

# INDIAN LITERATURE THROUGH TRANSLATION TINTED GLASSES

## Abstract

Translation breathes life into words otherwise rendered incomprehensible and out of our grasp. Translated works have been an inseparable part of Indian literature since time immemorial. Translation of mundane and ordinary brings people closer as we learn our sufferings are shared and love translational. There are several writings in different languages that are excellent pieces of literature that otherwise would have been limited to a small number of readers if not for being translated. Translations also help shorten the bridge between known and unknown. I have taken two such works namely, "One Part Woman" a Tamil novel by Perumal Murugan translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevam, and "Tomb of Sand" by Geetanjali Shree a Hindi novel translated in English by Daisy Rockwell. These works have left their mark in national and international space respectively. With this paper, I would like to emphasize the importance of translation work in Indian Literature.

**Keywords:** Indian Literature, Sanskrit, translation work, Languages, Human time period

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Bridging horizons is what translation means to me. We live in a country where language changes at a mere distance of 50km. This is no exaggeration or flaunting of any kind but a simple known fact. For example, let's take a walk; the starting point is my hometown, Rohtak. If we move from Rohtak to Gohana to Panipat; or Rohtak to Jhajjar to Rewari, etc. All of these cities and villages come under Haryana hence the major spoken language is Haryanvi, but the burr, the tone of enunciation of each word is so vastly different that one would be amazed at the changes a language undergoes at a stone's throw away. One can hardly escape the vastness of language that is present in India without drowning himself in the overwhelming feelings of present diversity. In such a country translation plays a major role when it comes to communicating effectively let alone be it part of literature.

Translation is no new term to us, we have been translating anciently. Almost all of our earliest texts have been written in Sanskrit, a language of Gods but we no longer are living in the golden era of the human time period. Now Sanskrit has become a language known to a handful of people, sad but true. It is thanks to the translation that we can still bathe in the knowledge of those ancient texts otherwise they would remain unknown to the masses. Translation helps uncover what is at the core of each empire and more often than not we find ourselves drawn by a common essence that always remains the same despite coming from different civilizations. Time and again we have explored the unknown and drawn conclusions based on what we find similar and dissimilar to our latest notions.

Literature has always helped to bring close the differences, familiarize the unknown, give birth to diversity, and much more. Each country has its own language and its own literature which remains a big question mark until it gets translated into the language known to others. If we want to understand what goes beyond the surface to the nitty-gritty, it is important to be aware of their language but since not everyone can be a polyglot, a translator comes to the rescue.

Texts are notorious for documenting things in one way and then getting interpreted in another. But what can be done because that is how things work. Each translator has their own view of reading a text and then rewriting it in other languages. If you do not like the translation done by one person then switch to another translator or better yet be one and do things your way. One can get a peek at the art of translation by reading the same document translated by different translators. You may find differences and then get a gist of the overall text, a feel of who prefers what during a translation and then stick to one that suits your taste.

It is a long debate about what kind of translation is the correct one. Some prefer the text-to-text translation, some believe in restoring the essence of the text, some like to stick to structure and form while some a bit of everything. But that is not under discussion in this paper. We are not here to establish a correct way for translation but to highlight that regardless of the way translation itself is the important entity. It has its own authority in Literature especially in Indian Literature.

Translation provides a new outlook for the common and ordinary and at the same time, it consolidates the familiar. We find that hurt, betrayal, and love taste same across different languages while the way one looks at things changes and morphs into something

new and exciting. Translations grant us a view of a world that looks alien from afar but analogous in some form. It helps rediscover things, peoples, and norms that are similar and diverse at the same time or were at a certain time. Indian literature has always been a home to translations, a welcoming place that helps voices to come to the surface from distinct communities.

During Pre-colonial India Sanskrit was the language from which works were translated into other Indian languages. Then in Mughal India, Abd al-Qadir Badayuni took four years to transcribe Ramayana into Persian. While prince Dara Sikhoh ordered translators to convert Upanishads and Sanskrit texts into Persian (Mukherjee, 1997). English translations rose to fame in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century with the translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntla* by William Jones in 1789. Then we have some other works like O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha*, translated by W. Dumergue (1890); Chattopadhyay's *Durgeshnandini* translated by Charuchandra Mukherjee (1880), *The Puppet's Tale* (1968) from Bangla by Manik Bandopadhyay, *Wild Bapu of Garambi* (1968) from Marathi by Shridhar Pendse (Mukherjee, 1997).

We have classics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* that are retold, rewritten in multiple languages for e.g., *The Mahabharata from Vyas* (1980), *The Ramayana from Valmiki* (1983) translated by P.Lal. Tagore's translations have international fame. Vijay Tendulkar's play like *Silence! The court is in session*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Ramanujan's translation, *Fifteen Poems* from a Classical Tamil Anthology (1965); and *Some Kannada Poems* (1967), *The Farce of Drunken Monk*, a play by Raja Mahendrarman, of the South Indian Pallava dynasty. *Dhammapada* (1967) from Pali, *Mother of 1084* by Mahasweta Devi from Bengali, and *Japji Sahib* from Punjabi. We can go on and fill endless pages with translated titles over the years but for now, at least, let's rest the case with these works as I am sure it is enough to prove that translation has always been a part of our Indian Culture and Literature.

