

## Emergence of New Texts: Interplay between Translation and Gender

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### Abstract

Translation entails an act of rewriting wherein the latter does not merely entail the act of copying the original text but the formation of new texts. A new text is close to the original text with a perspective of its own that goes beyond the meaning of the main text. In the light of translation, translated works have their own linguistic, historical, and social significance. Transfer of meanings from one vantage point to another, from one era to another, and from one language to another problematizes the idea of increasing the horizon of having multiple perspectives.

In order to understand this idea, this paper analyses the politics of translation through the lens of gender wherein both translated works and works of women writers are considered as what was prevalent in France as “Les Belles Infidels”. This paper challenges this concept and analyses the process of translation as being a faithful exercise of reproducing different perspectives. It also acts as a medium of diversifying meaning generation thereby bringing a cross-cultural connection across the world.

This paper examines various theoretical contexts of translation from the point of view of gender. This examination would attempt to bring clarity to how the translation helps in giving space to the voiceless/manipulated and brings the margins to the center.

**Keywords:** *Translation, Retelling, Meta-Text, Gender in Translation, Les Belles Infidels, Myths, Cultural Studies,*

Edith Grossman, in his book, *Why Translation Matters*, said, “Translation asserts the possibility of a coherent, unified experience of literature in the world’s multiplicity of languages”(Grossman 17). Herein lies the beauty of translation as a creative and literary process wherein it is wholesome and coherent with a perspective of its own. We are living in the post-structuralist and deconstructionist era wherein multiplicity in meanings holds utmost importance. The death of the author metaphorically means the birth of new perspectives wherein every new writing and reading project has the aim of what Peter Barry mentions in his book titled *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* “unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies in the text, aiming to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity” (Barry 72).

With the aim of decoding such disunities, translations have attained an important position in the world of literary creativity. Every translated work has an ideology behind it, an ideology that makes the concerned translation a deliberate exercise of giving rise to certain questions through shifts in language and author. Such shifts offer fresh perspectives to the concerned works. According to Andre Lefevere, ideology, in the context of translation, acts as a “set of discourses that wrestle over interests that are relevant to the maintenance or interrogation of power structures central to a whole form of social and historical life” (Lefevere 58). This makes translation, a process of rewriting wherein the source text is rewritten with a different point of view. He believes that translation is a productive exercise and deserves to occupy a more central position than the status of being considered secondary to the original text.

Coming back to the discourse of translated works being rewritings themselves, it is important to understand the politics of the translated works of source texts. Mini Chandran, in the article titled “The Practice of Translation in India,” talks about various meanings of

translation. According to the article, translation is not just a linguistic exercise. It is also *Anuvaad* (speak after), *bhashantar* (linguistic transference), *tarzuma* (reproduction), *roopantar* (change in form), *vivartanam* (change). It is evident that how transformation is the key element of translation, transformation in meanings, forms, and interpretations thereby giving rise to meta-texts. Stuart Hall, in his concept of the 'circuit of culture' establishes the fact that being a part of society, an individual's existence can be understood through five levels production, representation, identity, consumption, and regulation. In the light of translations as well, these five elements play an important role in shaping the ideology behind them. For example, a translation that is produced/reproduced represents a certain section of society as its theme. This representation puts an impact on the psyche of the reader and gets consumed by them ultimately getting regulated as another worldview. This is how meta-text derives its identity from the main text.

This paper projects light on the generation of such meta-texts from the perspective of gender discourse. This brings in the argument pertaining to *Les Belles Infidels* which refers to a literary practice in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France wherein the belief was that translators, with the aim of improving upon the source text, would rather produce unfaithful translations removed away from the essence of the main text. Similar is the position given to the works of women as compared to that of men wherein the literary geniuses of women or for that matter, the voice of women's freedom has always been secondary or silenced in the patriarchal society. The authority of the original/source text over the translated work is closely linked with notions of masculine and feminine wherein the original is considered the strong generative male, the translation the weaker and derivative female. Sherry Simon, in the book, *Gender in Translation*, says:

We are not surprised to learn that the language used to describe translating dips liberally into the vocabulary of sexism, drawing on images of dominance and inferiority, fidelity and libertinage. The most persistent of these expressions, “Les belles infidels,” has for centuries encouraged an attitude of suspicion toward the seemingly but wayward translation. (Simon 12)

This brings in the counter-narrative as to how translations in that way act as a medium to fight out the inequalities prevalent in society, one of them being that of the position of women. Women across all religions and cultures have always been considered as what Simone De Beauvoir termed as the ‘second sex’. The idea of derived existence is that it has its being at the periphery, something whose essence lies within a central system, this central system being the prolonged patriarchal culture that has its own paradigms of limiting women to the margins. Here, it is imperative to understand that gender discourse and translations have a similar ideological mechanism in order to generate a room of their own. This mechanism comprises problematizing the center/ the transcendental signified to question the marginalized space to which they have been relegated. Translated works decenter the center and hence act as narratives of *résistance* in their own ways, thereby transforming into meta-texts, texts going beyond the fixed ideological politics to bring to the surface, the subjugated and silenced voices. Marguerite Duras, one of the French novelists explains:

