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# Translation as Empowerment

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## Abstract

*The article emphasizes the need for a feminist translation of texts which rather creates meaning than reproduce the original. On the other hand the paper encourages feminist translations to give a distinguished description of women issues, particularly, child widows. With the illustrations of two prominent Kannada novels, being translated, the article exemplifies the need for feminist translations which acts as a preponderant element in breaking the ties of male cultural hegemony in the society.*

In so far as translation is considered as a mode of engagement with literature, it involves not merely linguistic and technical issues, but goes on to create new pathways for cultural communication. Scholars have recognized the curious connection between translation studies and feminist theory as both have been assigned secondary status in the field of literary studies. As Sherry Simon comments, “*The hierarchical authority of the original over the reproduction is linked with imagery of masculine and feminine...*” (1996:10). Simon also says that both are tools for a critical understanding of the difference as it is represented by language (1996:8). The trajectory of the growth of translation Studies is said to closely parallel the development of feminist history in the 70s. N. Kamala points out, “*This obviously led to the practice of what is now termed ‘Feminist Translation’*” (A. Rahman ed. 2002:34). It may be observed that in the post-colonial context both have broken the bounds of secondary status and gained new voice through their greater relevance in the modern world. Feminist translation foregrounds the question of the secondary status both of

translation and women in society while perceiving translations as projections of equivalence.

As Helene Cixous points out in “*Women’s liberation goes/starts through language*” (A. Rahman 2002:30), if women are to express themselves, they are forced to resort to the language of male discourse which is strongly patriarchal in nature. Barbara Godard writes, “*Translation in its figurative meanings of transcoding and transformation, is a topos in feminist discourse used by women writers to evoke the difficulty of breaking out of silence in order to communicate new insights into women’s experiences and their relation to language*” (A. Rahman 2002:29). Women writers are evolving new strategies to challenge or subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology in order to represent other images of female sexuality. Translation is one such strategy that represents women’s experience extending the idea of ‘*dialogue*’ between languages in the widest sense. It opens up communication and helps to break the silence and begins to speak to others. As is well known, all acts of translation are rooted in politics. The feminist translations attempt to “*map the conversion of submission into resentment, resentment into resistance and resistance into representation*” (Brinda Bose 2002: xix). The articulation of women’s experience in itself becomes a site of resistance and when women’s experience finds representation through the translational mode, this challenge has implications for rewriting the hegemonic history. Having joined force with women’s writing, translation becomes an important strategy of articulation and a powerful site of resistance, empowering the silenced and the dispossessed.

Feminist translation attempts to question the notion of authority and patriarchy by projecting the presence of women who have been silenced in language and in society. While acknowledging the political and interpretative dimensions of feminist translation, women translators become active participants in the creation of meaning. As N. Kamala records, their intervention takes many forms

which Luise Von Flotow elaborates as “*supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and ‘hijacking’*” (A. Rahman ed. 2002:37). Supplementing is a strategy that compensates for language differences especially to make the woman visible; feminist translators provide proper perspectives of the subject in their interpretative prefaces and footnotes, and ‘*hijacking*’ is a term, which is being used for feminist translations. Feminist translators attempt all strategies to make language speak for them and even attempt to recover old terms with negative connotation by turning them into positive tropes. Terms like ‘*Virago*’ or ‘*Kali*’ have come to stand for creative energy.

It is clear that “*resistance*” is the fulcrum of feminist activism in contemporary India and resentment and rebellion are read into representations that defy traditional gender norms. Translation of women’s writing becomes a gendered intervention that forms part of the process of interrogation of patterns and norms that have been traditionally patriarchal. Every new translation, which recreates feminine images, reinforces the history of resistance and translations that recover narratives of silenced voices through the act of ‘*remembering*’ form part of feminist historiography. Feminist translations bridge the interlanguage space in a true sense, and make expressions of resistance available to readers outside one’s own language, and help to construct a female tradition for ourselves. The translation of *Phaniyamma* and *Breaking Ties*, two Kannada novels into English, acts as a message transmitter as these are two powerful narratives of women’s exploitation in the traditional Indian social context. *Phaniyamma*, written originally by M.K. Indira, an early progressive writer of the second generation of women writers in Kannada, and *Breaking Ties*, originally titled *Chandragiriya Tiradalli*, by Sara Abubackar, a progressive Muslim woman writer of the modern period, document women’s experience of two different periods and two different communities but sharing across the barriers a common heritage of oppression. The novels strongly portray the plight of women caught in the coils of rigid social and

religious traditions which are overtly patriarchal. The two novels share deeper correspondences in so far as they reconstruct sages of pan and outrage where the feminine sensibilities are ruthlessly ground down in the name of tradition.

