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Gendered Identity in Translation Studies: *Her Stories*

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Abstract:

Translation studies in recent times have been instrumental in accentuating gender issues addressed in literary creations of art. These works of translation make accessible to readers the intention of the author of the SL text as well as add new dimensions to it, thereby functioning as a form of linguistic and cultural enrichment. This paper tends to focus attention on Sanjukta Dasgupta's translated short stories- *Her Stories*- to interrogate the validity of patriarchal agendas employed to foster gender identities in society. Through a thorough analysis of the translated pieces in the anthology I would like to explore the points of rupture created by them, forming a discursive space which initiates the disruption of the phallogocentric order.

Keywords: Translation, gendered identity, patriarchy.

Translation refers to an act of re-creation, contributing to the dynamics of cultural representation. The medium that makes translation possible - language - is essentially a translation. Therefore Octavio Paz opens his essay *Translation: Literature and Letters* with the following words:

When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child who asks his mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simplest words he already knows. In this sense, translation within the same language is not essentially different from translation between two tongues. (p. 152)

He further opines that “no text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation” (p. 152). In short, all acts of human communication are, in effect, acts of translation.

The role of a translator is often called into question. Critics argue on the function of the translator in familiarizing or de-familiarizing the source language and doubt his/her dexterity in overcoming the difficulties involved in translating culture-specific items from the SL text to the TL text. Whether the process of translation is a mechanical or a creative one is also open to debate. Giovanni Pontiero's observation in this respect can offer some meaningful insight:

Literary translation, therefore, is no mean task. It is an art worthy of greater recognition from publishers, critics and readers. The job requires intelligence and experience, but also humility, courage, heart, and imagination. (p. 65)

As Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak points out in *The Politics of Translation*, substantial attention has been paid to translation studies only in recent years, seen in relation to cultural exchange. The ever expanding field of translation activities should be viewed in a historical

context; significant examples of literary translations in the past include the ones between Greek and Latin languages in classical times and the Biblical translations of various scholars from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek and Latin. The development of translation studies in the past few decades has been instrumental in bridging the gulf across cultural boundaries, thereby initiating a steady expansion of writing in the field of translation from the nineteenth into the twentieth century.

Since the 1970s numerous research projects have been undertaken to investigate and explore the role played by translation in promoting new socio-political ideas centered on gender and their literary expression, the roles played by women translators in the present and the past, and their reception and influence. Because language exercises a powerful impact on a society's perception of gendered identity and profoundly influences the creation and manipulation of texts in translation, the two respective fields of study gradually came to overlap. The focus on gender over the last part of the twentieth century, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition, has affected translation as well as been powerfully reflected by translation. To quote the words of Luise Von Flotow :

Translation analyses tend to deal with works in which traditional ideas about two genders are called into question ... It posits a powerfully assertive translator, exploring the (mis)representation of women authors in translation, the invisibility of women translators, and the patriarchal aspects of translation theories. (pp. 93-94)

In this context I have chosen to concentrate on Sanjukta Dasgupta's translated short stories entitled *Her Stories* which focus on the paradoxical position of women in Indian society, a position re-defined through her selection of narratives which "prioritize the *well being* rather than the *ill being* of women in varying degrees, in an on going process of negotiation." (Preface, *Her Stories*, p.i). The selected pieces for translation problematize, interrogate, resist and de-construct dominant patriarchal ideology which, functioning through gender stereotyping, denies women the power to assert themselves. In the Preface to *Her Stories*, Sanjukta Dasgupta voices her intention behind undertaking this work of translation:

I have tried to trace through these translated texts the gendered presence and absence, women's identity, subjectivity and agency, the sameness and difference, the silences, the sensitivity, the resistance and the courage in the face of systematic exploitation, oppression and marginalization. (Preface, *Her Stories*, p. 2)

The whole thrust here is to de-mystify the celebrated notion that patriarchy is the handicraft of God. The selected eight stories – 'Opium', 'Chinta', 'Surrogate', 'Quintuplets', 'From the Heart of Darkness', 'Good Woman, Bad Woman', 'Face', 'The Drowned Man' – by contemporary Bengali women writers bring to the fore the fact that though power-centered correspondence between the sexes seems an immutable natural phenomena, it is in effect an indubitable indoctrination fed into the psyche of the dominated by the dominant sex. They are lashing condemnations of inequality within what is glorified as the sacred space of domestic activities. *Her Stories* gives credence to the thought that translators have the freedom to prioritize women authors and to express their own understanding of gender issues in a text.

