

**TRANSLATING GENDERED IDENTITY IN FOLKLORE: READING A
RAJASTHANI KĀLBELIĀ SONG IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse the problems of representation of gendered identity that an English language translator is confronted with when s/he attempts to translate an item of folk literary repertoire into English. In the process, the paper will also discuss the problems of translating folk literary texts into English. To contextualise the discussion, the focus has been kept on Rajasthani folk songs. The piece of folklore that shall particularly inform the present discussion is a folk song called Rekhaṇ, sung by the women of the Kālbeliā tribal community of Rajasthan. Towards this purpose, the paper would first try to arrive at a basic understanding of folklore – and Rajasthani folklore in particular – and the representation of gendered identity within this particular subcontinental folk tradition.

The word “folklore” was first used by the Englishman William Thoms in 1846, for what was then called “popular antiquities” (quoted in Georges and Jones, 1995, 35). Within its ambit, he included things like tales, music, songs, oral history, proverbs and so on and so forth. However, in the contemporary times, it has been loosely defined as the “vast array of local traditions” (Mill et al., 2003, vii) from any cultural or ethno-linguistic group. Others like Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones (1995) have defined it as follows, “With time and repetition, some examples of human expression become pervasive and commonplace. When they do, we conceive them to be traditions or traditional; and we can identify them individually or collectively as folklore” (emphasis in the original, 1).

In the Indian subcontinent, there has been a long history of documenting these examples of human behaviour that have become pervasive and commonplace. In the colonial times, it was done mostly by the British to facilitate political control. Its cultural value and its recognition as a body of collective work that carries popular wisdom are of recent currency, which mostly gained ground in the twentieth century. While the colonial authorities labelled it as primitive

and backward, contemporary indigenous scholarship has come to recognise and legitimise it. One of the methods of such process of legitimisation of folklore is the translation of the literary components of the subcontinental expressive traditions into the English language¹.

However, as we all know, translating any literary text is a complex enterprise. Every translation exercise carried out by any translator is fraught with numerous challenges. These problems and challenges range from finding equivalents and approximations in the target language for words and expressions used in the source language to maintaining sentence structures of the source text, with an assortment of other pitfalls accompanying them. As Harish Trivedi (2007) notes, “the translation of a literary text [is a] transaction not [only] between two languages, or a somewhat mechanical sounding act of linguistic ‘substitution’. . . but rather a more complex negotiation, between two cultures” (280). It, then, falls upon the shoulders of the translator to negotiate them as effectively as possible and as much as possible. Thus, any translation is in some way or the other a kind of mediation between two languages and cultures and will, hence, be brought to bear upon by questions that such mediation gives rise to, and makes a translation good or bad.

As folk literary texts, more often than not, tend to be oral in nature, translating them in another language is more perilous than those directly appearing in the written form. Compared to the written texts, the process of making an oral text emerge in translation in written form in another language usually undergoes an additional stage, that is, of transcription. Transcription tends to freeze an oral text in time and it is this frozen text that gets translated into English. This is one of the major problem areas with translation of oral folk texts. As such texts are expressions that become pervasive and commonplace within a particular cultural or ethno-linguistic group, no one person can lay claim to the authorship of such texts. On the contrary, as and when an oral text transmits itself from one person or group to another or one generation to another, its form and content keep changing. Thus, while the source text stays fluid without any ascribed authorship, the target text stays frozen till such time as another wave in the source text is frozen and translated.

The following example will help illustrate the fluidity of an oral text. Referring to a childbirth song, Gūgri², eminent Rajasthani folklorist Komal Kothari says, “. . . it can be sung in twenty lines, or as many as one hundred lines. It all depends on the women, improvising it, who use their own imagination and musicality to extend the life of the song from one rendition to another” (quoted in Bharucha, 2003, 165). In this case, it would be fallacious to presume that the text of twenty lines is more authentic than the hundred lines text or vice-versa. Similar is the case with wedding songs that welcome the groom’s party to a bride house, by invoking the names of everybody in the groom’s family in order of seniority. Thus, the length of such a song increases or decreases, depending upon the number of the groom’s family members. Also, stanzas in such songs are more or less independent of each other. Therefore, it is not of much consequence as to which stanza is sung earlier and which later. Such variations in the

text beg the question: what does one transcribe and translate, when a definitive primary text itself constantly eludes the transcriber and consequently the translator? It can merely be said that there is no one fixed text; rather there are multiple texts of the same text.