The sensitive translations of *Phaniyamma* by Tejaswini Niranjana and *Chandragiriya Tiradalli* by Vanamala Vishwanatha as *Breaking Ties* into English help to reinforce the 'binding vine' of female tradition in its struggle against the mechanisms of patriarchy and make way for social awareness and change. The translations like the original novels join hands with the efforts to prioritize and promote gender equality.

*Phaniyamma*, published by Kali for Women, and organization known for its promotion of women's writing, is a narrative that reconstructs the story of a real life character *Phaniyamma*, a child widow and an ancestor of the author who lived during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Phaniyamma's* story is a rediscovery within a fictional framework of a Brahmin child-widow's fate at the time and it raises questions highlighting the marginal gendered positions. The religious forces postulated the subordinate position of woman in all walks of life and denied her an identity, reducing her to be merely a tool in the hands of man for the fulfillment of the traditional Indian values of dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Her fulfillment was seen in the fulfillment of the values of obedience, subservience, service, sacrifice and tolerance. *Phaniyamma* reflects the rigid social and religious practices and hypocrisies, which held the colonial Indian society in its clutches and which became the principal source of the oppression of women. In recreating the history of *Phaniyamma*, the novelist represents both her heroine's conformity in the given circumstance and also her silent resistance, which is the result of her instinctive awareness of the plight of women in general.

*Phaniyamma*, the central character of the novel, becomes a widow at the age of nine, as her boy-husband *Nanjunda* dies of

snakebite. The tradition bound elders of the house helplessly connive with the elder of the village who represent the patriarchal power structures, to reduce the child to the state of a widow, wearing a white sari, after breaking her bangles and wiping her kumkum. Unaware of her tragic fate, the nine year old *Phaniyamma* cried because her beautiful bangles were broken. At the age of fourteen when she begins to menstruate, they arrange to shave off her head and make her a 'madi' (cleansed) woman and force her to join the group of old widows at home. In one sense, life comes to an end for her. Doors are closed on all the ordinary joys of life which others live. From then on, life is one long tale of constant toil and suffering as it is for all widows, broken only by her inner awakening. Although she assists at the innumerable marriages, childbirths, festivals and feasts celebrated in their joint family, she herself lives on one meal a day, thought to be proper for a widow. And in later life, she reduces it to only two bananas. She is a spectator of the incessant procession of life in her ancestral home of which she is not a participant. Yet she grows inwardly and silently questions the blind beliefs, vindictive religious practices perpetrated on women and the hypocrisy of the male society, which imposes restrictions only on women in the name of morality and purity while keeping themselves out of it. The gentle *Phaniyamma*, though silenced and relegated by the repressive society, finally grows into a person of great moral strength and creates an identity for herself. She becomes a rallying point for other women in their trying times. She opposes the shaving of head of another young widow in her desire to stop the repetition of another tragedy like her own; although a Brahmin, she delivers the child of an untouchable mother and reaches out to other women in various ways. At the center of the narrative, female consciousness is visualized at multiple levels. Though shackled by patriarchy yet it receives strength through bonding.

*Phaniyamma's* tragedy began when she had gone to the Tirthahalli fair with the whole family after her marriage. In the darkness of the evening some thief had cut her plait to steal the gold

ornament she was wearing in her hair. It was an ill omen and the family, terribly upset, cut short its trip and returned home. Soon after they learnt that *Phaniyamma's* boy –husband *Nanjunda* died of snake bite. Her father *Tammayya* went to *Sringeri Math*, the religious center, for advice. The Swami's unequivocal decision was communicated to him, "*Since the girl is a child, remove the signs of marriage on the eleventh day and have her wear a white sari. Don't touch her hair. She shouldn't show her face to anyone until she menstruates. Nor can she perform any 'madi' task. The fourth day after she menstruates, her hair must be shaved off and she must be made to take up 'madi' for the rest of her life. If these instructions aren't followed to the letter the entire household will be excommunicated*" (p.46)

The patriarchal hegemony left no choice for the family and they reduce her to the status of a child-widow toiling away in the dark birthing room till she reached puberty. At 14 when she was blossoming into youth, her head was shaved off. From then on, until she dies, "*she would have to eat one meal a day and live with a shaven head*" (p.49).