The introductory story ‘Opium’ is a powerful documentation of an educated, cultured woman’s sense of alienation in the post-marriage period of her life. In a societal set-up where feminine beauty is more valuable than an enlightened female mind, the “lack of a fair complexion” (*Her Stories*, p. 20) disparages Sumita’s various talents and renders them absolutely meaningless. Denied the right to subjectivity in her in-laws house, Sumita returns with her father to escape the ignominy of a subservient existence. However, such is the intoxication of an affluent lifestyle and amorous desires that Sumita chooses them against a dignified and independent living. Thus, despite possessing a refined sensibility, Sumita gradually lets her “sense of values” (*Her Stories*, p. 24) to melt away in order to fit in to the stereotyped image of femininity destined for her:

The language of her letter didn’t bear the stamp of a highly educated refined literary style. It was just the whining voice of a woman! The fact that Sudhi [her husband] wouldn’t be able to understand any other mode of expression, wasn’t unknown to Sumita. (*Her Stories*, p. 25)

‘Chinta’ focuses on the plight of a working class woman whose suffering is caused by a combination of multiple factors: crushing poverty, societal indifference and vulnerable circumstances. A young resourceful widow, Chinta easily becomes prey to the sexual advances of Utsav; “Errant youth and bodily desire” (*Her Stories*, p. 41) clouds her sense of judgement and she ends up eloping with Utsav only to be cheated by him and left unguarded in an unknown city:

He did not marry me, nor did he give me any jewellery. Instead he beat me up, took my money and then disappeared after giving me two kids. (*Her Stories*, p.41)

Female sexuality has more often than not been viewed as a viable means of gratifying the libidinous cravings of men and Chinta’s “attractive physique” (*Her Stories*, p. 43), coupled with her hapless condition, soon engages the attention of ravenous men who are unabashedly patriarchal in considering women as anything other than sex objects:

Smiling slyly the *paanwallah* tried to accost Chinta making signs of vulgar intimacy. That Chinta was absolutely without any resources whatsoever, made him salivate and munch his *paan* excitedly. (*Her Stories*, p. 43)

Reduced to a sexual commodity by the voracious male gaze, Chinta’s survival options in such a bestial environment are seriously threatened. Hence she dares not defy the sacrosanct authority of her self-righteous male guardians when they propose to sell off her illegitimate daughters for securing the interests of her legitimate son and granting her acceptance in society.

Both Sumita and Chinta collude in their oppression, one being unable to overcome “the narcotic effect of material wealth, affluence, economic power and marital sex” (Preface, *Her Stories*, p. iv), another being victimized and methodically silenced by ruthless, uncompromising and judgmental patriarchs to ensure their dominance. But Sarama in ‘Surrogate’ strikes at the very root of patriarchy by negating the prime role it assigns to women – that of nurturing a

“dream child”(*Her Stories*, p.62) of ones own. Since time immemorial motherhood has been glorified and looked upon as a woman’s prime source of fulfillment. Initially Sarama sought happiness through this idealized form of consummation of womanhood. Having sacrificed the golden years of her life in the service of other peoples’ children (both at home looking after her younger brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, and at school taking care of her pupils) Sarama “ardently yearned for a child of her own” (*Her Stories*, p. 56). But a sudden unnatural change in the behavior of her husband baffles her intensely:

He seemed to have become so intense in his excessive passion that he caused Sarama a great distress. Even when she was a newly wed bride she had never noticed such ardent desire for intimacy in him. (*Her Stories*, p. 60)

The riddle is solved the moment she realizes that Soumen was impudently using her body to satisfy his lust for another woman. Completely disillusioned, Sarama decides to preserve the sanctity of her ‘flesh and blood’ (*Her Stories*, p. 62) by aborting an ill-gotten fruit of liaison. Sarama’s unconventional retort to Soumen’s act of perversion de-romanticizes the conventional icon of motherhood and makes ‘Surrogate’ a “path-breaking story” (*Her Stories*, p. 53). By refusing to become “the receptacle of lust meant for someone else” (*Her Stories*, p. 53), Sarama liberates herself from the quintessential scheme – the mystic splendor associated with maternity – employed by patriarchy to imprison women.

