

The Voice of Silence: A Study of the Act of Transportation of the Muted Voices

Dr Purabi Goswami

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Handique Girls' College, Guwahati, India

Mail Id: goswami.purabi@rediffmail.com | ORCID ID: [0000-0001-7147-6311](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7147-6311)

Abstract

Women and translation are connected by their empirical identity. Translation is something which comes after the original and holds a secondary position. Similarly, woman is second to man. The narrative from the Genesis too emphasizes the same notion. Creator endows breath of life to create the human species by transforming dust into man and then creates woman from the man's rib. From then on it is proclaimed she is called Woman because she was taken out of Man. Woman is named here in a derivative manner and this gives the assumptions to create all the clichés on the secondary nature of woman. Similarly, translation is something derived from the original text. The clichés never acknowledge the fact that translation is actually transformation where the 'original' goes through a change.

Notwithstanding these traditional assumptions many women translators are successful in including their own perspectives in the translated texts with subtle feminine interventions. Similarly many translated texts too have independent identities. For instance when we read a novel written by Orhan Pamuk we hardly think about the original. The 2022 International Booker prize winner *Tomb of Sand*, the English translation of *Ret Samadhi* written by Geetanjali Shree is acknowledged all over the world; but we do not weigh how far it is a derivative of the original.

Keeping these ideas in view the paper will look at different nuances of translation and women in the multilingual context of India taking into account two stories "Pas Chotalor Kathakata" and "Mariam Astin Athaba Heera Barua" written by Arupa Patangia Kalita, a Sahitya Akademi Award winning Assamese woman writer. The stories bear distinct feminist identity in terms of language and experiences. With innovative narrative techniques it tells us about women's silence and disappearance from the public domain. However, the paper will focus how English translations of the stories carry over these intricate experiences to a larger audience and endow a distinct identity to the Assamese writer.

Keywords: Translation, Woman, Gender, Silence, Voice

Women and translation are connected by their empirical identity. Translation is something which comes after the original and holds a secondary position. Similarly, woman is second to man. The narrative from the Genesis too emphasizes the same notion. Creator endows breath of life to create the human species by transforming dust into man and then creates woman from the man's rib. From then on it is proclaimed she is called Woman because she was taken out of Man. Woman is named here in a derivative manner and this gives the assumptions to create all the clichés on the secondary nature of woman.

The traditional interpretation of women as mysterious and indecipherable aided to maintain the secondary status of women in the public sphere. The image of women as 'deceitful' further accentuated the 'unknowability' of a woman. That was considered the feminine essence which made her more attractive to a man and to win over her was considered another victory for the man. Ilya Parkins in her essay "texturing visibility: opaque femininities and feminist modernist studies" observes: "...male authors glorying in the unknowability of women are comfortable in this position because it represents a means of denying engagement, disembodying femininity, distancing it only to hold on to the abstract erotic possibility that women represent" (58).

Similarly translation is something derived from the original text. The clichés never acknowledge the fact that translation is actually transformation where the 'original' goes through a change. Visibility of women in public life is a comparatively a new happening. In this context if we discuss the association of women with translation and dig into history we discover women in 18th century appeared in the world of publication through translation. Marie-Pascale Pieretti, in the essay "Women Writers and Translation in Eighteenth-Century France" writes: "It is clear that women used translation either to educate themselves and others, or to participate publicly in the literary and scientific debates of their time" (474). Discussing two French women writers Emilie du Châtelet and Anne Dacier of 18th century she shows how translation was the only forum to establish visibility in the world of publication. Châtelet is well known for the translation of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* and Dacier came up with a scholarly translation of Homer's *Iliad*. She further comments that translation was:

part of the rhetoric women writers of that period mastered in order to be heard. Consistently reiterating the perception du Châtelet and Dacier had of themselves as writers lacking the proper talents to create original works, a widespread opinion concerning the work of translators, these writers identified translation as the only appropriate form of writing they could publish(476).

Analysing Dacier's translation of Homer Pieretti finds that she makes a contribution to the realm of women by venturing into the male province. She argues:

Her most obvious achievement in this regard was to render the style and diction of the poem with her deep understanding of Homeric culture, found in numerous footnotes appended to her *Iliad*. In this way Dacier, a female author, achieved what none of her contemporaries or predecessors had managed: an accurate reading of Homer's work in modern French prose. Refusing the limiting concessions of the Moderns, Dacier used translation to assert herself on the terrain of the Ancients. She thereby made the

role of women more visible within the male-dominated discourse on knowledge rather than within the confines of novel writing, regarded as a more feminine literary endeavor at that time (477-78).

