own relationship with the commercial film song. Gregory Booth's interesting study of the performances of brass bands in Lucknow reveals the ways in which the disco film song is improvised, adapted and individualised to include solo tabla

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| RØgnerezuizwØlilazi | The fire is burning with colours today       |
| PØlaxØrdalØte       |  |
| PhagunØrebalagil    | In the branches of the Palash                |
| NikunzØbØnØte       |  |
| (Das 2020: 7421-22) | The aroma of Phagun has arrived              |
|                     | In the abode of the nurturing woods          |
|                     | (Translated from Assamese by Tonmoyee Doley) |

performances and add musical elements in the tradition of oral and performative transmission (Booth 1991/2). This highlights the ways in which the fixed film song is adapted and can again return to the realms of the folk in circuitous ways, revealing the relationship between the folk song and the commercial film song is far from static and unidirectional and one of constant dialogue and exchange.

The paper has tried to argue the complexities of intermedial translation that lie throughout Holi *baiithaks* in Kumaon and the ever-complex and evolving relationship between the Hindi film industry and folk forms across genres. The relationship between the folk and the Hindi film industry is complex and tumultuous, but as argued above, one must not fall into the trap of dismissing Holi songs featured in movies as inauthentic and distortions of the original. An acknowledgement of the power dynamics that produce them needs to be taken into account, discussed and critiqued, but a conscious effort needs to be taken to avoid the labels of authenticity and copies. This perpetuates the argument that folk songs and folklore in general are a relic of the past, the sole proprietary of the authentic Indian villagers, and a static art form that needs to be preserved as it is. Folk songs draw from the rhythms of everyday life, and they are dynamic, ever-changing, and shaped by the social, political and cultural contexts they are produced in. They are actively, and continuously, created and recreated by cultural participants. Rather, these songs need to be appreciated in their own right, in the spirit of constant change, adaptation, transformation, mutation, and translation. As the Holi folk song(s) are translated over and over, from the oral to the page, and then right back to the *baiithak*, they mutate and transform as the medium, mode and audience change, in the spirit of celebration of the form of the folk song.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Sunita Kaushik for translating the two versions of the ‘Rang Barse’ bhajan for this paper and explaining the context of the same to me. Her assistance has been invaluable, and the paper would not have been written without her. I would also like to thank

Tonmoyee Doley for translating the Assamese folk song and Reetu Raj Kashyap for his assistance in the same.

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# ***Muraqqa-e-Chughtai*: Protecting Identity by Re-establishing Intersemiotic Relations**

Mohd Aqib

## **Abstract**

Abdur Rahman Chughtai (1894–1975) is well known in South Asian art for his visual renditions of the poetry of two canonical Urdu poets, including Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). His miniature paintings in *Muraqqa-e-Chughtai* (1928), based on Ghalib's couplets, inaugurate a new realm of interrelations between art and literature, which stabilises into an evolving inter-art practice over the 20th century. The present paper delves into the genesis of *Muraqqa* and studies the correspondence that Chughtai establishes between the textual and visual media types while also examining the intellectual formulations that enable and perpetuate this correspondence. Further, the paper analyses the emergent discourse by Chughtai and his contemporaries to see how their views problematise the idea of language over medial boundaries by putting it in a wider rubric of intersemiotic theories of language and communication comprising perspectives from east and west. Thereby, the paper argues that *Muraqqa* and its emphasis on the combination of textual and visual aesthetics was a tactical move to protect the cultural identity of the South Asian Muslim community at a time of transforming sociopolitical order. In doing so, it throws light on changing attitudes towards visual arts in Islamic thought and highlights how the combined force of technology and ideology affects the privileging of a medium in communication.

**Keywords:** intersemiotic, inter-art, Muraqqa, Urdu, Abdur Rahman Chughtai, Ghalib

## **Abdur Rahman Chughtai: Early Influences and Achievements**

A useful source of the details of M. Abdur Rahman Chughtai (henceforth Rahman) is his biography written by his youngest brother Abdullah Chughtai, a scholar of Islamic art and architecture in South Asia, who also assisted in the making and distribution of the former's various artworks. It is included in

a volume titled *Abdur Rahman Chughtai: Shakhsiyat aur Fan* (1980), compiled by poet, critic and scholar Vazir Agha (1922–2010). From this biography, it is learnt that Rahman was born in Lahore in 1894 in a family that traces its pedigree back to Mughal architects and masons who were involved in the construction of buildings like the Taj Mahal and Red Fort. Further, after his primary education, during which he often dropped out, his excellence as an artist first showed when he joined the Mayo School of Arts (now the National College of Arts) and passed the exam with flying colours in 1914. Thereafter, he became a drawing master at Gujranwala Mission School and taught there for two years before returning to the Mayo School in Lahore to teach at the lithography department. In the summers of 1916, Chughtai travelled to Calcutta (now Kolkata) on the advice of the school's principal to receive further training in lithography at the Government Press.

In Calcutta, Rahman met various accomplished artists, including Husain Bakhsh, Gaganendra Nath Tagore, Nand Lal Bose, and Rabindra Nath Tagore [sic] of the Bengal School of Art, and returned with a vehement urge to invent and establish his own style.<sup>1</sup> This urge was not sudden. Rather, Rahman possessed it since he was a student at the Mayo School, where he was taught by Surendra Nath Gupta [sic], who belonged to the Bengal School and was one of its representatives in Lahore.<sup>2</sup> Rahman disliked the Bengal School as much as western art. When back in Lahore, he sent a painting to Ramananda Chatterjee (1865–1943) for publication in the popular English monthly called *Modern Review*, of which Chatterjee was the editor. This painting was published in 1917, and it was with this painting that Chughtai's widespread fame initially began, leading to more of his publications in *Modern Review* over the next few years. Later in 1924, his paintings were exhibited at the Empire Exhibition held in Wembley, where he represented the Lahore School, which was identified majorly with his own name and which perished after his death in 1975.

A little before the visit to Calcutta, Rahman had travelled with his brother Abdullah to Delhi and Agra to witness the architectural remains of the Mughal period. This visit compounded Rahman's creative bent, which was already ignited by enduring Islamic art traditions in Lahore. Reimagining the Mughal past with a hopeful nostalgia subsequently became a persistent trope in his art. Hailing the lineage to which he belonged, Rahman developed his style in opposition to western art, which, according to him, depended on re-creating the images of live three-dimensional models in the quest for the face of divine Mary. In contrast, Rahman furthered the tradition of eastern art in two dimensions, which reflects in his miniatures, including the ones in *Muraqqa-e-Chughtai* (1928). Praising Rahman, Abdullah writes that his artistic merits were indeed exceptional, but his staunch opposition to the Bengal School and

Western art may have been prejudiced. Nevertheless, Rahman soon rose to stellar fame, particularly after the publication of *Muraqqa*. Recognising Rahman's achievements, the erstwhile British government conferred on him the prestigious honorific title of 'Khan Bahadur' in 1933.

***Muraqqa-e-Chughtai: Genesis and Impact***



**Plate 1**

In Rahman's own words, he was first a writer, then a photographer, until finally, he became an artist—a turn of fate that he had never imagined.<sup>3</sup> (Chughtai 1969: 727) This fortuitous irony also reflects in the genesis of Rahman's most celebrated work, *Muraqqa-e-Chughtai*. Telling its story, which Abdullah's narrative nearly testifies, Rahman writes that its idea was born when one day at his house he was in the company of his friends, including his younger brother Abdur Rahim and Muhammad Din Taseer (1902–1950), poet and critic, who was also a pioneer of the Progressive Movement and keen admirer of Ghalib. While looking at one of Rahman's paintings (Plate 1), which shows a woman draped in black kneeling piously beside a grave, Rahim remarked to Taseer how closely it depicted that couplet of Ghalib, in which he says:

sham'a bujhti hai to us mein se dhuaa.n uthta hai  
sho'la-e-ishq siyah-posh hua mere baa'd

(as) smoke rises from a candle when it is extinguished  
the fire of love put on a black robe to grieve my death

The chord struck immediately. Taseer proposed at once that Rahman should do a *musavvir* (illustrated) edition of Ghalib's divan. At first, Rahman did not show much interest in this proposal but began to take it seriously at the repeated insistence of Taseer and his other friends. He says that his initial disinterest was due to his limited understanding of poetry, but when discussions on Ghalib continued, its effect gradually deposited in his mind, and he himself began to feel that some of his paintings had descended upon him as autonomous translations of Ghalib's poetry. Thus began the preparations of the project, for which some images were selected from Rahman's existing oeuvre while others were to be made freshly. On other fronts, an authentic volume of Ghalib's poetry was found in consultation with the local experts, while technical requirements like paper and printing machines were fulfilled from far-off locations including Bombay (now Mumbai), London, and Vienna. Once ready, *Muraqqa* was finally published in 1928 in two editions, including a special edition priced at Rs 110 and a mass edition priced at Rs 17.

*Muraqqa* contains 24 paintings and five sketches other than a portrait of Ghalib. Also, in addition to the text of Ghalib's divan, it features at the end an *intikhab* (select verses) of Ghalib, a foreword in English by Muhammad Iqbal, and an introduction, also in English, by James Henry Cousins, an Irish-Indian playwright and critic. All paintings and sketches are captioned with Ghalib's couplets or lines, while each of them also carries an English title. If not for Ghalib's illustrations, the *Muraqqa* was a book first of its kind also because of the supplementary text in English. It was an instant hit, being gladly welcomed by the public sphere and propelling Rahman to come out with another edition in a smaller size under the title *Naqsh-e-Chughtai* (1935). Later, more than 30 years after the publication of *Muraqqa*, Rahman collected his paintings on Iqbal's poetry and published them in a volume titled *Amal-e-Chughtai* (1968), containing, in addition to the illustrations, brief commentaries on them in both English and Urdu, along with English titles, and in the caption, the couplets of Iqbal that inspired them.

Looking from a transnational perspective at the art of modern South Asian Muslim artists, including Rahman, Iftikhar Dadi explores how, despite his nostalgia and self-orientalisation, Rahman initiated an artistic modernity in Muslim South Asia, which inspired successive modernist artists after national independence (2010: 10). Dadi's argument situates Rahman's innovations at the beginning of a 'critical modernizing *practice*' that aimed at decolonisation of Islamic art and eventually produced 'new institutional frameworks of exhibition, patronage, and reception for modern art' (2010: 2–3). One of its major impacts was that it 'reconfigured the traditional emphasis on textuality in South Asian Muslim intellectual life to accommodate a new relationship with the visual arts' (2010: 10). Further, in a recently published article throwing

more light on this conjunction of text and image in South Asia in the 20th century, Dadi looks at how the emergent technology of lithography played a key role in enabling it. He looks at the art books—a term that Dadi uses for 20<sup>th</sup>-century muraqqa of Ghalib to denote their lithographic assemblage—of Rahman and his modernist successor Sadeqain to elaborate how they signified the orientation of art and literature towards each other in the intellectual culture of Urdu. In instilling this new consciousness of picto-textual interrelationships, one must not forget, as Dadi also points out (2023: 236), the contributions of Taseer, who, in collaboration with Rahman, launched the journals *Nairang-e-Khayal* and *Karavan* in 1924 and 1933, respectively, with the purpose of integrating the contemporary visual and textual arts as well as playing a central role in the realisation of Rahman's *Muraqqa* from its ideation to publication.

For a closer understanding of the 'reconfiguration' that Dadi talks about, it is pertinent to look at the historical context in which Rahman's *Muraqqa* acquires its revolutionary significance. In Rahman's biography, Abdullah traces the history of the development of visual arts in Islamic culture and notes the contrasts that it shows with the West (Agha 1980: 249–58). He explains that while western artists proved their mastery by creating realistic images in imitation of the world, Islamic art has throughout remained idealistic because any act of realistic portrayal signifies encroaching on the territory of God. This is the reason why no Muslim painter (in India, Iran, Turan, or China) has ever painted their patron for pleasing them. In contrast, there are found many paintings in the books of geography, surgery, and even poetry that are de facto made for the purpose of easy comprehension of the subject matter. Miniatures in illustrated books carried this principle forward, though gradually, they began to acquire aesthetic significance as well and led to the creation of masterpieces like those by Kamaluddin Bahzad (1450–1535) in Central Asia or the illustrated *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza* commissioned by Mughal Emperor Akbar. In fact, Akbar's views in *Ain-e-Akbari* reflect a change of attitude towards painters in the Islamic world. He says that artists are more near to God than any others because they alone can understand what it means to produce a form and not be able to enliven it (Agha 1980: 251). American art historian Jonathan M. Bloom's exploration of the intersection of Islamic arts with the invention of paper also points to a similar trajectory. He writes that Islamic artists and artisans working with their select materials like clay, bronze, cloth, brick, or plaster did not take up the use of paper until much later as opposed to writers, mathematicians, geographers, and merchants who adopted it rather quickly (Bloom 2001: 177). Use of paper commenced in Islamic art and architecture only from the 13th century onwards. Likewise, printing was adopted only as late as by the end of the 18th and 19th centuries, while in the western world, paper printing had spread far and wide nearly 300 years before

that. Discussing the art of illustration, Bloom informs further that although there exist several hundred Islamic manuscripts from before the 13th century, there are only about three dozen of them that are illustrated, and only three of them were produced before the 12th century. Furthermore, figural illustrations are even rarer, and as Abdullah also notes, compared to the Christian world, where illustrations began with religious representations, Islamic book illustration was thoroughly a secular evolution (Agha 1980: 249; Bloom 2001: 178). Despite the late acceptance of visual arts in the Islamic world, it would not be right to assume that the sense of visual aesthetics was entirely restricted since the beginning. Rather, the letrist art of calligraphy has always occupied a high position in Islamic culture. The fact that calligraphy tends to blur the boundary between text and image points at its deeper connotations.

### **Picto-textual Correspondence: The Medium of Language**

It is not mere boasting when writing his groundbreaking treatise of modern Urdu poetry; Altaf Husain Hali claims that no community has produced more poets than Muslims (2013: 32). Rather, beneath its surface, it is a pronouncement of the belief that ‘words’ are the only true means of getting closer to God. In this context, it is worth noting that the Quran has never been illustrated because that would imply altering the message of God (Bloom 2001: 178). It is in accordance with the same belief that Hali dismisses painters as only secondary to poets in his treatise (2013: 50). Given the history of Islamic art as noted above, it can be said that until the mediaeval period, artists remained the subaltern species of the creative world. Though this perception changed in the mediaeval period, the notion of the superiority of ‘word’ over ‘picture’ resurfaced in the late colonial period, in the backdrop of which Rahman was born. On the other hand, though the history of the competition between visual and textual arts is much older in the west, it is by no means uniform. In its earliest manifestations, the debate goes back to Plutarch (c. 46 CE–120 CE), who stated much succinctly that poetry is a speaking picture and picture is silent poetry. Nonetheless, around 500 years later, Horace’s dictum of *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry) in his poem *Ars Poetica* again seems to settle this debate by establishing an equivalence between words and pictures, but not certainly for good. Once again, 18<sup>th</sup>-century German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing powerfully raked the issue in his essay *Laocoon: On the Limits of Poetry and Painting* and forwarded his thesis of ‘medium specificity’, positing that what can be said in poetry cannot be shown in pictures and vice versa. It can thus be observed that across east and west, the comparison between ‘word’ and ‘image’ vis-à-vis their relation to truth is common and based on the question: how is a message related to its medium?

Suggesting an engagement with this question, Rahman expresses his view that there is a difference in the languages of a couplet and a picture, no matter how close they come in meaning creation. Yet, as he advanced in his understanding of Ghalib, he also came closer to understanding the relationship between these languages. He picks one image in particular (Plate 2), which he says he owes entirely to the couplet on which it is based, as opposed to others of which he is not so certain.



**Plate 2**

go haath ko jumbish nahin aankhon mein to dum hai  
rahne do abhi saaghar-o-miinaa mere aage

Although the hand cannot move, the eyes can still see  
Let the (wine-)glass and (wine-)decanter remain in front of me

Explaining why he likes this image the most, Rahman only says that at the time he made it, he had no mastery in skeletal structure, technique or colour. But the viewer can easily make out the semantic relation between the painting and the couplet. As is often the case with the classical ghazal poetry of the Delhi School to which Ghalib belonged, this couplet too evokes several layers of meanings. A more straightforward meaning is that the poet is now so old

and near death that he cannot move his hands to pick up the glass of wine to drink, yet his craving for it is as strong as ever. He therefore asks to let the glass and wine remain in front of him so that he can die in peace while looking at them. However, a deeper meaning suggests that it is not due to his dying condition that he can't move his hand but rather his drunkenness. In other words, he is too drunk to make organised movements. Yet his eyes are still in his control and therefore can serve as a means to cater to his relentless thirst. The image that Rahman has made seems to capture the second meaning, particularly when one observes the eyes of the male figure. His posture and his folded hands also suggest that he is dead drunk rather than dying. It is, however, of note that the metaphors of wine (love) and the female figure (*saqi*, or the beloved, not directly mentioned in the couplet) who hides her face from the poet and whose one hand reaches out to remove the flagon while the other plays with her tresses that have sent the glass a-flying may not be clear to a viewer who is not steeped in the ghazal tradition. It is therefore worth asking to what extent the couplet and the corresponding image rely on each other for their comprehension. In *Abdur Rahman Chughtai: Shakhshiyat aur Fan*, Vazir Agha and Saleem Akhtar, noted critic, historian, and fiction writer, evidently engage with this question.

Agha traces similarities between Ghalib and Rahman in terms of their ethnicities and temperaments, which he says bring them together despite their temporal and spatial distance. He describes their complementarity using the metaphor of the meeting of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, which meet at one point (*sangam*) and produce the mythologised Saraswati (Agha 1980: 210). According to him, when Ghalib's abstraction meets Rahman's, they both add to each other's meanings. He explains it by focusing on another image (Fig. 3) in which Rahman portrays Ghalib's metaphor of *rakhsh-e-umr* (the horse of life), which recklessly moves ahead without precaution or control in the form of an earthen lamp that is placed on top of a flower floating on water and from which smoke rises in an irregular trail to leave the bounds of the painting. Accordingly, he sees Rahman's art as similar to a poet's creation of metaphors (Agha 1980: 4).

Engaging with this question in more detail and providing deeper insights, Akhtar analyses in his essay in the same volume whether the images truly represent the couplets or not. While doing so, he too, not unlike Agha, points out the ethnic similarity between the painter and the poet as well as a semiotic correlation in their creative idealism. Talking about the present image, he says that it surpasses in eloquence the couplet that it represents. He explains that in the couplet,



Plate 3

rau mein hai rakhsh-e-umr kahan dekhiye thame  
ne haath baag pe hain na paa hai rikaab mein

the horse of life is in motion, let's see where where it stops  
neither is its rein in the hand, nor is the foot in its stirrup

*Rakhsh* is not an ordinary horse, but rather the horse of Rustom, which is a distant metaphor for life. Moreover, the meaning of the couplet is conveyed comprehensively by the first line itself. The second line adds nothing to its meaning but rather explains it as if conversing with a school-going kid (Agha 1980: 195). In contrast, while discussing the other image (Fig. 2), he says that it falls flat in front of the couplet and reduces its poetic imagery to mere symbols of saqi and *mai-khvaar* (drinker/poet).

Before proceeding to these analyses, Akhtar makes some pertinent remarks as regards the creative faculties of poets and painters, which help in understanding how the raw materials that they deal with are similar or different and how they are processed in their minds. He says that literature and painting or other fine arts use varying means for their expression, but in the form of imagination, they all have a common foundation. In the case of a poet, between the occurrence of a thought in the mind and its conversion into a couplet, there is a moment of '*irfan*' (wisdom) that strikes like lightning in a dark night and illuminates the surroundings, thereby allowing the thought to appear

in the form of a word. Similarly, when a painter picks up a brush, there occurs in his mind an array of colours along with the sketch of an image. A writer or a painter therefore produces not just those material realities that we identify as tangible works of art. Rather, their true creativity lies in the ‘*tasavvuraat*’ (pictures) and ‘*takhayyulaat*’ (thoughts) in their minds on which wisdom performs its conjuring act.

It will be observed that in Akhtar’s remarks, ‘*tasavvur*’ and ‘*takhayyul*’ take on their medium-specific meanings—visual and textual, respectively—whereas in common parlance and to a considerable extent in critical literature too, they are often used synonymously to signify ‘imagination’. At the same time, ‘wisdom’ in Akhtar’s view transcends medium specificity, which he nevertheless describes in terms of the visual metaphor of ‘lightning’. On the other hand, Agha describes the intersection of Rahman’s pictures and Ghalib’s words, not in terms of sensory but in terms of the kinetic metaphor of two rivers, which combine to produce another metaphor of metaphysical or mythological kinesis. Putting these observations in the context of inter-art discourse in different cultures, it appears that the need for metaphors to describe intersemiotic relationships is a common trope irrespective of the relative statuses of the compared arts. At times they are described in terms of one another, while on other occasions an entirely different plane of conceptualisation is evoked that avoids speaking in sensorial terms. If, on one hand, it indicates the complexity of the medial aspects of information, it prompts, on the other, a metalinguistic inquiry into the concepts that direct the very processes of cognition. This two-pronged ambiguity of the dynamics of transferring ‘meaning’ across media reflects in the difference between Roman Jakobson’s and Jacques Derrida’s views on language in translation, as discussed below.

In his foundational essay titled ‘On Linguistic Aspects of Translation’ (1959), which demonstrates the centrality of translation at all levels of communication, including cognition, Jakobson distinguishes between three different ways of interpreting a verbal sign. Namely, ‘intranlingual or rewording’, wherein a verbal sign in one language is interpreted by means of other verbal signs in the same language; ‘interlingual or translation proper’, in which a verbal sign in one language is interpreted by using a verbal sign in another language; and lastly, ‘intersemiotic or transmutation’, which refers to the interpretation of a verbal sign by the use of non-verbal signs (2012: 127). According to this classification, Rahman’s miniatures in *Muraqqa* should fall in the third category. However, Derrida’s view adds a twist to such effortless categorization. According to Derrida, the differentiation between the three ‘kinds’ of translation is impossible because ‘the unity and identity of a language, the decidable form of its limits’, cannot be determined in the final analysis

(qtd. in Dharwadker 2002: 128). Therefore, just as one cannot draw a boundary between, say, English and Urdu, so is a boundary impossible between a verbal and a visual language. Vinay Dharwadker resolves the contestation between the views of Jakobson and Derrida and critiques the latter while elaborating the theory and practice of translation of renowned Indian poet and scholar A. K. Ramanujan. Dharwadker argues that Ramanujan recognized that the 'interiors' and 'exteriors' of a language

are separated by porous elastic membranes and not by rigid walls; and that, despite such a permeability of boundaries, each language heuristically retains its 'identity' in relation to other languages, a unique 'inner form' that resists intrusions, outsiders and colonial conquests...Ramanujan accepted the hybridity of languages and cultures as a starting point... (129)

### Conclusion

Though Dharwadker's argument is made with reference to the boundaries between verbal languages, it can be extended to include the boundary between a verbal and a non-verbal language. It will help to show that despite their hybridisation being the starting point, each of them resists intrusion by the other to maintain its semiotic uniqueness and thereby enable the proliferation of the markers of cultural identity to which language as a broader system of multimodal signification caters. Umberto Eco's theory of semiotics (1976) is particularly useful to substantiate this point. In it, he synthesises the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce to go beyond language and analyse cultural phenomena as a system of multimodal signs. By conceiving meaning as a 'cultural unit', he argues that cultural communication works by constantly translating.

signs into other signs, and definitions into other definitions, words into icons, icons into ostensive signs, ostensive signs into new definitions, new definitions into propositional functions, propositional functions into exemplifying sentences, and so on... (71)

Keeping this in mind, Rahman's 'transmutation' of Ghalib's poetry and Taseer's proactive involvement in it to lay the groundwork for a theory of visual aesthetics in Urdu (Dadi 2023: 236) acquires broader significance. At a time when, after the fall of the Mughal Empire, the South Asian Muslim community was fiercely under attack on various fronts of culture and politics, the emergent leadership sought ways to grapple with the transition in the erstwhile sociopolitical order by establishing a new institutional framework across the fields of education, literature, society, and politics. It appears in the forms of Muslim University, Aligarh, Hali's call for modern 'natural' poetry in place of fantasy literature, the founding of the Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu, the formation of the Muslim League as a self-assumed political leadership of Indian Muslims,

and Progressive Writing, which from the 1930s onwards grew into a massive social movement across Indian religions and languages. When seen in the context of these developments, *Muraqqa* appears as a tactical attempt to assert and safeguard an identity that feared extinction in an atmosphere of increasing national homogenisation and rising communal tension.

\* All three visuals have been reproduced from the copy of *Muraqqa-e-Chughtai* (1928), available at <https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/muraqqa-e-chughtai-deewan-e-ghalib-musawwar-mirza-ghalib-ebooks>. It carries no details of publication year or copyright statement.

### End Notes

1. Abanindra Nath Tagore. The source incorrectly mentions Rabindranath Tagore as the founder of the Bengal School.
2. Surendra Nath Kar. Surendranath Dasgupta was instead a scholar of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy.
3. Rahman published various collections of short stories, but they remained rather unknown. Abdullah says that Rahman's writing lacked merit. He wished that Rahman would rather not write and focus only on art. Some of the collections include *Lagaan* (1942), *Kaajal*, *Pucca Road*, etc.

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# Translating Folk Tales – Go Local in a Localised World

Nabanita Sengupta

## Abstract

In one of the major projects, Sahitya Akademi has included 130 oral tales from 53 Indian languages in a book to be shortly published under the title *Indian Folk Narratives: Oral Tales from 53 Languages*. The importance of the project lies in bringing together more than double the number of languages recognised by Sahitya Akademi itself. The anthology in question has been translated from a Bengali compilation, *Bharatjoda Kathan Katha*, edited by Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay. The source text itself is a translation of the oral narratives collected from various parts of India in different languages. This makes the English anthology a work of double translation.

Folk narratives are important for their anthropological, cultural, ethnographic, linguistic, and social values. In a country as geopolitically diverse as India, such an anthology assumes a greater importance of representing the pluralistic tradition of the country. One of the positive impacts of globalisation has been a reverse interest in the ethnic and indigenous traditions, as an attempt to understand and negotiate with the present. Folk tales, or oral narratives, have also gained significance under the current wave of 'going local', primarily for their holistic and ecocritical approaches towards life. The role of translation in the circulation, dissemination and preservation of these narratives has already been well documented. This paper attempts to look at the necessity of such a project, in two different languages, in a multilingual community like India. It also attempts to problematise the concept of 'translation' from oral to written, across different linguistic mediums, by exploring the concept of 'go local' within the narrative structure of translation and representation.

**Keywords:** Translation, folk tales, orality, oral literature, Indian literature

Folk narratives are significant in today's world from several perspectives, such as anthropological, cultural, ethnographic, linguistic, and social values. In a country as geopolitically diverse as India, an anthology of folk tales

assumes a greater importance in representing the pluralistic tradition of the country. One of the positive fallouts of globalisation has been a reverse interest in the ethnic and indigenous traditions, as an attempt to understand the past and negotiate with the present. Though it started as an economic activity, globalisation made it possible for people to be aware of the diversity of cultures and languages. Awareness led to an interest in and the possibility of preserving the minor languages and marginalised cultures. In other words, globalisation presented an ecology in which, in spite of the threat of majoritarianism or homogenisation, newer possibilities of preserving diversities also developed.

One of the major reasons that folk tales or oral narratives have gained significance in the contemporary world is for their holistic and ecocritical approaches to life. A search for alternative discourses that could be a response to the anthropocenic worldview of the corporate-driven, technology-centric society found a possible answer in the organic perspectives of the folk narratives. Postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, gender studies, and even ecocriticism have highlighted the importance of these alternative narratives as one of the ways to preserve multiculturalism and ethnocentrism and to fight against cultural and other forms of imperialism. The role of translation in the circulation, dissemination and preservation of these narratives has already been well documented. This paper attempts to problematise the concept of ‘translation’ from oral to written and from one language to another by looking at a particular anthology of folk tales. It also tries to look at the necessity of such a project of recording folk narratives in two different languages in a multilingual community like India.

The text under discussion here is an anthology of folk tales collected from all across India, titled *Bharat Joda Kathan Katha*—loosely translated as oral tales from all over India—and its English translation, *Indian Oral Narratives*. The Bangla anthology, edited by Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay, is an epic collection of 128 tales from 52 languages. The number of languages included in this book is more than double the number of languages recognised by the Indian constitution or even included under Sahitya Akademi. The tales included here are mostly oral tales, collected from sources by various individuals with access to the original language and anthologised in this book in Bangla. This entire book, along with a few additional tales from Hindi, has been translated into English as *Indian Folk Narratives*, edited by Sanjukta Dasgupta, and brought out by Sahitya Akademi. Before delving into the above-mentioned issues, it is necessary to look at the location of folk tales within the Indian socio-cultural framework.