A different image of motherhood is portrayed in ‘From the Heart of Darkness’. Like an archetypal mother, Shantobala devotes her life to the well-being of her daughters. She serves as a typical example of what a mother can do for the sake of her child. What is rather unconventional in her attitude is that she cares little for her sons, knowing fully well that they are privileged by virtue of their superior sex. The determination to strike out a new destiny for her daughters – “Just enough education to be able to write to their mother” (*Her Stories*, p.108) after getting married – gives Shanto the required strength to oppose her husband’s decision of marrying off their daughters at an early age.

For the first time in her life Shanto strongly voices her protest against the atrocious norms of a society represented by her husband. Being an extremely shy and tolerant person, Shanto never questioned the authority of her guardians, hence she exchanged marital vows with a man of her father’s age simply because her parents could not afford to ‘cling on to a girl-child’ (*Her Stories*, p.103). Helplessly she endured the unremitting tortures of a monstrous husband:

Making her wear gold bangles he asserted his right over her... She became pregnant over and over again. She went through the many births and deaths of her many children. Shanto couldn’t think of a time when she was not either carrying a child in her arms or inside her. (*Her Stories*, p. 103-05)

Shanto’s plight reminds us of Engel’s insightful observation in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and The State*:

The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children. (p. 57)

The cumulative torments she has been subject to since her marriage makes Shanto detest the very thought of her daughters going through the same ordeal, hence she murders her husband when he conspires to destroy the lives of Kamini and Jamini in the same way as he had obliterated their mother's hopes and dreams. Shanto's transformation from an abject being, incapable of protecting herself, to an autonomous subject, accepting responsibility for her actions, is realistically delineated in 'From the Heart of Darkness'. Thought-provoking and inspiring, this story remains another landmark in the history of English feminist writing translated from Bengali literature.

As Sanjukta Dasgupta opines, "The idealized notion of the family as a space of security, stability and harmony has often been debunked, exposing the family as a claustrophobic space with gender inequality and power relations being the subtext of the micro politics of daily domestic life experiences" (*Responses*, pp. 62-63). The private domain of the bedroom becomes inescapably intertwined with the public sphere of politics in 'The Drowned Man' where Sanjoy Deshmukh, a public persona, marries a Muslim girl to further his political career. Entering a relationship with a man solely guided by self-interest, Nazmin turned Amrita soon finds herself leading a miserable life devoid of self-esteem. In spite of taking charge of all domestic chores and assisting her husband in his various professional engagements, Amrita's status remains nothing better than that of an unpaid, unacknowledged labour. Bearing the brunt of an abusive husband Amrita nevertheless enacts the role of a "devoted Indian wife" (*Her Stories*, p.183); the fact that she has no other place to seek shelter in enables Sanjoy to take undue advantage of her shortcoming. Amrita's emotional attachment with her only son further suppresses her urge of revolting against her husband's injustice. But Amrita does not stoically accept her fate either. Gaining assurance of a sheltered life from her brother, Amrita makes up her mind to stifle her feelings for her son and launch a decisive attack on her oppressive husband. Accordingly Amrita plans the subsequent course of her action. She decides to ruin the very ambition that prompted Sanjoy to exploit Amrita's naivety and convince her for an inter-religion marriage, hence she strategically quits her husband's household before the imminent election so that his hopes of political advancement are shattered.

