
Translation and Gender

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From the Guest Editor:

A search for works by Bengali women authors in English translation, as a part of a project, brought the realisation home that even in a heavily translated language like Bengali, representation of women authors in other languages, including English, was way less than that of the male authors. That further brought an understanding of how gender affected translation – not just the craft of it, but also what to translate. One of the reasons can be visibility and availability of the texts. There are some deep-set and complex sociocultural issues that create this gap in representation. And this is not just true for the Bengali women authors, rather, a worldwide phenomenon which has led organisations and movements like PEN/ Heim Translation Fund or #womenintranslation project to promote more women authors in translation. Women’s writings, particularly from the past, are yet to receive a proper circulation among readers. Feminist studies, postcolonial studies and globalisation have helped in the increasing the possibilities of translation of texts by women authors though that is yet not enough.

In an article in *The Conversation*, Olga Castro mentions, “The future of feminism is in the transnational, and transnational links can only be made through translation”. Postcolonial studies too prioritise plurality of voices and representation of the marginal, and therefore gives space to the women’s writings from various cultures. In the post globalisation world, translation emerges as an important tool of communication that can initiate conversation between various linguistic communities. This intercultural communication lays the basis of inclusive and intersectional feminisms. With the third wave of feminism which directs its focus on feminisms and intersectionality, the transnational experiences become crucial. Since identity politics has become one of the pivots of exploitation and suppression, borders have gained greater significance. Transnationality is a movement beyond the borders, highlighting the necessity of porosity and transcendence of boundaries. Among the key factors that played a determining role in identity politics, gender is an important one. Also, gender experiences differ with nationalities. This realization is at the basis of the third wave of feminism that has identified the need for inclusivity of experiences as one of the basic criteria for a less stratified world. The significance of translation in this context has been highlighted by Michael Cronin:

“Translation also functions as a way of establishing transnational networks which are expansive in their ambition and reach. That is to say, it is translation which prevents national literatures from

cultivating a myth of pure autonomy or essentialist autogenesis. Translation can contribute to movements of linguistic or cultural independence but only on condition that the state of independence is one of interdependence” (35)

This resistance to ‘pure autonomy’ or ‘essentialist autogenesis’ is also the key to resist authoritarianism. This makes translation an important tool for feminist movements too as it resists the authoritarianism of patriarchy and other exploitative agencies.

Each age has its own dominant literary genre. It can be said that translation is fast emerging as one such in the contemporary age. With an increasing level of cultural intermingling, the need for translation has only been felt greater. Globalisation has impacted the language map of the world in multiple ways. While, in the erstwhile colonies it has led to the proliferation of English as a major language, it has also created a desire to understand the other languages. Though it has began as an economic activity, as a product of the market forces, there has been a growing trend towards cultural exchanges. This fall out of globalisation has been responsible for an increased translation activity too. In a multilingual country like India, translation has an even more important presence. In a land where the ruling dictum is: *Kos kos pe badle pani/ Chaar kos pe vani* (at ever kos, there’s a change of water and at every four kos, the language), interlingual exchanges are very important. For communities to understand and interact with each other, translation becomes the primary tool. In a country where language politics has often played a divisive role, importance of translation can hardly be stressed more. Linguistically divided boundaries of India are not just political demarcations, but they are also locations of multiple cultures, rituals and traditions. The reason that they are here also implies the inherent polyphonic structure of the Indian society which further emphasise on the need for translation.

Gender and language have always had troubled relationship. Language, along with translation, has been referred to as “tools for gender oppression and liberation” (Castro 2013: 7). Being a vehicle for communication of culture, language also becomes the medium of communicating prejudices. Therefore, feminist writings have felt the need to re-invent language, to find out means and ways to subvert the patriarchal bent of the language and re-engage it to topple the existing hierarchies. The radical feminists of 1970s looked at language, “as an instrument of women's oppression and subjugation which needed to be reformed, if not replaced by a new women's language” (Flowtow 14). Discussing the role of translator in translating radical feminist texts, Flowtow mentions the translator as “working for the cause of the woman in this work, she regularly oversteps the bounds of invisibility that traditionally define her role” (20-21), bringing in the role of translator as an activist.

