

## Solitude

*Ekānt*<sup>1</sup> by Himanshi Shelat in Gujarati

Translated by VIRAJ DESAI

### Translator's Note

The process of literary translation, to a great extent, resembles entering a complex labyrinth- baffling, agitating, and full of new challenges at every step (or here, word). A translator needs to strike a very fine balance between utilising his/her creative faculties and the craft of translation in order to meet a satisfactory product in form of a translation at the end of it. A text layered with a multitude of meanings can posit a translator with a bracing challenge, especially to a novice translator like me. Hence, the process of translating the present short story by an eminent and celebrated writer such as Dr. Himanshi Shelat was extremely nerve-wracking and stimulating for me. However, it was this very challenge that fuelled my desire to come up with a befitting translation that can do justice to such a beautiful and well-crafted piece. I do not know whether I have succeeded or not. Although, I have strived my best to do so. To me, this challenge posited by a text is the essence of the process of translation. For it is from those moments of constant pondering that the most satisfying experiences of the translation process emerge. The process of translating this story too had such moments.

'ekānt' (trans. Solitude) dives deep into the inner recesses of a newlywed Indian bride's psyche. The protagonist remains unnamed for the course of the narrative, as the longing for some solitude is a very personal and yet a very common emotion felt especially by married women. And the way the

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<sup>1</sup> Originally titled as 'ekānt' in Gujarati, the story was published in a short story collection by Himanshi Shelat titled 'Antarāl' published by Arunoday Prakashan, Ahmedabad. The copyright to the anthology is with the author.

protagonist manages to find her solitude right in the middle of the marital and familial engagements is probably the manner in which most women find their own solitude. The “room of one’s own” that Virginia Woolf argues for every woman to have remains unattainable to most married Indian women, even in contemporary times. Just like the protagonist of this story, most women end up finding that ‘room of their own’ or their ‘solitude’ internally, as opposed to in the physical sense of the word. Their solitude has nothing to do with the physical world they inhabit; it remains untouched by its crowdedness and clutter. The present story depicts the realisation of the protagonist for the need for solitude, the importance of which can only be understood by being devoid of it. The story is also a description of how the idea and form of solitude change for a woman once she takes up the responsibilities of marriage and consequently, an entire family and household. It is a very short and yet extremely poignant depiction of how women, along with compromising their solitude, also compromise parts of their personality itself in order to fit into the role or roles demanded from them by a marriage.

Himanshi Shelat is known for weaving intricate tales around such unexplored aspects of human life and emotions. My personal affinity towards her stories was undoubtedly one of the primary reasons behind translating the present story. However, I would like to enlist a few other equally important reasons here as well. Firstly, there is a dire need to translate more Gujarati literature into English in order to widen its horizons. Due to the meagre amount of Gujarati texts available in translation, “not only the readers of other languages have remained deprived of Gujarati Literature but also there seems to be a lacuna in the degree to which Gujarati Literature must have been recognised at the national level”, notes Late. Shri

Bhagwatikumar Sharma<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, it is extremely necessary to draw national and international attention towards the finest writers of Gujarati language, whose works have remained confined to Gujarati language just because of a very limited representation through translation in other languages. ‘Solitude’ is one such work, which I personally felt, should reach as many readers as possible and hence this translation was undertaken. Thirdly, translating Gujarati works into English, Hindi or other Indian languages would mean a more comprehensive and substantial representation of Gujarati literature in the negotiations of Indian as well as World literature in contemporary times. This translation is a humble endeavour from my side, which I sincerely hope would contribute in a small way towards achieving these mighty goals.

Lastly, I am extremely grateful to Himanshi (Shelat) Ma’am for putting faith in a neophyte translator like me for translating her work. I would like to thank her for going through the translation and enriching it with her insightful observations about the same.

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### **Solitude**

She had an intense longing for solitude. A solitude in which she would reminisce about the pleasant mornings of her home, in which the tranquility of the night sky spread outside the window may touch her. Where she could read a book or hum a tune if she wanted to, and by doing so would gently put the scattered pieces of her being together. Solitude was extremely necessary for her as in this unknown house, no one would leave her alone. It might be true that everyone had immense

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<sup>2</sup> From the Editor’s Note to *Parab, June-2010* published by Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, Ahmedabad. Translated from Gujarati by the author.

love to shower on her, but how to explain to these people that just the way a tiny sapling often gets uprooted in a heavy outpour and dies out of suffocation, she may too!