### **Significance of folk tales in India**

Folk tales are important as alternative discourses. While the mainstream posits certain norms that have validation of a central power structure, folk tales celebrate divergence, marginality, and subversion. Though from a

structuralist perspective they can be considered to have certain tropes or patterns, a unifying thread runs across most of these patterns—in most of these narratives, a character, whether human or non-human, from the margins subverts the power structure or goes against the conventions. From that perspective then, the folk tales have a subversive nature. They are alternative discourses in which the powerless, by magic or divine interventions or by their virtues like simplicity, honesty, industriousness, etc., can subvert the established conventions. There is an element of inclusivity in the contents of these narratives too—for example, women can marry their chosen one by going against family or society, or even prostitutes and fallen women can aspire to be reinstated within the society—something almost unthinkable in a more rigid social structure of the normative society. Another significant aspect of folk tales is the acceptance of humans as a part of a larger ecosystem, as opposed to the anthropocentric worldview.

India is a rich land of folk tales and mythological stories. The culture of orality is very well-developed here. Though identified under the umbrella term of ‘folk tales’, such oral narratives are diverse in terms of both their form and content. In popular conception, the term folk tale evokes the idea of a simple, linear narrative. But it will be naïve to consider that all folktales have such simplistic frameworks. Mukhopadhyay points out in the preface to *Bharat Joda Kathan Katha* that several tales included in this anthology have an elaborate and complex structure. There is also no uniformity in terms of the length of the narratives or the number of characters. All these make folk tales quite a heterogeneous category in which we try to fit in stories that have their primary origin and presence in orality.

There is an element of fluidity within the folk narratives that allows these tales to travel across the coordinates of time and space. From ancient times, more than 2000 years back, Indian stories have migrated in translation across languages and continents as examples of tales from the *Jatakas*, *Kathasaritsagar*, or *Hitopadesh* show. This predates colonialism by centuries and points to an active exchange of oral literature and culture much before the Europeans, particularly the British, made translations from Indian languages an imperial project (Mund 2019: 121). While travellers have assimilated, adapted, and translated stories that they have been fascinated with, there has been an involuntary movement of narratives across races and countries. With the movement of storytellers, these stories have gained a characteristic feature of the ‘travelling metaphor’, which in turn has also acquired a shape-shifting character, intertextuality, due to the overlapping of stories in various frames (Mund). As a result, there are slight changes in the stories with their retellings not only in other countries and cultures but even within India. Hence, with various levels of retelling and interpolations, we often find similar stories

existing in various forms across languages. It is a well-known fact that there are similar stories assigned to the names of Birbal in the North, Gopal Bhand in the East, and Tenaliraman in the South. Given below is another case in point to illustrate the existence of similar stories in multiple cultures or languages.

A very popular folk tale in Bangla is '*Jola o saat bhut*', collated by Upendra Kishore Raychoudhury, in which Jola is a young boy who has a chance interaction with the ghosts that changes his life forever. A similar story is found in a Magahi tale, anthologised in *Indian Folk Narratives* (376). The name of the protagonist here is Kunreram. In both the stories, the protagonist, going through the forest to reach the city, takes out his lunch and sings to himself that he will eat them all. The ghosts living in that tree misunderstand and offer him gifts that are stolen by his greedy friend. It is the ghosts again that come to his rescue and help him retrieve his magical gift.

There is another kind of cultural intermixing that is found in folk tales. In a Khasi folk tale, 'The Birth of Paan Supari and Tobacco' (296), again anthologised in the same book, the readers are told about the origin of the tradition of hospitality by offering *paan and supari* in Khasi households. *Paan-supari*, not being a part of the Khasi custom, the concept was taken from the Assamese tradition of hospitality. This narrative shows how through folk tales, ethnographic changes and cultural adaptations can also be traced back through these.

The 2011 census data points to the immense linguistic variety that exists within our country. In such a linguistically varied geopolitical space as India, with different mother language groups living in close proximity with each other, the levels of interpolations and metamorphoses of the tales occur at multiple levels. Also, the migration of communities for economic, political, natural, or any other reason for centuries has led to an intermingling of cultures. In that sense then, while documenting oral tales from different languages, we are already looking at cultures or narratives that have adapted certain parts from multiple cultures. The success of these folk narratives lies in their assimilation of different cultures. The travelling metaphors and stories are accepted and accommodated to be a part of one's own culture. It is through this fluidity and intermingling that the oral cultures have maintained their existence and continue to do so. But it is this fluidity that also leads to overlapping narratives, like the example of *Jola o saat bhoot* and Kunreram discussed above. There are numerous examples of several such stories that demonstrate how there are intertextual elements of folk tales with reflections of one language and culture being manifested in the other. A tracing of the routes of language families and the journey of these stories will enrich the ethnographic study of intercultural influences. Multiple versions of the same tale, existing in the same language, also lead to a different set of complications.

Since *Indian Oral Narratives* include only one representative version of each story, this paper will not discuss the problematics of such same-language variants and instead focus on the issues of translation from oral to written and across different languages.

### **Why translate oral literature?**

To quote Turin, Wheeler and Wilkinson in *Oral Literature in Digital Age*,

for societies in which traditions are conveyed more through speech than through writing, oral literature has long been the mode of communication for spreading ideas, knowledge and history... In most cases, such traditions are not translated when a community shifts to using a more dominant language. Oral literatures are in decline as a result of a cultural focus on literacy, combined with the disappearance of minority languages. The Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, released by UNESCO in early 2009, claims that around a third of the 6,500 languages spoken around the globe today are in danger of disappearing forever. (Turin *et al.* 2013: 1)

This fairly sums up the condition in the Indian context too, though there are certain key areas of difference that will be discussed in the latter part of this section. As per the Language Atlas based on the 2011 census, after a rigorous process of authentication and elimination, there were 1369 rationalised mother tongues and 1474 mother tongue names that remained 'unclassified or relegated to the 'Others' in the mother language category (Census 2022: vii). All the languages recorded as mother tongues do not enjoy the same status as well. There are differences in terms of their speaking population as well as the presence of script. While in some languages, like the ones included in the constitution, scripts are fairly developed, there are also languages like Andamanese, Bongcher, and others that do not have any script of their own or follow the script of any other major language like Devanagari (from Hindi) or Roman (from English). So it is undeniable that in the Indian societies, alongside languages with fairly developed systems of writing, there is the simultaneous existence of languages/dialects that are primarily oral in nature. While a move towards greater literacy is one of the ways of ensuring 'development' in a post-globalisation and digital era, it also prioritises written languages over spoken ones, thereby further marginalising the oral cultures. The minor languages that have sustained themselves primarily on orality are also facing threats due to the writing-dependent modernisation of contemporary societies. "Globalisation and rapid socio-economic change exert particularly complex pressures on smaller communities of speakers, often eroding expressive diversity and transforming culture through assimilation to more dominant ways of life" (Turin *et al.* 2013: 1).

Though Indian scholarship, till recently, has been dominated by the Western school of thought, there are certain key points of difference too when it

comes to the context of folk tales and oral traditions. As G.N. Devy highlights, “an Indian student of literature finds himself precariously hanging between a literary metaphysics that rules out the very possibility of translation and a literary ethos where the translation is becoming increasingly important.” This, as he explains, is a result of training in Western theories, which, till a particular period of time, focused on the untranslatability of the text (Devy 2015: 11). The West looks at oral forms as a pre-civilisation mode of representation; hence, there is an infantilisation in the treatment of oral literature. Post-industrial European society has made a single-directional movement toward the ‘written’ culture. Even in their imperial missions, they have failed to understand the orality from the Indian perspective. Chandrasekhar Kamber notes that ‘the oral tradition in India does not belong to the pre-literate age, representing a primary condition of civilisation, both traditions co-exist in a given period in Indian history.’ So in the Indian context, there is a simultaneity of the existence of oral and written literature. He further adds, ‘literacy in India is not the only way to cultural or spiritual experiences’. This is where the Indian situation slightly differs from what Turin, Wheeler and Wilkinson discuss, as quoted above. In a culture where storytelling has been traditionally accepted and still continues as a means of passing on the traditional knowledge and cultural values, the importance of orality cannot be stressed more. Though on a decline, the art of storytelling had managed to retain its hold, however tenacious, in spite of a burst of other alternative media such as books, audio-visual, and now, the internet. It is in keeping with this tradition of storytelling that the said book of *Indian Oral Narratives* is dedicated to Indian grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. In nuanced addressing of relationships that are available in Indian languages, unlike in English, the Bengali dedication of *Bharat Joda Kathan Katha* categorically mentions—*thakuma, didima* (paternal and maternal grandmothers), *mayer ghorer mashi* (mother’s sister) *o baper ghorer pishi* (feather’s sisters)—those women who were the primary storytellers in any traditional household. Storytelling has remained one of the most effective and popular ways of transferring knowledge across generations. Though with the smaller size of families and decrease in joint families, this tradition is now on the decline. Even then, orality has remained a part of our culture very much within the framework of living memory. This points to the fact that there has never been any clash between the co-existence of oral and written literature in the Indian context.

So, compared to the European situation, the location of orality in our culture is more layered and requires a different perspective of understanding. While there are certain languages under the threat of extinction because of their essentially oral nature, there are other well-thriving languages that face the problem of losing a rich corpus of indigenous knowledge, stories, etc.

that had been traditionally passed on through verbal communication. From such a point of view, then archiving these oral forms of literature becomes a way to preserve and continue the minority languages. Translation in major languages also ensures recognition for those languages otherwise at the brink of oblivion. In a reverse process, such an act may also generate interest and pride in one's indigenous language and culture. *Bharat Joda Kathan Katha* and its English counterpart, *Indian Oral Narratives*, play an important role in that direction.

### **Problematics of Translating Folk Tales**

Translation of orality, though an important concept, has its politics and problems. In this section, I would like to approach the act of translation from the perspective of intersectionality and intermediality. Intersectionality, which as Flowtow discusses, deals with the differences in terms of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or age that 'intersect' with the experiences of 'gender'. In its original sociological context, it would refer to the diverse and changeable aspect of the 'local'. It is the only weapon against what Spivak terms 'convenient translation'. In the context of Indian folktales, this intersectionality can be extended to understand differences between humans and non-humans (*rakshasas*, natural objects, animals, or any 'other'), the forces of good and evil, and magic and non-magic too, as they often simultaneously intersect the human experiences of not just gender or sexuality, but also the very act of existence within the narrative space. Such representations in folk tales are often counter-stereotypical, subverting the conventions that form a part of the mainstream ideology. Since these narratives are deeply rooted in the local customs and nature in their microcosm, the translator has the important task of preserving the 'local' while translating the tales for a larger community of readers who may or may not be a part of the microcosm of the source language.

Any translation of these folk tales has to keep in mind these intersectionalities. One example of such a translation would be the *Jom Pukur Vrat*, which records one particular ritual of Bengal in which the woman prays to Yama, the King/God of the dead, to stay away from her family and to keep the souls of those deceased in peace. The well-being of the family is intersected by several non-human elements, which also point to the understanding of life as an organic whole, as a part of a greater natural order. This being a narrative deeply set in the rites and rituals of Bengal, the fauna and creatures referred to are also extremely regional. There are a number of plants and customs that cannot be easily translated into English, yet they are important to show how the traditional mode of existence was inclusivist in nature, bringing together the local ecosystem. The Bengali version, included in *Bharat Joda Kathan*

*Katha*, is the ritual as recorded by the eminent Bengali author and folklorist Dakhina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar. Majumdar's text, which is a translation from oral to written, already includes several footnotes for contemporary readers. The English translation, a step further away from the original text, requires more footnotes and a glossary to do justice to the text. Though the metatext increases, it also helps in preserving the 'local'.

Intermediality, on the other hand, refers to the multiplicity of media. The translations of these folktales are an exploration of the intermedial nature of translation as the final product; that is, the translated story becomes a collaborative effort of the storyteller, the collector, and finally the Bengali translator—a movement from a performance to a documented existence. The oral nature of these folktales presupposes a performative aspect that is more fluid in nature, while the recording of the same in written form gives it a fixed structure. This movement, from oral to written, is acknowledged in the Bengali text as we find a mention of the names of both the Bengali translator as well as the collector of the original tale there, though at times both are the same person. Like Plato's theory of forms, here the Bengali translation becomes twice removed from the original. By recognising the collector and the translator in the Bengali anthology, the text already accepts the multiple layers of translation. In recording the oral tales, there is already one level of translation that is both intersectional and intermedial. By translating all these tales from all across India into Bangla, there is a further level of translation. But what is significant is that, in spite of the tales being retold in Bangla, there is an effort towards cultural preservation that distinguishes the tales of one region from the next. After the Sahitya Akademi project of translating the Bengali anthology into English, we are looking at another level of translation. With the cultural turn in translation that became dominant after the 1990s with the works of Susan Bassnett and Lefevre, liminality in translation became important. It is in these liminal spaces of translation, at each level, that we can locate the cultural specificity of the source text in the target. This liminal space is generated by the metatextual content, like footnotes and glossaries, that act as the go-between for the target language readers and source culture.

With three different levels of translations, it becomes a challenge to remain true to the original because, at each level, there are chances of negotiations and compromises that the target language or medium has to make. But translation is the only solution to both the preservation as well as the circulation of these tales. It is also a strategy to help a minor language find recognition in the language map of the world. Since language is identity and there is a constant negotiation and interaction between languages that Michael Cronin points at, as a dialogue between the local and the global or the marginal and the dominant, the politics of translation gains a further significance in this globalised world

(Cronin 2006: 11). Translations become a form of activism—a means to survive. While the translation of a marginal language into a dominant language or from oral to written can be hegemonic, it can also be a means of survival, a gateway to ensure one's presence in the world. Acknowledgements therefore definitely play an important part in this entire politics. By acknowledging all the key players in this game of translation, for example, in this case, both the collector of a particular tale and its translator, the levels of translation and interventions are highlighted, not erased. Also, by acknowledging the source languages of the stories, the tales are given an identity that pre-exists their presence in any anthology and thus prioritise the local even in this globalised context. It becomes an act that neutralises the threat posed by a corporatised homogenisation of language and culture. These levels of interventions are not visible in the English version, which becomes a translation of the Bengali text. But an interesting appendix is included in both the English and the Bengali texts—an introduction to the languages of the tales included in the anthology containing information like their family and origin, demographic information, and script used, among others. This paratextual reference is important because it adds to the visibility of the source language.

There is a rich framework of paratextual elements included in the book that helps in locating the folktales within the continuum of orality as well as their transference from orality to the written world. Apart from the 'Linguistic Introduction', there are two introductory essays in the English volume. The first is the Introduction by editor Sanjukta Dasgupta, and the second is the translation of the introduction to the Bengali text by Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay, titled in English as 'Tales and Fables from Across the World'. These two essays discuss in great detail the location of these tales within the tradition of orality, their significance, and the need to bring out such anthologies.

In a country where states are divided linguistically, and even within one state, there are several languages spoken, translation has no alternative. There is also a rich heritage of oral literature in Indian tradition. But that is now being jeopardised with the dominance of the written world. Many linguistic communities, such as Andamanese and Bongcher, have less than 1000 people. While it is important to find ways to preserve these languages, recording these tales in the form of written narratives is also important. Though the act of writing robs the oral text of its dynamic character, it also ensures that such tales are not lost forever. Translating these texts comes with its own set of problems that require certain strategies and negotiations. There may be possibilities of some losses in the process of translating, but it is important to translate such texts. In the words of A.K. Ramanujan, folklore is the 'literature of the dialects...This is the wide base of the Indian pyramid, on which all other Indian literatures rest' (Ramanujan 1990: 4) This statement points to the

immense value that Indian folk narratives have. A globalised world has its own complexities. While on the one hand, it is moving toward a monochromatic world devoid of its plurality, it also offers other alternative solutions to maintaining this plurality. In such a context then, *Indian Folk Narratives* is bound to make some meaningful interventions and help in preserving the pluralities of India.

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# Translating the Untranslatable: Comics as Translation

Namra Sultan

## Abstract

The urge to translate is reflective of the desire to forge a shared humanity. Translation studies has moved past the idea of translation being limited to a literary exercise in holistically transferring the codes of one language into another. In light of the expanding horizon of our understanding of “translation”, I propose to study graphic narratives as an exercise in translation and to establish comics as a form of representation that translates thoughts, ideas, signs, and kinaesthetics into a visual lexicon which creates a shared humanity that transcends linguistic codes. I will read two graphic narratives—*Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* and *Maus*—alongside each other to explore the inter-cultural communication that transpires between these two texts which are otherwise historically and socially removed from each other. The translation of lived reality into a visual lexicon that both texts undertake can be read as a shared cultural act, created through an inter-cultural transaction.

The objective of translation should be to subvert the hegemony of dominant voices and languages. In *Munnu* as well as in *Maus*, this happens through the narrative and also through the visual form of the texts. *Munnu* narrativises the troubled socio-political history of Kashmir through bildungsroman. The visual tools it uses to recreate the narrative of a troubled land and its people resonate strikingly with Art Spiegelman’s globally acclaimed work unravelling the Holocaust through personal history. The intertextual conversations highlight the shared humanity that inhabits both narratives. One must ask then: How can visual representation qualify as translation? Does it encourage the forging of shared humanity? What is the role of this translation act in creating collectivity? How does *Munnu* create and represent the South Asian experience? Does it satisfy the original urge of translation—to forge shared humanity in a world of differences?

**Keywords:** Holocaust, translation studies, *Maus*, *Munnu*, collectivity, comicsverse.

### Introduction

The urge to translate, I offer, comes from a desire to create shared humanity. Translation has traditionally been a pathway to connect different linguistic cultures by means of their literary output. However, we have now moved past the idea of translation as merely a literary exercise in holistically transferring the codes of one language into another. I propose to study in this paper graphic narratives as an exercise in translating the human experience and to establish comics as a form of representation that translates ‘untranslatable’ human experiences of trauma by employing a visual-verbal mode to represent these experiences—transferring thoughts, ideas, and kinaesthetics into a visual lexicon.

I will study the graphic narratives *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* by Malik Sajad. *Maus* was published in two volumes in 1986 and 1991 and has received worldwide critical acclaim since. It has been the recipient of many literary awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for its unique representation of the memory of the Holocaust as the writer Art Spiegelman delves into the subject through interviews with his father Vladek—a Holocaust survivor. *Munnu*—removed from *Maus* in both its geography and history—is a coming-of-age memoir, a first-person account of the writer’s own experience of growing up in a conflict-ridden Kashmir. Published in 2015, *Munnu* traverses the life of the writer from the 1990s against the troubled socio-political backdrop of Kashmir. Both *Maus* and *Munnu*, however, resonate with each other on multiple accounts—being renditions of traumatic human experiences in the comics format, they serve as alternative explorations of the history and politics of their respective time and place and of the intersection of the political with the personal. The parallels in *Maus* and *Munnu*—at the level of theme and genre, as well as in their visual lexicon—point to the channels of communication that the comics medium creates between comics. These channels, which utilise the visual-verbal medium of communication, transcend linguistic as well as national borders.

I claim, thus, that comics are a medium of representation that actively create shared humanity and engage in world-building. The urge of comics to represent the local for the global results in creating a collectivity that is not bound by geography and even, to a large extent, by language.

### On Translation

Translation has been used as a tool—especially in the postcolonial world—for interaction among nations. Translations have helped pave the way for conversations that enable an understanding of social, cultural, and political ‘Others’; that enable an interchange of colonial pasts; and provide an opportunity to emerge out of this past collectively; that make possible

postcolonial futures where nations find strength in their own unique nationality as well as in the shared ideology of nationhood among newly independent states.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has dawned upon us with newer ways of interaction among people as well as among nations as advancements in communication technology have done away with the barrier of physical distance. Along with this, the propagation of the visual mode of communication in which the image has become a central tool of communication has reshaped the way we think and communicate. It is in this socio-cultural background that comics have emerged as a medium that utilise the power of the visual mode to communicate and ‘carry across a sense of equivalent time, history, place, nationality, culture, gender, religion, sexuality, caste, class’<sup>1</sup> into a global web of interconnectedness.

### **On Comics**

From the Golden Age of comics in the early 20th century, which gave the world its comic book superheroes—Superman, Captain America (Chute 2017: 11)—the form developed as a medium to narrate and question socio-political realities and subvert the dominant narratives of the world. Will Eisner is credited with optimising the form to an unprecedented potential of representation. His comics, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, published in 1978, brought realism to comics as they narrated the intricacies of the human experience by dealing with subjects of faith and corruption, love and romance and fidelity and betrayal through stories of Jewish men and women against the political backdrop of the history of the expulsion of Jews from Russia and their migration to and settlement in New York.

The comics medium has since been used extensively to translate human life—its thoughts, ideas, aspirations, and fears—by means of a visual lexicon. This visual lexicon is not simply a visual translation/rendition of the objective world but utilises iconography, metaphor, and other tools of representation to create a rich visual sign system. The formal elements of comics that are unique to the medium—the visual-verbal vocabulary, space-time juxtaposition, styles of panelling, and gutters (McCloud 1994), as well as the demand for interactive reading and simultaneous meaning-making that happens with the active cooperation between the text and the reader (instead of the more passive consumption in other forms of media)—have all contributed in making comics a medium that is claimed to be capable of ‘translating the untranslatable’—the horrors of human experience.

### **The Language of Trauma in Maus**

‘Most dramatic films have a hard time with the Holocaust as a subject because of the medium’s tendency toward verisimilitude and reproduction of reality through moving photographic images. Holocaust movies usually look

like they're populated by fairly well-fed inmates, for example. Movie makers can get involved in some kind of crazy trying-to-rebuild the camps, as opposed to creating it as a mental zone, which *Maus* does.' (Spiegelman 2011:166). The trauma that is a result of such crises of experience leads to a breakdown of communication such that a normal retelling of the event by victims becomes nearly impossible.

Comics let go of verbal language as the primary mode of telling and offer instead a space for visual-verbal expression. They create a medium that can narrativise and record experiences for which verbal language has failed, and *Maus* and the many other graphic narratives that followed suit to *Maus* in using comics to translate the most challenging human experiences are testaments to this.



Figure 1: *Maus*, 147 (SPIEGELMAN, 147)

This is a series of panels that depicts an episode from *Maus* where Vladek and Anja, the writer's parents, have to hide in a store. The commentary tells us they have to watch their breathing for fear of being too loud and have to go without food or water at a stretch for three days as the Polish woman hiding them couldn't come to them with food because her husband was growing suspicious. The visual depiction of this small, dark space where Vladek and Anja have to hide is done by putting crouched figures of these two inside a panel that doubles as their space of confined refuge. A barrel is drawn on one side of the panel and Vladek and Anja on the other, which visually depicts the confined space that both of them have to survive in. As the narrative progresses in the subsequent panels, the barrel is foregrounded, and the panels with Vladek and Anja retreat into the background. The visual depiction becomes

very interesting at this point because a rat enters the scene. This is interesting because Spiegelman has used the figure of mice (hence the title MAUS, which is German for the English word mouse) to depict the Jewish people. Now, the figure of a rat in the text, which is hiding from Vladek and Anja behind the barrel, comes to occupy the foreground of the page. So Vladek and Anja are stuck inside the panels, the barrel in front of them, and the sewer rat, in front of the barrel, has broken out of the confinement of panels even as Vladek and Anja retreat further inwards out of fear, still contained within the panels. The chapter this section is from is called 'Mouse Trap'—and an instance of heightened irony presents itself as the sewer rat roams free while Vladek and Anja are trapped in a life where they are worse off than vermin.

The panel in Figure 2 depicts Vladek and Anja as they search for a place to go after their escape from a previous hideout. With nowhere to go, they start walking towards Sosnowiec, their hometown. The writer draws the road on which they are walking as a swastika, and it becomes a powerful visual metaphor to say that no matter which way they turn, there will be no route to freedom, no escape. The panel depicts a night scene (a good time for escape), and so only the silhouettes of Vladek and Anja are visible against the moonlight, and the rest of the landscape is in shades of grey to depict night. However, while night settles its darkness on all else, the swastika is shining white. This white Swastika symbolises the racial purification it stands for, and the black silhouettes of Vladek and Anja begin to look even more ominous against it; their tiny figures are visually engulfed by its magnitude, as is much of the rest of the panel. The structuring within the panel positions the swastika-shaped road in the centre with other components—trees and houses—drawn in the periphery, making the Nazi representation central in the panel and also indicating its pivotal position in the larger narrative. The mood that Spiegelman creates with this kind of rendering of the pervasive presence of the political—which shows itself clearly even in the dark of the night when all else is camouflaged—is a remarkable use of the comics medium to translate the perpetual and inescapable horror of the Holocaust for the Jews.

Figure 3 records the reception of an earlier comic of Spiegelman, by his family. In a moment of metatextuality in the narrative, Mala comments after reading one of Spiegelman's earlier comics on the shock that reading intensely personal content in the comics form gives her—'I thought I'd faint...I was so shocked' (Spiegelman 2003: 132). Vladek commends his son's book, saying someday Art will become famous like Walt Disney (Spiegelman 2003: 132)—a statement that becomes prophetic as Spiegelman's mouse not only went on to gain worldwide acclaim but also redefined the figure of the mouse.



understood to be such that it becomes richer with use as meanings are created or recycled and reinvented with every new text. Each text in the comicsverse has the potential to extend the visual lexicon by adding new meanings or perspectives to a pre-existing visual language—a language that may be recognised across national and linguistic borders.

### **Developing the Visual Lexicon: Cross-cultural Allusions**

A testament to this is the use of this particular style of representation of Spiegelman by Malik Sajad in his graphic narrative *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*. Sajad uses a similar anthropomorphising technique to represent people from Kashmir, who he draws as hanguls—the red stag deer found in Kashmir. The visual technique to represent humans through animal imagery—an act of dehumanising that is both literal and metaphorical—as well as the technique of representation where everyone looks the same are borrowed directly from Spiegelman. However, the choice of the animal is unique to the text and its context and therefore makes the lexicon of visual representation only richer. The animal metaphor, which is picked from Spiegelman, is localised by Sajad with the choice of Hanguls instead of mice. Hanguls, which are red stag deer, are the national animal of Kashmir and are recognised as an endangered species. The cats versus mice of *Maus* become Hanguls versus humans in *Munnu's* Kashmir, and Sajad takes it another step ahead by calling attention to the 'endangered' status of both Kashmiri people and animals due to the conflict.

Another instance of intertextual borrowing can be seen in the opening style of *Munnu* and *Persepolis*. *Persepolis*, written by Marjane Satrapi and published in 2000, is also a coming-of-age graphic memoir where Satrapi documents her experience of growing up in Iran in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. While *Munnu* is geographically and historically removed from *Persepolis*, both texts narrate the story of a land and its people through narratives of their selves. *Munnu* opens with a panel of a family photograph, reminiscent of Marjane Satrapi's class photograph that introduces her text. Sajad and Satrapi both choose to introduce the 'I' of the narrative—their younger selves—to the reader through a photograph that is recreated by hand. While a photograph offers the potential of objectivity, the drawing of a photograph is twice removed from that promise. And the reader is made aware before he plunges into the text of both the writer's promise of objectivity in their text as well as the impossibility of the task. The narrative similarities, as well as the technical similarities that we witness in *Munnu* and *Persepolis*, reinstate the comics medium as a realm that offers a space to writers/creators belonging to different socio-political realities to engage and to co-create a visual language that resonates across space-time and is shared at a global scale.



Figure 4: Satrapi, 1



Figure 5: Sajad, 2

## Conclusion

One of the objectives of translation should be to subvert the hegemony of dominant languages, voices and cultures. In *Munnu*, the depiction of Kashmiris as Hanguls not only uses the metaphor of the endangered species to comment on the endangered status of the Kashmiri people, but it also subverts the

dominance of the human-centric perspective by bringing the narrative of animals into relief. The Hanguls are ‘endangered because its habitat has been wrecked by the army and deforestation’ (Sajad 2015: 333). The visual image of Hanguls then stands as a symbol of the impact of war and conflict on not only human life but also the ecological environment.



*Figure 6: Sajad, 309*

Thus, we witness in comics a medium of representation that defies conventions on multiple levels and subverts the hegemony of not only mainstream histories and dominant narratives but also of the channel by which they are conveyed—by challenging the supremacy of verbal language itself. The comics medium introduces a lexicon that is capable of conveying the unsayable. This paper, in reading *Maus*, *Munnu* and *Persepolis* alongside each other, also destabilises the practice of classifying texts by region. The narrative in *Munnu* represents the South Asian experience. However, in using a language that is shared by writers across time and space—Spiegelman, who narrates his father’s Holocaust experience and Satrapi, who documents her coming-of-age in post-revolution Iran, and numerous others—comics like *Munnu* can be read as texts that represent the local for the global.

