

Spark

Tankho by Himanshi Shelat in Gujarati

Translated by PRATIXA PAREKH

Translator's Note

Translation is closely allied with the emergence and advancement of multiple languages and this activity has passed through various phases – from the earlier perception of being considered as a ‘secondary activity’ which does not pass beyond linguistic level to be later considered as socio-cultural phenomenon to finally achieve the status of creative act in form of ‘Transcreation’ (Lal 34). The emergence of ‘Translation Studies’ as a major branch of comparative and cultural studies and the emergence of the booming translation industry during the twentieth century helped to liberate translation from the narrow notion of what Bassnett has called “...the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL)” (Bassnett 11) and establish itself as a creative form of art.

For a country like India which is a unique mosaic of multiplicity of languages and cultures, translation has been a part of life since the time immemorial to negotiate the socio-cultural and linguistic diversities and the free adaptations of our scriptures during the past many centuries bear witness to it. Earlier translation activity flowed from Sanskrit into other languages like Prakrit, Apabhramsha and modern Indian languages and later with the arrival of the British into English and other European languages. English gradually became a bridge to connect the cross-cultural divergences and in recent times translation activity is taking place at multiple levels in form of the adaptation of scriptures and literature into movies, dance and musical performances, animations etc. thus opening up many possibilities of creative transformation.

If we consider the particular case of Gujarat, we can notice a dearth of translation from Gujarati into other Indian languages as well as English. For a prolonged period of time Gujarat has been in the position of recipient to the literature of other languages especially from Sanskrit, English and Bengali. To quote Rita Kothari, “The difference between what has gone out of Gujarat into other languages (including English) and what has come into the Gujarati language from outside sources is staggering...approximately thousand works from Indian and some European languages exist in Gujarati translation...In contrast, very little from Gujarati literature has made inroads into other languages, particularly English.” (138) In the last few years, it has become a matter of serious concern for writers and critics of Gujarati literature that some of this literature should be available to the audiences outside Gujarat. When compared with the other languages like Tamil, Malayalam or Bengali, Gujarat has a meagre quantity of Gujarati texts translated into other regional Indian languages as well as English.

This translation is undertaken with an aim to give a glimpse of Gujarati literature to the non-Gujarati Indian as well as Western readers and for this purpose I have chosen a short-story originally published in a collection of short-stories titled *Sanjano Samay* (The Evening Time) by a renowned author Himanshi Shelat. Himanshi Shelat (1947) is a critically acclaimed author of the Post-modern Gujarati literature. What makes her stories noteworthy is her portrayal of the psychological bent and sentiments of her characters in various situations in subtle yet minute details. Apart from being a writer, she has also been involved in many social welfare activities related to the women of red light areas and many of her stories (including the present one) depict the theme based on her experiences of working with this stratum. The present story is a brilliant piece of narration which connects two

women from completely different social strata namely a poor sex-worker and a woman from a well-to-do family in a very sentimental way where at one point their social as well as financial differences seem to dilute under the common link they share – of their being women in the patriarchal world. The central character Purna's initial detest for a sex-worker who approached her doorstep turns into sympathy for her financial dependency on men for her livelihood to her ultimate self-realization at the end that perhaps her own so called happy married life is somehow dependent on the existence of such women. The story very delicately yet firmly establishes a connection between two completely separate worlds – our so called reputed society and the disgraceful lanes of the red light areas and hints an inter-dependency of both on each other for their survival and reputation. Along with that the story also hints at the pathetic condition of women in both these societies who had to undergo much physical and psychological turmoil at the hands of men even though their worlds seem to be wide apart.

Shelat's women characters exhibit a different kind of feminist consciousness. They hardly rebel or voice their feelings openly even though they are well-aware of their marginalized status and exploitation. The same is the case with the central character of this story – Purna. Although being an educated and modern woman, she hesitated to ask for any explanation from her husband, at the end, regarding her speculation about his involvement with any prostitute and thus suffers silently. In the same line, the sex-worker who visited her house also felt helpless when her customer disappeared without paying her money resulting into her suffering. When questioned in this regard, Himanshiben replied : “In our society it is not easy to change our circumstances or somebody else's or to change the scenario of relationship till you are aware. Awareness is more important than doing something physically different. It is not

easy for a woman to leave not because of her status but because of her emotional bonding. It is a different kind of sensitivity but people do have it, very rare though but as I have it, I could find it in others, in my characters. They have, at times, a very strong reason to leave, still they decide to hang on. Their conscious decision to lead such life is a different type of rebel. Leaving everything is easy but this is difficult as you are so sensitive. It is not easy to break bonding even though women suffer intensely.” (Shelat) Thus the writer advocates a different side of feminism where the women stick to their families even though they have a very strong reason to abandon them out of their sense of love and responsibility towards their fellow beings.