In British English literature the 'translatress' comes to the scene during the period of Renaissance. Women used the discourse of translation to enter into the public world of writing. The task of translation was given to woman for the sole reason that it was considered the only intellectual activity appropriate for women. Yet it rescued the women from their imposed silence. To appear in print was considered aggressive behavior for females during that period. Translation gave them the opportunity to be involved and get engaged in literary culture without challenging male control. Noted translatresses of this period were Margaret More Roger, daughter of Thomas More and Mary Sidney, sister of Philip Sidney. Another important woman translator of this period is Margaret Tyler. Unlike her contemporaries Tyler is not known for the translations of religious works but for a Spanish romance. Moreover, the powerful preface to this translation is strong enough to get compared to a feminist manifesto. Later on translation work was taken up by woman writers like Aphra Behn who was capable of translating from Latin and French.

When we talk about women's relation to translation two things get clubbed together: translation studies and gender studies. Samia Mehrez establishes affinities between the two fields in the following manner: "Both gender studies and translation studies are fairly new academic fields with international and interdisciplinary thrusts and implications. Both have oriented themselves toward travelling across traditional academic disciplines to create transnational communities and cross cultural communication" (107). Like translation studies gender studies too cross boundaries and make possible cross cultural communication. Hence translation of women's works broadens the scope of gender studies.

The traditional association of translation with women because of its secondary role further denies an independent status to both translation and women. This also results in turn what Helen Smith has identified as a "critical double bind, through which the devaluing of women's labour as mechanical and the devaluation of translation as derivative perpetuate each other." (31-32). Marie Alice Belle in the essay, "Locating Early Modern Women's Translations: Critical and Historiographical Issues" comments:

Micheline White notes for example that women's translations still represent a "neglected" genre in early modern literary studies. Her concern is echoed by Anne Lawrence Mathers, who further underlines the difficulty for female-authored translations to achieve canonical status. The status of translations within the corpus of early modern women's writings appears itself somewhat problematic. Long considered a secondary form of literary production, translation has sometimes been presented as a pis-aller, or default solution, which one should study to complement or compensate for the scarcity of female-authored texts belonging to more traditionally accepted, and therefore more easily recognized, modes of writing (7-8).

In spite of the secondary position of translation the women translators of that period successfully used it as medium to voice out their perspectives as female authors. Barbara Godard's asserts that female subjectivity should be foregrounded both in writing and translation. Godard says, "The feminist

translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. *Woman handling* the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest-self-effacing translator" (91). In the 19th century Madame de Staël, Margaret Fuller and Eleanor Marx used translation to voice for political causes. In the 20th century women translators like Constance Garnett, Lady Gregory, Willa Muir performed translation establishing a close relation to social, political or intellectual framework.

Looking at another dimension of translation and women Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood says, "I am a translation because I am a woman" (95) and "I am a translation because I am a bilingual" (89). Bilingual because women are obliged to use two different codes within the same language, the dominant male language and the often silent women's tradition¹. As women are silent and invisible in the literary tradition Hala Kamal contests Venuti's idea of invisibility and argues how it is unacceptable from a feminist perspective:

Looking at the translator's invisibility through a feminist lens, invisibility becomes unacceptable, since feminism, in theory and practice, is concerned with restoring women from a history of marginalization, silencing, and obscurity. It is therefore self-evident that in the translation of *EWIC*, and any translation carried out by a feminist, there would be a consciousness of the dynamics leading to the subordination of the translator; and to accommodate agency, there would even be a strategic acknowledgment of the role of the translator, as well as his or her being given space for overt self-expression. (258)

In this sense the act of translating creates a text that lives on its own terms with a distinct mark of the translator. C.M. Bowra commented on Edith Hamilton's ² translation of *Prometheus Bound* in a popular reprint of *The Greek Way*. Bowra discusses the positives of 'feminine intuition' and acknowledges her choice of 'the most significant'. He writes:

Miss Hamilton started from the best, the right, the only possible point – the actual texts of Greek literature. These she knew from the inside, not through translations and commentaries but through the original words, which are remarkable for their clarity and elegance and force. With this knowledge she was able to turn her feminine intuition in many directions, to adapt herself easily and almost unconsciously to the writers whom she studied, and to extract from their work what appealed most deeply to her and seemed to be the most significant. (xvii)