Variations in the primary source text are not the only problem that translators of folk literary texts are confronted with. Another major challenge is the translation of words specific to the dialect and culture in which the text emerges; words that might not have equivalents even in the dominant language of the region, let alone English. For example, Rajasthani words like *gulguliā*³ or *thābak-thaiyān*⁴ do not have equivalents either in Hindi or English. Further, the rhyming structure of a song might be lost when it is translated into English. For instance, if the line “*Miṭṭi re ghaḍ lā i rayā ‘thābak -thaiyān’ sago yun rahyā*” (Bharucha, 170) from a wedding song is translated into English as “A doll made of clay, he brought back,/ Oh in-law! Left where he was!” (Bharucha, 170), it appears more like poetry in free verse rather than a song with lines that rhyme. Further, *sago* can be any male member from the bridegroom’s party, elder to the groom. The ‘in-law’ in English, along with the use of the pronoun ‘he’ conveys only the sex of the bridegroom’s relative and not the seniority.

Sometimes, even the identity of the central character gets altered or toned down. The question of identity, as Anisur Rahman (2003) informs us, “may be answered in a variety of ways — by drawing upon the socio-cultural markers, historical signs, philosophical icons, linguistic configurations, or may be, by referring to a metaphor, a myth, a symbol, or even a turn of phrase, a way of speaking” (N. pag). Thus, identity of an individual or a group(s) of individuals is contingent on numerous variables such as race, gender, history, location, religion and so on and so forth. Further, identity, as we all know, has emerged as the central concern in the contemporary political and cultural discourses, and in a multilingual and multicultural world such as ours, and as Michael Cronin (2006) writes, “translation must be at the centre of any attempt to think about the questions of identity in human society” (xi).

Gender, for times immemorial, has been one of the many markers of human identity. Definition and execution of gender roles has over time led to a hierarchy where the male is privileged over the female and almost all socio-political systems of human existence have come to be dominated by man where woman is the site of exercise of power by man. However, there has always been resistance to this exercise of subjugating power in one form or the other. More so is the case with oral literature, as Mridul Bhasin (2007) points out in the context of her translations of Vijay Dan Detha’s short stories based on Rajasthani folktales, “oral literature all over the world is the literature of protest” (xii). Bhasin’s statement holds true in the context of Rajasthani folk songs as well, especially those composed and sung by women. Most of the women’s songs from Rajasthan either celebrate domesticity or life-cycle events within the domestic sphere, such as childbirth, marriage, death and so on, or they are an expression of protest against oppression. It is in this context that gendered identity

becomes important and if we are to translate such songs, it is imperative for us that this aspect of the songs finds representation in the target text as well.

In the present context, that is, reading gendered identity in the song *Rehan*, we draw upon a socio-cultural marker, a symbol and a linguistic configuration. The song entitled *Rehan* is sung by the women of the *Kālbeliā* tribe in Rajasthan. *Rehan* belongs to the repertoire of *pashu-pakshi* (animal-bird) songs, wherein a story is narrated by the use of animal imagery. Literally, 'rehan' means 'locust', which is a significant part of the staple diet of the *Kālbeliā*. In *Rehan*, a female locust who has been abandoned by its swarm, risks being killed by unidentified marauders, who might kill her children as well. Hence, she is being asked to fly away and save herself. The irony here is that such sympathy is being expressed by a member of the community that does not share a happy and peaceful relationship with the locusts. While locust swarms are known to destroy crops, they are, in turn, eaten by the *Kālbeliā* and other nomadic communities. The menace of locust swarms is a given reality in the lives of the *Kālbeliā*. Then, how does one explain the sympathy of the *Rekhan* singer for the locust? It is here that gender identification comes into play. It is significant to note both the addressor and the addressee are female. It is as if one woman is expressing her grief and suffering by giving voice to the predicaments of another woman. The sentiment being expressed here is that women across time and space have been at the receiving end of the male-female human relationships. The male violence is expressed in this song in its full dramatic intensity. The song successfully conveys this without even referring to any male character in particular.