Himanshi Shelat’s speciality as a writer is that she presents even shocking reality in a very subtle way giving only hints of the facts or situations, particularly the sentimental upheaval in the minds of her characters. So the biggest challenge while rewriting this story was to transfer the sense of the theme while keeping the style of the original author intact. The author uses many indirect hints to indicate a point and so as a translator I had to be constantly conscious of not to indulge into over-translation by providing any kind of explanation or commentary to allow the readers to decipher the hints on their own for a better reading experience. Finding suitable equivalence of some culture specific expressions along with carrying forward the essence of the Gujarati culture as reflected in the original story were other challenges faced during the process. And to deal with these challenges, I adopted what Nida calls ‘Dynamic equivalence’ technique which aims at “complete naturalness of expression” (Nida 129)

To conclude I can say that the entire process of translating this poignant story was very enriching experience with a deep sense of satisfaction to be able to help Gujarati literature reach

out to the national and international readers through my humble efforts.

References

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Purna had been chatting with Annu till late night, and even after she went to bed, sleep eluded her; so she felt lazy and listless the next morning. She lacked the energy to get on with the daily chores, and instinctively felt that the day was bound to be one of inertia. And to increase her irritation she heard a knock on the door. She got annoyed and thought that it must be some stupid fool to knock on the door despite the door bell! Hurriedly Purna rushed all the way from the kitchen to the living room, panting for breath. She pushed open the door, and seeing an unexpected visitor, stepped back.

Generally at this hour of the day, her neighbour Ushaben comes to pay her routine visit or someone comes to meet Annu or at the most someone or the other comes with an invitation for some function. Purna least expected the stranger who stood before her. She thought to herself, how on earth this woman entered the compound gate. She held the door as if about to shut it and stood there restlessly. She was quite clueless about

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what business this woman had here. Maybe she wanted to go somewhere else and was here only to ask for the address.

The woman adjusted the strap of her cheap purse; she seemed to be quite anxious to say something. She was decked up in a blue sari with *zari* border which shone brightly in the sunlight. As Purna found it inappropriate to stare at that woman's face, she bluntly and quickly inquired with downcast eyes :

“Who are you looking for?”

That woman said in Hindi :

“Does Lalsingh work here?”

She uttered Lalsingh's name in a hushed voice and held out a crushed chit to Purna who tried to read it from a distance. The chit, written in unseasoned hands contained Lalsingh's name, the name of the bungalow, the society address and a map. Everything was mentioned perfectly.

“Lalsingh has gone to his village. He is on leave,” retorted Purna.

“I am aware of it.” said the lady, “He was supposed to come back in one month's time but two months have already passed.”

Purna answered back in an irritated tone, “What if two months have passed? I don't know anything about the matter. You can see that he hasn't come.”

The lady was disappointed but stood there nonetheless.

“Will he not work here anymore?”

“We will know once he comes back,” said Purna, her voice hardly hiding her irritation.

“Did he indicate when would he be back?”

“No” said Purna almost dismissively.

Purna didn't like the fact that this woman was standing on her doorstep making such inquiries. She would definitely not like to be seen with such a woman. What explanation would she give to the inquisitive people? She was even hesitant to ask her straight away what business she had with Lalsingh, but realized that it was none of her concern. She made a gesture of closing the door. Sensing the fact that once the door got closed, it would never open again, the woman made a last desperate attempt to say whatever she had to:

“Lalsingh owes me some money.... Rs. 500....he promised to give it to me later on.”