The woman translator cannot remain invisible behind the original author she does make her presence felt in the translated text. In this way translation becomes a medium for the women writers to make themselves visible in the public world. However, we can also look at the idea of women and translation from another perspective that is how the different narrative strategies and nuances of women writers can be transferred through translation. We should keep the idea in consideration that as a woman translator can make her presence felt in the translated text; in the same way a translated text written by a woman can also get a distinct identity. When we take up writers from regional languages the scope to get multiplicity of experiences and viewpoints becomes more. Recently in India some women writers have come up with anthologies containing translated works of Indian women writers. At many times translations into a language like English erase the regional specificities of these works giving them a pan- Indian identity. However, works like *Women Writing in India* edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita are treasures in the sense that they had not only dug history to excavate

archival works but were careful to include texts which did not lose their individuality to fit into the idea of a nation. Hence they included translations: “that did not domesticate the work ... into (a) pan-Indian mode” (xx). For instance, Meena T. Pillai in the essay, “Gendering Translation, Translating Gender A Case Study of Kerala” questions:

A ‘woman’ thus constructed in language is an already subordinated entity, coerced into positions that ‘silence’ or ‘hide’ her. How does woman’s negative relationship to language inform an act of translation where there is qualitative and quantitative difference in the production and maintenance of gender hierarchies in the Source Language and Target Language? (1).

Describing Malayalam as a highly gender prejudiced language where the system of Patriarchy has silenced women she believed “ the degree of gendering is different in Malayalam and English” (2). Although these challenges cannot deny the need for regional literature to be translated; at the same time we can also not ignore the fact because the women in regional languages produce the most original works with high cultural innuendoes. The translations of them into English will not only provide a window to such literature it will also create a rich literature.

In recent times we find a host of contemporary women writers in Assamese literature who write about women’s lives and experiences in new ways. They have done the work of breaking the silence in the sense that they have a vocabulary which can be used to talk about women’s experience and by women only. They do not feel compelled to use the conventional narrative structures and at many times they talk quite openly about tabooed subjects like sexuality, love and women’s body.

In the translation of these stories the translator should be very cautious so that the nuances of the original can be carried across. As Lakshmi Holmström³ writes in the essay, “ Ambai The Language of Love, Desire and Sexuality”: “Translation is concerned, I believe, with paying very close attention to what the language is doing in the original text. Particularly in the language of sexuality and desire, the *tonal value* of words, and their *context* seems to be as important as their (more obvious) meanings. This is always a difficult and sensitive area for the translator” (58). The language and style of these stories are distinct in the sense that they are lyrical, spontaneous and unconventional.

For the study in this paper two stories “Pach Chotalar Kathakata” (“The Narrative in the Backyard”) and “Mariyam Astin Athaba Heera Barua” (Mariyam Astin or Heera Barua”) written by Sahitya Akademi award winning Assamese woman writer Arupa Patangia Kalita are chosen. The main narrative in “Pach Chotalar Kathakata” is moulded by other narratives which the narrator happens to read. In fact those narratives determine the later actions in the narrator’s life. The story progresses with the stream of thought of the first person narrator, Junu Hazarika. The background information about the characters are revealed through the strategy of flashback when the first person narrator reminisces about her past. Junu Hazarika, a researcher who is working on the child widows of 19th century India, is determined to secure an emancipated life for her daughter – free from all constrictions which a woman usually had to undergo in the period she takes up for research. Thinking about her daughter she utters, “I will give you a sky to fly. You will fly. You will fly, Majani, flapping your wings” (3).⁴ The narrative develops through her dialogues with the dead characters coming

alive on the worn-out pages of the old books. The narrator confronts them through her reading of these books and journals, and observes their lives closely. A narrative chain can also be discovered if we visualise Junu Hazarika reading books about the 19th century women and we reading about her experiences. The first part of the story is about those unfortunate women who were deprived of a life of dignity because they had lost their husbands, some of them at a very tender age and some even did not know whom they were married to! In the second part of the story, Junu Hazarika gets the news that her daughter has attained puberty and she hurries back home to take care of her daughter whom she has left behind in the custody of her in-laws. Majani's mother, Junu Hazarika is totally taken aback by what she has got to see at her in-law's house. Her daughter is kept quarantined in one room. She is not allowed to eat and be touched. Suddenly she realizes that the lives of the 19th century women she was reading about sitting in the National Library in Kolkata is not a distant reality but a stark present which is too immediate and close at hand to be complacent about it. The wall between the past and present collapses as she discovers a semblance of the past in place of the progressive development she dreams of. The writer writes: "It was a world of enchantment where the differences between past and present merged into a synonymy" (5).