The inhumanity of the social practice and the tragedy of the child widow, robbed of a normal life are juxtaposed in the narrative with the manner in which *Phaniyamma* is still able to create an identity for herself in spite of her misfortune. Gentle by nature, she shares her meager evening snack with the children of the house and lives an extremely austere life. Once, tired of periodic sitting before the barber half naked for head shaving, she applies the ummathana fruit juice to her head. She had heard it caused hair fall. The next day all her hair fell off releasing her from the necessity of facing the barber.

By chance traditional Brahmin woman of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, she instinctively reaches out to all women in pain and

suffering, thus forming a binding vine of love and affection. *Phaniyamma* creates for herself an image of quiet strength.

The feminist discourse at the center of the novel is obviously the dominant motive for the choice of its translation and *Tejaswini Niranjana* won the Sahitya Akademi award for her translation of *Phaniyamma* in 1993. Her rendering is a good instance of feminist translation that supplements the language and ‘hijacks’ the narrative. M.K. Indira puts her text in the fictional framework, revealing her real life connection with her protagonist *Phaniyamma* only in the last paragraphs of the novel. The translator shifts these last paragraphs to the beginning of the novel and by doing so she invests the text with a conscious feminist project. At the beginning of the novel, she places the first three paragraphs of the translation in italics, which appears almost like the translational manifesto. The original text begins with the evocation of the colonial social context of a remote rural area. It thus locates the text within a certain socio-historical framework, arousing in the reader expectations other than feminist concerns. Whereas *Niranjana’s* translational strategy of shifting the last paragraphs of the original in which the novelist reveals her connection with *Phaniyamma* through her mother *Banashankari* establishes at the very outset the theme of female bonding and the translator’s intentions of tracing the female tradition through its mothers and grandmothers. The creation of feminist historiography is a strategy that actively operates throughout the novel. This strategic shifting ‘hijacks’ the narrative, which projects *Phaniyamma* as one who silently offers resistance to the society that had silenced her, by inwardly questioning the double standards of patriarchy and its sanction of inhuman practices against women. She is seen here not merely as a victim but also as someone who draws strength from her suffering to reach out to other suffering women, and creates an identity for herself.

The translator creates an atmosphere of Indian domesticity and at the same time, maintains the individuality of the text by

preserving the flavour of the specificities of local customs, culture and language. The translation dismantles the male discourse by supplementing the language difference through culture-specific terms like ‘*madi*’, ‘*atte*’, ‘*happala*’, ‘*sandige*’, ‘*mangalasutra*’ etc. There are also culture-specific terms like ‘birthing room’. The translation conveys effectively moments of shared communion characteristic of female experience as when *Phaniyamma* consoles *Dakshayini*, another child widow, supports and encourages *Premabai*, a young Christian midwife and helps an untouchables’ daughter in a difficult delivery. As N. Kamala puts it, “*Laying the cards on the table right at the outset is the main characteristic of feminist translation*” (A. Rahman ed. 2002:39). Niranjana’s translation of *Phaniyamma* clearly projects a feminist discourse right at the outset and contributes remarkably to the creation of a female tradition. In recalling the words of *Phaniyamma*’s brother “*that no other woman like his sister Phani had ever been born or would be in the future*” (p.1), the text is not really playing up to the dominant male ideology and in the absence of any overt rebellion, nor is it reinforcing it. On the contrary, the translation successfully represents the gestures of defiance and subversion implicit in it.

Sara Abubackar, the author of the novel *Chandragiriya Tiradall* (= On the banks of the Chandragiri), is a first generation Muslim woman writer in Kannada who successfully voiced the helpless plight of Muslim women subordinated and oppressed by the patriarchal hegemony at social and religious levels. She speaks on behalf of the countless Muslim women who remain voiceless victims of male ideology and male interpretations of the religious scriptures. In the preface to the 1995 edition of the novel she earnestly urges for an impartial study and reinterpretation of religious prescriptions. *Chandragiriya Tiradalli* foregrounds the Muslim woman’s burden of inequality in social and religious spheres. The fictional narrative represents the tragic plight of the central character Nadira, the helpless and young daughter of an egotistical and dictatorial father. It is about Mohammad Khan, who

