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Bhakti in Translation: The translation of cultural motifs and symbols in selected Abhangas of Janabai

Lakshmi Gupchup

Department of English, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune, Maharashtra, India

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Abstract— *Bhakti literature has been translated widely into English. These translations range from prosaic texts by scholars to poetic translations by poets and authors. These translations, however, often fail to convey the complete meaning of an Abhanga of a Bhakti Poet. Bhakti poetry often uses obscure metaphors and symbols to explain difficult philosophical concepts. These symbols are clear to Marathi readers because of the cultural significance they have. The language is also rooted in the culture. Hence, cultural symbols and metaphors used in Marathi Bhakti Literature can be understood when the literature is read in Marathi.However, though English is widely used in India, it still remains a foreign language, coming from its own culture. It has its own commonly used cultural symbols and metaphors. Hence, while translating Bhakti poetry into English, it is difficult to translate these symbols and metaphors without compromising the meaning of the Abhanga. This paper studies selected Abhangas from 'The Ant Who Swallowed the Sun' a translation of Abhangas of women saints of Maharashtra. It will seek to examine how the translators have dealt with the above stated limitation of language.*

Keywords— ***Bhakti movement, Cultural motifs Janabai, Translation***

I. INTRODUCTION

One can argue that Bhakti poetry forms the backbone of Marathi literature. It developed from the thirteenth century. It is only during this time that we can find literature in the modern Marathi Language, as compared to the older Maharashtri Prakrit Language.

Bhakti poetry spans from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth century CE. It has had a significant impact on the modern Marathi literature, as well as the modern Marathi understanding of faith, God and religion.

The Bhakti poets wrote poetry in the form of Abhangas. Abhangas are generally short devotional pieces of poetry that are complete in themselves, usually written in the meter similar to that of an Ovi, with four line stanzas with rhyming couplets.

Bhakti poetry is deeply rooted in regional culture and tradition. The poems use traditional motifs and themes, which are relatable to the Marathi audience, but may sound confusing or even nonsensical to a non-Marathi reader. However, the themes expressed in the poetry are universal, and hence, have been translated into several languages.

The Abhangas of these Bhakti poets have been widely translated into English as well. Collections of translated Abhangas have been written and published since the early nineteenth century and continue into contemporary times.

The translation of these Abhangas involves the translation of traditional motifs, symbols and metaphors in a way that would be understood by non-Marathi readers, minimally compromising on the meaning of the Abhanga.

However, it is very difficult to translate traditional motifs and their symbolic meanings in a foreign language. Thus, part of the meaning is often lost in translation.

Here, we will be using the example of 'The Ant Who Swallowed the Sun' a collection of Abhangas translated into English by Neela Bhagwat and Jerry Pinto. We will examine the way in which the translators have translated traditional motifs, symbols and metaphors, and how the limitations of language play a role in limiting translation of cultural symbols.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Janabai's Abhangas have been studied extensively, both individually and as part of the larger corpus of Bhakti literature. These studies involve readings from various perspectives, including, but not limited to caste, social stigma, religion, and philosophy.

As stated before, we also see that Janabai's work is extensively translated. We can also see instances where the translated works are used to study Janabai's work and life. However, we hardly see any work based on the comparison between the original material and the translation of any Marathi Bhakti literature.

The theory of Domestication and Foreignization, that was first put forth by Friedrich Schleiermacher and later expanded by Lawrence Venuti is used throughout the paper to understand how the translation tries to bridge the gap between the two cultures.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study will use the method of a close textual analysis of the original Marathi Abhangas as well as the English translations by Neela Bhagwat and Jerry Pinto.

It will proceed to identify the traditional cultural motifs, symbols and metaphors used in the Abhangas and study the corresponding words or phrases used in translation. It will then closely examine the synonymous words used and find the subtle differences between the original Marathi meaning and the translated English meaning, and try to see whether or not the emotional and metaphysical meanings of the Abhanga are translated into English.

The study will then go on to determine whether the English substitutes are able to address the multiple shades of meaning that are present in the original Marathi work.

The study will conclude by looking at the overall impact and meaning of the translated Abhanga, and comparing it with the original.

