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Women and Translation: Reading Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Empty Chest*

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Translation implies crossing of boundaries. Similarly many issues related to women are not confined in one country. They are common everywhere with some variations. Beginning with this affinity between women and translation the paper explores some areas the combination of the term women and translation unfolds. It examines women's representation in language, across languages and women's participation in this representation with reference to a story written by Mamoni Raisom Goswami and translated by Dr. Pradipta Borgohain.

1

"Both gender studies and translation studies are fairly new academic fields with international and interdisciplinary thrusts and implications. Both have oriented themselves toward traveling across traditional academic disciplines to create transnational communities and cross cultural communication". (Meherez, 107)

Samia Mehrez establishes affinities between gender studies and translation studies in this manner. Like translation studies gender studies too cross boundaries and make possible cross cultural communication because it address transnational communities. In this context when we talk about translation of woman's text it amalgamates both the fields and opens new avenues of cross cultural communication. The term women and translation immediately brings to our minds three other issues such as women's representation in language, across languages and women's participation in this representation. Women are represented in a language which is governed by the 'law of the father' to follow the Lacanian view. When women have to represent themselves in this language order they find no place for themselves. Hence Cixous and Irigaray, the two French feminists argue that women have a separate symbolic order characterized, for Cixous, by plentitude and for Irigaray, by multiplicity in contrast to the rule and logic of the phallogocentric symbolic. Ann Rosalind Jones explains Cixous' idea of plentitude in this way: "Cixous calls for an assertion of the female body as plentitude, as a positive force, the source simultaneously of multiple physical capacities (gestation, birth, lactation) and of liberating texts" (8). Similarly Irigaray believes: "Woman would always remain multiple... if the female imaginary happened to unfold" (2010: 388). Irigaray's approach is psychoanalytic which inscribes multiplicities of pleasures and perspectives possessed by women. Hence these two French feminists find a different order for women's representation in language.

Talking about women's representation across language, that is, in translation Spivak brings in the idea of gender and cultural identity. When the translator is woman Spivak says "The feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the working of gendered agency" (1993:179). This demands self-awareness on the part of the female translator in terms of gendered identity and also emphasizes the need to attend to the other nuances of language over its logical

systematicity¹. Talking about the relationship between translation and woman Barbara Godard says, “Translation, in its figurative meanings of transcoding and transformation, is a topos in feminist discourse used by women writers to evoke the difficulty of breaking out of silence in order to communicate new insights into women’s experiences and their relation to language” (45). So women’s speaking or writing is translation in the sense of transforming their experience into language. This leads to the question of woman’s relation to language? Is there a woman’s language? It is now widely accepted in feminist and culture discourses that considerable differences exist between male and female vocabulary². For instance certain expressions are considered taboo to woman. They are not allowed to verbalise swear words, sexual experience or emotions. That is why perhaps Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood says, “I am a translation because I am a woman” (95) and “I am a translation because I am a bilingual” (89). Women are bilingual because they are obliged to use two different codes within the same language, the dominant male language and the often silent women’s tradition.

To talk about women’s participation in the act of writing if we take the case of India the scene is not very encouraging. Sanskrit, the mother language of all Indian languages describes an ideal woman in the following manner:

“Kāryesu Mantrī
Karmesu Dāsī
Rupesu Laksmī
Ksamāyā Dharitr
Snehesu Mātā
Śayanesu Vesyā
Sadharma Nārī Kuladharmā Patnī” (cited in Pillai: 2)

By which, the saying literally means that an ideal woman should be a minister in practical affairs, a slave in action, Goddess Lakshmi in beauty, Mother Earth in patience and a prostitute in bed and so on.

Writing and literature were under the male province in India since ancient times. The earliest Indian women who tried their hands at writing were the Sangam poets (100BC–250AD) in Tamil. AK Ramanujan who translated many of these poems is of the opinion, “Some of the poems echo the need for bodily love and passion, the foolishness of war and the spears that men were left with to wage wars”³ (cited in S. Shoba: 113). Certain other critics date back Indian women’s writing to the advent of Buddhism in the 6th century BC. Buddhism paved the way for women’s writing as it advocated freedom and campaigned for the principle of equality. The Therigatha nuns were the contemporaries of the Buddha who composed the first anthology of women’s literature in Pali, the language of Buddhists scripts. Talking about the further development of women’s writing in India S. Shoba writes,

While the oppression of the caste system encouraged Janabai to write, the rise of Islam produced a writer of the caliber of Princess Gul-Badan Begum. Maddhupalini and Mahlaqua Bai Chanda are the examples of courtesans who had the rare privilege to write. 19th century women’s writing, as seen in the works of Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati and Sarojini Naidu concentrated on the freedom struggle. Women’s writing from the 20th century onwards, represented by Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande and others, deal with women’s and political issues. (114)