At a very basic level, it is a question of choice as to who does the speaker wish to be identified with, in case she is to protest. Which identity is more important for her: that of the community she belongs to or that of the gender she belongs to? The speaker's choice of identification works at two levels here. It is a case of double protest. Firstly, she identifies with the locust, that is, an entity the existence of which is always contingent on its relationship to humans; a relationship which is antagonistic in nature at the very base of it. Secondly, her addressee is a female locust and not any male locust. Thus, it is a statement of protest against male violence through the expression of a gendered subjectivity.

The first few lines of the song are as follows:

Aṭhe rī uḍiyori rekhaṇ Rrohet dhāḍo diyo - 2

Thānrā bachhadā ruḷ jāyī rekhaṇ

Pari uḍe ni e

Thane mār wā ne āyā rekhaṇ (Kothari, quoted in Bharucha, 166)

In these lines, it is to be noted that neither the marauders out to kill the locust nor the children of the locust are present. Their presence lies outside the body of the song, as they remain anonymous throughout the song. The only character in the song that is explicitly identified is

the locust. The gender of the locust is identified in the third line with the use of feminine “pari”. Further, it is identified in lines such as “Kāndā re khāyegi mūlān re khāyegi / khāyegi sabki bādi.” (Bharucha, 166). Thus, in the Rajasthani text, the gender of the locust being addressed is clearly identified, not only through direct address (“pari”) but also through use of feminine adjectives such as “pātalīye” and “dābariyā” , and through the feminised verb “khāyegi”.

However, in the English translation, this gendered identity of the locust gets toned down and it is made implicit, as opposed to explicit gender identification in the Rajasthani text. A condensed version of the song in English translation is presented below⁵:

From here flew the swarm of locusts and landed at Rohet
Your children will be lost and scattered, oh locust
Why don't you fly away now?
They are coming to kill you, oh locust
The onions are all eaten, the radishes are all eaten
Everybody's vegetable gardens eaten bare
My locust of slender feet
For your large eyes, oh locust
My locust of slender wrists
My locust with round cheeks
For the sake of your slender wrists, locust
For the sake of your round cheeks, locust
Why don't you feel away now? (Bharucha, 166-167)

As can be seen, in the English translation, the gender of the locust is not explicit but is made implicit. Although the body of the locust is feminised by attributing adjectives such as “slender” and “round” to feet and wrists, and cheeks, respectively, there is no explicit feminine term of address, thus muting the gender identity of the locust. Thus, what we see here is that it is not entirely possible to translate gendered terms from Rajasthani to English. The gendered subjectivity gets muted in translation. The double level of protest in the Rajasthani text is reduced to just one level. Thus, while documenting folk might not be a very taxing enterprise, its translation into a language not bound to the immediate context certainly poses significant problems. Items of the literary repertoire of folklore have their own internal logic and rhythm bound to the socio-cultural markers and linguistic configurations in which they originate and, hence, they resist translation.

Notes

¹ This paper does not delve into the debates centering on the choice of English as the preferred target language, and why not any other language, as it would be beyond the purview of the present paper.

² “The custom is that, [*sic*] whenever a male child is born in any Rajasthani family, some *gūgri* is prepared and a very small quantity is distributed to each of the houses in the neighbourhood, and to close relatives in the kin group,” (Kothari, quoted in Bharucha, 2003, 163-164).

³ While the noun form of this word — *gulgulā* — is the same as in Hindi, the adjective has no corresponding Hindi word. In English, neither the corresponding noun nor the adjective can be found. *Gulgulā* is a sweet *pakora* (a kind of deep-fried snack) made of wheat flour, jaggery and clarified butter.

⁴ It can be loosely translated as “doll”. However, the pejorative and derogatory connotation that it has in Rajasthani is not possible to convey either in Hindi or English.

⁵ By condensed, it is implied that only one instance of every line is being reproduced here, without any repetition, as it would be in the original Rajasthani text.

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