IV. OVERVIEW

Janabai was born in the lower caste, and was given to Namdev's house as a maidservant at the age of six, after the death of her mother. She worked in his house throughout her life. Her Abhangas are a clear reflection of her lived reality. She interacts with Vitthala in a variety of ways, sometimes calling him a mother, sometimes a lover, and sometimes even scolding and cursing him. Her relation with Vitthala is close and intimate, and it keeps changing throughout her life.

Janabai's poetry is has a bold, unashamed voice, using stark and striking imagery which is not always pleasant, sometimes even using swear words in her poetry. Her poetry often expresses anger and dissent, while also showing her close relationship with her God. Her poetry is both emotionally charged and philosophically meaningful.

We can see that the translated text selected also uses a very distinct voice. The translators, use a free verse form, which is very different from the Abhanga form, which uses the form of an Ovi.

In older translations, we see that the visual style of the translation is kept similar to that of the Abhanga, or a simpler, traditional English meter and rhyme scheme is used. Some translations also remain completely prosaic and do not bother with poetic form at all.

In this study, selected Abhangas are used in order to allow for a deeper, detailed textual evaluation. These will be used as a sample to examine how the limitations of language and the traditions and culture it is rooted in and is part of affects translation into a foreign language.

The three selected Abhangas are:

1. Ganga geli sindhupasi
2. Doicha padar ala Khandevari
3. Are Vithya Vithya

V. ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

5.1 Ganga Geli Sindhupasi

Ganga geli Sindhupasi expresses the feeling of being spurned by god. Janabai expresses her helplessness, comparing herself with the river rejected by the sea. She ends the Abhanga by leaving everything in the hands of Vitthala.

Janabai uses symbols that are traditionally used in Marathi poetry such as the river and the sea. The mother and the child, and fish and water are also common motifs found in Bhakti poetry across India.

In the third line of the Abhanga, Janabai uses the words Jala and Jalaachara. Jala means water, while Jalaachara may be translated as fish.

However, the exact words used for fish and water in Janabai's Abhanga are 'Jala' meaning water and 'Jalachara' meaning 'that which lives in the water' which can, of course, be interpreted as fish. However, the use of Jalachara brings out the dependence of the fish on the water, a subtlety that is impossible to bring out in English.

The last line of the Abhanga is 'Pahije te Uddharile', translated as 'Save me if you wish'.

The word 'uddharile' also has a lot of connotative meanings. It comes from the root word Uddhar. Uddhar literally means to raise up. In the context of Bhakti, it is generally used to signify salvation. Uddhar here, means to raise up beyond the human condition. Much like the word salvation in English, Uddhar is generally used in spiritual terms, though it has a multifaceted meaning.

In the case of the first phrase, Jalachara, the translators have used the word fish. We can see that this makes the translation much easier to understand and appreciate, and makes it less technical and more emotive, though it makes the meaning less accurate.

A similar problem is seen with the word Uddhar. The translators use the word 'save' as the English alternative. However, once again, we see that there is no real English alternative, except for the word 'salvation' which is, though not exact, close. However, we can see that the verb form of Salvation is save, which has a slightly different meaning in modern English language.

Overall, we can see that while the emotional impact of the Abhanga and the translation remain similar, the exact meaning changes slightly to make way for the emotional impact.

5.2 Doicha padar ala khandevari

Let us now consider the second Abhanga, 'Doicha padar ala khandevari'.

This Abhanga is written against the patriarchal and brahmanical society that Janabai lived in. Material wealth, knowledge and even devotion was refused to women and shudras. Janabai was marginalized both as a woman and as a Shudra.

Here, Janabai insists that she will break all the bondages of society and devote herself to Vitthala with or without the approval of society. The Abhanga evokes a feeling of rebellion, and yet, it is filled with devotion and love for Vitthala. It is, at the same time expressing dissent and devotion.

The very first line of the Abhanga itself is very culturally specific. Doicha Padar ala Khandevari can literally be translated as the 'Veil of my head dropped to my shoulders'. However, this has a more significant connotative meaning.

All decent Marathi women in the medieval period were supposed to wear the padar, or veil over their head. Not wearing the veil over the head showed that the woman was indecent, probably a prostitute. Thus, the veil falling to te shoulders signifies that Janabai has decided to let go of all concepts of decency and has no concern for what the world would think of her. Janabai, thus, does not care about that people will think of her as she wanders bareheaded in the crowded market.

