

Understanding Transliteration and Translation in *The Goddess of Revenge*

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Abstract

Language is rooted in culture and Translation Studies has evolved as an effective communication tool between cultures. The present study “Understanding Transliteration and Translation in The Goddess of Revenge” is an exploration into how transliteration and translation prove to be significant in the understanding and retaining the culture that prevailed in a Namboothiri community through the English translation of “Prathikaaradevatha”, i.e. “The Goddess of Revenge” by Lalithambika Antharjanam. The study also intends to analyse the ideological and historical role of women in language and see how translation helps in presenting the female self to deconstruct the prevalent patriarchal hegemony in a global scenario. It enables the transmission of knowledge as well as culture in a globalised society. Thus the concept of culture, identity and gender is made universal through the linguistic study of translation thereby communicating cultural customs across the world.

Keywords: Translation, Transliteration, Culture, Identity, Gender, Language.

Widespread immigration in these days of globalization, a multicultural and multilingual society demands the need for Transliteration and translation, the two allied fields of language studies. It has turned out to be an effective communication tool between different cultures, which enables the transmission of knowledge, development of economy and a protector of cultural heritage. Thus translated literature not only leads the readers to their respective language, but it also points the way to other languages. According to I. A. Richards

“Translation probably is the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos” (13).

The present study “Understanding Transliteration and Translation in *The Goddess of Revenge*” is an exploration into how transliteration and translation prove to be significant in the understanding and retaining the culture that prevailed in a Namboothiri community through the English translation of “Prathikaaradevatha”, i.e. “*The Goddess of Revenge*” by Lalithambika Antharjanam. Unfolding the raging spirit of the oppressed women flaring up against the patriarchal society, Lalithambika Antharjanam foregrounds the powerful indictment of the sexual and emotional exploitation of women perpetrated by men in a male-dominated society through the real-life story of Kuriyedathu Tatri and at the same time juxtaposing her own dilemma when she decided to write a story in a patriarchal society through “*The Goddess of Revenge*”. In emphasizing the crucial historical and ideological role of gender in language, by underscoring the role of subjectivity in framing and reclaiming meaning, feminist translators foreground the cultural identity of women (Simon 1996: 133).

The story translated by Gita Kishnankutty focuses on retaining certain expressions and trans-creation of female identity and gender roles performed which are crucial in the understanding of the work to its fullest. Thus, the concepts of culture, identity and gender are made universal through the linguistic study of translation thereby communicating cultural customs across the world. According to Newmark, culture is “The way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression” (1988: 94). A probe into translation enables one to intervene in linguistic aspects and a global discursive rendezvous.

Spivak emphasizes that the “task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency” (Spivak 1993: 179). At the outset itself, Lalithambika Antharjanam is in a dilemma when she decided to write a story. She felt that for a woman to write a story is not easy. The status and prestige of a high-born prevented her from expressing her true feelings and emotions. Another factor that troubled her as a writer was the choice of subject matter. Subjects like contemporary issues, religion and caste are very sensitive and as a writer, she must be prepared to face a massive amount of criticism. There is also a chance of the critics to use obscene language. The writer is also not sure whether she could defend herself when confronted with the opponent’s obscene language. Expressing her doubts and anxieties and at last coming up with the life of a woman, Kuriyedathu Tatri whose name once horrified the people and was even forbidden to utter. She was looked upon by society as “a fallen and disgraced woman”. It could be seen that both Lalithambika Antharjanam, through her writing and Tatri, through her life defied the gender roles ascribed by society. Thus writing and translating the female self contains in rendering the body and soul of the female protagonists and informing the world, the discontent against patriarchal hegemony.

Since proper nouns like the names of persons, places, things etc are predetermined or accepted by a particular community for a considerable period of time, they could only be transliterated. Transliteration is to write or describe words or letters using letters of a different alphabet or language (Wehmeier, McIntosh, Turnbull, & Ashby 2005: 1632). Thus in the story, the author Lalithambika Antharjanam herself becomes the character as the story unravels itself at the juncture when the writer in her dreams encounters the spirit of Tatri who narrates the latter’s predicament of being born in a

Namboodiri community and the whole plot of hers is taking revenge against the menfolk. The names, Lalithmbika Antharjanam and Kuriyedathu Tatri itself reveal the community to which they belong which remains the same in the source language and the translated work. Again the use of names like Parasurama, Shilavathi and so on from Puranas are also noteworthy. Thus the expression “this land of Parasurama” and “I was another Shilavathi” are examples to acknowledge this point. Parasurama is believed to be the sixth avatar of Vishnu in Hinduism and Shilavathi is believed to be a chaste and dutiful wife in the Puranas. Again the use of words like “Antharjanam” and “Namboothiri” are retained to convey the cultural and social milieu since the whole story revolves around the Namboothiri Community and the predicament of Antharjanams in a patriarchal society (Antharjanam: 71- 72).