In the afternoon, she would hardly have had any time to herself when Kamini rushed in with her friends. The house was shaken by their hubbub. They kept insisting only on one thing- “let’s go for a movie right now”. She hesitated a lot but at last, they managed to convince her somehow. An elderly lady too advised her to mingle with everyone in the house, that remaining aloof like this is not good! “Kamini will take care of her, wouldn’t let her get alone! Our Kamini is very extrovert and talkative”, said the mother-in-law. Everyday someone or the other would come to meet her and the same kind of conversations would be repeated- “the design of this bangle is good, *haan*”, “this saree was gifted by us at the time of engagement, not at the time of the wedding. That one is different”, “the pearl earrings were gifted by her family, and a complete dinner-set in utensils...”. No one was curious about her interests. Kamini would keep on saying that her sister-in-law sings but took no real interest in knowing what she has learned or what does she like to sing. Just like her sister-in-law’s soft skin or long hair, this was merely another point of conversation for her. Now she could understand what yearning felt like. She kept on longing for some solitude for a while to make her feel a little better.

This house was as such a house of sounds. Outcries, hurry-scurry, gibbers- no one ever felt the need for solitude. All the time post-evening belonged to Dhiren anyways. Once he would come home, she had to get dressed up, had to go out, had to listen to his romantic talks-whatever little that he knew of. She had landed up in this house from an altogether different world. She did not like to speak much. She was raised alone, grew up amidst the heaps of books, music and, paintings. She

learnt Bengali with so much enthusiasm and diligence, especially for *Rabindra Sangeet*! She was excited to sing such beautiful songs and for someone to listen to her. When they went for their honeymoon for fifteen days, it did not strike Dhiren even once that it would be pleasant to listen to her singing while roaming in the mountains, while taking the gushing water of the stream in the hands or while touching the breezy greenery of the mountains. However, it wasn't Dhiren's fault, he did not have the taste for music. So many chosen songs remained confined to her lips-unsung!

She quite liked the misty, dewy mornings of a hill-station. Even when Dhiren wasn't around, she enjoyed smelling the breeze while soaking the fresh air in. It would irritate Dhiren to see her happily roaming around, all alone! He would take her back to the room insistently by taking her into his arms. Dhiren didn't like the outdoors much. She got really angry once. But then she thought that it would be such a relief if her anger, of all the things, could familiarise Dhiren with her a little! Much to her astonishment, Dhiren mistook the fiery ball of her anger for a bunch of roses. He guffawed thinking that her anger is a demand for some pampering and laughed aloud of amusement. That was the first time she understood that she had no means to convey her feelings to Dhiren.

And hence her desire for solitude further intensified once they came back. A lot could happen if she got a few moments that were hers and hers only. Amidst the commotion and voices of all the family members and the stereo constantly screaming in the background, she was slowly forgetting her own voice. The moment she would step outside to sit or sneak away to the terrace, someone would definitely follow her. "Why are you sitting all alone? Did something happen?" There was a simple understanding in this house that one would prefer to stay alone only if he/she was upset.

Dhiren had to go to Bangalore unexpectedly. He kept on saying that he had to go because the company had some urgent work there and continuously repeated the same until he left the house: “You will get lonely; you wouldn’t like it here. Do you want to visit your parents for a few days?”

She didn’t visit her parents. There was no point in escaping somewhere else if she had to find her solitude in this very house. Dhiren was not to come back for fifteen days. Each and every moment of those fifteen days was precious, to be preserved with care! This was the first evening in a long time when Dhiren’s eyes were not glued to her. Half-bloomed buds of jasmine could be seen through the window and the air was filled with their fragrance. She felt like singing. But she later rejected the idea and ended up listening to the recordings of her songs. On hearing after days, she found her own voice so unfamiliar! She read until late in the night and rolled on the soft bedsheets of the double bed, becoming a little girl once again. She slept hugging the pillow like she used to hug her mother. What a slumber! She had read for this long in the night after a long time and hence in the morning, her under eyes had taken up the dark violet colour of the jasmine flowers blooming outside the window! “Looks like *Bhabhi* didn’t sleep well last night, must have felt lonely”, Kamini teased her. She was beaming with contentment. Fifteen days without Dhiren passed in a bat of an eyelid. Dhiren had returned.

-And then she was being shaken by Dhiren’s voice; travelling through the dark depths of the seven seas, it could barely reach her - “did you get too lonely? You didn’t like it here without me, right?” Dhiren’s touch was barely there to be felt. Though she was thrilled, it wasn’t because of that touch. Suddenly her entire being was filled with a sweet song. Every note of that song was drenching her like a splash of cold, breezy water. This music jingling inside her had nothing to do with anyone

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else. She was roaming amidst the trees touching the sky, singing her favourite song...*Tumi mor pāo nāi parichay...pāo nāi parichay...*it was impossible for Dhiren or anyone else to set their foot on the place she had reached while wandering. Her solitude was very much *inside* her! She was alone, all alone!

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