#### **Endnote**

1. Circulations, Mediations, Negotiations: New Perspectives on Translation from South Asia’. *IACLALS*, <https://www.iacalals.com/annual-conference.html>.

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# From Mahasveta's 'Dopdi' to Kanhailal's *Draupadi*: Translating Draupadi/Dopdi

Natasa Thoudam

## Abstract

The character Draupadi of the Meitei stage in Heisnam Kanhailal's eponymous play, which has AFSPA violence as its context, is an adaptation of 'the tribal revolutionary Draupadi' (Misri 2011: 605) or 'Dopdi' as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translates in Mahasveta Devi's short story of the same name. This story contextualises the Naxalbari movement in Bengal in the 1960s, and its 'tribal' Dopdi is further based on 'the ancient Draupadi' of the *Mahabharata* (Spivak 1981: 387). Consequently, what gets translated in these multiple acts of translation and adaptation is not the contents but rather a common context of violence under oppressive regimes. Moreover, these acts are not only intermedial (short story, play, and epic) but also multilingual (Bangla, Meiteilon, and English) as they simultaneously initiate an interactive conversation between a written text and an oral performative text. Through an interrogation of the gendered enactment of Draupadi's/Dopdi's disrobing in these three texts, this paper opens up the ongoing debate on writing versus orality in Translation Studies while raising pertinent questions on authorship, intertextuality, multilinguality, and intermediality.

**Keywords:** AFSPA, Draupadi/Dopdi, Heisnam Kanhailal, intermediality, intertextuality, Mahasveta Devi, multilinguality, Naxalbari movement, writing versus orality

At the outset, this paper analyses in English the disrobing scene of Draupadi from the Sanskrit epic, *The Mahabharata*, using two of its English translations. It then compares this scene in these English translations with that in two of its literary adaptations. For the purposes of analysis, the paper uses two adapted texts. They are: the English translation of the Bangla short story

'Draupadi' written by Mahasveta Devi and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the video recordings of the performance of the Meiteilon play *Draupadi* written and directed by Heisnam Kanhailal. The disrobing scene in this play was performed by Kanhailal's partner, Heisnam Sabitri. Owing to the researcher's own linguistic limitation and the format of this conference, the entire analysis of this paper remains in English.

This paper begins with an observation on the multiple acts of translation and adaptation involved in the three texts chosen for analysis. Chronologically, the disrobing scene first appeared in the Sanskrit epic *The Mahabharata*, which has indeed not only undergone numerous translations but is also multi-authored, as observed by the scholar Iravati Karve and the translator Kisari Mohan Ganguli. One of the two English translations used for analysis is done by Ganguli. Ganguli's translation had been dated between 1883 and 1896. It was later digitised and made available as an ebook on the Project Gutenberg website in 2005. Moreover, G.N. Devy had already categorised *The Mahabharata* as 'an oral epic' (2010: 34), which got written down first as a printed text and then into a digitised ebook. The other English translation used in this paper is C. Rajagopalachari's summary of *The Mahabharata*, originally written in Tamil, which is then translated into English. The disrobing scene is differently treated in these two translations: the appearance of Krishna as the saviour of Draupadi is absent in Rajagopalachari's translation.

A close reading of this scene follows: When 'Duhsasana' is 'ready to seize' Draupadi's 'clothes by force', Draupadi, as the narration describes, realising that 'all earthly aid had failed, and in the anguish of utter helplessness, she implored divine mercy and succour' (1999: 113). This is Rajagopalachari's summary, and there is no mention of Krishna as the saviour here. In contrast to this is Ganguli's translation, which has 'Dussasana ... forcibly seizing Draupadi's attire before the eyes of all', and he 'began' to drag it off her person'. As 'the attire of Draupadi was being thus dragged', she thought of Hari (another name for Krishna) and 'cried aloud, thinking of Krishna'. Then, 'Krishna was deeply moved' and 'covered her with excellent clothes of many hues' while 'remaining unseen'. This scene is then adapted (used in the sense of rewritten) by Mahasveta Devi in her short story in Bangla and translated into English by Spivak. The disrobing scene is rewritten thus: The captive Adivasi Dopdi Mejhen is no princess like Draupadi. She is suspected to be a member of the Naxalites. She is raped multiple times by multiple men, leaving her naked after the acts. In her desperation and anger, she refuses to be clothed after her disrobing, and she tears 'her clothes' (2005: 402). Furthermore, this is what she has to say: 'What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?' (402). Dopdi's outburst does not end here. She adds: 'There isn't a man here that I should be

ashamed of. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me—come on, *counter* me—?’ (402; emphasis in the original).

Kanhailal's *Draupadi* has been performed only in Meiteilon. Two video recordings of its performance have been used for analysis. One is Amar Kanwar's documentary version, and the other is the Indian International Centre's (IIC's) recording. The lines spoken by Dopdi that have been reused and reiterated in this play are as follows:

In Kanwar's version in Meiteilon translated by me: 'My clothes! I will not let you clothe me. Come, come closer, and counter me!'

In IIC's version, also in Meiteilon and translated by me: 'Come, come closer—come closer, and counter me—and counter me!'

It was one of his plays that was meant for performance. Hence, it has not yet been written down yet, and there is no script for this play as such. Evidently, the two video recordings show Sabitri improvising and performing this scene in two different manners.

This paper also considers as gendered Sabitri's 'faithful' or 'truthful' re-enactment of Dopdi's disrobing scene, both of which are further subversive re-enactments of the scene from *The Mahabharata*. Inevitably, all scenes of enactment as well as re-enactment highlight the patriarchal character of the society in each tale. Karve's analysis of *The Mahabharata* uses the following qualifiers to describe its society: It is 'patriarchal polygynous [also polyandry]' and 'patrilineal' (2006: 49, 186), where women were commodities to be won in a war or 'a svayamvara, groom-choosing festival', and 'an enormous bride-price' (48) was paid to secure a wife. Karve further refutes the argument that 'Draupadi was the cause of the war in the Mahabharata' (93). She reasons that '[t]he seeds of war had been planted on the day Dhritarashtra was denied the throne' and 'Pandu was made King' (93). Consequently, their 'enmity' existed since 'their earliest childhood', which was 'even before the Pandava's marriage to Draupadi' (93). In Karve's assessment, the Pandavas were trying to avoid war and concerned with obtaining 'a portion of the kingdom' as 'a share' (93). In fact, Karve supports her claims with this statement about using Draupadi as a war bargain: 'How little Draupadi mattered can be seen in Krishna's offer to give her and a share of the kingdom to Karna if he would join the Pandavas' (94). Even though Karve dismisses the misogynist claim about Draupadi as the 'main' cause of the war, the former (Karve), however, considers Draupadi's question that 'had put all' men 'in a dilemma' and 'baffled the elders' as 'a grave mistake' (101). According to Karve, Draupadi was showing 'off her intelligence' arguing like a 'lady pundit' (101). The question Draupadi asked before she was dragged to the assembly was regarding 'the rights of a master over a slave and a slave over his wife' (101).

Subsequently in the epic, Draupadi's legal argument could neither stop nor stall the violent violation of her body—her disrobing. This violence becomes

a testimony to the oppressive nature of the patriarchal society she inhabits and the patriarchal family into which she belongs. According to Karve, unlike *The Ramayana*, which is 'a poem', *The Mahabharata* is 'a history' that 'took place about 1000 B.C.' (79). The latter assertion is also supported by W. Norman Brown in the Foreword to Karve's book. *The Mahabharata*, then for Karve, is 'the story of a family [also a patriarchal family, nonetheless] quarrel ending in a fierce battle' (1).

This 'historical' episode of violence is then imported and re-enacted in two literary renditions. In the context of contemporary Bengal, Mahasveta writes of state oppression against the adivasis. Dopdi's disrobing and rape then reveal the violence of another patriarchal institution: the Indian state and its masculinist armed forces. In both the 'historical' oral epic (*The Mahabharata*) and the written short story ('Draupadi' or 'Dopdi'), the nation remains uncontested. Spivak's own reading of the Senanayak ('the army chief') as the 'First World scholar in search of the Third World' (1981: 381) is not much of a help here.

However, in Kanhailal's play and Sabitri's re-enactment, the nation is challenged. The disrobing scene in this case invokes three kinds of patriarchies: the Meitei patriarchal family/community, who attacked Sabitri's character owing to this scene; the patriarchal Indian state and its armed forces protected under AFSPA in the 'disturbed' state of Manipur, whose gendered violence is critiqued in the play; and the imagined patriarchal Meitei nation that is in conflict with not only the Indian nation but also the imagined nations of the Nagas and the Zos.

In 'Orality and Literacy: Part 1: India', Devy argues that '[g]iven the overlap of the conventions of speech and script in oral and written traditions, the two linguistic manifestations of a society's creative imagination clearly cannot be taken to stand for a simple polarity between literary and illiteracy; or between "literature" (all that is "written") and "orature" (all that is "spoken or sung")' (2010: 30). Clearly, for Devy such distinction has its limitations. Devy's argument was intended to underline 'the convergence of literacy and oral creativity ... embedded in India's social practice' (38). For Devy, this is demonstrated through the 'oral traditions' of India's 'illiterate' adivasi communities, the 'literate' India's participation in the growth of 'oral literature', and the 'testimony to India's age-old love for the oral' found in 'the immense popularity of the Indian cinema' (38).

My reading of the video recordings of Sabitri's disrobing from Kanhailal's play could be used to illustrate Devy's observation. Kanhailal's play, indeed, shares some features of what Devy calls 'the folk forms of drama in India' or the 'regional forms' (34). Kanhailal's play does not have 'a fixed and written text to support the performances' (34). As a result, it is 'spontaneous and rely

heavily on improvisation by the actors' (34). Lastly, its plot is 'based on [a] well-known [episode] from the *Mahabharata*' (34).<sup>1</sup>

This convergence of literacy and oral creativity in three acts of translation and adaptation, as I argued in the abstract of this paper, is accompanied by three interlinked processes: intermediality, multilinguality, and intertextuality. The three texts are clearly intertextual with the disrobing scene as the connecting link. They are also variously intermedial. First, *The Mahabharata* is an oral epic, while Mahasveta's *Draupadi* is a written short story, and Sabitri's oral performance of Kanhailal's dramatic play is interpreted using video recordings of the play. In addition, they are indeed multilingual. The story of *The Mahabharata* was originally sung by bards or Sutas, then written down by scholars in Sanskrit. The English translation of *The Mahabharata*, first written in Sanskrit, is then used for interpretation in this paper. The other English translation is of a summary of *The Mahabharata*, first written in Tamil and then translated into English, which is then ultimately used for analysis. Similarly, Mahasveta's short story was initially written in Bangla and later translated into English by Spivak. Finally, Kanhailal's play is performed in its entirety in Meiteilon, while its interpretation is in English. Shibani Phukan writes: 'GJV Prasad views the very act of writing in Indian English as an act of "translation"' (2008: 28). Arguing on similar lines, could my interpretation of the Meiteilon performance in English be considered an act of translation?

The dilemma of multilingualism does not end here, as Phukan highlights a danger of multilingualism to translation in India. To elaborate on this, she cites K. Sachidanandan's 'anxiety', which she reads as the 'danger' of some languages acquiring a 'hegemonic status' as 'translation is seen as a measure of the growth achieved by one language at the expense of others' (2008: 29). This eventually would lead to, as observed by Phukan, 'the issue of lack of reciprocity in translations between various Indian languages' (29). This is another important point to ponder about but not the focus of this paper.

As this paper ventures towards its conclusion, all discussion thus far is also made to lead into one ultimate question: the question of authorship. There are two opposing tendencies here. Spivak in 'The Politics of Translation' argues that 'translation' is 'reading' (2012: 313). She writes: 'translation is the most intimate act of reading', and '[u]nless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text' (315). In opposition to this tendency is Susan Bassnett's 'The Translator as Writer', wherein she demonstrates that 'translation is a fundamentally creative act, in that it is a re-writing of a text in another language' (2011: 91).

How does one read authorship in these three texts in the light of these opposite tendencies? I found the term collaborative useful here: collaborative

not only from the perspective of production but also of reception. Moreover, the nature of collaboration and authorship differs in each of these texts. In *The Mahabharata*, authorship is collaborative because it involves contributions from the bards/sutras, interpolations by the Brahmin class, and translations by Indian and foreign scholars. Indeed, the two English translations are from two different languages: one is from the Sanskrit text, while the other is from a Tamil one. Mahasveta's Bangla short story and Spivak's English translation similarly share another collaborative exercise performed by Mahasveta, the writer, and Spivak, the translator—both of whom contribute to the creation, production, as well as reception of the story. Finally, zeroing in on Sabitri as Draupadi, authorship could be discussed at two levels. The actor/performer Sabitri as the author/writer of the performance on one level. On the other is Kanhailal, the dramatist/playwright, as the author/writer of the script of the performance. This performance is then captured in the audio-visual medium of Kanwar's documentary film, as it is also similarly captured in the IIC's video recording. Both of which are then used for analysis.

Here, the act of interpretation is in a language (English) that is different from the language in which the performance is articulated (Meiteilon). This complicates the act of interpretation that entails within it an act of translation. As translation straddles between the two acts of reading and writing, a new collaboration is forged between the multilingual author/writer/performer/dramatist/playwright/bards/sutras/translators and the multilingual reader/audience/listener within the domain of a multimedial intertext. However, the danger of the aesthetic of such collaborative rewritings is that they are often forged at the cost of subaltern politics.

### Endnote

1. This is what C.L. Innes would consider as 'rewritings of canonical texts' and which has received the criticism of postcolonial critics who saw these acts as reinscriptions in which 'the author who "writes back" becomes not a resistance fighter or revolutionary but a collaborator' (75). Still, Innes responds to this criticism by positing the argument that such engagements (with canonical texts) could be enabling as they could make 'postcolonial writers' to 'express their own identity' as 'cosmopolitan participants' rather than 'passive recipients' (76). This is an important debate but beyond the scope of this paper.

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# Translating Affect: Emotion, Erasure, and Readability in *Godaan: The Gift of a Cow*

Shailendra Kumar Singh

## Abstract

This article demonstrates how the pervasive presence of sentimentality and melodrama that one encounters in Premchand's last novel, *Godaan* (1936), is appreciably moderated in Gordon C. Roadarmel's English rendition. While this indeed upsets the emotive charge and affective appeal of the original text, there is still a crucial advantage that one discerns in the translated version, namely that of readability. Dominant affects such as anger and pathos, which otherwise constitute the hallmark of Premchand's social realism and account for much of the writer's celebrated and lionised status in the world of Hindi letters, have nevertheless also been perceived as precisely the kind of limitations and shortcomings that somehow prevent him from matching the depth, range, and virtuosity of someone like Tagore. Translation, in this case, involves a precarious trade-off that not only diffuses the impending possibility of hyperbole and exaggeration but also enhances readability, albeit at the cost of sacrificing cultural flavours and geographical specificities.

**Keywords:** Premchand, *Godaan*, translation, affect, readability

By the time *Godaan* was published in 1936, Premchand's reputation as a literary writer had been firmly cemented in the world of Urdu and Hindi letters. As someone who strongly espoused the notion of socially engaging fiction, his literary output at this point consisted of not only popular novels and plays but also several short stories that invariably examine multiple questions and themes such as that of nationalism, gender, and peasantry. But while the earlier works were indeed characterised by a formulaic template of forced and contrived endings, his final masterpiece deliberately refrains from offering

any easy alternatives. The pervasive presence of sentimentality, nostalgia, and melodrama is nevertheless as true of *Godaan* as any of his previous peasant narratives. Ostensibly simplistic binaries of the good and the bad, the hero and the villain, and the village versus the countryside constitute a recurring motif in the novel.

This intense emotionality surrounding these conceptions obviously does not strike us as odd or awkward in Hindi, particularly if one is familiar with the writer's other works. But a language such as English need not be comparably hospitable to such ideas of excess. To illustrate this point, albeit through a minor digression, one only needs to look at the way in which the melodramatic registers and romantic rhythms of Hindi cinema are seen as being fundamentally at odds with the so-called cinematic representations of Hollywood. Where then does one locate the significance of the translator as a conscientious mediator between two languages, cultures, and sensibilities? How does one ensure that the thematic spirit of the source language is captured for its target readership while still respecting the acceptable limits of creativity, innovation, and readability? To answer some of these crucial questions, this article demonstrates how the ubiquitous strand of sentimentality and melodrama that one encounters in Premchand's last finished novel is appreciably moderated in Gordon C. Roadarmel's English rendition. While this indeed upsets the emotive charge and affective appeal of the original text, there is still a crucial advantage that one discerns in the translated version, namely that of readability. Dominant affects such as anger and pathos, which otherwise constitute the hallmark of Premchand's social realism and account for much of the writer's celebrated and lionised status in the world of Hindi letters, have nevertheless also been perceived as precisely the kind of limitations and shortcomings that somehow prevent him from matching the depth, range, and virtuosity of someone like Tagore. Translation, in this case, involves a precarious trade-off that not only diffuses the impending possibility of hyperbole and exaggeration but also enhances readability, albeit at the cost of sacrificing cultural flavours and geographical specificities.

### **The Emotional Excesses of *Dharma***

At the heart of it, *Godaan* is a deeply poignant account of Hori, a peasant who is literally overwhelmed by the exploitative rural apparatus, which consists of morally debased Brahmins, moneylenders, and government employees. But what makes the peasant protagonist stand out from the rest of his fellow villagers is his sheer insistence on *dharma*, which may be loosely translated as moral duty. In the novel, it is this quality that is repeatedly emphasised by the author and almost serves as the most powerful moral centre of the narrative. And while Premchand has taken recourse to this term for indicating both a

secular as well as a religious sense of morality, the multiple strategies employed by Roadarmel offer a unique perspective on how the translator could exercise some degree of autonomy without compromising the richness of any given formulation.

To begin with, Roadarmel introduces a kind of diversity by translating this word in many ways, depending on the context and situation that the novel outlines. For instance, in one of the early chapters, the Rai Sahib is shown to be having a long conversation with Hori, and there all his rhetorical flourishes that are built around *dharma* are immediately punctured and undermined through his resentment toward the men on forced labour who refuse to work. This sudden interruption, which reveals the duplicitous and hypocritical stance of the landlord before his tenants, is captured through words like ‘goodness’ and what is essentially ‘right’ (Premchand 1968: 25–7).<sup>1</sup> At another point in the text though, Datadin, a Brahmin character, argues that even though Shobha, Hori’s brother, may escape from the clutches of the police, *dharma* would not rest without punishing him for committing the heinous crime of poisoning a cow (Premchand 2006: 123). Here Roadarmel’s perspicacity as a translator is quite evident since he chooses the term ‘moral law’ (even though it is also a religious sacrilege of one kind) to communicate the appalling and reprehensible nature of outrage that an act such as this entails (Premchand 1968: 136). His keen attention to the various nuances and finer shades of meaning that this multivalent and polysemous word carries with itself is once more apparent at a pivotal moment in the text. Matadin, Datadin’s downright wicked and morally depraved son, ends up impregnating Siliya, a Dalit maiden, and this predictably incurs the hostility and wrath of her family members. Harkhu, Siliya’s father, ingeniously proposes that despite being a Brahmin, if he is determined to violate the chastity of a lower-caste girl, then the least that he could do was at least relinquish his *dharma* in the bargain (Premchand 2006: 277). This *quid pro quo* proposition that involves a transactional arrangement is again competently translated by Roadarmel because he chooses the word ‘caste’, which is precisely what even Premchand had in mind while describing this entire incident (Premchand 1968: 305).

But probably the most accurate equivalences and parallels that the English translation works with are fleshed out when Matadin, after being sufficiently chastised, first by Siliya’s family members (they force a bone down his throat and tear off his sacred thread) and then by the society at large, has a meaningful change of heart. Having discovered the hard way the deeply problematic and questionable double standards of his caste and community, he begins to envision a future course of identity for himself, one that is independent of these embedded cultural markers. The original sentence in Hindi repeats the word *dharma* when it comes to one’s accountability vis-à-vis society and

one's own self (Premchand 2006: 331). In the English version, though, Roadarmel brings in a kind of distinction and heterogeneity that does not sound too repetitive or jarring for the readers: 'A man may have sacred duty as a member of society, but he also has a duty as a human being' (Premchand 1968: 365). Here the word 'duty' for the second usage of the term '*dharma*' somewhat de-sacralises the venerated connotation that is unmistakably associated with the first mention of the same expression. Thus, even though Toral Gajarawala points out that '[W]hile caste exploitation reveals itself to be economic and sexual, in the metonymic food chain of novelistic sympathies, caste must often take second place' (Gajarawala 2012: 53), one could still arrive at two important conclusions related to the question of caste in so far as this novel is concerned. The first one is that despite the overt romanticising of Siliya's character by the author, there is ample evidence to suggest that her family members do not necessarily share the same view. On the contrary, they are acutely conscious of Matadin's shallow posturing through which he can vindicate and rationalise his sexual intimacy with a Dalit girl even as he continues to treat her as an untouchable and avoids any other kind of contact or interaction with her at a quotidian register. This clearly bespeaks a sense of Dalit *chetna*, or consciousness, no matter how incipient, tentative, or provisional that *chetna* might be. The other inference that is also discernible is that Premchand is by no stretch of the imagination ever being charitable to the Brahmins, which, in my opinion, also counts for something if at all the question of caste is being examined in a comparative framework.

However, there are at least two occasions where even Roadarmel gets the bewilderingly complex concept of *dharma* or its related formulations completely wrong. Hori lies through his teeth and swears a false oath in a desperate attempt to defend his brother Hira before Datadin. The English version of *dharmatma* (Premchand 2006: 122) reads 'religious' (Premchand 1968: 136), whereas the more theologically neutral term 'virtuous' might have served as a more accurate equivalent. This is because there is nothing in Dhaniya's fulminations to suggest a religious sense of morality or righteousness. Similarly, when Gobar, Hori's son, challenges the unprincipled moneylending practices of Datadin, his father starts fearing the punitive consequences that may follow on account of brazenly offending a Brahmin. In the Hindi original, this feeling of anxiety and restlessness is communicated through the words '*dharma ki kranti*' (Premchand 2006: 243) which Roadarmel translates as 'a surge of conscience' (Premchand 1968: 270). What is worth observing here is that in this case *dharma* also involves a religious component that is not precisely being encapsulated by the term 'conscience'. These two nuances that get overlooked in the target language need not appear significant on the surface of it. But a closer scrutiny of the way in which Premchand's delineation of

the peasant protagonist unfolds throughout the text does, however, seem to indicate that the figure of the Brahmin holds an extra magnitude of power and authority over Hori because of his religious standing and revered status in the village community. Often, the excessive affective charge that accumulates in the Hindi original through the repetitive usage of the term *dharma* is successfully diffused by Roadarmel, which obviously has desirable implications for readability in a language that need not entertain a sustained strand of didacticism and melodrama. And yet, at least on a couple of instances, the situational subtleties and cultural connotations do get obliterated for a reader who may not have access to the source language.

#### **Accumulation of Affect: Anger**

Hori's character, which serves as the focal point of moral uprightness in the novel, is sharply contrasted with that of his son, Gobar. Fundamentally rebellious in temperament and often at odds with the views, beliefs, and practices of his family members because of his defiant disposition, Gobar's presence animates the translated text in a way that is literally quite difficult to sustain within the moralistic schema of the Hindi original. The multiple differences of opinion between the father and the son that Premchand deliberately outlines throughout the novel are largely meant to champion Hori's patience, virtue, and fortitude over Gobar's restless and impulsive acts of resistance in the text. And yet, Roadarmel takes recourse to subtle strategies of translational practices that substantially render the narrative more ambivalent for the reader so that he/she too is compelled to assess Gobar's remarks about Hori in relation to what the other characters have to say insofar as the so-called ideal peasant protagonist is concerned.

On the surface of it, it appears as if Gobar's return from the city of Lucknow brings about a positive and desirable change in his outlook toward life in general and people in particular. By attending council meetings, he becomes conversant with the concepts of nation and social class (Premchand 1968: 246). This, in turn, makes him deeply suspicious of social conventions and the fear of public criticism. Not surprisingly then, the village elders are scared out of their wits once they realise his intimate familiarity with law (Premchand 1968: 271). But to prevent the scales from tilting entirely in Gobar's favour (something that would make it increasingly difficult for Premchand to ultimately celebrate Hori's ethical virtues), the novelist engages in a conscious balancing act that also underscores the ill effects of industrialism and the cityscape for a migrant from the countryside. Gobar's drinking habits and his violent behaviour, both of which are shown to be a direct product of the backbreaking nature of his work in Lucknow, thus hint toward an irreducible component of moral debasement. His disrespectful attitude toward

his father becomes grist to the same mill when he chastises Hori for allowing Bhola to take the bullocks away, 'That's what comes of being too good' (Premchand 1968: 261–2). In the source language, the word '*gau*' is used, which is quite evidently Premchand's attempt to associate Hori's character with the title of the novel so that he comes across as a sacrificial victim, one who is apparently defeated by an oppressive and exploitative agrarian apparatus but not before making up for the moral deficit of the other characters in his family and neighbourhood.

Viewed in this context, it appears as if Roadarmel has once again missed out on another cultural nuance that the author had in his mind. But this translation can only make sense when one realises that a dissolution of one affect (pathos) through multiple renditions of the word '*dharma*' goes hand in hand with the accumulation of another (anger, in Gobar's case). This is because on other occasions, the translator almost always goes for a literal translation of the word '*gau*'. Consider, for example, Mehta's shocking revelations before Malti, where he compares love not with a meek and gentle cow but with a ferocious lion, which lets nothing set eye on its prey (Premchand 1968: 382). How does one then decode this seemingly minor but otherwise quite significant discrepancy? Well, for Premchand, it is obvious that he intends Gobar's offensive and discourteous behaviour toward Hori as a thematic counterpoint to what lies ahead for the rebel figure in terms of one's own personal failings, weaknesses, and moral degradation. But by simply choosing to go for a semantic translation as opposed to a literal one for the first time that the word '*gau*' is used, Roadarmel, in a way, also partially diffuses the overtly moralising and didactic discourse of the novel. This acquires an enhanced effect through the general sense of dissatisfaction that even the other characters express vis-à-vis Hori's conduct. At an earlier point in the narrative, even Dhaniya had complained about how being too good can also be wrong (Premchand 1968: 161). Hori's puritanical insistence on *maryada* (honour) and *biraadari* (community) thus increasingly stops making sense to him (and everyone else around him) as he eventually loses his lands and is reduced to the level of a hired labourer.

The final nail in the coffin for him, though, is his inability to reject Pandit Datadin's proposed match between his younger daughter Rupa and Ramsevak, a much older man who is nonetheless a relatively affluent peasant. When Ramsevak pays a visit to Hori's house, he too expresses a sentiment that neatly resonates with that of Gobar's: 'Being meek as a cow doesn't get you anywhere in the world' (Premchand 1968: 424). Here the word '*gau*' is literally translated, which provides an additional force to the kind of critique of Hori's behaviour that is fleshed out in the translated version. This is because, unlike Gobar, Ramsevak's brave, courageous, and spirited disposition (one can also

say the same about Dhaniya) is completely devoid of any moral deficits that could have otherwise rendered such observations shallow and ironic in the ultimate analysis. By partially rescuing Gobar's character from the relatively more straightforward and judgemental gaze of the third-person omniscient narrator, Roadarmel enacts his own balancing act through which Hori's son too comes across as a credible voice of reason, though not without his own share of hubris that will have to be eventually abandoned. Moreover, if the translator chooses a semantic equivalent for Gobar's comparison of Hori with a cow (a literal one would have forced the reader to not take this too seriously given Gobar's own standard character flaws), the English version still acquires a certain sense of legitimacy for the discursive presence of anger and discontent in the novel. Hori tries his level best to reason with his son about the importance and necessity of *biraadari* (caste/community), to which the latter replies: 'We were in good standing in the caste and respected in the community... So why couldn't I be married? Tell me. Simply because we couldn't afford even food in the house' (Premchand 1968: 262). The narrative reveals how Gobar's wisdom and common sense prevails over his father's standards of justice and virtue. Similarly, after seeing the error of his ways, the rebel figure comforts his father who is having conscientious qualms after choosing his lands over finding an age-appropriate spouse for his daughter. He observes, 'Prestige and honour have no meaning when a man can't fill his stomach' (Premchand 1968: 430). The rational force of these two instances that almost provides a reality check to Hori becomes far more pronounced in the target language precisely because Roadarmel is able to marginally offset the emotive charge of Gobar's criticism of his father by privileging a semantic (as opposed to the symbolic) understanding of the word '*gau*'.