The journey of the translated text is not easy over the years but we have a few agencies and programs to applaud for taking the tremendous task of translation under their wings and providing us with current translation literature. The first being, Sahitya Akademi (1954) with its periodical *Indian Literature*, and then National Book Trust (1957) both of them set up by the Government of India. *Aadaan Pradaan*, a program initiated by National Book Trust in 1970, where a modern literary work gets translated into other Indian languages. It is because of this initiative we can read Pannalal Patel in Bangla and Munshi Premchand in Kannada and much more (Mukherjee, 1997). Through a special tribal Literature project tribal languages and dialects like Garo, Kui, Mizo, Gadwali, Gondi, etc. have been taken into consideration. Then we have Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's '*Women Writing in India*' (1991, 1993). The book has over 200 works gathered from all over India, a unique compilation of diverse text. Orient Longman (Disha series), Penguin India, Oxford University Press, Rupa & Co, Sage, Random House, Pearson Education, etc. have started to gain momentum in the field of translation. '*Modern Novels in Translation*' by Macmillan India, this project enabled cheap but high-quality translations of many titles in different languages like Bangla, Kannada, Gujarati, etc. We also have another program called 'Katha' that enables translations to see the daylight in other Indian languages and lately in English as well.

## II. TRANSLATIONAL WORK

One Part Woman is written by Perumal Murugan and translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. It is a Tamil novel that won ILF Samanvay Bhasha Samman and its English version won Tamil Literary Garden Award for Translation. The book was also selected in the long list for the 2018 National Book Award for Translated Literature. The book is the first part of the trilogy followed by 'A Lonely Harvest' and 'Trial by Silence'. The story follows a South Indian couple Ponna and Kali. They are happily married and live their life comfortably. The only ill that plagues them is that they are yet to be blessed by a baby. This makes the couple go through myriads of trouble. They leave no stone unturned in their desperation to get a baby.

They visited as many temples as known to them for the sake of redemption to dispel the wrath of Gods. From lighting lamps at Karattur Murugan, visiting Devatha-Maadhorubaagan; the 'Mother god' or 'One Part Woman', other Devatha the one residing in the red rocks of the mountains, circling around the stone where the likelihood of losing life is just 99.99%, making a Pongal offering to the Dandeeswarar having no regards to their lives. The couple did anything and everything that they could do all in the hope to get a child. But the fury of Gods never abated. The fire continued to burn and the desire somewhat turned into obsession that became the harbinger of troubles to the once harmonious married life of the couple.

The book sheds light on how great of an impact society has on the childless couple in fact on any childless couple. They are treated like untouchables, especially Ponna. She is seen as the person bringing bad luck in sacred rituals. Her touch is taken as a bad omen for anything going wrong at any place in the village. There is an incident mentioned in the book. During the time of Aadi, people would come together and help each other with fieldwork. Plowing and sowing and working together make the task easier and the spirit of camaraderie boost everyone's relationship. During one such time, the yield of one person's land was not up to the mark. The real reason was that his field was not watered properly. The land was dry during the time seeds were sown but the blame fell on Ponna and I quote, "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?" (Murugan 115)

There is another example where she was barred to perform a ritual of the family function. As the ceremony was of the girl's coming of age she was asked to not take part in it. It was assumed that if she, a barren woman touched the girl; the young girl would also be afflicted with the disease. Barrenness is seen as a disease and the women who carry it are looked down, their souls are crushed under the scrutiny of society until nothing becomes of her and she is left as a shadow of her formerself. As these incidents accumulate and Ponna becomes estranged from society. Eyes that once shone with brilliance drowned in the spit of spites.

Similar incidents are mentioned about Kali as well. He loves to perform temple dances and he was a good dancer. For him, there was nothing more joyous than being in the crowd. People loved to praise those who dance well and teased the ones who did not. One such time the teasing got out of hand, the person who was being made fun of 'Murugesan' lost it and vented on Kali. "Work is not about this. Work is about *this*... Tell me, now, who

looks like a doll and works like a corpse?” (Murugan 82) Poor Kali shrank in shame and his love for the crowd extinguished like a flame drowsed by water. In another episode, the group was celebrating and congratulating Subramani for being a father for the first time. Everyone was drinking and having fun when a remark from Subramani made the whole situation awkward. “It is not enough if the water you take in is great, the water you send out should be top-class too” (Murugan 83). Poor Kali became the butt end of these jokes and eventually became scarce during gatherings of any sort.

Just because they were childless they could not be included in the rest of society. This alienation drives the couple and their family to extreme ends jeopardizing their marriage. The novel is filled with such anecdotes that show the superstitious mentality of the rural villages. The pariah revolves around their loss of individual identities; if they cannot be parents then they amount to nothing. The book offers insight into how the whole institution revolves around linear customs. A person has to get married at the right age, if not, then just like the uncle of Kali, Nallayyan, he is not welcomed by society. His property won't be his as he has no inheritors. He should not get an equal share because he was a bachelor. The other family members ignore him most of the time. But there are times when he gets unexpected gains. He gets good food because his relatives want to curry favour with him. If they are good to him then he will leave his property to their names. A simple meal between family members become no less than a bribing event taking taste out of the food or rather it leaves the bitter aftertaste of selfishness.