The dead mothers from the past have come alive as flesh and blood presences challenging her illusions about her daughter's liberated existence in the present. Junu Hazarika, in her imaginary conversation with them, wants to know about their inner state of mind as she asks: "Do you have any idea as to what your family members said at the time of your death?" (7) The researcher Junu Hazarika engages with a conversation with those characters from the past. As Junu Hazarika treats them as living characters, the narrative she is reading has such an engrossing impact on her consciousness that she feels as if she is conversing with them. 'Kathakata' or narrative is the focal point of this story. It is about women's need to search or re-search women's narratives. Initially, Junu Hazarika reads those stories as only research material and distances herself from those stories. Nonetheless in the later part of the story, she ironically finds herself in a circular situation because she perceives that she and her own time are also in the same regressive state and therefore need to be subjected to critical scrutiny as she has been doing to the 19th century women's lives. The need is to regain one's agency as woman, a shift from the object to the subject position.

Towards the later part of the story, the narrative develops a stream of consciousness mode. The stream of the central character's thought crosses the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious. Majani's mother is shocked to have seen her daughter performing all the ritualistic norms of puberty under the supervision of her grandmother. Suddenly, she realizes that her dream of raising Majani differently is getting shattered. In the confusing state of her mind, Gyanadasundari's mother (a nineteenth century woman) appears before her and confronts her with a reminder that Majani's state of life is not different from that of her daughter. Majani's mother replies her angrily: "How can my Majani and your daughter be the same? My Majani is not a widow." Gyanadasundari's mother replies: "She is not a widow but she is threatened with the fearful prospect of being a widow, which is the same. How could my daughter too be a widow when she was not even touched by a man? Yet she remained a widow throughout her life. How can you and I be different as we have the same body, the body of a woman?" (27).

The narrator expresses how her entry into the National Library of Kolkata gave a feeling of enchantment and carried her back to antiquity. She felt: "Dead time is enlivened with flesh and blood; from the ruins of the dead time emerge a train of diverse people. I have come here searching for the mothers of the past. Not the fortunate mothers who gave birth to sons; I have come in quest of the blind mothers who raised daughters" (4). The determination of the protagonist in the story shows a parallelism with the central idea of the paper. The story wants to install the forgotten and unknown figures of the past. Similarly translated texts need to get a self sufficient status and women's works too need to come to the forefront. Translations of women's texts add in the widening of the scope and status of women's works.

The story creates a narrative space where 'woman's burden' can be realized and shared. The gamut of women Swarna, Kamala, Basanti, Gyanadasundari, Indumati, exhibit how since the past, women have been suffering for being women. In the consciousness of Majani's mother, these characters speak out their heart:

" 'Indu's mother! What did you do when your daughter went to stay at Kashi?'

'I was in my funeral pyre after a few days.' The women started weeping loudly. Gyanada's mother, Kamala's mother and Swarna's mother – all of them assembled there. Each of them began to howl" (33).

It is through her imaginary conversation with the dead child widows and their mothers that Majani's mother Junumoni gets back her determination to bring up Majani in her own ways, defying all the prescribed conventions. She drives off the oppressed souls of the past and utters: "You go and take shelter in the cracks of the walls of fallen houses. You have died, but I have not. Touch me and feel my body temperature. You are as cold as snow; my body bears the smell of a living human" (35).

In the story of "Pach Chotalar Kathakata", there are few events which can be considered as given. The narrative retrieval of the stories of the 19th century widows influences the course of events in the later part of the narrative which tells the stories of Junu Hazarika's life in the present. The act of retrieval of the silent voices controls as the driving force for the later course of events in her life.

Similarly, in the story "Mariyam Astin Athaba Heera Barua" the present state of Heera Barua is shaped by the story she heard from her maternal uncle about Mariyam Astin. Heera Barua makes an attempt to accept the trials and tribulations of her present life in the light of a narrative about an unfamiliar woman Mariyam Asin which Heera Barua had found quite strange in her childhood. The lonely life of Heera Barua with her pet dog and her stream of consciousness remind the reader of Clarrissa Dalloway from *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. Like Clarrissa, Heera Barua too often goes back to her past life and lives in her memories. Through her memories comes alive another woman Mariyam Astin, the landlady of her maternal uncle in London who lived alone with her pet dog. The story progresses non-sequentially with memories of Heera Barua. Her lonely and secluded life is unfolded through her recollections. The story does not focus on any external occurrence. The emphasis is on the consciousness of Heera Barua. Two women, one from the East and the other from the West go through the same experiences in their lives. The narrative flows with the reminiscences

of Heera Barua: “The imaginary picture of Mariyam Astin got engraved in her mind in her childhood itself. She couldn’t sleep for the whole night. She is remembering Mariyam Astin again and again...” (208).