I think "feminine literature" is an organic, translated writing ... translated from blackness, from the darkness. Women have been in darkness for centuries. They don't know themselves. Or only poorly. And when women write, they translate this darkness... Men don't translate. They begin from a theoretical platform that is already in place, already elaborated. (Duras 174)

Here, myths from a woman's perspective are a kind of translation in itself. For example, the retelling of gendered myths such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, Pandora's Cornucopia, The Laugh of Medusa and so on across cultures establish the fact what Luis Von Flotow, in the book, *Translation and Gender*, says:

Rewriting myths always has more translations, and retranslations. The emphasis is thus not on the one perfect translation (that can never be achieved), nor is it on the deconstruction of the traditional hierarchy between translation and original. The emphasis is not on equivalence or on equality, nor for that matter on some mythic linguistic wholeness. Precisely because every text can be retranslated and every myth can be rewritten, seriality is a condition of translation, a condition that has no end, and no beginning. (Page 47)

In the light of retellings of myths, myths are an essential part of one's culture and tradition as they reflect the existing idea and the way of living of the people belonging to different cultures. That is why, these become the means for individuals to create their own qualitative identities. However, time is an entity that does not remain the same and so does the approach towards tracing the changes in the acceptance of myths. Mythology has a profound influence on our present lives as well. It has permeated into traditions and day-to-day activities by way of religion, philosophy, sociology, and other such avenues. However, it has been rightly said that change is the only constant. That is why, myths are an important subject of study in the current scenario. With each attempt, more and more perspectives get generated in order to understand more and more facets of human life and existence. With each retelling of the respective myths (and their translations) across time and space, there is a change in the point of view that takes place. Along with this change, another important aspect that plays a vital role in the study of myths and their retellings is the prevalence of the respective social orders.



The concept of ‘then and now’ is very essential when it comes to understanding the changes in the acceptance of myths across different times.

Keeping in mind the Indian myths, major texts like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Upanishads*, the *Vedas*, and the *Puranas* have always been present in the Indian tradition. The famous characters of *Rama*, *Sita*, *Draupadi*, *Krishna*, and many others are not just mythical characters but have become metaphors for certain values and ideal human actions. Since times immemorial these myths (and the respective translations) have been the foundations of ideality and goodness. *Sita* has always been the ideal woman, *Rama* being ideal man, *Krishna* being the best counsellor. Even in *Ahalya*’s case, she waits for Rama to touch her so that she can regain the human from being a stone. Narratives like this have been received in such a way that they have become the archetypes of understanding human emotions. However, human life is highly complex and is governed not just by idealities but by problematics as well. In such a narration, not all characters of the myths are brought forth to the readers. Therein, comes the concept of building up hierarchies as to what will actually be presented and what not. These myths have been rewritten time and again as well as carry their own politics of the respective times. Myths are a mode of representation of certain codes of conduct that are assigned according to gender roles. When myths are retold, it is not just about revisiting the past but about the reinterpretation and reconsideration of voices that have not been heard yet.

Human beings do not exist in isolation. The entire worldview including the social, political, and psychological leanings plays a vital role in establishing who we are and how we respond to situations around us. And when it comes to the identity of a woman, the complexities and the politics of being a woman of virtue and vice gets attached to her. A woman’s identity has always remained problematic as her only prerogative is to serve the

men without any expectations on her part. Mythology is fraught with such references to women wherein they are celestial beings born out of the milky ocean, full of vigor and beauty as well as given preference according to their art of wooing and expertise in art and music. However, they have to ultimately face ostracization. Be it *Rambha*, *Urvashi*, or *Tillotamma*, they are some of the well-known *apsaras* in Indian mythology who have had immense beauty and artistic abilities but ultimately were treated as objects. All these women stand as a metaphor for all such voices who have faced oppression, discrimination, and violence but have had a lot of resilience.

There have been many writers who have made an attempt to give voice to women's trials and tribulations for having a relegated existence but also have talked about their own ways of resisting the gendered power politics. In the context of translations, the texts can be studied at various levels as they not only focus on the parameters of certain changes but also throws light on how certain social codes are still the same due to the mindset people have regarding gender roles and the parameters that are attached to the concept of purity. This also brings in Derrida's concept of the centre and the margins.