Categorically, the names of Ismat Chughtai (Urdu), Mannu Bhandari, Krishna Sobti, Shanti Gupta (Hindi), Padma Sachdev (Dogri), Amrita Pritam (Punjabi) and several other Indian women writers including Mamoni Raisom Goswami writing in languages other than English are more likely to be seen as a set of literary women who write from a particular space that is drawn away from the larger firmament which is adorned by male ‘mainstream’ writers. These women are doubly marginalized. First of all, they do not get any place in the literary canon building because they are women. On top of that they fall under the category of regional writers. Questioning the notion of mainstream women’s writing in India Lakshmi Holmstrom brings out *The Inner Courtyard Stories by Indian Women*, an anthology which contains eighteen stories from different parts of India including women writers who write in English and regional languages. Holmstrom says in the introduction to “...many of the stories are feminist in the sense that they present a woman’s perspective and point of view in a particular way” (1991:xi).⁴

2

After this discussion on women and translation when we turn to the writer of our discussion, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, seems to beg the question as to how shall we place her works and her translations in this apparatus? Mamoni Raisom Goswami is a writer whose works always lend a voice against the conservative Indian patriarchal society. Her novels and stories reflect her concern for issues related to woman. In terms of the ‘law of father’ in language Mamoni Raisom Goswami worked in a linguistic tradition where proverbs or even the structure of language is patriarchal. Certain proverbs such as *katārī dharābā śile tiroṭā dharābā kile* (sharpen a knife with a rock and sharpen a woman with a whip), *tāmol pānehe bārī putramantahe nārī* (As a garden is charming with the betel nut trees; so is a woman with a male child), *tirī latā tirī pātā tirīk nakabi sacā kathā* (woman is like a creeper, woman is fragile. Don’t tell her the truth.) reflect the invisibility of woman in language and in society. In this dogmatic linguistic style there is hardly any space for the silenced race’s voice.

“Udam Bākac” (“The Empty Chest” in translation) is about a poor woman called Tarādai, now married to a drunkard driver but once loved by a young son of a rich man. She is leading a beggar-like life nearby a cremation ground. Tarādai is turned into a sterile and coy object by the constant surveillance of the society (the society formed on the fringes of the cremation ground under the shrine of Kāmākhya) and also by the gaze of Hayabar, who waits for her favour at night. This compels her to enclose herself in her worn out hut. Her repressed self utters in anguish: “what is left in this body to draw you back?” (2001: 31). In this state of mental turmoil her only strength is her passionate and intense love for her deceased lover Saru Bopā. The wooden coffin carrying the dead body of Saru Bopā is the souvenir of her love. She wears her vermilion in the memory of her lover not for her jailed husband.

She is in a painfully pitiable condition because she is under an illusion which is shattered at the arrival of her brother. She keeps the coffin of her dead lover like her bridal bed, living in those memories with the firm belief that her dead lover remained a bachelor because of her love, a house maid at their place at one point of time. Her brother only blasts her belief revealing the truth showing her the wedding cards of her lover, “Saru Bopā was not planning to stay an eternal bachelor because of you. His wedding had been fixed. Wedding cards had also been printed. Read them. Read them! In fact he was on his way home to get married when the accident happened” (2001: 36-37).

The English translation does justice to the sensitivity of language and emotion exhibited in the ‘original’ story. The story is full of symbolic and intuitive innuendos which are evident in many of Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s stories and novels. For instance, the empty chest is “a source of strength to Tarā dai” (32); but instead of being soothing, it keeps its “cavernous mouth open” (33). This type of language which exposes the woman’s condition symbolically is very common to an intelligent writer like Mamoni Raisom Goswami. The writer appropriately describes the illusive support Tarā dai was clutching on to as her last resort to live her life, “Tarā daiye eibār asahāy hoi ābahu mulyabān buli ji mānikak tāi dhari bāndhi rākhiba khujise – āji sei ācalo ei mānuhtoye khuliba khujise...” (1998: 125). The translated version reads like this: “Tarā dai looked helplessly at her brother. She had managed to salvage something precious from her what had once been. Would her brother deprive her of even that?” (2001: 36). The panic felt by Tarā doi is expressed better in the ‘original’. However, the translation too successfully represents the writer across languages. To put in other words the multiple meanings and innuendoes of the text is well transferred. For instance, in the story Tarā dai, the central character, caresses the coffin of her dead lover: “Strange! Strange indeed! Reveling in the incomparable pleasure she felt, she lay inert for a long time in this chest which had been divested of its cremation ground. She had to take out some blood-stained pieces of ice from it. She had almost forgotten about that. Tarā dai wept” (2001: 33). It shows the language reflects desire and futurity of a woman pointing to multiplicity of reality existing for that woman.