does not hesitate to ruin his own daughter's marriage for selfish reasons. Because his son-in-law is unable to give him money when he needs, he takes it as an affront and takes revenge by separating the loving couple through *talaaq* (=divorce). On the other hand, Rashid arranges to have their child kidnapped in order to force Nadira to return to him. It breaks Nadira's heart. She can neither defy her father nor can she give up her husband. Mahammad Khan who terrorizes the women in the house in the end realizes Nadira's misery, and is ready for the reunion of the separated couple. But this time, religion stands in their way. As per the religious code, Nadira can reunite with Rashid, her husband, only if she goes through the ritual of marriage with another man and gets a *talaaq* from him. Though it terrifies her, Nadira in her desire to go back to her husband and child reluctantly consents. But the sight of the man with whom she is to spend one night so fills her heart with terror and despair that she goes and ends her life in the pond near the mosque. The patriarchal order works itself through the institutions of family, society and religion systematically and Nadira defied it in the only way in which she could.

*Breaking Ties* is clearly a feminist text and projects the female body as the site of struggle. The novel provides a glimpse of the Muslim woman's world and gives expression to the subaltern experience of oppression of the poor, uneducated Muslim women victimized by Muslim patriarchy.

Mahammad Khan's brutal treatment of his child-wife on the first night is heart-rending and more so because the father and the *moulvi* support Khan and not the scared child-wife. "*Scolding and spanking her, Fatimma's father had carried her to Khan's room himself and consoled him!*"(p.5). Equally powerful is Nadira's predicament that reflects the psychological trauma arising from the conflict at the center of which again there is the female body. Mahammad Khan who ruins Nadira's marriage and wants her to

marry a wealthy old husband the second time, stands for the masculine principle that negates the feminine totally.

Vanamala Viswanatha, the translator, provides a fairly informative introduction locating the novel and comments on *Chandragiriya Tiradalli* as a woman's narrative. She employs the modern techniques of translation to 'represent' the Muslim woman's world and it may be observed how the translation becomes the agent of voicing subaltern consciousness. The translator explains in the introduction the change of the title to 'Breaking Ties': "*The title could have been translated into English as "On the Banks of Chandragiri" to reflect its Kannada source. But since it sounded too literary to reflect the political edge of the book and somewhat familiar....*" (2001: xix). She goes on to say, "*After a prolonged discussion on the implications of the title, we selected the more neutral and nuanced title Breaking Ties.....*" (xxi). In a way it "lays the cards on the table right at the outset" as it were, representing the feminist project symbolically. Like Niranjana in *Phaniyamma*, Vanamala too retains culture-specific terms like talaq, mehar, abba, umma, etc., for which there is a glossary at the end.

The narrative leads towards a reinterpretation of the religious codes which the patriarchal hegemony has used against women for its own convenience. The novel critiques the patriarchal order and argues for reform and justice for women.

Resistance to patriarchal ideology is implicit in the question which points out absolute disregard for the woman as an equal partner in marriage or for her feelings.

Nadira is expected to suffer the ordeal of spending the night with another man before she can remarry her first husband, Rashid. The very idea brings aversion to her. At the heart of the novel is the question Nadira asks herself silently, "*But what kind of law was this that the man who called himself 'husband' should pronounce talaq*

*three times from wherever he was and the marriage null and void!*" (p.75). It is a loaded question that attempts to deconstruct the concept of marriage.

It is important to note that the writers, translators and the translation editors of these novels are all women who seem to have joined hands for the common cause of equality. In both the novels "...*patriarchy is a common hegemonic structure within which women live and struggle; the particular kinds of oppression women face differ depending on their location in caste, class, region and religion*" (*Breaking Ties*, p.xvii). Translations act as powerful agents in the task of deconstructing the predominantly male cultural paradigms and reconstructing a female perspective and experience enabling the marginalized voices to find utterance. If *Phaniyamma* chronicles and questions the traditional Hindu codification and exposes the inhumanity of the social and religious rituals practiced against women, *Breaking Ties* similarly translates the religious codes against women and the harsh patriarchal attitudes of the Muslim community that all but stifle the female voices. By taking these texts to a wider public, the translators not only underline the articulation of the implicit resistance but become participants in the creation of meaning.

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