Nuances and subtleties such as these have also been missed out by eminent critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee. In her opinion, the acquiescent serf Hori becomes the sympathetic centre of the novel, and Gobar's protest proves ineffective and jejune (Mukherjee 1985: 164). But we have already seen how the Hindi and the English versions portray Gobar in a relatively different light. After all, Hori dies while Gobar survives. Moreover, his wisdom and common sense find a much more well-rounded delineation in the way in which one reads about Ghisu and Madhav in 'Kafan', one of the most iconic stories by Premchand. And this is precisely where translation and affect come together. As Kaisa Koskinen succinctly puts it, 'translators should foreground elements that machines are not yet able to master and that therefore are still the domain of human translators. Hence the focus on analysing, modulating, and performing affects' (Koskinen 2020: 151). In the target language, Gobar is substantially redeemed because the translator himself performs a certain kind of 'affective labour' (Koskinen 2020: 27), a sustained strand of emotional

objectivity that seeks to go beyond the simplistic binaries of the third-person omniscient narrator and understand pathos and anger on its own terms instead of merely affirming one at the expense of negating the other. Thus, despite the two occasions that we discussed in the earlier section, the overall competence of Roadarmel as a translator has nonetheless stood the test of time since even after fifty years, his English version is widely circulated as a standard variety that is not only being utilised for pedagogical purposes but also serves the research interests of South Asian scholars whenever the need for citation arises.

### Endnote

1. For the various uses of *dharma* in this conversation in the Hindi original, also see Premchand (2006: 15–17).

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# Translating Resistance: A Brief Overview of Translations from Assamese to English

Shibani Phukan

## Abstract

In *Translation as Discovery and Other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translation*, Sujit Mukherjee suggests the enabling idea of English translations of works in Indian languages working as a link literature for India. Given the context of political, social and cultural marginalisation the north-east of India continues to combat, the relevance of Mukherjee's idea cannot be overemphasised. Keeping this in mind, the paper proposes to look at Assamese literature available in English translation, focusing primarily on the genre of novels and short stories. Unlike literature from the rest of the north-east which is predominantly written in English, there exists a thriving practice of writing in Assamese in the state of Assam. Therefore, the paper would examine the works of literature that have been translated in recent times to study if there exists any commonality of themes, politics or practices. This would be done with the intent of discovering if there is any underlying agenda at work, and if so, the reasons thereof. It would also attempt to examine if the diversity of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Assam is reflected in these translations. It would be of interest to analyse what translational practices dictate these translations, especially in terms of resisting a homogenising tendency in presenting certain people and their stories as representative of the Assamese people and their literature. Orality and the folk are other key features of Assamese literature, and it would be important to study how these features are negotiated in translations, if at all. In conclusion, it would also be worthwhile to analyse if translations from Assamese to English are able to overcome the paradox inherent in translating into English through a practice of resistant translatorial methods to ensure that translations remain uncompromised. In the final analysis, the paper hopes to posit translations of Assamese works into English as truly post-colonial in the sense of writing back to both the 'mainland' and the colonial masters.

**Keywords:** marginalisation, Indira Goswami, Vaishnavism, orality, Sujit Mukherjee, Indian Literature in English Translation

In *Translation as Discovery and Other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translation*, Sujit Mukherjee suggests the enabling idea of English translations of works in Indian languages working as a link literature for India. Given the context of political, social and cultural marginalisation the north-east of India continues to combat, the relevance of Mukherjee's idea cannot be overemphasised. With this in mind, the paper proposes to look at Assamese literature made available in English translation in the last decade or so, focusing primarily on the genre of novels and short stories. Indira Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*, Arupa Kalita Patangia's *Felanee*, Debendranath Acharya's *Jangam*, and Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Blossoms in the Graveyard* are some of the works that would be taken up for reference and study. Unlike literature from the rest of the north-east which is predominantly written in English, there exists a thriving practice of writing in Assamese in the state of Assam. Therefore, the paper would examine the works of literature that have been translated in recent times to study if there exists any commonality of themes, politics, and practices. This would be done with the intent of discovering if there is any underlying agenda at work, and if so, the reasons thereof. The paper would also examine if the diversity of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multicultural Assam is reflected in these translations. It would be of interest to analyse what translational practices dictate these translations, especially in terms of resisting a homogenising tendency in presenting certain people and their stories as representative of the Assamese people and their literature. The paper would continue to study how orality and the folk, key features of Assamese literature, are negotiated in translations, if at all. In conclusion, it would also be worthwhile to analyse if translations from Assamese to English are able to overcome the paradox inherent in translating into English through a practice of resistant translatorial methods to ensure that translations remain uncompromised. In the final analysis, the paper hopes to posit translations of Assamese works into English as truly post-colonial in the sense of writing back to both the 'mainland' and the colonial masters.

In Assam, translation as an activity engaged in by saints and scholars predates mediaeval times and the then-growing influence of Vaishnavism in the region as a result of the Bhakti Movement. Sanskrit texts, primarily those seen as philosophical, such as the *Bhagavat Gita*, along with religious texts such as the *Ramayana*, were translated into local languages. But translation as an activity gains momentum only as a consequence of British colonialism. The Serampore Mission Press, a book and newspaper publisher, was set up in January 1800 with the mandate to publish translations of the Bible in twenty-five Indian languages. A Bengali translation of the Gospel of Matthew was published in the month of August, 1800. Once this press closed down on

account of running into debts, a similar mission was transferred onto the shoulders of the Baptist Mission Press. The translation of the Bible was part of the larger imperialist agenda of civilising the native under the guise of the narrative of the 'white man's burden', but the translations of the Bible had an impact that proved to be quite significant in ways that perhaps the coloniser had not foreseen. It ushered in a modernity into the Indian languages and gave it an impetus towards standardisation. This context was also responsible for the introduction of print-capitalism in India and consequently the beginning of the publication of journals in Indian vernaculars that popularised a culture of writing, publishing and reading.

Assam was ruled by the Tai Ahoms for almost 600 years till British colonialism made inroads into Assam and its culture in 1826. Tilottama Misra observes how, in place of a wonderfully mixed and syncretic culture, 'Colonialism...superimposed a Eurocentric concept of modernity derived from the Enlightenment on the literatures of the region, thereby creating a rupture between the past and the present' (Misra 2011: xiv). Along with the translation and publication of the Bible, books and journals were published and brought about a standardisation of the Assamese language. As Praphulladatta Goswami discovers, a model for translation was set up when in the monthly journal *Orunodoi*, a translation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress* was done following the language as it was used in the spoken form, deviating from the Sanskritised Assamese, which was generally used for writing in those times. This process of standardisation was further strengthened by the concerted efforts of the Assamese 'intelligentsia' to resist the British attempt to impose a standardised Bengali in Assam. The translation of the Bible not only resulted in a modernisation of the Assamese language but also paved the way for other translations from English to Assamese, which ultimately resulted in the growth of the Assamese novel and the exploration of more contemporary themes and narrative strategies by those writing in Assamese. The unfortunate fallout of this standardisation was, of course, a very regrettable effacement of the polyglot linguistic culture of a people where many other languages and dialects besides Assamese were, and continue to be, prevalent.

The larger point this paper seeks to establish is that translation played a critical role in the emergence of the modern Assamese language, the cost notwithstanding. It is also important to note that the role played by translation unfolded against a greater political, cultural and material context. If the exposure to English resulted, among other things, in the translation of a great many English texts to Assamese, in recent times, one notices a reversal of this trend with a great many translations, especially of novels and short stories, being done from Assamese to English. While organisations such as the Sahitya Akademi have been responsible for a while for making writing in Assamese

available in English and vice versa, it is perhaps the presence of publishing houses such as Zubaan, Aleph, Speaking Tiger, and others that has slowly but surely made literature from the north-east, including from Assam, widely available in English translation. This proliferation and publication of translations from Assamese to English, mostly of novels and collections of short stories, have also resulted in interest and much curiosity around the literature from the north-east and, consequently, the north-east becoming a popular theme of many a literature festival in recent times.

This leads us to a perusal of the particular works being translated and an examination of novels and stories that are being translated in terms of their thematic content, among other things. Some of the translations that have been published in just the last decade or so include Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee* in 2011, a year in which the translation of Tilottama Misra's *Swarnalata* too was published; 2015 saw the translation of Indira Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* published four years after Goswami's demise. The translation of Birendra Kumar Bhattachayya's *Blossoms in the Graveyard* was published in 2016, and the translation of Debendranath Acharya's Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel *Jangam* was published in 2018, decades after his tragic demise at the young age of 44. In the last couple of years, there has been an interesting development in terms of many a collection of short stories being published in translation. Some of these are collections of short stories by the same author, such as Kalita's *Musk and Other Stories* and *The Loneliness of Hira Barua*, or Harekrishna Deka's *Guilt and Other Stories*. Recently a collection of novellas by Indira Goswami titled *Five Novellas about Women* was also published. A collection built along thematic concerns titled *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, edited by Aruni Kashyap, was published in 2020 and comprised a mix of stories translated from Assamese and those originally written in English. The year-end of 2021 saw the publication of *The Greatest Assamese Stories Ever Told*, edited by Mitra Phukan and translated by various translators, and just a few days back one came upon the announcement of the publication of *The Areca Nut Tree and Other Stories: Contemporary Women's Writing from Assam*, selected and translated by Ranjita Biswas.

There are a few things that need to be pointed out about the mentioned translations. While by no means one is claiming that it is an exhaustive and complete list, it is indicative and adequate to arrive at a few conclusions. Increasingly, translations are being seen as a viable proposition for big publishing houses, and while the Sahitya Akademi continues to do the good work it does, it no longer dominates the scene. If that translates to a larger volume of works of translation being published, it is something this paper cannot ascertain due to the difficulty of sourcing adequate data. But Amit R. Baishya does have

an interesting perspective on the matter when he raises the question of whether we are ‘seeing’ more translations because more are being published or if it seems so because they are being marketed better, and hence their visibility has increased manifold with social media presence—Insta-live, Facebook and Zoom panel discussions during the pandemic—only furthering their visibility. What also becomes fairly conclusive is that translation is being viewed as work that requires a specific skill set and expertise that may not necessarily match those required to be a writer. So, unlike ten or fifteen years ago, we have very few translations of work done by the author himself or herself. There are writers who also translate, such as Mitra Phukan and Aruni Kashyap, but both have been engaged in translating works that they haven’t authored, with Kashyap stating quite categorically that he would never translate his work into Assamese from English, although he writes and translates in both languages because he believes a certain distance from the original is important for him. We also note that there is a certain author-translator dynamic at work wherein we observe that certain authors work only with certain translators. For example, with the exception of Patangia’s *Felanee*, which was translated by Deepika Phukan, most of her other works have been translated by Ranjita Biswas, and the author has often mentioned in interviews how that shared comfort and trust between the two is quintessential to their translation process.

In fact, in response to a query I posed to Aruni Kashyap about what dictates his choice of translating a work, he said, ‘I prefer to translate works only if I have a comfortable working relationship with the author of the original text’. He goes on to further elaborate that he does not translate a work unless it meets two criteria: ‘I admire their work immensely. I can argue with them relentlessly as a colleague for the betterment of the translated text’. While one may completely agree with Kashyap’s process as an almost ideal one, it may not be a choice available to all. As mentioned earlier, *Jangam* was translated post the demise of the author by Amit R. Baishya. Responding to my question on the difficulties faced by him during translating *Jangam*, Baishya wrote that the author’s absence wasn’t a huge issue, but he would have liked to know ‘his reading strategies and the texts (he) consulted’ to understand a novel that was situated in a period and a context that was largely unfamiliar to the translator. It was a challenge that Baishya said he tried to offset by reimagining the text in a larger critical context of literature focused on the Second World War. The concerns in a collection of translated stories are, of course, very different, and the editor, Mitra Phukan, of *The Greatest Assamese Stories Ever Told*, elucidates in her exhaustive ‘Introduction’, that one of her primary concerns was that, ‘...that quality which a fine translator should have, that quality which cannot really be quantified, but is essential if the work is to read well in the target language (Phukan 2021: xi).’ The sentiments of Phukan almost echo those of Sujit Mukherjee, who advocated a method of translation

'seeking maximum readability within the confines of faithful rendering' (Mukherjee 1994: 6). To this end, certain standard practices were adopted by the various translators in the collection, which did ensure that the stories did read very well in the target language, though perhaps at the cost of some inevitable loss in translation that must accompany any process of standardisation.

A glance through the recently translated Assamese to English works also raises important questions about if the translated novels and stories adequately reflect the linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity of Assam. Once again, the lack of available information makes it difficult for one to come to a definite conclusion. But one does have a sneaking suspicion that adequate translations of works written by those who belong to linguistic or ethnic minorities are perhaps yet to attract the attention of the big publishers, and that is also the reason why anybody with any interest in translation and translation studies gives a lot of importance to organisations such as the Sahitya Akademi, which are not necessarily motivated and influenced by the commercial aspect of translation. However, there has been a heartening development in recent times wherein more Bodo literature is being translated into Assamese, and one hopes that with Assamese acting as a filter language, translations of Bodo literature in English will soon gather momentum. The concern about adequate representation of Assam's linguistic and ethnic diversity also leads one to an examination of the thematic content of the novels and short stories that are seen as viable for translation. Such an assessment, unsurprisingly, shows that stories about violence, conflict, and the insurgency continue to dominate, as one would perhaps expect from literature from a state that continues to suffer from the same till date. Much of the literature written in English from the north-east, is literature that is focused on the retelling of the history of the north-east. This is a concern that is not as pronounced in the writing from Assam, but novels such as *Jangam*, *Swarnalata*, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, *Felanee*, and *Blossoms in the Graveyard* can be categorised as historical novels. Acharya's *Jangam* is that rare novel that documents the story during the Second World War of the Burmese Indians on their long walk home to British India, 'fleeing from the Japanese advance and also from escalating ethnic violence in Burma'. Misra's *Swarnalata* offers a glimpse of mid-nineteenth-century Assam caught up in larger socio-political forces of nationalism and accompanying social reform movements and posits these forces against that of suffering and resistance to British colonialism by those such as the peasants. *The Bronze Sword* by Indira Goswami is the tale of Thengphakhri, a female Bodo freedom fighter who was believed to be a tehsildar in British India. Bhattacharyya's *Blossoms* revolves around the story of Mehr, a girl from East Pakistan caught in the conflict leading up to the Bangladesh War, and *Felanee* plunges us into the world of mindless death and violence brought about by the language wars.

*Blossoms* was written in 1972, *Jangam* in 1984, *Swarnalata* in 1991, *Felanee* in 2003, and *Thengphakhri* in 2009. But the translations of all these novels were published in the same decade, between 2011 and 2018, and that itself is indicative of an increasing interest in translation in recent times. What is also important to note about these translations is that beyond the trope of violence and insurgency, each of these novels is radical in its telling of the story from a position of marginality. If *Jangam*'s protagonists are literally the wretched of the earth, the migrant labourers, *The Bronze*, *Blossoms* and *Felanee* not only offer a feminist perspective but one that is complicated by the intersectionality of ethnicity, religion, caste, and class along with gender. In a world where contemporary literature can be seen as progressively moving towards an interest in a more complex and complicated worldview, especially one which offers a worm's-eye view of the world, the choice of these texts for translation perhaps reflect that larger movement. Also, as Kashyap's title of the collection of short stories edited by him points out, there is greater articulation of a positional shift from looking at stories from the victim trope to a survivor's trope, and that too is reflected in many of these translations. As already mentioned, the tendency to fictionalise history is also very evident in each of these novels, and that is perhaps due to the utter neglect that the history of the north-east suffers from, finding little or no mention in mainstream Indian history. What these novels, therefore, strive to achieve is to not only fill in the gaps of history, at times in terms of resistance to colonialism, sometimes to show the impact of the Second World War, in which the north-east was particularly affected, or to show the impact of contemporary politics—both at the national and local level—that has caused so much bloodshed and misery to the people.

Translations of the same go on to ensure that these stories reach a much wider audience and thus ensure that these hitherto marginalised histories enter the mainstream discourse. The gains that these translations make are undoubtedly significant, but the fact that they are done so in English, which also happens to be the coloniser's language, raises some questions. The most important of these apprehensions perhaps arise from the anxiety that translations into English are seen as significantly erasing the polyglot nature of Assamese literature. The polyglot composition of Assam's linguistic fabric is reflective of larger differences in ethnicities, caste, religion, and so on. One often speaks of the impossibility of retaining registers of speech in translations from Indian languages, but in translations from Assam, that problem is compounded, and the resultant loss is the effacement of the pluralities—pluralities that are often fraught with politics, politics responsible for conflict and violence that continues to cast a shadow over the people of Assam, and yet quite beyond the concern and understanding of the average person from the mainland. The other sense of unease arises from the further effacement that the oral tradition of literature might suffer on account of

such translations. The damage to a great extent had already been done with the arrival of print capitalism and its conscious effort to erase differences between oral and written forms, and concerns that translations to English, a dominant language in every sense, would further efface the inherent orality of Assamese literary tradition are quite legitimate. These complex issues are addressed to a great extent because of the efforts of the original writer in the first instance and further owing to the sensitivity of the translator in most instances. While the polyglot composition is practically impossible to replicate in translation, the very choice of novels and stories chosen for translation gives the 'outsider' a sense of that heterogeneity. It would be of interest to note that, for example, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* was written at a politically critical time. In an interview, the translator of the same, Aruni Kashyap, says:

I wish more readers knew how a book can change the political conversation in a state. The Bodos have fought for a different homeland and the rhetoric and militancy have eroded the social fabric. This book contributed towards healing relations. By foregrounding Bodo life and culture in this re-narrativization of India's freedom struggle, Goswami helped change literary, historical and sociocultural discourse in Assam ... (2020)

Sometimes, many a times, a translation can do the same. The choice to translate a particular text, a novel or a short story, is always a political choice. This is made abundantly clear, for example, in the collection of translated short stories edited by Phukan, wherein from each story, a classic like Lakhminath Bezbaroa's 'Patmugi', or Syed Abdul Malik's 'Mistaken Identity', to more contemporary stories such as Anuradha Sarma Pujari's 'No Man's Land', reverberate with the socio-cultural politics of Assam. Similarly, the heterogeneity of Assam in terms of religious, ethnic, linguistic, and other categories is again amply visibilised to an audience reading a translation, once again owing to the very choice of the novels or short stories that are chosen for the purpose of translation. What comes across is that most of the translators are keenly aware of the pitfalls of translating for a target audience comprising primarily mainlanders and therefore are keen to challenge and interrogate the widely prevalent stereotypes that prevail amongst the general Indian population. One also notes that many of the authors, such as Indira Goswami and Arupa Kalita Patangia, painstakingly incorporate elements of folk and folklore in their endeavour to preserve the inherent orality of Assamese literature. It is an effort that is duly acknowledged by the translators whereby the 'spokenness' of a story is retained to a great extent through the retention of sentence constructions and punctuations that may sometimes impede the reading of a text but in doing so serves as a reminder to the reader of a tradition that has its own grammar and language. At times, in stories such as Kalita's poignant 'Suagmoni's Mother, the Storyteller', the tradition of storytelling is woven into the very subject and narrative of the story.

But in the final analysis, the question that needs to be raised is the question that has been asked about translations of writing in Indian languages into English for a long while. Aijaz Ahmad warns in ‘Indian Literature: Notes Towards the Definition of a Category’, that ‘it is in English more than any other language that the largest archive of translations has been assembled so far; if present trends continue, English will become, in effect, the language in which the knowledge of “Indian” literature is produced’ (Ahmad 2001: 250). The anxiety is not simply about the use of the language of the coloniser but also about the Foucauldian nexus of power and knowledge and the resultant production of knowledge. As Paul St Pierre states, ‘Translation in the postcolonial context of India underscores the connection of translation to power: relations between languages and between communities are actualised and transformed through translation; translation strategies reproduce more than mere meaning’ (Pierre 2010: 62). While the apprehensions voiced by both Ahmad and St Pierre are made with reference to translations of writings in Indian languages in general to English, they are true in the context of Assamese to English translation too, especially given the position of marginality that Assamese occupies, say, with reference to Hindi or Bengali. But translation, especially in the Indian context, has always been a subversive activity, fulfilling objectives beyond the obvious. As Saugata Bhaduri points out, ‘Translation, if it is to be read in conjunction with power, has to be seen in terms of differentials, because it is only on such a foregrounding of slippages that one can at least try to expose and challenge structures of power’ (Bhaduri 2008: xxv). If one studies the translations of novels and short stories from Assamese to English, one would glean that strategically, subversively, the very choice of the works chosen for translation challenges, by its very diversity, the flattening, homogenising and stereotyping that Assam and the north-east are subjected to by mainland India. It does so by using English, the very language of dominance, but to its own end, retaining the intrinsic qualities and characteristics of orality among other features that are a part of the rich heritage of Assamese literature. GJV Prasad writes, ‘...in our traditions, we translated to understand and reify ideas, not to accept or assert authority, but to hold conversations’ (Prasad 2010: 11). Translations of literary works, especially in the popular genres of the novel and short stories, serve exactly this purpose; they enable conversations, hopefully those that will facilitate understanding, and in doing so will stay true to the spirit of resistance that Indian translations have always, mostly, embodied.

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# **Inter-medial Translation of Kalidasa's *Abhignan Shakuntalam* by Painter Raja Ravi Varma**

**Shubhangi Shrinivas Rao**

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the intermedial translation of Kalidasa's *Abhignan Shakuntalam* in the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma. The paper aims at Translation Studies being a discipline in itself and moving beyond the boundaries of equivalence and untranslatability, taking in view Intermedial translation theory focusing on the transfer of meaning in different media and challenging the issues of translation. Translation has been perceived as an activity of transferring from one language to another where issues of accurate, ethical and equivalent translation have surrounded the discipline. However, another perception of translation offers that translation is an activity that considers cultural shifts as an art in itself and makes it possible to take liberties from word-to-word translation, as taking liberties and cultural shifts has been an act of creativity too. Intermedial translation offers another perspective on the transfer of meaning from one art form or medium into another and thus paves a new way for the development of the discipline and its different perception.

For this intermedial translation, the paper takes Kalidasa's play *Abhignan Shakuntalam* as a verbal source text while viewing paintings of Shakuntala by Raja Ravi Varma as its intermedial translation or the target text. The analysis of the paintings will be considered as the translation of the play, where the sole focus would be on the transfer of meaning from verbal to nonverbal, also keeping in mind that both follow a basic narrative, i.e., the story of Shakuntala and Dushyant from the *Mahabharata*.

**Keywords:** Inter-medial Translation, equivalence, untranslatability, transcreation

## **Translation: Problems and Shift**

To translate means to carry across. Dr. Johnson states: 'To translate is to change into another language, retaining the sense.' (Qtd. in Haas. 1962: 208)

Translation is a process of communication involving a sender and a receiver. It is a process of communication that involves two languages in which the translator acts as a mediator. Translation is a bilingual process of communication ordinarily aiming at the production of a target language text equivalent to a source language text.

The practice of translation is long established. Many scholars practiced translation and discussion about it goes on from the time of the Romans to the Anglo-Saxons, Renaissance to Victorians, and Modern Age to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This practice developed into a study and later as an academic discipline in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, translation was a means of language learning, being a part of the Grammar Translation Method, which helped students to study the grammatical rules and structures of a foreign language. There were exercises of translation to learn a new language or to read a foreign text for those who didn't have the ability to read the text in its original written language. Translation thus was perceived as a sub-branch of Linguistics and Comparative Literature.

After the 1960s, Translation Studies developed as a serious and independent discipline and was no longer considered secondary to other prevalent disciplines. The discipline expanded globally and became a fundamental act of human exchange over the entire world. Translation developed as a discipline to bridge the gap between fragmentary worlds. The concept of translation has changed over the years from translating one language to another to a purely linguistic approach and from textual focus to translations of cultures and other human dynamism. In due course of time, 'translation' became a 'Translation Studies' discipline. Throughout history, written and spoken translations played a crucial role in interhuman communication, access to diverse texts for knowledge, information, religious purposes, trade, and industry.

Translation developed as a discipline, but it also went through the debate between word-for-word or sense-for-sense translation or translating according to the linguistic approach or the cultural one. These debates include the idea of translation as mimesis, i.e., only an imitation that gave the original text a sacred character while translation was secondary. The romantic approach to translation also considered translation an inferior activity of mere imitation when compared to the author who creates something having aesthetic value. This notion resulted in the central issues of translation, including equivalence and untranslatability. Linguistic systems of two languages vary greatly, which is why word-for-word translation is not possible. Even synonyms of the same word in the same language do not guarantee equivalence, which becomes more complicated when the languages are different. Apart from linguistic differences, cultural differences add on to the problem of equivalence.

According to Nida, 'Since no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to the correspondent symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence there can be no fully exact translations.' (Venuti 2000: 126) Sometimes not only the equivalence among words but also the grammatical structure of different languages raises the question of untranslatability, especially when it comes to proverbs or idiomatic language. Along with the problems of equivalence and untranslatability, there are also issues of the notion of loss and gain in translation. There is an assumption that when you translate a text from one language to another, something is lost. There is a possibility of miscommunication. This problem is due to cultural dissimilarity between two linguistic groups. Robert Frost states about poetry: 'Poetry is what gets lost in translation.' (Qtd. in Hyde 1991: 42)

There is a need to overcome these issues of translation, considering only the stylistic equivalence, which focuses on the transfer of meaning when we talk about similarities among two texts. It is no longer acceptable to consider the translated text as an evil. When content of the source language is translated, the rules of the source language should completely be erased because the grammar of two languages need not be the same. Translation is possible on account of a twofold relation of an entity where two expressions are viewed as vehicles of a single entity called meaning. It is the meaning that interprets any significant expressions. The distinction between good and bad translation holds prominence. While translating a text, it is not possible to translate word-for-word or sentence-for-sentence; the line to translate is internally a lot different from the original; only then can it preserve the essence of the original text as a whole, especially in the case of translating poems. Meanings cannot survive alone, but without meaning, expression cannot express. Once any sentence is written or uttered, the next step is to understand its meaning. This approach to the meaning-making process stems from the view of the cultural turn in translation. The issues of equivalence, untranslatability and loss of the traditional translation approach are challenged when the focus is shifted to the deliverance of meaning from the source text to the target text. This focal shift to the meaning makes translation a transcreation.

This view of translation as transcreation helped to develop translation studies as an academic discipline. However, since the study of translation began as an academic discipline, the primary object has been the verbal element, i.e., the written and the oral texts. This focus on the verbal texts places linguistics at the centre of translation studies. The issues of equivalence and untranslatability in translation cut out language from the context, due to which

only the spoken and written discourse were considered in isolation while translating.

Since the 1980s, the emergence of other paradigms took place with a view to combine the context with language. These paradigms included cultural, sociological and medial shifts in translation studies. Even after embedding the language and context, the merging of language with non-verbal elements remains untouched. It was Jakobson who first defined intersemiotic translation (Gonzalez 2014: 121).

Jakobson described three categories of translation:

- Intralingual translation or 'rewording': 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
- Interlingual translation or translation proper: an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
- Intersemiotic translation or transmutation: an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems.

Following this, many scholars tried to term this shift in sign systems while translating, but they lacked systematic conceptualisation for the same. Gottlieb (1997) and Remael (2001) redefined intersemiotic translation as the transfer of meanings across different media. Fine (1984) redefined intersemiotic translation as shifts between two different medial variants of the same sign system.

### **An Approach to Intermedial Translation:**

After Roman Jakobson's concept of intersemiotic translation as a type of translation, the concept has broadened and been reinterpreted by different scholars in different ways. It means, moreover, to add something in the text in a new code rather than changing the text. There are instances in which translation according to the culture is said to be an art in itself. To understand meanings of the text across different media, there is a need for the translator to carefully overlook both the verbal and the non-verbal elements linking it to the meaning-making process. Looking from another perspective, translation from one text to another is entirely dependent on the semantic side of the text, which is why a broader study of Translation Studies can be done in the form of multimodal translation or intermedial translation. This intermedial translation may include the source text in any art form, such as films, adaptations, music, dance, sculptures, dubbing, subtitles, paintings, and many more.

Nowadays, communication itself has become multimodal, combining multiple modes such as words, images and sounds in the form of emojis, voicenotes, GIFs, and so on. Texts that are translated these days are multimodal, whether user manuals, films, audiobooks, podcasts, paintings, photographs, dance, or music. These texts demand a need to be looked at in the sense of their meaning-making process individually as well as linking it with other

modes. It is important to put emphasis on the non-verbal elements of a multimodal message. (Touminen *et al.* 2018: 1)

Keeping in view the Aristotelian principle that all arts are imitative and human nature is fundamentally imitative but each art imitates in a different way. The imitation of reality is common to all arts, but the means by which such imitation is carried out differently in each art is specific. The Rasa theory of Indian aesthetics, where a mythological or legendary narrative is converted into a dance performance that is articulated with nine types of Rasa, or expressions or emotions, including delight, laughter, compassion, wonder, disgust, bravery, anger, fear, and peace. These emotions, when interpreted through a dance performance, can be said to be intermedial.