The element of social order plays an important role in deconstructing age-old myths. Culture is one of the most important parts of the social order. Every human culture produces general narratives based on the experience of the elite or the subjugated, expressed as binding and sometimes constructed truths. Every human society consists of individuals and groups positioned in relations of unequal access to scarce economic, political, social, and cultural resources. As a result, individuals who are dominant, form perspectives to justify their position. Building upon this premise, they have woven a network of shared rights, justice, truth, and ideals to safeguard their interests. This is how translations emerge and they become the doctrines of existence. The translated texts delineate the fact that the human world is very

often not what it seems to be and through retellings, the hidden aspects of representation can be understood which in the original myths have been hidden behind power and manipulation. Translation Studies provide the platform to understand the politics of representation through which we render ourselves unto ourselves and others, as individuals, unique persons, and social agents. Through translated texts, the most private and social experiences are showcased to be culturally enmeshed. Translation Studies is an integral part of Cultural Studies and one of the most important aspects of this area is that it appreciates how power shapes meaning and through this, liberating oneself from the grip of some of its tentacles; learning to understand the strength and popularity of retellings, but being committed to demystifying the world; connecting with the remarkable pace of change in modern society. In the process, an attempt is also made to understand how representation operates to position the reader to hold fast to particular outlooks and values. Translations enable the readers to decode the voices which have not yet been talked about due to the characters that have always been at the centre. But centres tend to shift. In order to understand Translation Studies in the light of Culture Studies, it is essential to know three ways through which the translated works can be understood. They are as follows- 'deconstruction', 'demythologization', and 'demystification'. The first way is to understand a critical attitude to the primary dichotomies in language and culture which operate to entrench divisions and fetter identity. It focuses on the interrogation of cultural meaning in order to expose the different underpinnings of unexamined areas. The second method helps to reveal how cultural and social reality and a sense of shared past are coded and represented by myth. Since translated texts reflect the articulation of power, demythologization logically points to the exposure of the social, economic, and cultural interests behind the translations. The third approach of demystification links the exposure of translation, manipulation, and power to the real position of respective individuals in real life.



It is this politics of translation that Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty considers an important approach in achieving women's 'solidarity'. According to her, the task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a sign of the working of the gendered agency. This can be witnessed in one of her translated works, *Breast Stories* which is a series of her impressive body of work to a readership beyond Bengal. The three stories in this compilation titled, 'Draupadi', 'Breast Giver' and 'Behind the Bodice' talk about the idea of romanticizing the socio-libidinal relationship between the sexes, the idea of understanding the supposed normality of sexuality as male violence, and the ideas related to the ironies of caste, class, and patriarchy. Through translation into English Language, Spivak has projected light issues such as the closest approximation to the First World scholar in search of the Third World, women being considered as commodities to be put on a pedestal only to be consumed for surplus, and women being regarded as elements only to be discovered. *Breast Stories* as a compilation of translated works stands as an answer to her own question 'Can the Subaltern Speak'? She gives the three women Dopdi, Jashoda, and Gangor voice to speak about their plight in a global language.

Similarly, another prolific South Asian woman writer, Ismat Chughtai's short story, *The Quilt* is an English translation of the Urdu Short Story, *Lihaaf*. The quilt acts as a tool to unveil such social, cultural, and religious complications wherein women like Begum had to remain in the confines of a failed marriage and still were supposed to sustain themselves in the name of *Purdah* system- a system that dictates women to be the custodians of family honor and purity. The quilt keeps all these aspects hidden. David Richards, in his book *Masks of Difference: Cultural Representations in Literature, Anthropology and Art*, discusses a veil being a kind of mask that has "an aura of ambivalence and ambiguity about it. It is a disguise; it hides what we most need to know" (Richards 295). Now, the role of translation here is that

the idea of veiling or purdah system is not just limited to one specific culture. Metaphorically, it stands for the restricted agency. Hence, Chughtai's *The Quilt* decodes that garments such as hijab, cloak, or dupatta are not just cultural markers of honor but are metaphors for establishing hegemony which then become the cross-cultural signifiers of women's subjugation. The Quilt becomes meta-text carrying metaphors of what must be revealed. The story's translation from one language to the other widens up its horizon in terms of cultural relatedness as well as social

Translation, then is an act of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call 'deterritorialization' in their seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus* wherein the process of deterritorialization is always followed by reterritorialization. When a work is translated, it is deterritorialized from the original work so that it can be reterritorialized in a different context to give rise to multiple perspectives in the form of meta-texts. Here, the attempt has been made to understand translation as a discourse that helps in establishing equivalence wherein equivalence does not necessarily stand for similarities. Rather, it stands as a platform to pave way for what is not similar but has its own identity only to be incorporated into the structure of the society. Therefore, in the context of gender discourse, translations universalize women's points of view across cultures. The aim of this paper has been to draw a parallel between the understandings of gender and translation. In the process, the paper has also tried to reflect upon translation as being an act of re-writing where the meanings in the original text get transferred to the readers of the other languages in the respective languages. In the process of this transference, shifts in author's perspectives can further lead to different meanings for the readers as well. This process gives rise to multiple meanings. This difference in meanings become a chain which broadens up the horizon of a text which can now be accessed in various languages and which is open to several interpretations.

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