Besides Sanjoy, Soumya, a young reporter who receives the hospitality of the Deshmukh household and to whom Amrita confides her secret tale of woe, fails to comprehend the depth of her sorrow, though he notices traces of it on her face:

It seemed there was a lot of sorrow borne through many days
in those swollen red eyes. (*Her Stories*, p. 188)

Unfortunately, Amrita's 'secret sharer' fails to serve as her emotional outlet and provide her the much needed succor. On the contrary, he turns out to be as egoistic as Sanjoy, hence his exhaustive report carefully avoids any mention of Amrita's battered existence:

In Soumya's detailed report the history of the movement was outlined, it included snatches of conversations held with the real person. Conversations with Surath, Dhumia, Bisha and the

others. Amrita's face had, by then, become totally drowned and lost in that flood of humanity. (*Her Stories*, p. 195)

Society breeds stereotypes, and the two stereotypical roles allotted to women are those of the virtuous homemaker and the vicious streetwalker. She is either glorified as a Goddess or condemned as a whore. This dichotomy forms the core of 'Good Woman, Bad Woman'. Urmi, the "good woman", performs the role of "the angel in the house", meticulously looking after the needs of her husband and son:

Urmi once ran to the left and then to the right. Now she was in the kitchen and soon after in the bedroom. Now in her son's room, then at the dining table. Urmi kept on rushing and rushing breathlessly. If there was even a slight slip Samiran would kick up a pandemonium. (*Her Stories*, p. 118)

Urmi's sense of complacency arises out of her delusory belief that "So much of happiness, so much wealth were entirely hers." (*Her Stories*, p. 121). Thus she consoles herself when her presumptuous husband criticizes her ("Look at you, just one son and you can't take care of his needs!" *Her Stories*, p. 119) or her arrogant son is irreverent to her ("Don't disturb me. Leave me alone." *Her Stories*, p. 130). What puts a glittering mask over this parasitic existence is her idolatry of the marital institution. Fascinated by the dazzle and enchantment of opulence, Urmi remains in a euphoric state where nothing can destroy the calm of her mind. Urmi's spell breaks after her encounter with the "bad woman" Ria.

Unlike Urmi, Ria entertains no false convictions. Ria is a woman of ill repute, a commodity meant to satiate the sexual hunger of men of repute! She is well aware of the fact that the society represented by these hypocrites will exploit her but never grant her the kind of respect that it lavishes on docile women like Urmi. The only redeeming facet of her life is that she is financially independent, and that makes all the difference. The analogy she draws between the kinds of life led by a housewife and a fallen woman is at once striking and disturbing:

Sometimes I have a thought, Madam, what would I have gained if I had been a happy housewife? After a hard day's labour I'd have got a plate of rice. Or else I'd have got it by appeasing someone's desire at night. What's the difference between that and the life I lead? Society accepts one and doesn't accept the other. (*Her Stories*, p. 147)

Ria's sharp words arouse Urmi out of her reverie and she is stricken by the resemblance. Yet she can do nothing to mitigate her predicament, not even resist her husband's crime of marital rape ("forcible cohabitation" *Her Stories*, p.153). Rape in itself is a serious offence, and Ria, a victim of rape, strongly protests against this inhuman act of sexual aberration. She justifies the claim that every woman has a right to choose her own sexual mate as well as to refuse to yield in to his sexual urges at her own liking. Ria's assertive individuality stands in sharp contrast to Urmi's subdued mental state, hence she can only shed "secret tears" (*Her Stories*, p. 153) and wallow in self-pity when her husband delights in establishing his exclusive rights over her body against her wish:

We are after all, good women! We don't have the spirit of bad women like Ria! (*Her Stories*, p. 153)

'Face' is another insightful documentation of a young woman's quest for a philanthropic community amidst a bunch of debauched men of power. Humanity seems to have become an obsolete term in the dictionary of these so-called civilized protectors of law ("Their sense of values suggested that they belonged to a different species." *Her Stories*, p. 170), hence they have no scruples about employing sadistic measures. Engulfed by darkness on all sides, this unnamed woman activist's extreme thirst for basic human morals and values is quenched by one who is marginalized by our society as a "queer" creature:

Had I met this same person on the streets I would have shunned the person as a "eunuch". (*Her Stories*, p. 162)