This paper focuses on the verbal to non-verbal medium while translating, and thus the translated version is the visual mode. Visual mode refers to still images, moving images or information that is seen. Painting is based on icons and signs similar to the object or the reality that object represents. Literature works with words that are basically symbolic and conventional signs.

Lessing talks about the relationship between poetry and painting based on Alexandrine sculptures representing the story of the death of Laocoon and his sons at the hands of Goddess Minerva, and the same episode can be found in the second canto of Virgil's *Aeneid*. He proposed three possibilities for the same, that the sculptor's figures were inspired by the poet or that Virgil was inspired by a figurative rendering of the scene or that both were inspired by the same classical sources.

### **Shakuntala: Transcreations of the Legend**

Based on a similar understanding, this paper would analyse the basic narrative, i.e., the story of Shakuntala retold by Kalidasa in his play and by Raja Ravi Varma in his paintings. It is known here that Kalidasa was influenced by the mythological legend that is told in *The Mahabharata* and created the play. Raja Ravi Varma was influenced by Kalidasa and his great work, *Abhignan Shakuntalam*. The story of Shakuntala is told in a different way than that of Kalidasa's Shakuntala in *the Mahabharata*, yet the only Shakuntala the Indians know is of Kalidasa. Kalidasa lived in the fifth century of the Christian era and is still regarded as the greatest of the Sanskrit poets. Kalidasa wrote seven works, including three dramas, two epics, one elegiac poem, and one descriptive poem. The three dramas by Kalidasa are *Malvika and Agnimitra*, *Urvashi* and *Shakuntala*, and two epic poems, including *The Dynasty of Raghu* and *The Birth of War God*, the elegiac poem being *The Cloud Messenger* while the descriptive poem is entitled as *The Seasons*.

The glory of Kalidasa's work depends upon the quality of his work. His works are an indication of originality and power. Sir William Jones first

translated *Abhignan Shakuntalam* in 1789, and it was enthusiastically received in Europe. Since then, there are translations and reprints that have allowed thousands of people to be acquainted with at least one of Kalidasa's works, while tens of thousands of people have seen it being performed even on the European and American stage. It is said that there's no poet anywhere who sang of happy love between a man and a woman. Kalidasa did. Kalidasa's heroines appeal more to any reader than his heroes, as his heroines are eternal, timeless, and universal. His heroines are true, tender, and brave, and so is Shakuntala. Raja Ravi Varma, on the other hand, is the one man who has impacted an entire nation's visual culture. He was born in Kerala in 1848 and was related to the royal family of Travancore, who were supporters of aristocratic arts and culture. His father was a Sanskrit scholar while his mother was an epitome of classical dancing; thus, he incorporated mythological texts and legends along with classical dancing, which can both be found in his paintings. Varma was influenced by the European style of painting, and that influence was mixed with the Indian ethos, along with being the first one to use oil paint, which made him special. Hindu mythology was not only the subject matter for his paintings, but it was an inspiration for him. The special moments from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were depicted in his paintings, where the viewers would feel a connection with the legends and stories that they grew up listening to. Those legends had a face, a human character making it easier to connect with. It is said that Raja Ravi Varma is the artist because of whom the Hindus know what their Gods look like. He painted many paintings, recreating them in the form of oleographs and lithographs, but the influence of Kalidasa's *Abhignan Shakuntalam* can be seen specifically in his paintings of Shakuntala, which can be considered as its intermedial translation.

## **Analysis**

### **Their First Meeting:**

Kalidasa's *Abhignan Shakuntalam* Act 1

The two friends: Your Honour, we are frightened by this alarm of the elephant. Permit us to return to the cottage.

Anusuya (to SHAKUNTALA): Shakuntala dear, Mother Gautami will be anxious. We must hurry and find her.

Shakuntala (feigning lameness): Oh, oh! I can hardly walk.

King: You must go very slowly. And I will take pains that the hermitage is not disturbed.

The two friends: Your honour, we feel as if we knew you very well. Pray pardon our shortcomings as hostesses. May we ask you to seek better entertainment from us another time?

King: You are too modest. I feel honoured by the mere sight of you.

Shakuntala: Anusuya, my foot is cut on a sharp blade of grass, and my dress is caught on an amaranth twig. Wait for me while I loosen it. (She casts a lingering glance at the king, and goes out with her two friends.) (Kalidasa 1912: 28)

#### Kalidasa's *Abhignan Shakuntalam* Act 2

King: But when she went away with her friends, she almost showed that she loved me.

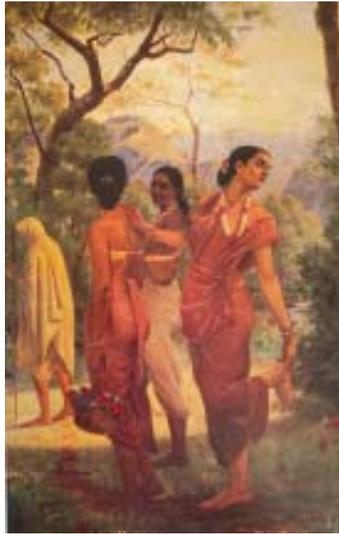
When she had hardly left my side,

"I cannot walk," the maiden cried,

And turned her face, and feigned to free

The dress not caught upon the tree. (Kalidasa 1912: 32)

Shakuntala Looks of Love (1898):



**Figure 1 (Shakuntala and her friends by Raja Ravi Varma 1898)**

The above painting is the translation of the scene by Kalidasa. This is about Shakuntala and Dushyanta's first meeting, where Shakuntala is with her friends, and they need to return to the hermitage while the king also needs

to go to fulfil his duties. She doesn't want to go, but she can't resist as she is surrounded by her friends as well as one or two hermits, which is why she pretends that she can barely walk and a thorn is stuck in her foot. By the excuse of a thorn, she takes a glance at the King and keeps on looking at him. This freezing moment of Shakuntala is painted in the same manner as that of Kalidasa's scene.

Shakuntala lived in the forest hermitage, which is why we find her and her friends in simple clothes and floral jewellery. One of her friends carries a basket of flowers in her hand, showing that they came to collect flowers. There are four people in the painting, but Ravi Varma intends the viewers to look at Shakuntala. Her clothes are different than her friends'; she has a lighter skin tone, making her more attractive than the others, also because she was the daughter of the most beautiful fairy of heaven, Menaka. She holds the shoulder of her friend for support so she can pretend that she is removing the thorn from her foot, but there's a smile on her friend's face too, as if they know about the pretence. She places her fingers on her foot but looks in a different direction, indicating that she is looking at the king, and this gesture also confirms the pretence. She does not smile but only looks at him with love or with a thought of not leaving.

Raja Ravi Varma paints Shakuntala very beautifully in that freezing moment, which is also a famous classical dance step of removing the thorn. He knew his theatre and Indian classical dance so well that the exact same gesture is given to Shakuntala.

The King's description in Act 2 about this gesture of Shakuntala also adds to the meaning of the painting, where the king says that she feigned to remove the dress, which was not caught upon the tree, giving him an indication of love.

### **Writing a Love Letter:**

Kalidasa's *Abhignan Shakuntalam* Act 3

Priyamvada (reflecting).

Well, she must write him a love-letter. And I will hide it in a bunch of flowers and see that it gets into the king's hand as if it were a relic of the sacrifice:

Anusuya. It is a pretty plan, dear, and it pleases me. What does Shakuntala say?

Shakuntala. I suppose I must obey orders:

Priyamvada.

Then compose a pretty little love-song, with a hint of yourself in it.

Shakuntala. I'll try. But my heart trembles, for fear he will despise me:

The two friends. You are too modest about your own charms. Would anybody put up a parasol to keep off the soothing autumn moonlight?:

Shakuntala (smiling).

I suppose I shall have to obey orders. (She meditates.)

King.

It is only natural that I should forget to wink when I see my darling:

For One clinging eyebrow lifted:

As fitting words she seeks:

Her face reveals her passion

For me in glowing cheeks:

Shakuntala.

Well, I have thought out a little song. But I haven't anything to write with:

Priyamvada.

Here is a lotus-leaf, glossy as a parrot's breast. You can cut the letters in it with your nails:

Shakuntala.

Now listen, and tell me whether it makes sense:

The two friends. Please.

Shakuntala (reads):

I know not if I read your heart aright;

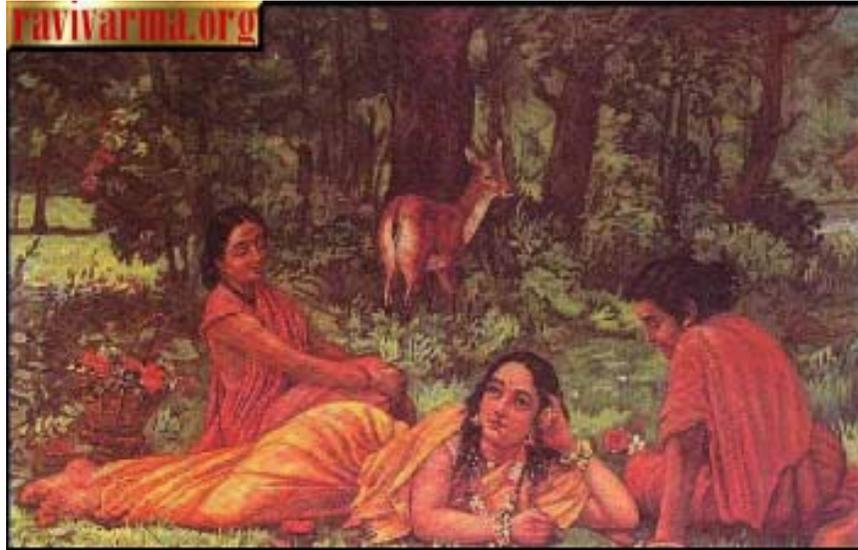
Why, pitiless, do you distress me so?

I only know that longing day and night

Tosses my restless body to and fro,

That yearns for you, the source of all its woe. (Kalidasa 1912: 38)

Shakuntala Patra Lekhan:



**Figure 2 (Shakuntala Patra Lekhan by Raja Ravi Varma 1876)**

The above painting is the translation of a scene by Kalidasa where Shakuntala is told by her friends to write a letter to the king and express her feelings. She thinks of something, but she does not have anything to write it

upon, so she is given a lotus leaf by her friend on which she writes a love song but has no idea about the presence of the king hiding there.

Raja Ravi Varma portrays Shakuntala in a very free position where she is lying on the ground thinking of what to write, which also adds to the fact that she does not know about the king's presence. She looks upwards as if she is seeking words by being lost in the king's thoughts. Her friends are shown sitting near her and looking at her, asserting that they are encouraging her to write and support her; also, it can be said that they are curious enough to know what Shakuntala writes. Even the fawn looks at Shakuntala with its eager eyes. The basket of flowers kept aside assures that the flowers are collected and that they still have time to return to the hermitage. She has a twig in her hand with which she writes on a lotus leaf.

### Conclusion

These are only two paintings by Raja Ravi Varma that are analysed, but there are more about the birth of Shakuntala, her friends fixing her dress when the king first sees her, another *patralekhan* version, the king offering his ring to Shakuntala as a memory, Menaka taking Shakuntala with her to heaven after she was forgotten by the king, Bharata playing with lion cubs, and the king reuniting with Bharata and Shakuntala. There are 8 paintings by Raja Ravi Varma, which are the translated versions of the play by Kalidasa in itself. Shakuntala has many translations in different languages and in different media, such as films, TV, paintings, sculpture, and an opera too. These translations are viewed as different adaptations or influences but not as translations. The paper aims at considering every recreation or transcreation as an intermedial translation, as the meaning conveyed is the same; however, it can have variations to fit in different media forms, structures, or cultures. These variations should be considered as a creative activity while translating, and it should not be expected for the translated text to be exactly the same as that of the source text. Shakuntala is a story created once in a legend and mixed with the imaginary and dramatic genius of Kalidasa, turning into the most popular play not only in India but in the entire world, where it reached only through translations. The same was translated by Raja Ravi Varma into a totally different form of visual art, i.e., painting.

Translation Studies cannot be limited to verbal mode only, and it is necessary to move beyond translating from one language to another and to read and interpret non-verbal elements as a means of intermedial translation. There can never be a direct or final translation of any form of art, but renditions of inter-art approaches can be found through filters such as ideological, cultural, aesthetic, mythological, and subjective. It is not possible to bridge the gap between verbal and visual, yet intermedial translation makes the

juxtaposition of visual art and the medium of writing, which shows how both media can deliver the same message.

Intermedial translation is a step beyond traditional translation, which can offer a wide range of interdisciplinary studies possible via the art of translation. It is time that translation studies as a discipline should break free from the limitations of equivalences and untranslatability, which makes it secondary to any original text. The cultural turn in translation offered an approach to focus on the meaning-making process in translation, but the question of untranslatability also arises from this cultural context. There is a need to only emphasise the meaning of the text and the accuracy to be evaluated by the audience's interpretation of the same text. This approach of intermedial translation will open new spheres for translation studies as a discipline.

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# Translator as Sahṛdaya: What is Gained in Translation?

Sreenath V.S

## Abstract

Symptomatic reading, developed and popularised by the American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, aims to understand how the translation consciously or unconsciously suppresses the ideological concerns in the source text. This method, which emerged as a reaction against the humanistic analysis of translation, played a vital role in sensitising the readers about the loss in translation, which is always a serious concern for the readers, the writers, and the translators. What is often neglected in Translation Studies is actually the new layer of politics that is added to the source text to empower it further. This paper titled ‘Translator as a *sahṛdaya*: What is Gained in Translation’ aims to problematise the process through which translation becomes a conscious political process to contextualise the source text in a new socio-political context. To uncover the political concerns of the source text, which are masked by the linguistic deficiencies of the source language, the translator needs to be a *sahṛdaya*—the one who sympathetically responds to the author. In this process, translation also functions as a political interpretation to overcome the linguistic deficiencies of the source language. To conceptualise this idea, I look at two texts—the Malayalam novel *Aarachaar* (2017) by K.R. Meera and its translation by J. Devika titled *Hangwoman* (2018). In this paper, I argue that J. Devika’s translation of Meera’s novel is a political process by which the text is aptly positioned in the critical framework of gender to overcome the linguistic barriers inevitably posed by the source language—Malayalam—in which it is written.

**Keywords:** Translation as a political process, *Aarachaar*, *Hangwoman*, Symptomatic reading.

Symptomatic reading, developed and popularised by the American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, aims to understand how the translation consciously or unconsciously suppresses the ideological concerns in the source text. This method, which emerged as a reaction against the humanistic analysis of

translation, played a vital role in sensitising the readers about the loss in translation, which is always a serious concern for the readers, the writers, and the translators. What is often neglected in Translation Studies is actually the new layer of politics that is added to the source text to empower it further. Proposed by the French Marxist Louis Althusser in his *Reading Capital*, symptomatic reading is originally a mode of reading literary and historical works to ‘determine what the work is unable to say, or what it represses because of its ideological conventions’ (Buchanan 2010: 462). Lawrence Venuti borrowed this concept from translation studies to examine the ideological implications brought about by the translator’s infidelity to the source text at the level of diction, syntax, or discourse. The symptomatic analysis was fundamentally a resistance to the humanistic analysis of translation that located only ‘a semantic unity adequate to the foreign text, stressing intelligibility, transparent communication, [and] the use value of the translation in the receiving culture’ (Venuti 1998: 24). In the *Translator’s Invisibility*, Venuti gives an example of symptomatic analysis by looking at the translations of Sigmund Freud’s text for the standard edition. Venuti notes that while Freud’s texts were often simple and colloquial, their translation was highly jargonised. When Freud had used the simple German word ‘Fehlleistung’, meaning something like ‘faulty function’, the translator employed the term ‘parapraxis’ to mean the same idea. According to Venuti, the translation of Freud into a scientific discourse from a colloquial language is symptomatic of the cultural forces of the translator’s time, which wanted to get Freud accepted within the standard medical discourse. By reading such stylistic inconsistencies symptomatically, Venuti demystified the notion of transparency concerning translation. The underlying assumption of this theoretical position is that translation is a process of elimination where the politics of the source text gets hijacked. But can translation become a creative process by giving a new layer of politics that the source text could not achieve? This paper titled ‘Translator as a *sahridaya*: What is Gained in Translation’ aims to problematise the process through which translation becomes a conscious political process to contextualise the source text in a new socio-political context. The primary concern that I will be highlighting in the present paper is the translation of the title of the source *Aarachaar* into *Hangwoman*.

The word ‘Aarachaar’ in Malayalam literally means the one who carries out execution by hanging. In Malayalam, it is a masculine noun indicating that this is a profession exclusively reserved for men. In other words, only a man is traditionally considered to be eligible enough to perform this duty because of his masculine gender. In Malayalam, there is no word to refer to a woman who is legally entrusted with the duty of executing a culprit. The ‘Aarachaar’ who the title refers to is the central character of the novel, Chetna Mullick,

who is the first lady executioner of India and the successor of her father's profession of executing people by hanging. The novel opens with the rejection of the mercy petition of Jatindranath Banerjee, who had raped and murdered a 13-year-old girl. Now Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, the 88-year-old hangman, Chetna's father, has to hang Jatindranath Banerjee. In view of the imminent hanging, Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick visits the jail along with his daughter Chetna as his assistant to do a trial of the future execution. Seeing in this exercise a possibility of public interest, a journalist named Mitra approaches Mullick and makes a promise of getting Chetna a government job and also gets from Mullick a contract for an exclusive coverage of all the happenings preceding the actual hanging. Mitra, when he visits Chetna's home, is so enraged that she breaks his camera. Extremely offended by this act of Chetna, he whispers in her ear, 'I want to fuck you hard, even if only once' (132). Young and inexperienced, she does not know what to do. When the hanging is finally confirmed, Phanibushan is already a murderer, of his brother and his sister-in-law. Although he believes that he can still be the hangman, he is not invited to do the job. So Chetna is called to hang Jatindranath Banerjee. Finally, she executes the hanging successfully and then goes to Mitra's television studio to share her experience of hanging Jatindranath Banerjee. He says in the television show, 'Viewers may be eager to know how Chetna hanged Jatindranath Banerjee today. How it took place and where, and what she said. Here we will recreate the experience for you!' (429). Chetna is invited to perform the same act in front of the television camera for the viewers. An employee named Kartik is the dummy subject for Chetna to perform the demonstration. But Chetna says that the length of the noose is not right for Kartik, and it will not suit him. Hearing this, Kartik moved out of the white circle where the demonstration is supposed to happen. By then Mitra had already become very impatient and insisted that Chetna has to be quick. Looking at Mitra, she said, 'Sanjeev Kumar, this rope actually suits you better' (430). Finally, Mitra decides to become a subject for Chetna to demonstrate the execution. As she approached him, she whispered in his ear, 'I want to fuck you at least once' (430). She ties his hand behind his back and puts the noose around his neck. Then, she declares, 'Here is where the noose tightens. The C-2 vertebra should break' (431). She once again whispered, 'Do not be afraid, Sanjeev Kumar. Mitra... There is nothing, really, to be afraid of' (431). Then she tightened the noose around Mitra's neck, and he screamed. 'His eyes rolled like balls. His tongue stuck out. His hands stuck closer to the body and scratched his thighs in sheer agony' (431), and finally he breathed his last.

The core of the story is the discussion about Chetna's selection as an 'Aarachaar' or executioner. How a profession that is traditionally reserved

for a man is taken up by a woman is definitely the central theme of the story. It is significant to note that the author has not paid attention to this aspect of the story. The title of the source text does not privilege the gendered aspect of the occupation. When a reader reads in the Malayalam language, the reader hardly gets the feeling that the text is dealing with a woman who is initiated into a profession conventionally reserved for men. In other words, the author of the source text did not try to be creative to coin a new word to reflect this crucial aspect of the story. Naming is a process of privileging a particular reading and silencing the other potential meanings. The naming arrests not only the movement of the text, but that of the reader also. The names ascribed to the text define what the text is. In other words, the title imposes ontological certitude upon the story. Ontological certitude is the act of reducing the identity of an entity to a set of fixed assumptions that we have about it. It is true that the reader can read the story in whatever ways s/he wants, and one does not need to think about the power of the ontological certitude that the title essentially imposes on the story. According to Barthes, while the idea of 'work' imposes a permanent signification and a specific generic label on a discourse, the concept of 'text' does not limit a discourse to any permanent categorisation or any fixed order of signification. Barthes notes,

The Text is plural. Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an *irreducible* (and not merely an acceptable) plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination. The plural of the Text depends, that is, not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the *stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers... (Barthes 1986:159)

We should also note that the ideas of 'work' and 'text' are not two separate entities; on the other hand, it is our attitudinal difference that makes a certain discourse either a 'work' or a 'text.' If we attribute a definite meaning and a generic label to a discourse, then we are considering it as a 'work,' whereas if we hold that a discourse can have multiple meanings and generic labels, then we are treating it as a 'text.' It is to mark this radical attitudinal shift from the idea of monolithic signification to multiplicity of signification that Barthes employs the term 'text.' Therefore, in the modern-day literary criticism, the conception about a literary work—be it a poem or a drama or a piece of literary criticism—is that it is a 'text' open to infinite possibilities of meaning.

This theoretical position vis-à-vis the meaning of the text is absolutely valid. But the important aspect that we need to keep in our mind is that the target audience of a novel is not always the informed literary critics. It includes the general public as well. So the first element that is going to influence the reader to read a text in a particular manner is the title of the text. According to

Eco, every text envisions a Model Reader. This Model Reader is a hypothetical textual entity capable of reading a text in all the possible ways the text wants it to be read. In terms of the Model Reader's function in the text, Eco classifies texts into two broad categories, namely a closed text and an open text. An open text is a text that is open to interpretations. It should be noted that although an open text is open to interpretations, it does not let its Model Reader interpret it in whatever way s/he likes. A reader who comes up with aberrant interpretations is an empirical reader. The Model Reader posited by an open text produces only those interpretations that the text envisions for itself. In other words, the Model Reader of an open text is not a deconstructive reader who can come up with aberrant interpretations to challenge the very agenda of the text. The very moment an empirical reader interprets an open text in the ways s/he wants, they lose their resemblance to the Model Reader. An open text expects an empirical reader to approximate the figure of the Model Reader. Now a question may arise: How can an Empirical Reader identify the figure of the Model Reader outlined in a text so that the former can approximate the latter? In an open text, there will be a whole lot of textual strategies outlining the image of its Model Reader. Eco cites an example of this textual strategy in his *The Role of the Reader* (1984). He says, 'If a story starts with "Once upon a time", there is a good probability that it is a fairy tale and that the evoked and postulated Model Reader is a child or an adult eager to react in a childish mood' (140). As empirical readers, we are supposed to tease out these textual strategies outlining the Model Reader so as to approximate ourselves to the Model Reader. A closed text, on the other hand, does not expect its Model Reader to interpret the text. What it asks its Model Reader to do is to read the story by paying attention to the right aspect of the plot.

In the source text, the title *Aarachaar* does not contain this gendered aspect of the profession and fails to position the reader to become a serious reader or the Model Reader that the text anticipates. This is where the contribution of the translator comes in handy. As opposed to the general conception that translation is a mechanism of mediation where the original and unique elements of the source text get lost. Devika's translation of Meera's *Aarachaar* is creative. If the translator had gone for the literal translation of the text, it would have been *Hangman*. But she chose to translate the title into *Hangwoman*. By translating the title *Aarachaar* into *Hangwoman*, Devika recaptured the essence that the writer of the source text could not give to the title. This shows that translation is a creative process where the translator responds positively to the writer's intention or *vivakṣā*. In other words, the translator needs to be a *sahṛdaya*. Ānandavardhana, in his lost work *Viṣamabāṇalīlā*, opined that the actualisation of a literary work happens only

in the presence of *sahṛdayas* or men of taste, just as a lotus bloom when graced by the rays of the sun: ‘Virtues blossom, /when admired by men of taste/ When graced by the sun’s rays, / a lotus becomes a lotus [*kamala*]’ (qtd. in Anandavardhana 1990: 207). In another poem often attributed to Kālidāsa, the speaker makes a strong plea to Lord Brahmā to spare him from the punishment of presenting his poem to an insensitive listener or *arasika* (*arasikeṣukavitvanivedanaṁsirasimālikhamālikha*||). Acknowledging the importance of a *sahṛdaya* in the appreciation of a work of art, another anonymous poet declares that the act of a poet appreciating his work of art is as inappropriate as a father appreciating the beauty of his daughter. Although a poet, the poem says, is the creator of a text, its merit has to be ultimately judged by the readers erudite in *kāvyaśāstra* (*kaviḥkarotikāvyaṅisvādujānātīpaṇḍītaḥ|sundarāyapilāvānyarīpatirjānāti no pitā* ||). It is clear that a work of art became meaningful only when it succeeded in evoking the desired aesthetic response in the spectator/reader.

This creative act primarily demystifies the common conception that translation is primarily meant for ‘readers who do not understand the original?’ (Eco 1984: 151). It is rather a creative process where the translator has to interact with the model reader of the text, that is, the reader anticipated by the text. The title of the text is definitely a component of the reader implied by the text. The text controls and fashions the reader’s expectations about the text with the aid of a mechanism called implied reader—‘atextual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient’ (Iser 1978: 334). An implied reader is a textual structure in the sense that the image of the implied reader is outlined abstractly in the text by the textual strategies such as the tone of narration, perspectives, and so on (35). The actual reader, by responding positively to this response-inviting system, actualises the meaning of the text. According to Iser, an implied reader ‘pre-structures the role to be assumed by each recipient without necessarily defining him and this holds true even when texts appear to ignore their possible recipient or actively exclude him. Thus the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text’ (4). The title *Hangwoman* plays an important role in moulding the reader to respond to the text in a particular manner. To uncover the political concerns of the source text, which are masked by the linguistic deficiencies of the source language, the translator needs to be a *sahṛdaya*—the one who sympathetically responds to the author. In this process, translation also functions as a political interpretation to overcome the linguistic deficiencies of the source language. To conceptualise this idea, I look at two texts—the Malayalam novel *Aarachaar* by K.R. Meera and its translation by J. Devika titled *Hangwoman*. J. Devika’s translation of Meera’s novel is a political process by which the text is aptly positioned in the critical

framework of gender framework to overcome the linguistic barriers inevitably posed by the source language—Malayalam—in which it is written.

That said, I do not mean to argue that symptomatic reading is a redundant process and the translator can tamper with the politics of the source text. A symptomatic reading is always necessary because it necessitates the importance of being faithful to the source text and shows that the ideology of the text is as important as its semantic content. It places on the translator a heavy task of being truthful not only to the source text but also to the target reader because the translator is the only agent of representing the source text for the readers in the target language. What I try to argue in the paper is that translation can also be a creative process by adding a new layer of politics to the source text. To quote Spivak, a translator must ‘surrender to the [source] text’ (1993: 205) to understand the political ethos of the text. A translator can surrender to the source text only by paying equal attention to the logic and the rhetoric of the source text. Logic is that process of moving from one word to another by making connections. Rhetoric is that quality of the language to convey an ideology without stating it explicitly.

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# Translations between Realities and Genres: From ‘*Pikoor Diary*’ to *Pikoo* by Satyajit Ray

Subhadeep Ray

## Abstract

In the Indian subcontinent, modern film has maintained a close relation with modern fiction to both expose a hidden literary potential to be ‘translated’ into another medium and establish independent cinematic perspectives towards a multi-layered reality. The difference of the language of cinema from that of literature has created here a very complex field of creative exchange between the two genres and also that of critical interactions between the reader and the viewer. In the light of this dynamic, this paper proposes to study the elements of mediations and transmutations in the translation of Satyajit Ray’s short story ‘Pikoor Diary’ (‘Pikoo’s Diary’), 1970, to his later short telefilm, *Pikoo*, 1980. Leading the mid-20th century cultural turn of the Bengali realistic cinema—and by implication the subcontinental cinema—Ray’s movies profoundly translate the written into the visual—a fact well acknowledged by scholars; but a unique poly-system can also be seen to be operating in the few cases of open-ending correspondences between Ray as a filmmaker and Ray as an author of the ‘source’ text, both being interested in teasing out alternative sides of truth in both life and art. Thus ‘Pikoor Diary’ itself exhibits an inner translatability—a six-year-old boy’s linguistically and perceptively ambivalent reflections on splitting Bengali middle-class metropolitan living—whereas *Pikoo* picks up characters from Pikoo’s writing to shift them to dual sets of actions framed by his entries and exits.