Gender and translation bring together multiple epistemological concerns. On the one hand it looks at the nature of language and its relationship vis-s-vis not just women but all the marginalised communities, on the other, it also looks at the possibilities of empowerment inherent in the act of translation. Multilingual communities like India adds to this complexity because the notion of language and gender gets interspaced with linguistic hegemonies and politics of linguistic

hierarchies. The language of woman is cut across by other parameters of identity politics such as caste, class, and location, each of which in turn, have an impact upon the language.

The papers included in this volume deals with the multiple aspects of gender and translation. There are two dealing with English translation of Mahasweta Devi's short stories which approach the act of translating a subversive text like these stories from two different perspectives. Manodip Chakraborty addresses the issue of translating the 'sufferings' in a text by woman author where the protagonist is female. He argues that these translations, instead of bringing in the complex and multiple identities, vis-s-vis the character's social, cultural and political positioning, only universalises the idea of suffering in a woman, giving central importance to the 'secondary' position of women protagonists and stripping her of other possibilities. In this case, translation propagates the stereotypical and also legitimises the figure of the oppressed woman in literary consciousness across languages.

In the second paper on the *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi, Ankita Bose looks into the act of translation of a woman by another woman and the politics of translation involved. Drawing from Cixous' idea of a woman writing with her body, Bose points at the discomfort that such texts evoke among the authorities and the mechanism of 'silencing' them. Removal of 'Draupadi' by Mahasweta Devi from the curriculum of Delhi University then becomes one such attempt. In this case both the translator and the author engage in a pact of de-stabilising the normative representation of woman by deliberately presenting a visceral representation of the female body and its experience of exploitation.

Namrata Chowdhury's paper deals with the problematics of translating gastro-political narratives of translation. Food is a site of cultural production and its deep-rooted association with a particular culture makes its translation a difficult task. She looks at the anxieties and trauma of partition through food. A translation of Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamayi's kotha* by Anchita Ghatak becomes an exploration of the gastro-political anxieties and how they become a part of the greater narrative of partition across states and linguistic communities.

Purabi Goswami's paper looks at the translation of Assamese short stories by women and how they challenge the established notions of patriarchal system. A translation of these short stories by women is significant because they bring different and nuanced experiences of women's life into focus, making the readers aware of the differences yet, the similarity of their underlying exploitation. After looking at a host of translations in the Western tradition, the author focusses on the Assamese short stories and how their translation leads to a broadening of horizon for the readers.

The book review of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Translating myself and others* also explores the idea of translation as seen by a woman. The review focuses on the craft of translation as Lahiri mediates through various strands of Western epistemologies to finally engage with the idea of *dhwani* and its centrality in the act of translation.

The five different papers approach translation and gender from five different perspectives, highlighting the rich avenues of scholarly debates and possibilities still left to be explored. The limited number of papers also highlight the lack of serious engagement with the theoretical perspectives of gender and translation and the need for a deeper exploration of the same. This issue is an attempt to engage with the multiple possibilities of gender and translation by looking at the way language becomes a tool of gender experiences and to open up fresh dialogic spaces to engage with the idea of gender from the perspective of translation.

References

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Guest Editor - Dr. Nabanita Sengupta

Bio - A translator and creative writer, Nabanita Sengupta is an Assistant Professor of English in Kolkata. She has translated *A Bengali Lady in England*, and *Chambal Revisited*. She has also authored an e-book of fiction *The Ghumi Days*. As a poet, her recent publication is a collaborative poetry anthology by three women poets, *Three Witches' Songs* and has also co-edited the first IPPL poetry anthology *Voices and Vision*. She has co-edited a volume of critical essays *Understanding Women's Experiences of Displacement*. She is one of the Executive Committee members of the Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library