The second line, 'Haati gheun Tala, khandyavar veena' also shows Janabai's devotion to Vitthala. These are the instruments typically associated with the Bhakti movement, seen with many Bhakti saints. Carrying these instruments was often seen as a marker of a devotee of Vitthala. They were also most used in the Kirtans, which formed a large part of worship.

The fact that she holds a Tala and Veena is what distinguishes Janabai from a common woman in the market. It shows her motive for the way she is acting.

One of the most difficult phrases to translate in this Abhanga is 'Mangatavar tel ghaalaa tumhi'. This is an idiom used in Marathi, meaning, 'to be angry at someone.' Here, Janabai says, you can be angry at me, I do not care.

As this Abhanga is filled with phrases and idioms that are specifically relevant to Marathi culture, it is difficult to translate into English, as the English language comes from a different culture, and hence, uses completely different religious imagery. The limitations of language become apparent in the translation of this Abhanga.

The first line is translated as 'I have left my veil drop to my shoulders'. This is able to capture the meaning of the sentence exactly, but lacks the socio-cultural understanding that is implied by the veil falling to the shoulders. However, it is easily understood, even by non-Marathi readers, as veiling as a form of modesty is practiced in several cultures.

In the translated version of the Abhanga, the translators transcribe the word Veena as it is. This is something Lawrence Venuti refers to as foreignization, as it forces the reader to try to understand the culture around the source material. The Veena is a stringed instrument often associated with Sarasvati. It has cultural significance in Indian culture, as it is the instrument associated with Sarasvati, the goddess of wisdom. It is also closely associated with the Bhakti tradition in Maharashtra, as the Veena is traditionally used by the kirtankars.

Hence, it would be almost impossible to translate the cultural significance of the word Veena in English, without destroying the poetic aspect of the translation. Using the name of any other stringed instrument would be a mistranslation. Thus, we see that the word Veena is directly transcribed, and not translated into any English word.

Finally, we come to the idiom, 'Mangatavar tel lava tumhi' The translator has translated this as 'Anoint my wrists with oil.' While this translates the literal meaning quite clearly, it fails to address the connotative meaning, which is more relevant in this Abhanga.

It is here that the cultural context that the two languages bring matters so much. In the Christian tradition, anointing someone is considered a holy act. It is performed by priests,

and signifies closeness to God. In fact, the messiah in the Judeo-Christian traditions is referred to as the anointed one.

Anointing wrists with oil is part of the Christian tradition, and is used by devotees to feel closer to God, or to observe certain devotional rites.

However, in the Indian tradition, we barely see the concept of being anointed. The action of anointing wrists with oil thus, has no cultural significance in the original text in Marathi.

In Marathi, when Janabai uses the phrase 'Mangatavar tel lava tumhi' it is through a feeling of disregard for the society. It has little to do with being closer to God.

Thus, when the phrase is translated as 'Anoint my wrists with oil' there is a cultural meaning associated with the translated phrase in the target language. While the literal translation of the phrase would be similar, the connotative meaning changes completely in such a translation. While the original phrase signifies dissent and rejection of the norms of society, the translated text signifies devotion and closeness to God. This changes the meaning of the entire phrase which forms an important part of the Abhanga.

Janabai ends the Abhanga by saying that she is Keshava's whore, and that she was coming to destroy his home.

In general, the overall essence of the Abhanga is maintained through the translation, though we can often see that the specific lines have different connotative meanings. However, though the emotional impact of the Abhanga is close, though not the same, we cannot say at all that the meaning of the text remains the same. Though the translators have translated the Abhanga word for word, it is unable to capture the cultural meaning that are hidden in the Abhanga.

5.3 Vithya Vithya, Moolamaayechyaa kartya

The final Abhanga in this paper is 'Vithya Vithya'. This Abhanga is based on the concept of Ninda Stuti. Understanding this concept alone might be difficult for non-Indian readers.

Ninda Stuti is a way of praising a god by insulting him, it is a way to humanize god, to make him relatable. In insulting god, the devotee creates a bond of trust, love and friendship, which allows such informal dialogue. Here, Janabai swears and curses at Vitthala, but she only has te right to do it because she loves him so deeply.

Janabai calls Vitthala by the name Vithya, which is a familiar, informal manner of address, which can be used as an insult. She goes on to call him the Moolamaayechya Kartya. The term Moolamaayaa refers to the principle of illusion, which is considered primordial in Indian mythology.