Ironically it is this "eunuch" alone who is sympathetic and kind towards her during her stay in police custody. The departure of this compassionate soul denies her the bliss of staying in close physical proximity with a human being in the truest sense of the term. Despair soon succumbs to hope as she once again encounters human faces outside the confinement of four walls, faces which remind her of the humane aspect of life and invigorate her with renewed vigour and courage. The atmosphere of menace which earlier threatened to exterminate her identity now loses all hold over its victim. Nothing, no more can crush her indomitable spirit:

I was no longer scared. Fear could not destroy me anymore. (*Her Stories*, p.175)

The crowning piece of the collection is 'Quintuplets' which stresses on the miraculous powers of sisterly love, much in the same vein as Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. It is the story of Chitrakha, Sita, Bhadra, Lopa and Krishnakshi, five childhood friends who are reconciled at a critical juncture of their lives. Engrossed in the trials and tribulations of mundane living, these women had gradually drifted apart from each other. It is only when they come together again that they realize how much they needed each other to come to terms with their personal losses. The ties of sisterhood again bind them together and prove instrumental in healing their wounds caused by infidelity ("I saw that the woman [who was sitting in an intimate position with Chitra's husband] was not Chitra." *Her Stories*, p.76), poverty ("Sitting on the worn bed was our Sita, the one we used to call golden Sita. Now there was nothing golden about her." *Her Stories*, p. 79), heartbreak ("How someone had played the fool with her, made her work out his thesis and then dumped her, we heard from Lopa." *Her Stories*, p.86-87), child loss ("It's three months today that she [Bhadra] has lost her only son." *Her Stories*, p. 89), and fraudulence ("My husband is impotent. He used me [Krishnakshi] as a bait for his underworld business. I am without husband and children. *Her Stories*, p. 90).

The optimistic note of the concluding lines of 'Quintuplets' – "The deep chasm in the heart of the earth had come together again. The universe resonated with the notes of *Panchojonyo*. For us. For the five of us. After all we *are* Panchali" (*Her Stories*, p. 93) – negates the personal regrets, failures and shortcomings of five friends re-united at middle age, thereby

initiating the possibility of an alternative matriarchal order. These women who have so long endured the sharp blows of life now look forward to a better way of living ignoring patriarchal strictures, thereby “resurrecting themselves from the morass of ennui. They re-emerge as winners.” (Preface, *Her Stories*, p. vi).

Family is a major conveyor of gender stereotypes and plays a major role in perpetuating the marginalization of women. Recent studies by eminent feminist critics have pointed out that the aura associated with this institutionalized unit of society is a patriarchal ploy devised to throttle a distinct female identity. It seems worthwhile here to cite Sanjukta Dasgupta’s words:

The efficacy of the institution of marriage and family life idealized by patriarchy and identified as the woman’s sense of contentment has been exposed by post-modern women authors as a patriarchal myth. (*Responses*, p. 47)

This valorized myth has been cross-examined, put under scrutiny, and critiqued in all the translated stories I have dealt with so far. Viewed from a feminist perspective, translation approaches are indeed required to re-interpret, resist, subvert or undermine established patriarchal assumptions in order to posit an alternative understanding of women’s position in society.

Culturally accepted notions of gender enter our language. However, whatever has been constructed can in turn be de-constructed and it is this process of de-mystification which most feminist translators have singled out for their case-study. For instance, Barbara Godard, an influential translator of experimental feminist writing, proposes that feminist translators should “flaunt” their presence and agency in text, making both themselves and their work visible. It seems apt to conclude with the illuminating words of Luise Von Flotow in *Gender and Translation*:

In terms of the activist positions taken by translators and by many researchers on gender in the past decades, both paradigms are based on identity-formation and group affiliations, and it is up to the translator to accept or refuse this identification. Moreover, both are constructivist, viewing sexual identity as either being unwittingly constructed from childhood or deliberately constructed and acted out as an adult. Both paradigms are reflected in language and can be evoked, displayed, activated, enacted, suppressed or erased both in source texts, and in translated texts when this language is carried over into other cultures and contexts. (p. 104)

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