Likewise, after marriage, there must be offspring preferably male so that the lineage can continue and there are inheritors of the property. The shallow nature of the relationships is also observed when the couple is treated highly in order to get a share of their property by friends and family alike. Nallayyan too was treated with flattery so that his brothers would get his share of the property. Such shallow relationships tend to shatter with the slightest test of time and hardships. The ever-changing nature of relationships in the face of adversity makes the book more a realistic and engaging read. The climax of the book the ultimate betrayal or sacrifice renders the heart of the readers in a dilemma that becomes the crux and driving force of the next novels in the series.

Ret Samaadhi by Geetanjali Shree is another example of translation work that has garnered international success. The English translation by Daisy Rockwell titled: *The Tomb of Sand* won the 2022 International Booker Prize. According to Financial Expert, it is a complex masterpiece of the partition and humanist literature. The novel describes the arduous journey of an 80-year-old mother to search for her ex-husband. The novel at times can be felt moving at snail's speed, for a major chunk of the book the reader is only introduced to the back of the mother facing the wall. In fact, the first part of the book is titled, 'MA'S BACK'. Here is an excerpt to describe how Ma was faring after the death of her husband and her relation to the wall. “What can never be known to certain whether the wall was playing the greater role in pulling Ma towards it, or whether it was her own desire to show her back to her family that drew her in. Ma just kept getting closer and closer to the wall, and her back became a wall itself, keeping at bay those who came to cajole: Get up, Ma, Get up!” (Shree 16) “The back has already become a sieve. Everyone's dishonor, rage, comprehension, have already poked it full of holes (Shree 55)”.

The walls and the doors have a special place in the novel. Shree has made excellent use of them to state what it is that we seek... the walls shift, the doors slide, the freedom that they offer the solitude that accompanies, and not to forget the history that each of them carries on their surface and deeply imbibed to their core everything comes alive in the story in a beautiful manner. At a certain point in the reading, I felt these inanimate objects to be more alive than the members who reside in them. The whole seven hundred thirty-one pages are filled with breathing objects and dead persons, a mesmerizing amalgamation of death and life.

The old lady who has lost her will to live seems to shrivel up after the death of her husband. Initially, one can feel the slow and painful breathing of Ma and as the novel progresses her revival fills the reader with vitality as well. Her friendship with Rosie fills the pages with new warmth that was slowly filling her life as well. “And thus began the visits of Rosie Bua. Barreling in like a fresh gust of wind (Shree 310)”. “A new posture of life. *Ow ow* from Ma, and Rosie guiding and chiding (Shree 314)”. This unlikely friendship at a not so happening age has its seed sown much earlier than anyone expected. The friendship vitalized the shriveling old Ma and when unexpectedly it ended, once again the old lady became like an old closed door which refused to move no matter how anyone knocked or oiled its hinges. It remained shut until the next visit of her inner angels or demons that dragged fate to her doorstep for the epic trip of her life, a trip that she led by the nose until the very end.

Even though the book deals with heavy themes like partition and female subjugation the way Shree has lightened the tone makes the read a light breeze on a hot summer day. There are almost eighteen pages of a rant of a man who is not able to laugh. Imagine a person describing how he cannot laugh with all the seriousness he could muster with. Next, we are up for a chapter of a son displaying his power with the *Sarees* he bought for his mom from all over his trips. I am pretty sure I learned about more than a dozen Sarees from him than any other person I have met. He could leave behind a Saree shop owner with his knowledge of sarees.

We get hilarious *crowsembly* that has their own concerns their own opinions and their own visions. The crowness, crowlaw, crowthority, and such clever puns are used to discuss serious environmental problems; even feminism has a place in this play of words. Have a look at this comical piece of the crowness educating a young proud crow. “Just because you have ambitions of flying beyond the crowthority. Birds like you are the ones that get caught every other day: someone gives you a bomb, and says take this, fasten it to your belt and go to festivals and fairs and press the button; daily your mg will appear on the first page. You just take off thoughtlessly and do what’s asked; only your beak remains in the newspaper, which you can’t even see. You are a crow. Don’t be an ass. Or a kite or a falcon or a crane either. Patience, child, she said, patting him on his bowed head (Shree 379)”.

Such a masterpiece would have remained hidden from the larger audience if not for being translated and winning fame on a large platform.

### III. CONCLUSION

Translations have always been an integral part of Indian Literature. If we are restrained by one language and one culture we will never get to know this vast world. Translations help bridge the gap between different cultures. They let us explore and re-search human notions of different eras. Even in a certain time period, it helps to know what goes in the mind of people who are united by time but divided by zones and boundaries. Indian Literature is littered with translations. Be it from one Indian language to another or to English, each has its own niche in people's hearts and homes.

### IV. WORKS CITED

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