At this point we can notice that Mamoni Raisom Goswami is a writer who maintains a great equanimity in character portrayal and in the overall description of the social scene. We can never critique her for being biased about woman’s issues. She projects her women characters in such realistic social settings that the question of exaggeration does not arise. “The Empty Chest” for example is not about Tarā dai, the woman alone. It is about her poor economic condition. The story in such a small space also portrays the life in and around the crematorium. Hayabar, the vendor who sells fake woods, the prostitute running her business with the people accompanying funeral, the wine bottles, spectre-thin Tarā doi and her children who appear like “phantoms from the cremation ground” (2001: 36) – everything reveals the crude, pitiable life nearby the crematorium. Yet the story is centrally about the empty chest which Tarā dai fills with her imagination. The woman’s experience is well communicated through the translation: “She caressed the chest with her hands. The bakul flowers, beautifully engraved on its sides, seemed quite real. She pressed her cheek to these flowers. After that, as on other days, she wriggled into the huge chest and lay there...” (2001: 32-33). In the discussion of the story many concerns related to the translation of a woman’s text come to light. Tarā dai belongs to the poorest section of our society struggling to live nearby a crematorium. She is haunted by the gaze of her neighbours: “Was anyone looking? These days people peeped through crannies and gaps between doors and windows and walls” (2001:34). The condition of the character justifies Simone de Beauvoir’s claims in her *The Second Sex*: “The body is not a thing, it is a situation; it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects” (362). Body is not a woman’s destiny. It is a way of experiencing the world. The freedom of an individual depends largely on this; but the situation is such that woman becomes the ‘other’, the inessential. To quote Beauvoir again:

Now, what specifically defines the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless discovers and chooses herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to turn her into an object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is for ever to be

transcended by another consciousness which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject – which always posits itself as essential – and the demands of a situation which constitutes her as inessential. (29)

However, the woman in the story is not explicitly rebellious but she is not passive sufferer either. The dread of transgression is overcome by the character. There are moments of crisis and resistance. Tarādai is not ready to inflict sufferings on herself when she comes to know her lover was not an avowed bachelor for her sake. She burns the chest, the preserved relic of her lover and turns it into ashes.

Yet through the story the writer appears to have made a point that in a prejudiced society regeneration of this woman is not possible. She makes an appeal for a new society. There is no indication that the society will accept and incorporate this type of woman into the system. Hence the story carries with it a host of issues as has been discussed. Translation of these stories mean transference of these socio-cultural realities related to women. That is why the task of translation also becomes challenging. As Derrida says in *The Ear of the Other*: “The woman translator in this case is not simply subordinated, she is not the author’s secretary. She is also the one who is loved by the author and on whose basis alone writing is possible. Translation is writing; that is, it is not translation only in the sense of transcription. It is a productive writing called forth by the original text” (153). It subverts the privilege of the ‘original’ and denies the secondary position of woman. By giving it productive role it points to secondary roles of translation and gender. It should not be double standard but ‘double bind’ as Derrida calls. It is a collaborative work where the writer and the translator both work together. In this context it will be limiting for a feminist translator if she is bound by the sex of the author. Gender constructs should be subverted but a female translator of a female author’s text and a male translator of male author should be cautious enough that they are not caught in the same power relations which they are fighting against. The conventional ideas and systems are very much ingrained in us. As Pierre Bourdieu observes:

[O]ne has to ask what are the historical mechanisms responsible for the relative dehistoricization and eternalization of the structure of the sexual division and the corresponding principles of division. Posing the question in those terms marks an advance in the order of knowledge which can be the basis of a decisive advance in the order of action. To point out that what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labour of eternalization performed by interconnected institutions... is to reinsert into history, and therefore to restore to historical action, the relationship between the sexes that the naturalistic and essentialist vision removes from them. (vii–viii)

At this juncture a firm stance of the translator is seemingly necessary. That is why perhaps Mamoni Raisom Goswami takes responsibility of translating *Datāl Hātīr Ūye Khovā Hāodā* herself and adopts a translation strategy which resists spontaneous reading and makes the reader to think and pause by enabling them to understand the regional idioms. At many points the translation runs like this: “A *fesuluka* bird flew close over ... He could now hear the sweet sound of the Jagalia river, so much like the tinkle of *muga mekhla* of young girls.... The *hathi bandha bakari*, the field where the elephants were chained, was not very far away.” (2-3)

End Notes:

1. Meena T. Pillai in her essay "Gendering Translation, Translating Gender" in *Translating Women* dwells on the issue of female agency in translation. She says that the female translator should be visible in translation to articulate "the muted spaces of gender" (13-14).
2. Deborah Cameron provides interesting insights into the relation of language and gender. Cameron says it is believed male-associated forms are the norms from which female deviates. The idea is elaborated in the book *On Language and Sexual Politics*. A very influential book in this respect is Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place*. She discovers a woman's language which maintains women's inferior position in society.
3. S. Shoba quoted Ramanujan while discussing history of women's writing in India in the essay entitled "Exploring the Unexplored: Tamil Women's Writing in India" in *Translating Women Indian Interventions*.
4. Holstrom's book includes short fiction by women writing in India, British and America and also incorporates varieties of genres covering the diverse themes of sexuality, quest for identity, caste and hierarchy etc.

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