The solidarity which is formed between these two women of two different countries is possible because of a female bonding she establishes with the distant woman. Heera Barua now passes her time talking with her pet dog, Sonamoni; she remembers how in her childhood days she used to hear a similar story about Mariyam Astin from her maternal uncle and found it quite incredible. “How incredible it was! Do human beings talk with dogs?” (187). Now she finds herself appropriating the actions of Mariyam Astin in her own life. In that sense, they also form a female bonding across time and space. In spite of spatial and temporal differences between them, both the women embrace the same lonely life sans their children.

The stories resist the repressive traditions existing in the society. The contemporary short stories offer us nuanced narratives as they depict the conflicts both within the characters’ mind and in the world outside as they fight against the old to establish the new.

This kind of experimental women short story writers abounds in contemporary Assamese literature. They have not only voiced the ignored concerns of women in terms of language and style they also have given a new recognition to Assamese literature. Translation of them into a language like English will ensure a well-defined identify of these writers introducing them to a large readership. It will also create a visibility of a regional literature to a large audience. None the less translation to another regional language too will familiarize the literature of this region to an audience who will be exposed to nuanced realities of women from another corner within India.

End Notes:

1. Deborah Cameron provides interesting insights into the relation of language and gender. Cameron says it is believed male- associated forms are the norms from which female deviates. The idea is elaborated in the book *On Language and Sexual Politics*. A very influential book in this respect is Robin Lakoff’s *Language and Women’s Place*. She discovers a woman’s language which maintains women’s inferior position in society.
2. Hamilton was criticized by some for misrepresenting the classical text; but discovered the woman in her translations.
3. Holstrom’s book includes short fiction by women writing in India, British and America and also incorporates varieties of genres covering the diverse themes of sexuality, quest for identity, caste and hierarchy etc.
4. Translations of the two stories are mine which are done for the purpose of the paper.

References

- Belle, Marie Alice. "Locating Early Modern Women's Translations: Critical and Historiographical Issues." *Renaissance and Reformation* 35: 4 (2012): 5-23. JSTOR. Web. 29 October, 2021.
- Bowra, C. M. Introduction to Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way*. New York: Time Inc. Reprint, 1963.
- Brewer, Maria Minich. "A Loosening of Tongues: From Narrative Economy to Women's Writing." *MLN* 99:5(1984):1141-1161. JSTOR. Web. 26 September, 2017.
- De Lotbinière-Harwood, Susanne. *The Body Bilingual: Translation as a Rewriting in the Feminine*, Montréal & Toronto, Les Editions du remueménage and Women's Press, 1991.
- Godard, Barbara. "Theorizing Feminist Discourse/ Translation", *Tessera* 6 (1984): 42-53. Web. 22 February, 2013.
- Holmström, Lakshmi. "Ambai The Language of Love, Desire and Sexuality." *Translating Women Indian Interventions*. Ed. N. Kamala. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2009. 46-62.
- Kalita, Arupa Patangia. "Pach Chotalor Kathakata". *Pach Chotalor Kathakata*. Guwahati, Jyoti Prakashan: 2000: 1-40.
- Kalita, Arupa Patangia. "Mariyam Astin Athaba Heera Barua." *Mariyam Astin Athaba Heera Barua*. Guwahati: Chanrda Prakash: 2012:110-121, 183-216.
- Kamal, Hala. "Translating Women and Gender: The Experience of Translating The Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures into Arabic." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36:3&4 (2008):254-268. JSTOR. Web 10 June, 2013.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Mehrez, Samia. "Translating Gender." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3:1(2007): 106-127. JSTOR. Web. 10 June 2013.
- Parkins, Ilya. "texturing visibility: opaque femininities and feminist modernist studies". *Feminist Review* ,107 (2014): 57-74. JSTOR. Web. 18 October 2021.
- Pieretti, Marie-Pascale. "Women Writers and Translation in Eighteenth-Century France." *The French Review* . 75: 3 (2002): 474-488. JSTOR. Web. 18 October 2021.
- Pillai, Meena T. "Gendering Translation, Translating Gender A Case Study of Kerala." *Translating Women Indian Interventions*. Ed. N. Kamala. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2009:1-15.
- Smith, Helen. *Grossly Material Things Women and Book Production in Early Modern England*. Oxford University Press:2012
- Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita ed. *Women Writing in India* Vol. II. Delhi: OUP, 1995.

Author Bio: Dr Purabi Goswami works as an Assistant Professor in the department of English, Handique Girls' College. She did her Ph D on the translated works of Mamoni Raisom Goswami and has done a couple of translations of Assamese novels and stories into English. Besides that, she has an interest in women's writing and has published several research articles on that area.