**Keywords:** modern film, modern fiction, cinematic translation, transmediality, cinematic adaptation

I’m slightly irritated ... by this constant reference to humanism in my work — I feel that there are other elements also. It’s not just about human beings. It’s also a structure, a form, a rhythm, a face, a temple, a feeling for light and shade, composition, a way of telling a story. – Satyajit Ray to Andrew Robinson (2022: 8)

In *Asterix and the Cauldron*, the 13th volume of the Asterix comic series, written by Rene Goscinny and illustrated by Albert Uderzo, Asterix is wrongly accused by his fellow villagers of failing to take care of a cauldron, full of Gaul coins, and is expelled from his village. He and his inseparable friend, Obelix, leave their village with the empty cauldron as they take an oath to fill it with coins again. When they arrive at the colony of Romans to fight back the money or earn it by labour, two friends are caught on the way by a young playwright cum director in search of characters, who would both be ‘natural’ and ‘import new element’ that would create the ‘modern drama’, to use the English translation of the Asterix series by Anthea Bell and Dereck Hockridge. Asterix informs what he is actually after—‘Personally, I’ve got a cauldron to fill’—and the theatre enthusiast replies, ‘Marvellous! Great! What a line! You’ll make theatrical history’ (Goscinny 2016: 36). A subtle change in register—that can be understood as a functional variation in the use of language in a different context—here leads to a new field, or a subject matter, a new tenor on the part of the characters involved, and also a different mode of communication. The cauldron is constantly emptied and filled throughout the narrative, and it can be used as a poignant metaphor for a network of interconnected genres, through which one form of textuality is translated into another, according to the shifting demands of reality. What Susan Bassnett refers to as the ‘process-orientated’ approach in translation studies, that is to follow ‘what actually takes place during translation’ (2002: 18), is of particular importance to the cases of transgeneric translation within a broad linguistic and cultural framework. This paper aims to focus on a case study of transgeneric translation as a significant aesthetic preoccupation in the cultural context of our subcontinent: the subcontinental modern film has always collected its source texts from the native modern fiction to both expose their hidden literary potential to be ‘translated’ into another medium and establish independent cinematic perspectives towards a multilayered reality. This paper is also meant as a humble tribute to one of the makers of modern Indian cinema, Satyajit Ray (1921–1992), whose birth centenary was celebrated in 2021–2022. This study draws on Ray’s interviews and non-fictional observations for a better understanding of the composite nature of his art, as it is exhibited in the concerned texts.

The difference of the ‘language’ of cinema from that of literature has created in this subcontinent a very complex field of creative exchange between the two genres and also that of critical interactions between the writer, the reader, the director, and the spectator. In light of this dynamic, this paper proposes to study the processes of mediations and transmutations in the transgeneric translation of Satyajit Ray’s short story ‘*Pikoor Diary*’ (‘Pikoo’s Diary’), written and published in 1970 in a literary magazine, into the screenplay

of his short telefilm of 26 minutes, made for a French channel at the behest of a freelance producer named Hanri Fraise. The film, entitled *Pikoo*, was released in 1980, i.e., exactly a decade after the publication of the source text. Leading the mid-20th century cultural turn of the Bengali realistic cinema—and by implication the sub-continental cinema—Ray's movies profoundly translate the written into the visual, a fact well acknowledged by film critics; but a unique poly-system can also be seen to be operating in the few cases of open-ending correspondences between Ray as a filmmaker and Ray as an author of the 'source' text. This aspect is particularly significant in the scholarship on Ray, taking into consideration his typical approach to reality through the lens of literature and his engagement with multiple transmutations, involving a play of genres and adjacent cultural resonance. His own words guide one to understand this aesthetic process: 'When I write my own story, I use characters and milieu I am familiar with. I can deal with something I do not know at first hand only with the help of someone who does (Bibhutibhusan's village, Tarashankar's world of zamindars/landlords, Tagore's Renaissance Bengal)' (qtd. in Basu 2016: n. p.). Ea.). As it would be asserted below, '*Pikoor Diary*' itself exhibits an inner translatability—a six-year-old boy's linguistically and perceptively ambivalent reflections on splitting Bengali middle-class metropolitan living in Ray's Calcutta—whereas *Pikoo* picks up characters from *Pikoo's* narrative to shift them to a dual set of actions framed by the little kid's entries to and exits from the screen.

This paper concentrates on a basic component of the entire cinematic composition: its screenplay, which is studied here as the 'target' text being adapted from the short story. In his preface to the collection, *Pikoor Diary o Anyanya (Pikoo's Diary and Others)*, published in book form in 1986, Ray admits, 'that the dissimilarities between the screenplay and the source text become more evident than the similarities between them when these two texts are read comparatively' (1986: 3; *my translation*). This study draws upon Mona Baker's application of the 'narrative approach' in translation studies in reading the shifts and crossovers between the tale and the screenplay. It further applies Gilles Deleuze's notion of deterritorialisation in language that discloses underlying differences of a cultural category. And it also seeks to foreground that cinematic adaptation, as primarily found in the screenplay, may be considered as a specific form of translation, by virtue of the capacity of shifting the 'source' text's 'cultural and/or temporal setting' and reframing it in an alternative mode of communication; and this process, which involves generic shift, renders the notion of essence in cultural production untenable (Sanders 2006: 19). As found in the case study to be assessed here, communicative and conceptual materials of literature are divorced from their ideological framing to be rearranged according to a new moral and aesthetic

pattern. The screenplay thus acts as a sort of entry point to the film that brings together imaginary, linguistic, and ideological elements within a distinct narrative shape. In the case of Ray, especially, the screenplay is the first step towards what he calls ‘organicity’ or a sense of unity and shaping power of cinema (2022: 46).

The screenplay, though a major preoccupation of a director like Ray, has not been given much importance in either translation studies or film studies as target texts prepared for the director of a movie. The role of a well-organised screenplay in the making of an Indian movie confirms its dependence on the fictional narrative, or a strong story line—a fact not so well observed in the case of many European cinematic traditions. As a leading figure of the subcontinental cinema, Ray thus affirmed in an interview taken by Bert Cardullo in 1989 that the screenplay ‘comes to me straightaway, and then of course the filming of them’ (2022: 55). This is, therefore, of further significance to the study of translation between genres. As Susan Bassnett observes, ‘the translator is both receiver and emitter, the end and the beginning of two separate but linked chains of communication: Author—Text—Receiver = Translator—Text—Receiver.’ (2002: 45). In the case of the transgeneric translation of literary text to cinema, this model can be modified and extended in view of the involvements of the author, the screenwriter, who may or may not be the director, and the director, who produces the film from the screenplay: Author—Literary Text—Receiver = Screenplay writer—Text (the Screenplay)—Receiver = Director—Text (the Movie)—Receiver (the Spectator). Furthermore, the concerned case study involves the intralingual translation from the Modernist literary genre of short story to a basic component of the film, which, to follow Raymond Williams’ evaluation of the genre, ‘is the definitive Modernist mode’ that locates Modernism ‘in the *inter-mediate* zone of urban experience . . . in a “structure of feeling” that has not yet assumed the relatively formalised shape of aesthetic doctrine or political act’ (Pinkney 2007: 11).

Ray’s role as an avant-garde artist in shaping the cultural expressions of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Bengali Modernism, and particularly Bengali film, is, therefore, crucially interlinked with the journey from ‘*Pikoor Diary*’ to *Pikoo*, covering a long period of Ray’s career as well as the career of Bengali postcolonial art. In this connection, the present study would examine how the two texts act differently from each other and ideological investments in these signs of difference. ‘*Pikoor Diary*’ itself informs an undoing of the coherent and tight form of literary realism in the conventional narrative form of short stories. The singularity of a narrative, built on a series of diary entries by a kid, works beyond the official grammar of language and culture and is, therefore, untranslatable in the formal sense. These entries empty out the adult world,

while reconstituting reality as potentially disorienting: 'I am writing a diary. I am writing the diary on my new blue copy. Seated on my bed, I am writing', 'I have filled in my fountain pen with the green ink that belongs to my father and that is of the Queen Brand by using a dropper belonging to my mother, who has had cold by mistake' (1986: 9–10; *my translation*). Thus, *Pikoo's* coming to grips with a broken reality re-marks every sign through an interplay between repetition and difference —the two basic ingredients of translation. Mona Baker, in introducing translation as re-narration, reminds us that 'the stories we narrate do not only mediate our access to reality, but also participate in configuring that reality' (2014: 158). In the light of this observation *Pikoo's* diary configures reality as constituted by some not-so-well-coordinated images, sounds, objects, characters, actions, and events. The only thing that may keep his world in order, to some extent, are the rules on the pages of his blue copy: 'Fortunately my notebook is ruled, and that prevents my writing from being slanted, but my elder brother can write without any rule; and my father can also write in straight lines, but father doesn't have any holiday' (1986: 9; *my translation*). The original Bengali text does not have any punctuation except full stops after long compound sentences. However, it is complete with its characters, settings, and, most importantly, projections of a version of reality, which is bordered by a child's reception of his surroundings and cannot be linked to what Baker identifies as 'the abstract, institution-driven notion of "discourse"' (2014: 159). This has further implications for the study of genre, which, from the institutional/discursive perspective, is seen as a socially legitimate form of literary production, reception and mediation. However, a nuanced reading of literature reveals how apparently similar networks and patterns of production, distribution and consumption consist of a wide variance of engagements with reality that undermine any sort of fixed classification.

*Pikoo's* diary, thus, suspends any sort of abstract judgement, as it involves what, after Gregg Lambert's explication of Deleuze, may be called 'the invention of a new language that carries the first outside its usual furrows (*habitus*), which, in turn, entails' another 'shattering of the clichés of visibilities and statements', and 'the "ideas" and "habits"' that usually 'determine the forms of seeing and saying' (2000: 152). *Pikoo's* diary thus both restricts and extends visibility by freeing it from those discursive 'ideas' and 'habits' to create novel connections among signifiers:

Mother does not work at the office. She only works at home. Mother is not at home now, as she has gone out with Hitesh uncle, and she promised me that she would bring something for me from the New Market. Nowadays mother presents me so many gifts: a pencil sharpener, a wristwatch that shows only 3 pm, a hockey stick and a ball. God only knows what she will bring today, perhaps an air-gun that I wish to

possess; let's see. ... Father asked Mother, 'Why there is a rifle at home?' Mother replied, 'So what?' Father scowled, 'You do not have any sense'. Mother replied, 'Why do you start shouting at me when you get back? ...' Father spoke in English. Mother spoke in English. Mother was more fluent—very fast just like what we watched at the cinema. I've watched Jerry Lewis ... and a Hindi movie ... without any scene of fighting ... Now my pen is running out. (1986: 9-10; *my translation*).

Pikoo's rejection of stock statements and visibilities pushes language to its limits and turns it towards its own 'outside' that 'appears in its points of rapture, in the gaps, or tears, in the interstices between words, or between one word and the next' (Lambert 2000: 153). His repetitions of the familiar things and events find unforeseen play of inconsistencies underlying the domestic world. This process is carried on across phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and six broad segments of his diary, and it is Pikoo's way of shifting his six sets of experiences within a single Bengali urban middle-class household from their habitual territory to a more creative one: 'As I write so much, I have a little pain in my fingers. When my mother was cutting my nails, I said, "Ah!" Mother asked, "What happened? Do you feel pain?" I didn't say anything so that the fact of my diary writing was not disclosed to her' (1986: 12; *my translation*). Thus, diary writing is a private affair for Pikoo, and it wrests from the realm of the familiar a reassessment of reality that the adult world has lost hold of. Within its own boundaries, Pikoo's narrative shamelessly discovers what the adult would have received as matters of shame and guilt. In this manner the diary offers an ethical world of its own that does not submit to the moral coding of its normative surrounding. The issues Pikoo pokes his pen into include his mother's extramarital affair, his elder brother's involvement in radical politics, and his grandfather's heart disease:

A few minutes ago, the telephone was ringing and I ran to it and said hello to find in wonder father had been calling. He asked, 'Who, Pikoo?' I replied, 'Yes, it's me'. Father asked, 'Isn't your mother there?' I replied, 'No. Mother isn't home'. Father asked, 'Where?' I replied, 'With Hitesh uncle mother has gone to watch a movie that is made for elder ones'. Father answered, 'O' and disconnected the line. I heard the sound of his putting the receiver down. (Ray 1986: 10; *my translation*)

The diary ends with an absolute isolation that Pikoo shares with his bedridden and gradually unresponsive grandfather:

Grandfather stays on the first floor because Doctor Banerjee has forbidden him to climb up the stairs ... Grandfather has a bell ... today I heard ting, ting, ting! ... I came to grandfather's room ... the wooden stairs created sound: doom, doom, doom! ... I found grandfather was looking upwards at the ceiling fan. It was the only Usha fan in our house ... I am writing my diary again and I am seated on my bed. There is no page

left and there is no one around besides grandfather and me and a fly ... very naughty fly and no more page and no more copy. It's finished. (Ray 1986: 14; *my translation*)

The diary becomes an instance of the literary refashioning of living connections and achieves a kind of novelty that a logically discursive account would not be able to reach.

In 'Postulates of Linguistics', included in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Felix Guattari insist on a feature of language that has direct relevance for translation studies,

*You will never find a homogeneous system that is not still or already affected by a regulated, continuous, immanent process of variation .... We were wrong to give the impression at times that constants existed alongside variables...that was only for convenience of presentation. For it is obvious that the constants are drawn from the variables themselves...it is a treatment of the variable opposed to the other kind of treatment, or continuous variation. So-called obligatory rules correspond to the first kind of treatment, whereas optional rules concern the construction of a continuum of variation. (2004: 120)*

In the light of the above observation, *Pikoo's Diary* offers one variation of generic/aesthetic possibility as well as one of the many options in life opened up by an unfolding reality. *Pikoo*, probably imitating adults, decides to keep his diary in a secret place. However, it is the film director who decides to display it, although in the form of a different composite genre of film. According to Andrew Robinson, "*Pikoo* is a very complex film", Ray commented. "It is a poetic statement which cannot be reduced to concrete terms". Ray, as Robinson reports, was considering leaving Calcutta and moving to Bombay out of disgust at the sorry condition of the film industry, and his 'mental state may have had some influence on *Pikoo*' (1989: 253-54). In the case of *Pikoo*, the shifts from the literary text to the film are mainly threefold, and they are well visible in the screenplay. *Pikoo* still remains a central character but all the events are no longer viewed through his eyes — the screenplay keeps him away from some of the central actions, and *Pikoo* is also observed by others; the film is meant to be more explicit with a bedroom scene between his mother and her lover and it leads to an ideologically mediated conclusion that an Indian mother cannot love her child properly if she is in an adulterous relationship — a conclusion Ray unambiguously expressed in an well-discussed interview on the film; and, the screenplay provides rather unruly dairy narration of the short story with a definite pattern, indicated at the first place by the use of proper names for each character. This is an example of the organised pattern that Ray likes to associate with the filmmaking, but the screenplay acts also in favour of a sort of moral reframing and rehabilitation of an ethically uncertain literary text. This reframing may be seen as the director Ray's conformity to the cinematic form, whose

dramatic rhythm and contrasts not only deviate from the literary treatment in the source text but also maintain a clearly visible binary between what is accepted and what is not. Through a generic transfer, a child's inimitable expression of what in Deleuzian terms may be called 'the conditions for changes in actual things' (Williams 2008: 56) is put in order. What Ray favours as the cinematic telling of the story requires being 'equipped to trace the growth of a person or a situation' within a comprehensive spatiotemporal limit, as the director confirmed in his 1989 interview, mentioned before (2022: 53).

A reading of the screenplay of *Pikoo* as a 'target text', therefore, involves Ray's own notion of the difference between literary narrative and cinematic narrative, the latter being specifically a filmmaker's craft. This may also serve as a significant reflection on the inter-generic translation:

Compare a good film of a book with the book itself and you will find that the original has undergone a process of thorough reshaping. The reason is simple, but needs to be stressed repeatedly: books are not primarily written to be filmed.

If they were, they would read like scenarios; and, if they were good scenarios, they would probably read badly as literature, for scenarios are no more than indications in words of what is really meant to be conveyed in images.

When I say 'reshaping', I do not mean reshaping beyond recognition. Obviously there are elements which remain unaltered or at least are recognizable.... (Ray 2011: 15)

Following Ray's formulation, one may focus on a few 'scenarios' in the screenplay of *Pikoo* to trace the narrative shifts from the source short story. The screenplay starts with suggestions to the movement of the camera to focus on Pikoo's photographs, followed by a photograph of his parents, Ranjan and Seema. Such a stance reverses the gaze, as the spectator is allowed directly to enter into Pikoo's world, without the help of him. The first dialogue is again between Pikoo's father and mother, and that rests on the anxiety of a strained relationship. Therefore, when Pikoo enters the screen, he finds things around him in a condition of falling apart, and he exercises his disciplinary authority on a dog: 'Pikoo now looks at the neighbouring house. A dog is constantly barking from that house. Pikoo stares for a while and shouts aloud. Pikoo: Hush! The dog magically stops barking, and Pikoo becomes satisfied...' (Ray 1986: 18-19; *my translation*). In the screenplay, Pikoo assures his grandfather, too, that he will gun down grandfather's heart disease. The script gives an elaborate treatment of the psychological nuances of Seema, who spends time with her boyfriend in her bedroom even when Pikoo is at home and manages the situation by strategically engaging her son:

Pikoo: What is that?

Hitesh: Guess.

Pikoo: Chocolate?  
Hitesh smiles.  
Hites: Come with me. I shall show you.  
Balcony.  
Pikoo unpacks it. There are a beautiful drawing copy and a set of brushes and a set of sketch pen.  
...  
Seema: Pikoo, come here.  
Pikoo: What?  
...  
Seema: You may play an interesting game.  
Pikoo: What game?  
Seema: Go to the garden, and draw picture of every flower you see.  
Pikoo: Every flower?  
Seema: Everyone. Draw the red flower with red colour, yellow flower with yellow colour, and violet flower with violet colour.  
Pikoo: (Excited) I have to match colour with colour, isn't it?  
Seema: Match between colours. (Ray 1986: 28-29; *my translation*)  
....

The action of the film is thus split between the bedroom, where Seema suffers by recalling Pikoo's innocent trust and Hitesh turns restless, and the garden, where Pikoo surveys the flowers and searches for appropriate colours. The mother cannot restrain her tears when she looks out her window, as before drawing the curtains, she catches sight of the little figure in the garden bent over his drawing copy. For Ray, where the directors want 'to make a crucial point—it's better if it's made visually rather than verbally' (2022: 11)—a strategy most eloquently applied at the ending of *Charulata*, 1964, the iconic filmic adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's short story, '*Nastanirh*', 1901. In *Pikoo*, Pikoo fails in his endeavour as he does not find a satisfactory way to draw a white flower, and he finally decides to sketch it with a black pen. The screenplay ends with a series of overlapping scenes to culminate in a loud and clear representation of grief and suffering as effects of the violation of moral codes of family. Though the film is not framed to state any solution to the crisis it deals with, its ideological aversion to such human terms is stated by the succession of mutually disrupting scenarios suggested in the screenplay: Hitesh's departure, the death of Pikoo's grandfather in an unattended situation, Seema's weeping, and finally Pikoo, being zoomed in on, appears as a lonely figure copying a violet flower on the balcony. While in the short story, Pikoo stops writing his diary abruptly, leaving the reader clueless in a precarious present, the end of the screenplay with the mourning image of Seema seems to hark back to a happy domestic world without any assurance of its existence ever in their life.

In *Asterix and the Cauldron*, the cauldron had primarily contained onion soup before it was being filled with coins. When Obelix asks Asterix why they primarily poured out the soup, Asterix answers one can buy gallons of onion soup with the money the cauldron can carry in it. Such an explanation baffles Obelix even further as he fails to understand if money enables one to buy soup; finally, what could be the point of wasting the soup in the first place? The translations between genres and realities involve such wonderings between variable perceptions and respective positions with respect to life and art.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is a slightly extended and reworked version of the paper presented by me in the IACLALS Annual Conference 2022. I am indebted to a wide range of discussions on different aspects of translation studies in our sub-continent, the plenary speeches, and particularly the insightful observations of Professor G.J.V. Prasad, who chaired the session of my paper reading. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the organisers and participants of the conference.

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# **The Translation of Visual Motifs: Engaging with the Currency of the Spectral in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Vishal Bharadwaj's *Haider* (2014)**

Swatee Sinha

## **Abstract**

Taking as its case study William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 cinematic adaptation of the same as *Haider*, the article proposes to analyse the translational economy of literary motifs that engage with the notion of the spectral. It begins with the proposition that Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in communicating an ontological condition of doubt and uncertainty as to the future course of action, remains invested in a rich poetics of inarticulacy communicated through strong visual motifs. The evocation of such a poetics of inarticulacy thus relies on regimes of signification other than language and deploys a string of visual cues as part of its interpretive framework to fill in the lapses and ruptures in verbal correspondence. The dramatic rendition of *Hamlet* set in 16th-century Denmark is populated by spectral shapes; Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*, which assimilates this poetics of spectrality as part of its translational grammar, draws upon a rich repertoire of visual omens garnered from the conflicted political topos of Kashmir in the 90s to underscore the beleaguered consciousness of the central character of *Haider*, caught between filial duty and the need to avenge his father's disappearance and untimely demise on the one hand and honouring his mother's newly consecrated wedding vows with the traitor who conspired against his father on the other. The essay reflects on semiotic ruptures and the disruption of the signifying ecology of language resulting in an unhooking of the consciousness from a conventional grammar of representation. Lines of rupture create zones of inarticulacy that volatilise the grammar of representation and introduce the visual currency of the spectral. The article proposes to enquire how Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014) transposes the spectral grammar of representation arising out of linguistic inarticulacy from the political climate of intrigue in the state of 16th century Denmark to the insurgency-ridden,

politically volatile landscape of Kashmir of the 90s. In other words, the article focuses on the specific economy of signs that draws on visual motifs to communicate the spectral world of *Hamlet* racked by instability, intrigue, and sedition, along with its complex nebula of affect, onto the politically volatile region of Kashmir. The socio-affectual correspondences and transactions between *Hamlet* and *Haider* remain invested in a grammar of translation that closes the gap or the temporal distance between the plays by producing a rich ecology of signs revolving around the motif of the spectral to communicate the dilemma of the central characters and the resultant deferral of action.

**Keywords:** *Hamlet*, *Haider*, literary motif, spectral, semiotics, translation

### Introduction

The paper investigates the currency of the spectral in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*. It argues that in both *Hamlet* and *Haider* a breach or rupture in the linguistic fabric of communication provides the occasion to introduce a semiotic phenomenology that focalises on visual props and motifs to address the lapses in communication arising out of verbal non-correspondence or lacunae. In order to chalk out the theoretical ambit of translation studies in terms of a semiotic phenomenology, the paper draws upon the works of the linguist Roman Jakobson and the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. It specifically looks at the textual transactions between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and its cinematic interpretation by Vishal Bhardwaj as *Haider* through the semiotic phenomenology of the spectral. Both Jakobson and Deleuze mobilise a pragmatic approach in the field of translation studies based on a material phylum, thus focusing on the social and material substrate underpinning the economy of words. Jakobson's 1959 article 'On the Linguistic Aspects of Translation' is a deconstruction of the structuralist paradigm (Kozin 2020: 161–2) in translation studies. The semiotic-phenomenological interface brings together Saussurean semiology and Husserlian phenomenology,<sup>1</sup> creating a plane of continuum where language as a social assemblage is destabilised by complex and plural regimes of signification. Husserl's phenomenology seeks to mobilise the heuristic or experiential texture of the sign beyond the structural function ascribed to it. Jakobson, who draws upon the theories of Saussure and Husserl, concludes that the sign is not the product of a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified but is defined by 'far more intricate relationships' that regulate the process of 'meaning production' (163), where 'translation is conditioned by the immanent structures in language that correspond to the immanent structures in experience'. Thus translation is not just about finding linguistic equivalents, which would be an interlinguistic act of translation, but is also concerned about inter-semiotic translation, which

involves the translation of one medium into another, switching from one semiotic system to another, moving from a written to a visual medium.

### **Theatre as Improvisation**

Angelie Multani (2015), in her critical appraisal of campus adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in the context of Indian universities, elucidates how such cross-cultural adaptations deploy inter-semiotic translations involving stylistic experimentations and non-linguistic modes of communication. Many of these student performances rely heavily on Indian dramatic styles like the *nautanki* or *tamasha*, prioritising song and dance over the linguistic sophistry of traditional Shakespearean plays, whereas others put into effect a strong visual coding based on popular Hindi cinema techniques. Angelie Multani's synoptic assessment of a 2013 rendition of *Hamlet* by Sri Venkateswara College (SVC), University of Delhi, will enable us to pitch the point of deliberation of the present essay in a more nuanced fashion, instantiating the complex interactional dynamics between a theatrical text, its written transcription, and its performative poetics. The SVC adaptation pared down the original play to exchanges between four characters: The Father, or the Ghost; Hamlet; Claudius; and Ophelia. Through an original use of props such as a tennis ball and eggs, which symbolised the state or the nation, and various kinds of material bearings, the play deliberated on the unreliability of all constructed notions of identity accentuated through the punning between the words 'Hamlet' and 'omelette', which remain interchangeable, dissolving the ontological moorings of the central character into a string of material substitutes. The falling apart of a sense of the self, the disintegration of being into the currency of the spectral, and the breakdown of all linguistic coordinates of experience seem to foreground vacuoles of non-communication haunted by spectral presences unhinged from a stable axis of representation. The inter-semiotic dynamics of translation thus engage with multiple media and dynamic props drawn from the immediate social substrate to articulate the dilemma of the central character.

In his dissertation entitled *Amputating Shakespeare: Theatre Becoming-Theatre*, Evans Crump traces 'the interplay between sensory and conceptual elements' (2020: 6) in his discussion of a live performance scene based on Act III Scene I of the original play. The brief discussion that follows engages with the critical question concerning the adaptation of the physicality of performance techniques to communicate philosophical concepts. At this crucial juncture of the play, Hamlet delivers his 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, contemplating whether to end his life or carry on. The psychological oscillation of Hamlet's psyche reflected in the text of his speech is translated into an embodied event. Shredding of the textual or linguistic content or amputating

the verbal dimension of representation and punctuating it with silences reduces the monologue to 'snatches of words and phrases' that are picked up and echoed by two other cast members playing spirits who circle Hamlet, thus dissipating his corporeality into spectral spaces. The unified, singular entity of Hamlet is fractured into multiple sites, as the spectral presences mouth the words originally ascribed to Hamlet's sole self, splitting 'one man's psychological treatise on the burden of existence' into a hoary and spectral projection of physical and mental anguish across multiple sites of performance. The drastic amputation of the full text into scattered, incoherent words such as 'Suffer', 'Sleep', 'Die', and 'Heartache' gives articulation to a rich poetics of silences. The long pauses between these sporadic utterances transform into fecund zones of affectual transactions based on non-linguistic modalities of representation. These scattered debris of language, such as 'grunt' and 'sweat', shaken loose from the monolithic block of language, are inornate, 'simple, kinesthetic and aurally punchy' (Crump 2020: 152) activating a broader sensorium of affects rather than focusing on a purely linguistic transcription to portray the physiology of a tormented consciousness. The words in blocks in the quotation that follows exude a kinetic energy of their own that breaks free from the grid of the signifying chain to engage in a corporeal portrayal of trauma

TO BE, OR NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION, /whether 'tis nobler in the  
mind to  
SUFFER/THE SLINGS AND ARROWS of outrageous fortune, /or to take arms  
against a sea  
Of troubles, /and by opposing end them? TO DIE: TO SLEEP;/No more; and by a  
sleep  
TO SAY WE END/THE HEART-ACHE and the thousand natural shocks/That flesh  
is heir  
to, 'tis a consummation/Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;/To sleep:  
perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;/For in that sleep of death WHAT DREAMS  
MAY COME/When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,/Must give us pause: there's  
the respect/That makes calamity of so long life;/For who would bear the whips  
and scorns of time,/The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,/The pangs  
of despised love, the law's delay,/The insolence of office and the spurns/That  
patient merit of the unworthy takes,/When he himself might his quietus  
make/With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,/TO GRUNT AND SWEAT under  
a  
weary life./But that the dread of something after death,/The undiscover'd country  
from whose bourn/No traveller returns, puzzles the will/And makes us rather bear  
those ills we have/Than fly to others that we know not of?/THUS CONSCIENCE  
DOES  
MAKE COWARDS OF US ALL:/And thus the native hue of resolution/Is sicklied  
o'er with  
the pale cast of thought,/And enterprises of great pith and moment/With this

regard their currents turn awry,/And lose the name of action.—SOFT YOU NOW!  
 THE  
 FAIR OPHELIA! Nymph, in thy orisons/Be all my sins remember'd (Shakespeare,  
 Act III, Scene i)

### **Filmed Interpretations of Shakespeare:**

In the introduction to her book, *Shakespeare on Film*, written in 2005, Judith Buchanan notes:

Shakespeare on film has...been sanctioned as part of the legitimate performance history of a Shakespeare play. As a subject, it has carved out a place for itself both within Shakespeare performance studies as part of the history of the ongoing life of a play, and within film studies as part of the debate about adaptation and the encounter between differing cultural registers. (2)

A filmed interpretation of a play is tied up with questions concerning the fidelity of the adaptation to the text and the framing of the play within broader issues like performance studies and cultural studies. The poetics and politics of the translation of a play from the text to the theatre to a realist visual medium involve grappling with the 'extravagant rhetoric' and 'meta-theatrical' and 'self-reflexive' quality of Shakespearean plays, as illustrated in the 'mouse-trap scene' in *Hamlet*, which uses the device of a dumb show as a play within a play. Bhardwaj's transcreation of Shakespeare through the idiom of contemporary Hindi cinema is rooted in a specific cultural politics, the conflict-ridden, India-administered Kashmir of the 1990s. Whereas Bharadwaj's adaptation retains the rudimentary structure of the plot as a scaffolding to pitch his unique problematics, the film gains traction as a semiotic act of transcreation. As the essay purports to show, Bhardwaj's adaptation hinges on both the metaphorical and literal implications of the spectral; the reduction of linguistic extravagance to traces of conversation and the pivotal metaphor of the 'disappeared' (referring to civilian disappearances) in Kashmir lends the filmic adaptation its own artistic authenticity (Yates 2016).