A translation tells us the meaning of words or expressions in another language. But a transliteration doesn't tell us the meaning of the words, it helps us pronounce them. The whole culture of a society could be recreated in a translated work through transliteration. Thus the lines “she wove chains of the sacred karuka grass”, “singing the Parvathiswayamvaraam, the Mangalayathira and other auspicious wedding songs ...”, “Even while struggling with the prickly, exasperating Kuvula flowers, our hearts are full of the fragrance of mango blossoms”, “I offered ghee lamps and garlands of thumpa flowers in the temple” etc evokes in the readers a nostalgia which takes them to their homeland. The very essence is retained through transliteration which otherwise leads to incompleteness. Duranti (1997) has suggested that transcribing spoken words into text is more than just writing; it is a process or technique for the “fixing on paper of fleeting events” (p. 27)

The use of transliteration becomes relevant as socio-cultural context need to be retained. A study by Nida and Taber

(1969) showed that “if one is to insist that translation must involve no loss of information whatsoever, then obviously not only translating but all communication is impossible” (p. 13). The use of expression “Karyasthan” rather than a manager, “sinduram”, a product made from natural ingredients such as turmeric and lemon, “samarthavicharam”, a kind of chastity trial, a procedure followed by the Namboothiri community against their girls or ladies if they were found guilty of adultery or illicit sexual contact with men other than their husband. It is a trial to punish the erring women of Namboothiri community, “angavasthram”, a white piece of cloth, traditionally worn by men of the Hindu community, which is draped over the shoulders, “vaidikan”, a priest or a preacher also add to the beauty of the story. Thus the process of transformation of texts from one language to another is embedded within the sociocultural context (Halai 2007). The woman’s hatred for her cruel and immoral husband turned into an act of revenge. She wanted to prove that women also have pride and strength, desire and life in them. With vengeance, she became a harlot and great men crowded around her. Finally, when she was tried for ‘samarthavicharam’ she challenged the authority that if she is to be excommunicated, so be all the sixty-five men who slept with her. In the end, Tatri succeeded in excommunicating all those men who pretended to be self-respecting and pure.

There are also instances where transliteration is done to convey ideas or emotions. Thus, for instance, it could be seen that Tatri establishes secret illicit affairs with many prominent men of the time as well as her husband who fails to recognize her. But when she herself reveals the secret, she says “he looked at my face and screamed, Ayyo, my Vadakkumnathan! It is Tatri! Tatri!” The very concept of turning towards God is presented with utmost effect when the author did the transliteration rather than translating it. (Antharjanam 72). The words like ‘Ayyo’

and ‘Vadakkumnathan’ are common words very familiar to a native speaker which at once takes the reader to a commonplace situation and evokes in them a familiarity. Nida (1969: 12) defines translation as reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and, secondly in terms of style. Tatri lived in an era when women were considered inferior to men and when the greed for flesh knew no bounds. Women of the time were “weak and helpless” and had to endure many injustices that were forced upon them by the male-dominated patriarchal society. The men went out of their way to seek immoral physical pleasure. It was against this backdrop Tatri challenged the double standards that existed in the society by her act of revenge and the author reiterated her life through her work. It in turn dismantles the masculine hegemony at play.

In the story after leaving her husband’s house, with hope of relief Tatri goes to her parental house and much to her disappointment finds it a kind of “prison”. Like any Namboodiri household, her house was also an abode to many distressed souls. Her dead father’s five wives, her elder brother’s wives, her two widowed sisters, a mad sister who was tortured by her Namboodiri husband and her two unmarried younger sisters lived along with her mother in the parental house. It was for her like “going from the frying pan into the fire”. It could be analysed how the inner conflict and emotions are put forth while translating the work as well. The author rather than resorting to common idioms or phrases went for the usage “going from the frying pan into the fire”, an exact translation of a colloquial expression. The same goes with the title of the story as well, in which “Prathikaaradevatha” is literally translated to “Goddess of Revenge”.

Translation is thus not only a reworking of work from the source language to the target language, but also an act of communication where culture, values, reality, social milieu etc of a particular community gets communicated across cultures. Thus House (2009) believes that translation is not only a linguistic act, but it is also a cultural one. Writing a female self and translating it becomes a means of self-empowerment. Elaborating on the discourse of chastity in gender discourses and deconstructing it through the life of Tatri and the courage of the author to bring forth the whole idea before the readers could be seen as a breakaway from the established constructs thereby resulting in a new dialectics of linguistics and gender signification. It could be concluded that Language is culturally embedded which is inseparable.

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