Janabai uses the word Kartya to define the relationship Vitthala has with this primordial power. Kartya, in colloquial Marathi, refers to a misbehaved child. Thus, Janabai calls Vitthala the misbehaved son of the primordial illusion.

However, some older uses of the word Kartya also give it a second meaning. Kartya also means a Brahmin who performs last rites.

Hence, we see a twofold meaning of the same word, both having incredibly philosophical roots. The beauty of the Abhanga lies in the fact that it can be interpreted both ways and still be correct. On one hand, the Abhanga states that Vitthala is the son of, and hence, is created by illusion. On the other hand, he also performs the last rites of the illusion, thus making his devotees see the ultimate reality.

Thus, even while fighting with Vitthala on the surface, Janabai reveals a deeper philosophical side to her Abhanga.

She goes on to describe how his wife is left widowed, but eternally wed. She even describes his funeral procession, saying that time itself will weep at his funeral. She concludes by describing herself hurling curses at him. These images too, have philosophical depths that are hidden in metaphors.

Vitthala's wife is Prakriti, the primordial personification of matter. As he loses his state of Nirguna, of being formless, she is left a widow. However, the essence of Vitthala is describe as timeless, and hence, she will be eternally wedded to him, and so, is described as wearing the 'chooda' or wedding bangles.

This particular Abhanga is characterized by the feeling of rage towards Vitthala, which is rarely seen in the Bhakti tradition. However, if we look a little deeper into its meaning, we can see that it has philosophical connotations not seen in te first glance.

It is in such a case that translation becomes extremely challenging, as the text contains not just culturally specific motifs, but also has multiple layers of meaning.

We can see several culturally specific motifs in the text of this Abhanga. The first being 'Moolamaayaa' Maya is the principle of illusion, which allows us to experience the world as separate from God. However, it is rarely considered harmful. Rather, it is considered something that is necessary to develop the correct perspective on the world. Maya is also worshipped as a goddess in her own right.

Raand and randki are considered swear words even today. Though Raand is used as a colloquial term for whore in modern times, its original meaning is widow. However, the word remains derogatory.

The word Madhe literally means corpse, specifically a corpse that is ready for cremation.

The concept of Kaala is also not completely translatable into English. Kaala is usually translated as time, but it is also used as a word meaning death.

In the translation, we can see that 'Moolamaayaa' is translated as the eternal mother. While is translation is not wrong, it is not complete, as Moolamaayaa has multiple meanings which cannot be captured in any single English word or phrase. The English translation is unable to capture the aspects of being illusory.

Similarly, Kartya is translated as prodigal son. However, the meaning of Kartya and prodigal son are very different. The phrase 'prodigal son' means a son who squanders his wealth and leaves home. Kartya on the other hand refers to a misbehaved child.

The second meaning of the word is not translated at all in English. The double meaning is impossible to translate in one word.

The prodigal son also has a cultural history attached to the phrase. The parable of the prodigal son appears in the bible. Hence, when the translators use the term Prodigal son, it carries with it its own history, separate from the source text.

The translation is also unable to capture the contradictory meaning in the second line of the Abhanga. The first part of the line says that the widow is abandoned, at the same time, the very next line calls her Janmasavitri. Savitri is a term used for a devoted life. Janmasavitri is a term used for a woman who never sees widowhood. It is also indicative of the bride of God, who cannot know widowhood as her husband is immortal. She is described in the original Abhanga as wearing bangles, which only married women are traditionally allowed to wear.

However, the translation completely ignores this contradiction. It simplifies it, by translating 'Janmasavitri chooda lyali' as 'her bangles wither.' This fails to capture any of the multiple meanings of the Abhanga, and does not even fit the literal or metaphorical meaning of the terms.

While the emotional impact is preserved in the translated work, we can see that the layered meaning and wordplay found in the original is not seen at all, as it is very difficult to communicate these in a foreign language.

When we look at all the examples seen here, it becomes clear that the act of translation is difficult when translating texts like Abhangas, which are filled with cultural symbolism and multiple meanings.

The limitations of language become quite clear in this case. The development of a language is rooted in a culture, and does not occur separately. Thus, cultural symbols are directly transferred to language as well. The two languages here, Marathi and English, come from different cultural backgrounds, and thus, certain words and phrases cannot be translated into English without changing the meaning of the Abhanga itself.

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