The article proposes to analyse the translational economy of literary motifs, engaging with the notion of the spectral, taking as its case study William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 cinematic adaptation of the same as *Haider*. Bhardwaj translates across cultures and across geographies, 'appropriating the films in a completely different cultural milieu' (Bhagira 2015: 2). Stephen Alter observes:

The brutal ironies of Kashmir and the shadow puppetry of violence offer a perfect counterpoint to the family intrigue and feudal politics of Hamlet's tragedy . . . the violence and deceit that Shakespeare weaves into his tragedy merge seamlessly with the fabric of contemporary Kashmir . . . By setting *Hamlet* in Kashmir, Vishal intends

to depict the horrific realities of a state under siege and the tortured ethics of nationalism and separatism . . . (Alter 2014: xiv-xv)

*Haider*, as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is a visual approximation of the original text where linguistic transcription is amply supplemented by a visual trail of motifs. If we can at all investigate *Haider* in terms of its replication of the source text, such a process of replication cannot be mapped within the conventional parameters of translation studies. In order to understand the complex correspondence between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Bharadwaj's *Haider*, we need to engage with the transactional economy of visual cues and spectral motifs that problematise the representational matrix of the written text. The essay argues that any comparative analysis of the two texts cannot ignore the vacuoles of non-communication and spectral modalities of exchange that they heavily rely upon. In other words, the ontological import of the texts does not lie in the representational schema provided by traditional linguistic parameters but in the pregnant pauses, spectral absences, and ambiguous silences that carve out an atmosphere of intrigue and suspense.

The article begins with the proposition that Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in communicating an ontological condition of doubt and uncertainty as to the future course of action, remains invested in a rich poetics of inarticulacy communicated through strong visual motifs. The evocation of such a poetics of inarticulacy thus relies on regimes of signification other than language and deploys a string of visual cues as part of its interpretive framework to fill in the lapses and ruptures in verbal correspondence. The dramatic rendition of *Hamlet* set in 16th-century Denmark is populated by spectral shapes; Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*, which assimilates this poetics of the spectral as part of its translational grammar, draws upon a rich repertoire of visual omens garnered from the conflicted political topos of Kashmir in the 90s to underscore the beleaguered consciousness of the central character of *Haider* caught between filial duty and the need to avenge his father's disappearance and untimely demise on the one hand and honouring his mother's newly consecrated wedding vows with the traitor who conspired against his father on the other. The essay reflects on semiotic ruptures and the disruption of the signifying ecology of language resulting in an unhinging of the consciousness from a conventional grammar of representation. Lines of rupture create zones of inarticulacy, volatilising the grammar of representation and introducing the visual currency of the spectral. The article proposes to enquire how Bharadwaj's *Haider* (2014) transposes the spectral grammar of representation arising out of linguistic inarticulacy from the political climate of intrigue in the state of 16th century Denmark to the insurgency-ridden, politically volatile landscape of Kashmir of the 90s. In other words, the article focuses on the specific economy of signs that draws on visual motifs to communicate the

spectral world of *Hamlet* racked by instability, intrigue and sedition along with its complex nebula of affect, onto the politically volatile region of Kashmir. The socio-affectual correspondences and transactions between *Hamlet* and *Haider* remain invested in a grammar of translation that closes the gap or the temporal distance between the plays by producing a rich ecology of signs revolving around the motif of the spectral to communicate the dilemma of the central characters and the resultant deferral of action.

Vishal Bhardwaj's screen adaptation of Shakespeare's play involves multiple acts of translations; there is a translocation of the original text from Denmark to Kashmir; Bharadwaj also transcribes the original text from a theatrical medium of expression to a cinematographic canvas more favourably placed to exploit the element of theatricality through special effects and rapid shifts in locations. By moving away from a temporally confined medium of the theatre towards the more synthetic canvas of celluloid invested in cinematic time, *Haider* definitely seems to have an advantage over a theatrical performance of *Hamlet* in its ability to telescope multiple slides of consciousness through the powerful visual techniques of the cinematic text, manipulating the audience's response by accelerating or decelerating action and modulating the audience's emotions by virtue of its ability to compress or pan out a scene, in the process heightening or dampening its emotional pitch and tonalities. This brings us into confrontation with an important question: What does a change in the material medium of expression imply for translation studies? Pankaj Kapur's cinematography effectively captures the overwhelming sense of gloom and despondency that haunts the spectral valleys of Kashmir. The thick pall of sadness that weighs upon the grey desolation of the valley and leaks into the psychic space of the audience; as a case in instance, we can refer to the uncanny visuals of the grave digging scene with its staccato, haunting music reinforcing the sense of desolation and giving us a grim foreboding of a tragic sequence of events yet to unfold, ominously waiting in the wings. This resonates with Deleuze's theory on stuttering,<sup>2</sup> dealing with 'a pre-signifying semiotic, enabling stutters, stammers, wordless' (Crump 2020: 105) shouts, haunting refrains, and gestural language to supplement or enhance linguistic forms of expression.

Located in the turbulent political topos of 1995 Kashmir, Vishal Bhardwaj's interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a nuanced depiction of the state of the psychological turmoil of its central character, Haider, played by Shahid Kapoor. Haider, a somewhat reticent young man, is a poet and a scholar at Aligarh University. Upon learning of his father Dr. Hilaal Meer's sudden disappearance under mysterious circumstances, Haider is compelled to abort his university coursework and return to a conflict-ridden homeland. His childhood home having been razed to the ground, his mother, Ghazala, has

moved in with his uncle, Khurram, an advocate by profession and an aspiring politician covetous of power. Haider is in love with Arshia, a journalist by profession and the daughter of an Indian Army officer. In the midst of the escalating chaos and political conundrum, Haider embarks on a perilous journey in search of his missing father. Haider emerges as a character 'fully in control of his tragic destiny', an insightful strategist who, with nuanced subtlety and sophistry, effectively uses 'feigned madness as a prop' (Dalal 2014) to execute his designs for revenge.

As we tread into a militancy-riddled Kashmir, submerged in a deafening silence that reverberates across the valley and finds articulacy through an ominous language of signs, stuttered exchanges, transfixed eyes, and rigid postures, we can sense the state of paralysis that has gripped the valley, censoring all linguistic apparatuses and muzzling voices of dissent through violent crackdowns. The spectralisation of Haider's home is described by Arisha in the following lines: 'There isn't much of a home left in what remains (Bhardwaj and Peer 2014: 36) (*Tumhare ghar mei ghar jaisa kuch bacha nhi hai Haider*). Both *Hamlet* and *Haider* remain embedded in a political climate of intrigue, seditious provocations, espionage, surveillance, ominous disappearances, anonymous graves, and an intense ontological probe into a state of spectrality. As Haider embarks on a gruelling search for his missing father across detention centres and police stations, he encounters the character of Roohdaar (meaning soul), a spectral, shadowy figure whose identity remains shrouded in mystery and who offers scraps of information about his father, Dr. Hilaal Meer. Roohdaar narrates to Haider the story of his imprisonment and how he met Haider's father in the detention camp. Haider learns from Roohdaar that his father is no more. It is Roohdaar who communicates to Haider his dying wish that Haider should take revenge on the traitor, his uncle, Khurram and leave his mother Ghazala to God's justice (Bhagira 2015: 2). The character of Roohdaar takes the place of the ghost in the original text of *Hamlet*. The name Roohdaar has rich metaphorical associations evocative of the spectrality of the soul. The word 'Rooh' means soul and Roohdaar is the soul of Hilaal Meer. Roohdaar, while introducing himself to Arshia, presents himself as a de-corporealised entity: Arshia: 'Are you a doctor?' Roohdaar laughs and says: 'A doctor's soul' (Bhardwaj and Peer 2014: 103). The article argues that rather than following the trail of signifiers in recreating the text of *Hamlet*, Bhardwaj's screenplay hinges onto a poetics of spectrality. There is thus a perceptible shift of the dynamics of translation from the linguistic matrix of the text to the material substrate, which bodies forth a host of unsettling emotions. For example, the 'mousetrap scene' reconstructed through the Bismil performance, using the tropes of music and theatricality, is punctuated by the sudden intrusion of the dumb show where Bhardwaj uses Dadi

Pudumjee's puppetry<sup>3</sup> as a larger-than-life prop to cut into the thread of the narrative, creating a vacuole of ominous silence where language is stripped to its bare minimum. The inarticulacy of non-words finds a dual mode of expression in Arshia's (Ophelia's) incoherent ramblings, as her consciousness loses its moorings, and Haider's strategic appropriation of language through his feigned madness. Language in the text thus emerges as a contested site rife with a semiotic politics that eludes the grid of a closed economy of signification based on a one-to-one correspondence. It is within this fractured terrain of linguistic expression that the poetics of the spectral and the evocative sensorium of spatial poetry gradually unfurl themselves. The text is reinterpreted, recontextualised and reconfigured in terms of its relationship to an outside.

The dilemma of the tragic protagonist Haider (Hamlet) is aptly summed up in the last scene where Haider is caught between his father's wish for revenge and his mother's last words, '*Intiqam se sirf intiqam paida hota hai. Jab tak hum apne intiqam se azad nahi ho jati, tab tak koi aazadi humein azad nahi kar sakti.* (Revenge only breeds revenge. As long as we are not free from our desire for revenge, no "freedom" is going to be able to free us)' (Mookherjee 2016). Haider ultimately withdraws from the blood feud and leaves his maimed uncle in the throes of agony as he pleads for a swift death (*Haider* 2014: 3.09.00). Much of the action of the play unfolds within the fractured psyche of the eponymous protagonist, for whom the loss of the father figure becomes synonymous with the loss of the phallic arbiter regulating the representational matrix of language, its ordered equilibrium, and its economy of expression. Pompa Banerjee (2018) foregrounds the representational politics of the burial ground in *Haider*, where the grave or burial mound can no longer be located and identified as the final resting place of the corporeal remains. The missing body of Dr. Meer, Haider's father, remains spectralised and untraceable, lost in a field of anonymous tombstones. When Haider is finally able to retrieve some linguistic trace that can serve as a spatial marker of Dr. Meer's tombstone, a numerical inscription followed by multilingual references to *Allah* beneath which the name of his father appears in English, Haider is finally able to piece together the story of his missing father in Urdu, Arabic and English (Banerjee 2018: 21). The usurper of the sceptre of phallic authority, Haider's upstart uncle Khurram, living in an incestuous relationship with Ghazala (Gertrude), strikes the death knell for the normative code of standard linguistic practices derived from the law of the father. The denatured, corruptible libidinal economy creates a dysfunctional family space where the sanctity of the familial triad—the father, mother and the child—is made profane by the act of incest, which befuddles all expression framed within standardised linguistics. There is thus a regression into a zone of inarticulacy, the confounded terrain of non-

words and a rich tissue of material signs that delicately captures the gradual psychic unravelling that Haider experiences. As a counterpoint to Haider's feigned madness, the women in the screenplay, Ghazala (Gertrude) and Arshia (Ophelia), caught within the politics of patriarchal hegemony and tussle for power, exude a quiet melancholy and poignant vulnerability communicable only through the wild disarray of their ruptured lives as they drift across the cinematic text as spectral figures whose subjective agency is withheld. Both Ghazala and Arshia rely on an evocative body language and the silence born of stupendous grief as they are emotionally abandoned by Haider. If in the case of Haider the dissolution of the contours of identity is precipitated by the lack of patriarchal affiliation, the loss of the symbolic value of the phallic presence, the women are rendered speechless by their relegation to the status of mute spectators in a patriarchal screenplay. It is the inability to vocalise the sense of loss and the attendant pain that reaffirms the relevance of signs and non-words as affectual signposts deeply engaged with a tangible encryption of pathos. As Banerjee writes, the cinematic text coins new words like 'half-widows' to refer to the wives of disappeared men or 'suffrocity' to demarcate the oppressive condition of claustrophobia and repression that has denatured democracy. The film resonates with a visceral politics reflecting a pathologization of trauma. If Shakespeare's *Hamlet* communicates the oscillating dynamics of the psyche of the central character through asides and soliloquies, Bhardwaj replaces the primacy of language as a signifying system with a pathological and symptomatic analysis of the valley and its people. The film highlights the 'perplexing symptoms of a "new disease"' that leaves men stranded at the thresholds of their own domicile, unable to enter their home unless they undergo the ritual drill performed by the military, subjecting them to a thorough physical search as part of a routine trial.

The last words of Hamlet in the original text, 'The rest is silence', highlight the inadequacy of language to gauge the depth of the tragic trail of events, whose psychic turmoil overpowers the feeble expressive capacity of language. In the concluding scene of *Hamlet*, the stage is littered with corpses—the queen is poisoned, Hamlet accidentally kills Laertes before killing his uncle Claudius, calling him 'incestuous, murderous, damned Dane', and finally succumbs to his injuries. This sheer volume of death and devastation and bloody carnage also haunts the last slides of *Haider* as the central character seeks release from the agony of speculation in the silence of the grave. Death is envisioned as a long sleep that terminates the 'heartaches' and 'the thousand natural shocks' that plague the flesh.

### **Conclusion**

Vishal Bhardwaj's film is co-written with Basharat Peer and realigns the cultural accents of Shakespeare's play to communicate the problems and concerns of a

militarised and conflict-ravaged Kashmir of the 1990s. The geographical transposition of the play results in the ‘insertion of Shakespeare into Kashmir’ (Pompa Banerjee 2018: 18) in the process repositioning the English language, simultaneously refracting it through the prism of an altered socio-cultural semiotics. The fractured political topos of Kashmir exists outside the linguistic terrain of representation, and as Banerjee suggests, ‘language itself is put under scrutiny’ (2018: 18). Such an act of geopolitical translation engages with unravelling the radical potency of signs other than language. The text becomes displaced in multiple ways and is reworked and reinterpreted across novel cultural planes in conjunction with ‘pre-existing local styles’. In order to adequately communicate the tenor of violence and the trauma of loss that shrouds the valley in a pall of gloom, Bhardwaj destabilises and disrupts conventional linguistic paradigms and deploys ‘linguistic dislocations, word replacements, signs’ invested in the dominating motif of the spectral to effectively articulate vacuoles of non-communication. The adaptation thus focuses on a synchronisation between the visual, the performative, the tangible, the verbal, and the textual that allows the process of translation a lot of creative liberty as it experiments with the rubrics of the text as a materially positioned and situationally conditioned event.

#### End Notes

1. Phenomenology draws upon a philosophy of experience and of things as experienced within the folds of consciousness. Strongly grounded in lived experiences, it does not rely on scientific causality, foregrounding instead facets of the human consciousness, which include imagination, intentionality, perception, time as a dimension of consciousness, bodily awareness and awareness of the world of phenomena.
2. As a speech disorder, stuttering exemplifies a non-normative mode of communication that may disrupt the economy of the signifying system through the release of a-signifying particles that unsettle the fabric of standard signifying practices, interrupting the chain of signification.
3. Dadi Pudumjee is the founder of The Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust. A renowned puppeteer in India, he was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1992.

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# **Retribalising the Ramayana Tradition: An Intermedial Analysis of Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues***

**Tanvi Sharma**

## **Abstract**

The *Ramayana* has been unceasingly translated, transposed and transcreated in diverse languages, contexts, modes, and media so as to render both the concept of an originary tale highly problematic and a restricted understanding of the practice of translation impossible as well as futile. In contemporary discourse that subscribes to an expansive view of translation as an intermedial as well as an intramedial process, this epic tradition serves as a classic case in point to explore how cultural negotiations take place when one engages in this eclectic and multilayered exercise. In my paper, I would like to focus on Nina Paley's animated film *Sita Sings the Blues* to gauge how meaning is generated through inter-, multi- and transmedial constellations and cross-medial references exploited by the text. I specifically deliberate upon how Paley translates the various performative traditions associated with the epic (delineated by Lutgendorf in his pioneering research regarding the modes of circulation of Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*) and adapts them to suit the needs of the digital medium that she translates for. I argue that by creating multiple narrative frameworks in her film, Paley engages with elements of each of these traditional performative traditions, namely, recital or path, explication or katha, and enactment or lila, only to destabilise the cultural contexts within which they exist and deconstruct the hegemonic meanings that they perpetuate. By picking on diverse sources to create her version of the epic, not only does Paley engage in an exercise of translation that cuts across multiple national, linguistic, generic, and media barriers, forcing us to expand our understanding of the process of translation, she further creates alternative methods of free distribution that flout and subvert the regulation of art and culture under a capitalistic framework. Through an analysis of the process of creation and networks of distribution exploited by Paley, I further contend that the detribalisation of the oral Ramayana narrative that occurred when the epic was transposed onto the printed page, is reversed and a

retribalisation seems to be underway by the use of cyber space and digital technology that allows for a possibility of return to an environment akin to that of the acoustic age (as predicted by McLuhan), that encourages proximity and dialogue between the artist and the audience with a view to disturb hegemonic meanings and associations accrued by the epic narrative in instances of regulated reproduction and translation of the text.

**Keywords:** Ramayana, transmediality, Ramcharitmanas, transcreation, performative traditions, katha

### Introduction to Translation and Intermediality

*Ramayana* is perhaps the oldest living text that lies at the heart of India as a civilisational entity and has one of the richest artistic traditions associated with it. Although Valmiki's text, written in Sanskrit, is considered the most authentic version of the *Ramayana*, the ur-text, and the poet is traditionally bestowed with the status as the *adi-kavi* of Indian literature, the epic has a much longer history in oral culture, and therefore to speak of an originary text is both impossible and futile. Many authors, like Kamban, Tulsidas and Krittibhas, to name a few, have recreated the *Ramayana* in multiple vernacular languages, and although they announce their allegiance to Valmiki, they continue to freely depart from his narrative. Not only in the literary field, the epic also has a long history in the performative arts, such as classical dance forms, classical and folk forms of drama and music, and visual arts such as pattachitra, miniature paintings, murals, and many more. Added to this is the wealth of transnational variations that the epic has imbibed by travelling across countries of South East Asia and again, with modern emigration, it has been exported to and introduced in newer contexts through the diasporic communities belonging to these nations.



The unending proliferation of variants of the epic in the present attests to the allure that the *Ramayana* has for the Indian psyche as well as, increasingly, the global audiences. The swelling number of new entrants into this tradition signals that there is no lack of interest in this tale even as the 21st century progresses. Each version of the tale till now has proceeded to record within it the spirit of the times in which it was written, performed and retold, a method that Prof. Lal has aptly termed as ‘transcreation’. The political, cultural and social discourses belonging to different times thus coexist in the various *Ramayana* versions. A restricted understanding of translation is thus deconstructed and problematised by the very existence of its layered narratives. In contemporary discourse that subscribes to an expansive view of translation as an intermedial as well as an intramedial process, this epic tradition serves as a classic case in point to explore how cultural negotiations take place when one engages in this eclectic exercise. In my paper, I use intermediality as the critical tool to study and assess the modalities entrenched in Nina Paley’s critically acclaimed film *Sita Sings the Blues* as she undertakes a transposition of Valmiki’s *Ramayana* into the audio-visual mode of animation. ‘In our digital age many works of art, cultural artefacts, literary texts and other cultural configurations either combine and juxtapose different media, genres and styles or refer to other media in a plethora of ways’ (Ripple 2015: 22). Rajewsky uses intermediality as ‘an umbrella-term and hypernym’ to describe ‘all kinds of phenomena that take place between media’ (Ripple 2015: 52). Most of the recent retellings of the *Ramayana* are already intermedial texts in themselves, in keeping with the definition of intermediality as ‘a condition or a category’ offered by Rajewsky that highlights ‘the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation’ already present in the text. (Rajewsky 2002: 47). However, if intermediality is defined ‘as a critical category for the concrete analysis of specific individual media products or configurations’ then ‘the concept of intermediality allows for a reading of...texts against the backdrop of their cultural and medial contexts from systematic and historical perspectives’ by taking into account ‘how meaning is generated in/by inter-, multi- and transmedial constellations and cross-medial references’ made by the respective texts (Ripple 2015: 24, 52).

Opening frame : *Sita Sings The Blues*

Raja Ravi Varma : early 20th century

While *Sita Sings the Blues* is already an intermedial text to begin with in its communicative-semiotic aspect and employs the aural and visual modes simultaneously by using the art of animation, intermediality as a critical category can be used to study the larger media networks that Paley's text participates in. The three subcategories enumerated by Rajewsky to study such interactions prove helpful here. Firstly, the film interacts with various media through trans-medial exchanges relating to 'phenomena that are non-specific to individual media (motifs, thematic variation, narrativity)' that bring this animation film into close association with an entire body of narratives that privileges Sita's concerns and her point of view in consonance with Paley's interpretation of the epic, beginning from literary texts such as Chandrabati's *Ramayana* written in the 16th century, Kumaran Asan's meditative poem *Chinthaavishtayaaya Sita/Sita Immersed in Reflection* (1919), Molla's 16th-century Telugu *Ramayana*, and Pattanaik's *Sita's Ramayana*. Naidu's *Sita's Ascent* to recent graphic novels like Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* and Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* by Campfire comics. Secondly, Paley's work also establishes intra-medial connections in relation to the previous renditions of the *Ramayana* in animation format, beginning with Ram Mohan's *The Legend of Prince Rama* (1992) to recent productions such as ACK's *Sons of Ram* (2012). Furthermore, the text forges rich inter-medial relations by drawing explicit references and implicit allusions to other media such as literary texts (Valmiki's *Ramayana*, on which it claims to be based), musical genres (Hanshaw songs specifically and Blues at large), and visual texts such as Indian calendar art, miniature paintings, and modern cartoons with allusions to Betty Boop, Johnny Bravo and the like. In the very first frame of the film, an animated figure of Lakshmi in a traditional Raja Ravi Verma-inspired pose, though drawn in a modern stylised manner using vector graphics, stationed on a blooming lotus flower, can be observed appearing from the water next to a gramophone made out of peacocks and snakes that begins to play Hanshaw's songs at her command. This points to the kind of interactions that the film initiates and encourages.

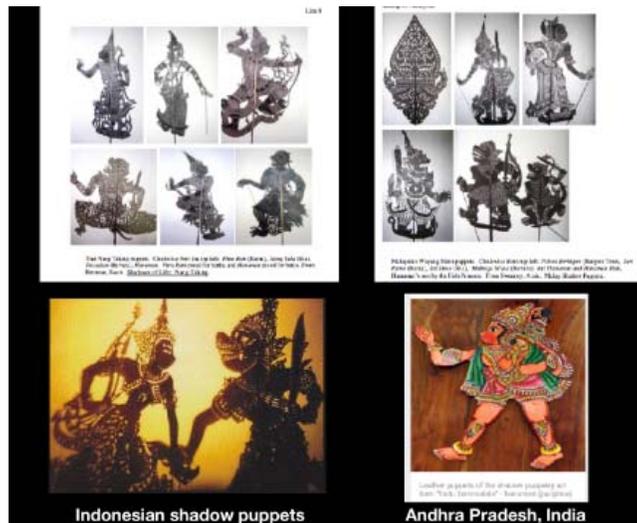
The film is moreover distributed through online, open-access forums. The manner in which it is produced can be understood by extending McLuhan's theories about the construction of para-social communities through technology that, in this case, are the newly created social-networking platforms that allow space for user-generated content and encourage unmediated dialogue between the creator and the producer. It was, in fact, the overwhelming audience response to her short film 'Trial by Fire', dealing with Sita's *agnipariksha* episode, that made Paley decide on making an extended film about the epic. Throughout her project, Paley was constantly engaged with her audience and kept posting sections of her unfinished work-in-progress

on online forums and seeking feedback to guide her in her production process. Although, admittedly, the feedback was varied and the artist did not accept all of it, especially the strong right-wing Hindu critique of her work, Paley avows that all the feedback she received helped her in her process of creation and in gaining a deeper understanding of the text. ‘I...engaged in some thoughtful dialogues with critics... We never changed each others’ minds, but got better at articulating our points of view’, she states (sitasingstheblues.com). The manner in which the text was finally produced, not only with intellectual inputs thus received but also financial inputs in the form of donations from the audience all over the world, displays a unique integration between the producer of the content and its consumers. As opposed to the detribalisation of the oral *Ramayana* narrative when it was transposed to the printed book form, a retribalisation of the text seems to be underway through the use of new technology, just as McLuhan had predicted it would facilitate, wherein cyberspace, or the internet, offers a return to a more dynamic form of interaction akin to that of the acoustic age, making the world into a global village. In her extended retelling that followed after the success of ‘Trial by Fire’, Paley narrates her *Ramayana* using multiple artistic styles and narrative frames. Her main focus is on the relationship between Rama and Sita and the gender politics that are played out between them. Concerns such as ‘how does romantic love constitute women? Does this reveal change over time?’ are interrogated in this film as ‘discourses on love, romance, sexuality, and the family are sites where women’s subjectivity is located, shaping how they are imagined” (Pauwels 6). Paley engages simultaneously with epic (Ram and Sita), devotional (Vishnu and Lakshmi), and contemporary lovescapes (Nina and Dave) to offer revealing insights on this matter. The story of her own failed marriage serves as a plot parallel embedded in the real world alongside the fictional world of *Ramayana*. Parodying the Bible’s adaptation as ‘The Greatest Story Ever Told’ (by Stevens in 1965), she subtitles her film as ‘The Greatest Break-Up Story Ever Told’. The film functions as a pastiche of visual, sound and speech styles borrowed from diverse sources that serve to provide commentary upon one another.

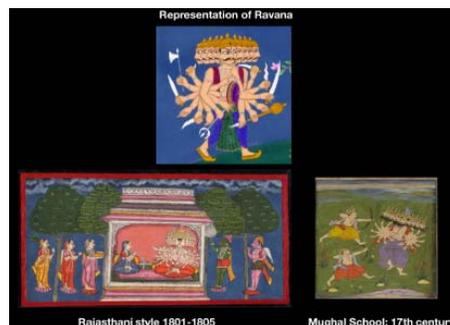
### **Transposition of Performative Practices Related to the Epic into the New Medium of Animation**

In order to undertake an intermedial analysis of the film, I would like to deliberate upon how the film engages with and transforms the performative traditions associated with the epic. Philip Lutgendorf, in his study of the performative life of the *Ramcharitmanas*, delineates three modes through which this text has been perpetuated. These are recital or *path*, explication or *katha*, and enactment or *lila*. By tracing multiple narratives in her film, Paley

engages with elements of each of these traditions in her retelling only to destabilise the cultural frameworks within which they exist and deconstruct the meanings that they generate. Elaborating on the *Katha* tradition, Lutgendorf notes, “the speaker was usually called a *kathavachak*, or *Ramayani*, and would read from a manuscript or printed book, but his performance was not strictly confined to the words of the text or even to the story it told. He could elaborate on or digress from any line of it, and the extent and ingenuity of his improvisation were limited only by his knowledge and training” (Lutgendorf 1994: 157). In the case of *Sita Sings the Blues*, the first teller of the tale that we encounter is obviously Paley herself, who has produced the entire film almost single-handedly, referring to not a single manuscript but to multiple *Ramayana* traditions and choosing to digress from the core narrative as she pleased to the extent of adding her own autobiographical details into the film as a parallel to the tale of Sita. By using the Creative Commons ShareALike license that was upgraded to the CC-0 license in 2010 that brought the film into the public domain, Paley effectively made her work accessible to everyone present in cyberspace. Lutgendorf points out that the ‘katha’, however, ‘always has a principal *srota*, or listener, who should be one “worthy of receiving the katha” (katha-adhikari)’, and the ‘chief listener’s qualifications are important because he can become another link in the chain of transmission of the katha’ (Lutgendorf 1994: 129). As a free culture activist who firmly believes that each one of us is a carrier of culture, Paley raises each of her viewers to the level of the katha adhikari by permitting them to use, borrow, broadcast, remix, add to, and work on the film she has created, thus disrupting the hierarchies inherent between the producer and the consumer.



Within the film, the role of the narrator is fulfilled by three Indian friends of Paley—Aseem Chhabra, Manish Acharya and Bhavana Nagulapally—who all come from different parts of the country and have different mother tongues, thereby possibly accessing varied *Ramayana* narratives. They are represented on screen through the use of Indonesian and Thai-inspired shadow puppets. Not only do their distinct perspectives on the text and its characters highlight the multiplicity of the *Ramayana* narrative, they further seem to undercut the institutionalised *kathavachak* tradition, as their knowledge about the text is but rudimentary and their narration is punctuated with mispronunciations, confusions regarding time, place and action and incredulity towards certain received aspects of the narrative. They highlight the inconsistencies present in the text, and their scepticism that they voice towards some episodes encourages the audience to re-examine the events in their own minds. Further, these elements make the audiences aware of the constructedness of the text, which is highlighted when Chhabra tells Acharya at a point where all three speakers are confused about what happens next that ‘you can always make it up’. Even when the Ayodhya crisis is referred to, Acharya adds the disclaimer, ‘they believe it (that Rama was born there), I don’t’. Owing to the nature of these discussions, any truth claims about the epic, lending it a granted historicity like the comment about NASA images confirming the historical truth of *Ramayana* and the marking of places such as Ayodhya and Sri Lanka on the map, lose all credibility. As these narrators reconstruct the tale of *Ramayana* through their memory, they simultaneously deconstruct some evaluative practices that have been attached to the text. The character of Ravana is made much of; ‘we have been led to believe’, says Acharya, ‘that he is an evil character’, highlighting the mediations through which the *Ramayana* reaches its audience, and later he goes on to refute these interpretations by making a case for Ravana, asserting that the only bad thing that the otherwise learnt and scholarly Ravana seems to have done is kidnap Sita, but there also he exercised restraint and never molested her, casting him as a tragic hero rather than an outright villain to bring in more shades of grey into the narrative.



Rather than seeking wisdom from the tale, as the *kathavachak* would do, the narrators in the film relate and react to the characters and incidents of the epic without attaching to it any devotional fervour or monumental significance. The *kathavachak* tradition that ennobled the speaker and the listener alike is thus exploded, and in the absence of a manuscript to be followed, is compelled to hark back to an even older mode of oral transmission of the text by ordinary people through time immemorial that was often characterised by multiple and even contradictory tellings of the epic. Paley uses collage frames made out of ubiquitous calendar art cut-outs and miniature paintings to accompany this narration in a comic fashion, reiterating and replicating the confusions, misgivings and side remarks offered by the interlocutors to add more humour to the narration. Many techniques, such as doodling and overfill, are used to enhance the comedy in these scenes.



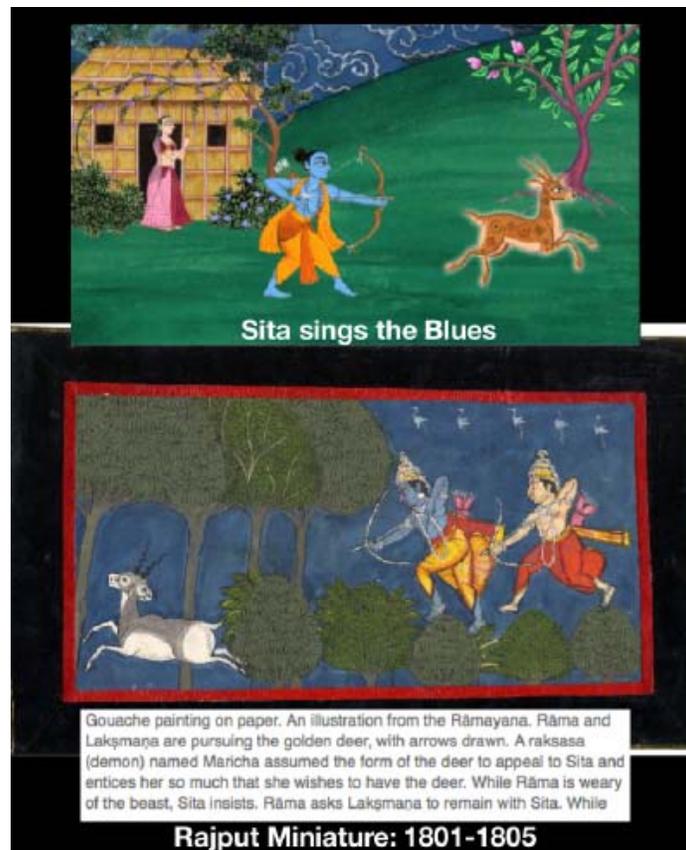
The enactment of the narrative recounted by the shadow puppets is done by employing paintings inspired by representations of the *Ramayana* in Indian miniatures dating back to the 17th-19th centuries. This forms a part of the second mode of perpetuating the epic as enumerated by Lutgendorf, usually through performance known as '*lila*'. *Lila* 'refers to the specific adventures of one of the Lord's incarnations and also their celebration and recreation by devotees' (Lutgendorf 1994: 250). For *Ramayana* it corresponds to the live theatre tradition of performing the epic as a part of the ritual celebration, especially around the festival of Dusshera in most Hindu communities.

Paley uses voiceovers of second-generation immigrant South Asian actors who impersonate the characters shown on the screen using miniature painting techniques, thus making the *lila* tradition fit the audio-visual animation format

driven by new age technology. Aptly enough, these sections pay homage to the audio-visual traditions they borrow from while also poking fun at the conventions employed by them in their use of classical language, melodramatic dialogue delivery, and repetitive eye takes that Indian audiences are all too familiar with, as Paley is especially influenced by the hugely popular Ramanand Sagar version of the *Ramayana* that aired on Doordarshan in 1987–88 and is believed to have supplanted many local *Ramayana* performances with the rising popularity and accessibility of electronic media such as the television. Both the live theatre and its electronic serialised counterpart were reenactments infused with devotional fervour as ‘historically and performatively’.

Tulsi’s bhakti-influenced ‘epic *Ramcharitmanas* lies at the heart of the Ramlila tradition’, asserts Lutgendorf (249). Through his studies of various seminal *lila* traditions, such as that of Banaras and Ramnagar, Lutgendorf attests to the “religious dimension of these performances and the ‘touching piety that motivates them’ (253). Paley uses limited animation in order to make the frames look more like poster illustrations of the *Ramayana*. Rather than infuse piety, this only serves to highlight the comic incongruences that Paley employs, such as the use of slang, comic sound effects, and so on to regularly disrupt this narrative. Even in its broader understanding of *lila* as the sport of gods, wherein gods assume an earthly form to manipulate the progress of the world in the desired direction, it shows the gods in an omniscient and omnipotent light. However, the Rama that we are confronted with in this narrative frame of the film does not behave like a character of divine status in the least. His reaction to Dasaratha’s announcement of exile and the reaction after Sita passes the *agnipariksha* highlight that he is a far cry from the all-knowing, all-controlling God envisioned by the devotees. Rather, these sequences serve as cues for the cartoon sequences that employ Hanshaw’s songs, which follow immediately after and intensify the critique of Rama undertaken by Paley through Hanshaw’s implicative lyrics and Paley’s outrageous visuals recording Sita’s mistreatment at the hands of her lord. Paley goes on to destabilise the last performative mode of the *Ramayana* enumerated by Lutgendorf, that of *path* or recital most vehemently, through the sequence featuring Luv and Kush with their guru, Valmiki, in his ashram. Path ‘reflects the importance of the oral/aural dimension of ritual and the notion that it should ideally include recitation of the sacred word’ (Lutgendorf 1994: 54). The composition of the song that Luv and Kush sing parodies *artis* and *bhajans* through the continual repetition of *Ram-naam*. However, rather than recounting the great deeds of the lord and appreciating his superhuman qualities, Paley’s song recounts all the flaws in Rama’s character, especially in his treatment of Sita, who clearly seems to have paid the greater price in his bid to become the ‘perfect man’. The song that begins as a song of praise

ends up becoming a tirade in which the entire community of *sadhvis* joins in, signalling a collective criticism from all the women of the community at large. It also extends as an ironic jab against the self-appointed Hindu right-wing protectors of religion, who wish to restrict the meanings of the epic to maintain gender- and caste-based hierarchies in society at large by appropriating the figure of Ram. Paley uses this sequence to break stylistic boundaries as different conventions overlap and juggle together on the screen, singing in unison, signalling a carnival-like uproar in a Bollywood-inspired song sequence that brings down the gender hierarchies subscribed to by the conservative readings of the text.



### **Singing the Blues: Layering of Diverse Artistic Practices and Cultural Heritage**

While the parts that deal with the epic stick to the sequence of shadow puppet narration followed by miniature painting enactment followed by cartoon-

song sequence, the film is further punctuated by Paley's own story, which runs parallel to that of Sita, recounting her husband Dave's transfer to India, where Paley follows her just like the heroine from the epic, but Dave, having moved on, breaks up with her on email while she's on a business trip to New York, asking her not to come back. Sita's pain at being banished for the second time is paralleled with the heartache of the jilted Nina. Both represent an undying fidelity towards their respective partners, pine for the men who have hurt them, and feel ridden by guilt about the failure of the relationship.



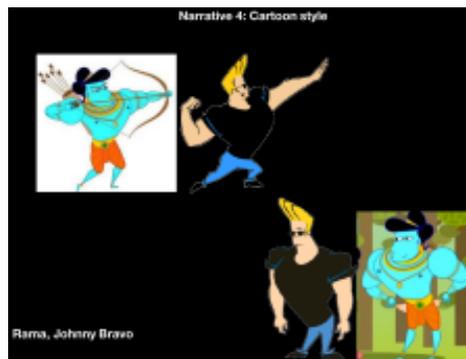
The sequences recounting Paley's autobiography use 'squiggle-vision, an animation technique patented by Tom Snyder. It consists of a set of animation sequences set in a vibrating frame, the effect being the same as that of a jittercam. Anchored in real locations, 'it is highly personal narrative that is based on rough journal sketches and photographs I (Paley) took in India' (Benzon). This narrative segment "locates the story towards its primary audience, US-Americans of a particular social and economic class whose location is underscored through their profession, living space, and speech and all this is reflected in the visual representation" (Chanda 2011: 7).

This story serves as a counterpart to the fictional locations of Sita's tale. These distinct but parallel narratives are further enclosed within the opening and closing frames featuring vector animations of Vishnu and Laxmi that enlighten the audience about the power structures between the two within their relationship. In the beginning, for instance, Lakshmi is portrayed

massaging the feet of Vishnu, who seems rather unconcerned about her presence. All these representations together serve to draw a parallel between the real-personal, cosmological-mythical, and the epic to question the patriarchal structures that make Sita's character resonate with the status of the women of the modern-day world.



It is the vector graphic 2D animation sequences that constitute the second narrative frame of the enactment of the *Ramayana* tale and is given the maximum screen space by Paley, which I would like to explore further. In keeping with Paley's gender politics, ironically it is here that Ram does not speak a single dialogue, thereby reversing the practice in what are considered to be patriarchal retellings of the epic, wherein Sita suffers a similar silencing. Rama's character, moreover, has visual allusions to Johnny Bravo, a popular muscular-looking cartoon character who keeps vying for female attention unsuccessfully, a veritable contrast to what the ideal enshrined in the figure of Rama is supposed to have done in prioritising all his social and royal duties over and above his concern for Sita, for which he is duly criticised in the song sung by Luv and Kush in the ashram mentioned above.



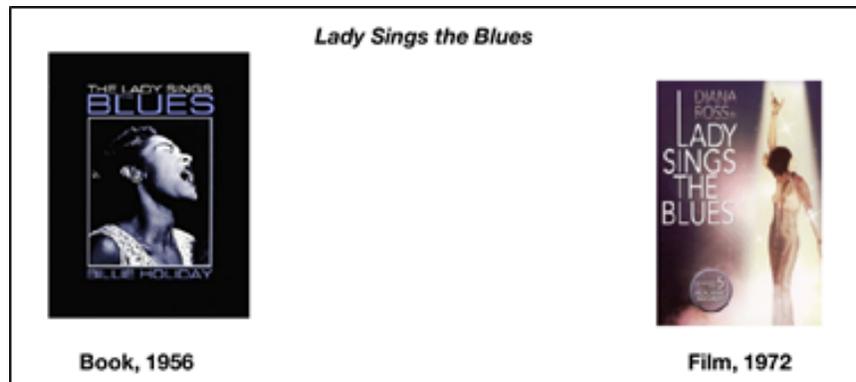


Paley uses songs sung by Annette Hanshaw in these sequences to give a vivid voice to her Sita, invoking the Jazz era of the 1920s and 30s and the politics of identity and representation embedded therein in the process. The Jazz Age announced the rebellion of the economically prosperous young men and women of the 1920s against the older, conservative Victorian generation. It was a time when many cultural and political changes were underway in post-First World War America. Culturally, jazz music, the roots of which can be traced to Afro-American communities, became supremely popular and afforded many artists the opportunity to be accepted in the mainstream. McLuhan hailed jazz as a symbol of the electronic age, a 'cool' medium (encouraging participation from the audience) that proclaimed the return of the acoustic age through retribalisation and stated, 'Jazz as compared with classical music, has many aspects of discontinuity and very much room for fill in' (Future of Man). Jazz in itself and 'Blues' especially as 'a mode of expression, were intensely personal and gave privilege to one's feelings and emotions of both elation and sorrow'. The fact that Sita sings the 'blues' is significant as it lends the *Ramayana* the kind of universality that Paley is arguing for in reading the epic as 'the greatest break-up story ever told'. It has been asserted by commentators such as Langston Hughes that 'the blues have something that goes beyond race or sectional limits, that appeals to the ear and heart of people everywhere', making them a perfect medium for Paley to tell the universal tale of heartbreak (145).



Jazz Age

Another obvious parallel that Paley wishes to evoke here is to the 1956 autobiography of the eminent jazz singer Billie Holiday titled *Lady Sing The Blues* and the 1972 film based on it, directed by Sidney J. Furie, that recounts the travails of the singer, her little triumphs, and her ultimate death in pursuit of her goals while elaborating on the emotional traumas she had to face along the way. The film ends with Billie playing to a packed house at Carnegie Hall, a crowning moment in her career, and the audience is informed of her later struggles and tragic death through an overlay of newspaper clippings. 'Nevertheless her Carnegie triumph is frozen in time'. The tragic dignity afforded to this African American artist is evoked and extended to the character of Sita in a story that will similarly capture her personal tragedy right till the moment of her escape into the mother earth, the moment that ostensibly frees her from a toxic cycle of belonging to and exile from a world belonging to Ram. Paley creatively uses the 'freeze' frame at the conclusion of the film to digress into Sita's final song that recounts all the travails she has been through in her love of Rama. Her final triumph, the hint is, lies in her eventual escape from a relationship that is proving to be crippling. Her moment of glory, therefore, coincides with her moment of escape.



The only two songs that have direct references to *the Ramayana* story used by Paley are the rotoscoped ‘Trial by Fire’ dance number in which Sita tries to convince Rama that her love is pure and the distorted Valmiki prayer referred to above. The rest of the songs sung by Hanshaw/Sita only implicitly refer to Rama’s failings while seemingly concerned only with Sita’s emotions. Paley realises the potential of Hanshaw’s music when she observes, ‘her voice is so sweet and vulnerable and without bitterness, even as she sings of heartbreak and man-done-her-wrong’ (Paley SSTB Website). This is precisely where the subversive potential of the blues lies, which Paley is able to tap into so well. Lamont observes that the blues offer no ‘overt opposition to the ruling class and its systems of order’. Rather, they ‘speak by indirection’, preferring to insinuate, imply and raise doubts rather than to ‘judge and fulminate’ openly (Switzer quoting Lamont, 2001: 28). In the development of Sita, Paley traces a character that similarly possesses the power to subvert the system without issuing an open revolt. The protest that the blues songs intend “is ‘encoded’ and ‘one has to listen carefully in order to hear it’, in the same manner as one has to observe the often-silenced Sita carefully to register her protest through her actions (Switzer 2001: 28). The singer ‘speaks only as pervaded by what remains unspoken’ which in this case is vehement criticism of Rama in the absence of any direct reference to him (29). It is the gaps in the traditional patriarchal readings of the *Ramayana* that Paley wishes to draw our attention towards as she systematically highlights them and deconstructs their meanings. The power of telling the tale, the position of the privileged Kathakar, is thus accrued singly and decisively to Sita. However, her acceptance in this role is marred with complications.

The visual narrative records Rama trampling over Sita, lounging on her back, and finally kicking her away, thereby filling the gap and enhancing the implicit critique offered through the aural medium of the blues and making

visible “the sleight of hand the suggestive innuendo, ambiguous hint and dangerous hidden truths” (Switzer 2001: 29). Like the bluesman who challenges the power vested in literacy by taking recourse to an oral medium, Sita, by positing an alternate narrative, becomes a figure whose ‘relation to their community is “marked by tension and ambiguity” as can be seen in polarised readings that her character often engenders as either a strong, decisive, self-willed person or an utterly self-effacing, devoted, subservient wife (Lamont in Switzer 2001: 29). This female *Kathakaar* thus sits uneasily in the tradition that favours male commentators and reciters and receivers of the epic.

Additionally, Hanshaw and other female blues artists were associated with what came to be known as the flapper figure, which was the manifestation of the modern woman of the 1920s and 30s, who was financially independent and politically active. With the popularisation of kitchen gadgets and the availability of domestic appliances that eased their burden and automobiles that afforded them mobility like never before, the women of what are often referred to as ‘the roaring twenties’ were a stark contrast to the Gibson girl of the earlier decades. However, the flapper was also simultaneously a highly curated ‘product of modern twentieth-century mass media and entertainment culture and was crafted by the advertisers, writers, designers, in order to sell clothes, music, cigarettes and a number of other consumer products’ to women (Zeitiz 2006: 8). In popular culture, therefore, the flapper was employed with requisite safety by being relegated to comic genres that would effectively contain the threat posed by her open sexuality, as is aptly epitomised by the figure of Betty Boop, on whom Paley models her Sita visually.



Hanshaw, who was billed as ‘The Personality Girl’, was both a purveyor and a product of these processes. By using her voice, alongside the Betty Boop-inspired cartoon version of Sita, Paley further complicates issues of agency and power that are being addressed. Her subversive use of the flapper is evident, as while comedy as a trope was employed as a means to contain the disruptive potential of the flapper figure, in Paley’s film, the same comic potential translates into an implied but extended critique of the gender structures and puts her Sita in the centre of much controversy rather than making her inert and ‘safe’. Ross points out that in the film industry of the 1920s and 30s, ‘the strategy was to make the young woman’s real or imagined transgressions a subject of comedy...(to)...retain the moral redemption angle in comedic form, through the flapper’s ultimate rejection of modern ways and recuperation into the family. In addition, comedies concerning modern girls eased the threat of the representation of them as sexual beings by making light of satirizing their behaviour’ (2001: 409). In contrast, at the conclusion of her visually diverse film-text, Paley makes Sita take leave from the audience, specifically in her Betty Boop-inspired avatar, registering her revolt and will to action candidly.

### Conclusion

Sita’s reaction to Rama’s demand for another trial by fire is neither narrated by the interlocutors nor enacted by miniature collage narrative frames but solely rests on the jazz-inspired vector graphic narrative representation of the epic. This act of going into the mother earth over choosing to go back to Rama is read by many as Sita’s ultimate attestation to purity but conversely can also be seen as her rejection and transcendence of the realm of Rama. ‘Nina is empowered, in the movie, not just by “moving on” from her husband abandoning her, but also by embracing the pain creatively. Yet this is not Sita’s way. Sita creates her identity in such a way that she is defined by her devotion to Rama. And this is accepted as another avenue to empowerment in the film’, comments Dodd (2009: 5). Paley portrays her Sita departing happily. No grudge is borne as she still sings about her love for her husband through the final track of the film titled ‘Falling for you’. Thus, Paley refuses to see ‘fidelity and devotion as forms of weakness’ in her film (Dodd 2009: 5). Like Hanshaw, whose singing style was relaxed and suited to the subversive blues of the 1920s and 30s, Paley’s Sita thus combines the voice of an ingénue with the spirit of a flapper.

This sequence is then complemented with the rounding up of the personal narrative of Paley. In the last autobiographical segment, which follows Sita’s escape, we see the image of a now recovering Nina finally embracing her independence, reading the multiple *Ramayanas*, and working on her project

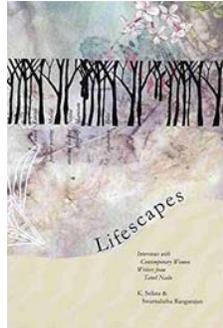
single-handedly, showcasing her creativity and highlighting the process of healing through self-dependence, self-motivation and will to action, which is not a direct confrontation of your adversary but a movement beyond his sphere of authority, so to say. Paley then finally returns to the last framing narrative of the film, which takes us back to the opening image of Lakshmi massaging Vishnu's legs in a tableau-like fashion. Reserving the final punch for the end, the tableau is now revealed to us with the roles reversed, and we see Vishnu trying to appease the goddess, her feet in his lap signalling a change in hierarchy. As the camera zooms into the face of Lakshmi, she responds with a wink towards the audience. Though the clip is accompanied by Indian fusion music rather than jazz blues, the 'wink' functions as a masterstroke that links Lakshmi with Sita and her inspiration, Betty Boop—the flapper who had traumatised the sensibilities of the audiences with her subversive winks during the 30s. Paley hence successfully plays flapper as a stereotype against flapper as a real woman and deploys the figure to disrupt a patriarchal reading of the *Ramayana* text. The cosmological-universal, epic and the autobiographical-particular strains of the narrative are thus tied up brilliantly at the end to complement each other and strengthen Paley's arguments.



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## Book Review

### ***Lifescapes: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers from Tamil Nadu***

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**210 pages, Rs. 375/-**

#### **Documenting the “writing lives” and “writing selves” of Women Writers**

*Lifescapes: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers from Tamil Nadu* by K. Srilata and Swarnalatha Rangarajan is a one of its kind, labour-of-love volume of comprehensive interviews with seventeen contemporary women writers from Tamil Nadu. The exhaustive introduction to the volume titled ‘Towards a Poetics of Ahampuram’ by seasoned academics and writers Srilata and Rangarajan lays bare the crux of the project: ‘to chart the complex factors that influence the writing lives’ of women writers from Tamil Nadu. The authors go on to map the largely male-dominated and male-defined literary environment of Tamil Nadu, the politics behind canon-formation, and, by referring to the pioneering sociological study conducted by veteran writer Dr. C. S. Lakshmi (Ambai) titled *The Face Behind the Masks: Women in Tamil Literature*, the authors survey the difficult and unique evolution of the ‘Tamil Woman’ throughout the Tamil literary tradition. In the section titled ‘Sangam Literature and the Poetics of the Ahampuram’, the authors take the readers on a meandering journey through some of the central governing principles of classical Tamil literature, i.e., the *aham*—an inner feminine space characterised by love; and the *puram*—an outer masculine space characterised by public life, politics, governance and war. The authors explain in detail the landscapes or *tinai*s associated with *aham* and *puram* poetry, which was liberally employed in the poetry produced in the Sangam age. It is fascinating to note how the writers interviewed in the volume relate to, engage with and question these

rigid conventions and the dichotomies of 'inner' and 'outer' with respect to both their lives and their works.

The authors explain their use of the portmanteau word 'ahampuram' going forward, which is meant to indicate 'the inseparability of gender, subaltern concerns, body politics, mythopoesis, place-based affiliations and environmental justice'. Signposting some key works from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the authors refer to Pandit Visalakshi Ammal's journal for women *Hitkarini*, Vai Mu Kodainayakiammal's founding of a publishing house, the trailblazing literary magazine *Manikkodi*, the Self-Respect Movement of 1921, leading up to the writing emerging from the post-Independence period (Rajam Krishnan, R. Chudamani, Ambai) and onwards (Bama, P. Sivakami, R. Vatsala, Salma, Kutti Revathi, Sukirtharani, Malathi Maithri and others), with the influx of Dalit writing, life-writing, writing that engages with anti-caste movements, writing about the body, political movements and other matters of contemporary relevance. The introduction also mentions the process of including the final seventeen writers, noting the other writers they were unable to include due to various reasons, the methodology adopted to interview the writers and translate their selected works to be included in the volume. The readers also learn that the interviews began from what the authors call 'a curtain-raiser' conference at IIT Madras titled 'Mapping the Ahampuram' in October 2017, and the conversations flowing thereafter formed the basis of *Lifescapes*: the organic and personal connection shared by the authors with the interviewees is evident throughout the volume.

It is pertinent to mention that of the seventeen writers interviewed in this volume, three viz. Bama, P. Sivakami and R. Vatsala are primarily novelists, while the rest have a more sustained relationship with the poetic form. It is learnt that eight of these interviews were conducted via email, while nine were conducted by the authors in-person. The writers interviewed herein (in the sequence they appear) are: Bama, Brindha Setu, Ilampirai, Kavin Malar, Kutti Revathi, Malathi Maithri, Manushi Bharathi, R. Meenakshi, Thi. Parameshwari, Perundevi, Sakthi Arulanandam, Sakthi Jothi, Salma, P. Sivakami, Sukirtharani, Thamizhachi Thangappandian, and R. Vatsala. Each of these interviews is preceded by a short biographical note, and a piece of the writer's work carefully translated into English by the authors, K. Srilata and Swarnalatha Rangarajan, which adds immense value to the volume by giving the readers a snippet of the creative craft of the writer being interviewed. The thoughtfully-curated interviews also carry crisp titles which indicate the recurring or the unique theme which characterises a specific writer's life or her work. The first interview for instance, that of the novelist Bama, conducted in-person, carries the title 'Finding reasons to laugh', refers to Bama's quest for delight and laughter in the midst of all her life's struggles and pain. Bama

speaks in detail about her childhood and growth, the storytelling culture she grew up in, the jobs she worked, her Dalit identity, her opinion about nature and environment, her engagement with Christianity and Feminism, a detailed discussion about both *Karukku* and *Sangati*, among other things.

The fifth interview, in-person with the poet Kutti Revathi (S. Revathi) is titled 'A Sheet of Paper, a Pen and a Pillow', and delves deeper into Revathi's twin roles as a Siddha Doctor and a Poet. Revathi speaks at length about her evolution into a poet, her early poems which dealt with the female body, the painful backlash she faced from the conservative society, the literary and thematic influences on her work, and her recurring negotiation with language, the female body and the poetic craft. The seventh interview, with Manushi Bharathi (A. Jayabharathi) via email is titled 'Transmuting anger into Poems', is particularly insightful with Bharathi's views on research, world literature, her frequent use of the triad of love-affection-attachment in her poems, her channelisation of anger and pain into her poetry, her incisive political critique woven into her craft, and her observations about the shrinking spaces of critical appreciation in these times of what she calls groupism and proliferation of social media. The in-person interview with Sakthi Arulanandam (Arulmozhi) who has published three collections of poetry, is an artist (painting and sketching), has won several awards, and earns her living by repairing household electrical goods, is titled 'On Fixing Machines and Writing Poetry' is a veritable treat to read as it offers the poet's significant understanding and mediations with urban ecology, indigenous knowledge and animal rights in addition to her evolution as a writer and poet through several periods of struggle in her life. The email interview with writer and performer Thamizhachi Thangapandian (T. Sumathy) (M.A. & M. Phil in English Literature), is captivating in part due to the sheer variety of genres she works with (poems, essays, short stories, interviews, translations from Gaelic, and translations of her own academic works), and due to her critical engagement with bio-regional writing. A reader interested in research will be delighted by her responses to the authors' questions which are succinct and informative, she lays bare her writing/editing process, and she reveals her uniquely wide range of literary influences on from across the world which include Hegel, Marx, T.S. Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Periyar, Phule and Ambedkar.

It is essential to register that these interviews cover a mammoth range of concerns which hold significant contemporary relevance, including discussions on form and content, genres, caste and gender politics, subaltern concerns, education of women, body politics, ecofeminism, environmental justice, regionalism, literary advocacy, mythopoesis, navigating popular media, publishing, challenging conventions, censorship, creating newer linguistic aesthetics, issues of translation and canon formation to name a few. Published

by Women Unlimited, the volume features a tastefully designed cover by Neelima Rao who depicts the five geographical *tinais* or landscapes and the emotions associated with them interspersed with silhouettes of trees and delicate flowerheads, aptly capturing the essence of the volume. Seasoned academics K. Srilata and Swarnalatha Rangarajan from Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Madras have done a great service to researchers and discerning readers alike, especially those interested in the disciplines of literary, gender and sociological studies, with a sustained focus on women's writing emerging from Tamil Nadu, by putting together this volume which deserves to be distributed widely, and needs several meticulously put-together sequels.

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