Now Purna realized the core of the matter. The visitor was a very ordinary looking woman. And right then Purna noticed that she was sweating and her face was smeared with loose powder. She had painted her eyebrows and had applied red lipstick...and her whole appearance looked quite unnatural. Her hand again reached the strap of her purse. Her wrists were studded with many gold and silver coloured plastic bangles, and she had worn a silver finger ring too. Purna thought to herself how it was possible that Lalsingh, who used to open the compound gate with pride in his manner, water the plants with eyes downcast, was involved with such a woman....

It may not be the reality. Perhaps the woman was lying. How people use various fraudulent tricks to extract money from others! She might be one of their types or may be someone had tricked and sent her with some ulterior motive. Even if she was telling the truth, Purna should not get involved into Lalsingh's shady deeds. She closed the door rudely telling the lady to come once Lalsingh was back. She also shut the open window without any apparent reason. And while closing the window, she caught a glimpse of the lady's back. The lady left and disappeared behind the big banana leaves of the compound.

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Only the reflection of her bright blue sari was visible at a distance through the window panes of her room.

While going towards the kitchen, Purna could not help to catch a glimpse of Annu's room. She was surprised to find her door ajar. Sitting on her bed, Annu was reading a magazine. The cover page had a photograph of a nude female model who had covered her bust with her hair. She thought to herself, how shameful the model looked! Guys like Yash were bound to get seduced by such women. Only yesterday her husband Suren had told her that Annu's marriage was all over, she must be prepared for divorce. The matter was serious and Yash would not compromise.

Annu was in great despair and agony as if someone had slapped her face tightly. Purna failed to understand how Yash could find Annu frigid who always used to seduce him with her intoxicating voice and unabashed manner.

Purna was now in the kitchen making *rotis* mechanically; she put them on the pan, puffed them up on the gas and arranged them on the plate one by one. Seeing the puffed up *rotis* it struck to her suddenly that perhaps the woman was pregnant. Now she felt she should have patiently listened to her. She would be in dark about the matter till Lalsingh returned.

Purna was taking a stroll in her garden while watering the plants in the garden. She realized that she had been neglecting the plants since past couple of days. The mud in the pots had dried up and the plants had become shrunken. Then she saw Ushaben coming towards her.

"You can send Annu to my house. A change of atmosphere will do her good," Ushaben suggested sympathetically.

"I'll definitely tell her," came Purna's prompt reply.

Ushaben anxiously inquired, "Any news from Yash....?"

“Nothing of the sort” interrupted Purna.

Ushaben was disappointed. She wanted to prolong the discussion.

She then handed a letter to Purna, “Oh! Take this, I had almost forgotten. The postman dropped it in my mailbox by mistake. This is a letter for Lalsingh. There is a boy called Lalu in my house, so the postman must have got confused.”

Purna accepted the envelope in a gesture of surprise. Lalsingh used to get mails from home and this was from his native place only. The address on the cover was of Lalsingh’s home. Purna almost forgot the presence of Ushaben while wondering where Lalsingh might have gone on the pretext of visiting his home. Lalsingh appeared to be quite a simple man; but things were gradually becoming suspicious - half revealed, half concealed. Purna failed to come to terms with the sudden turn of events and drops of sweat appeared on her forehead. When any such unexpected events occurred, this was her usual reaction. Her pulse beat became unstable and she felt uneasy. Suren always advised her to consult a doctor at such times, as recurring health problems should not be neglected. Suren often said “I am already overloaded with work, then Annu’s problem and to top it you too...”

Purna used to console him saying, “I’m fine. Is it necessary to visit a doctor frequently with such petty complaints?”

Suren always seemed to be busy with his work. She didn’t have much clue, but she could sense that there was some problem in his office at the moment. There were constant phone calls and increased movement of employees, lots of discussions were going on – sometimes in raised voices, at times in hushed voices. Amidst such work pressure, Purna hardly found the opportunity to talk to her husband peacefully about Annu, leave alone Lalsingh and the strange woman who

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had arrived in the morning. However serious the matter was, Suren's reaction had always been the same – “We'll see, some solutions will come up, everything will be alright” etc. After such cold reactions, Purna could hardly finish her conversation.

Today Purna was determined to talk to her husband about the strange lady and her query about Lalsingh. They should always be alert about employees who worked at their household. In case things went out of hand then Suren might only tell her that she should have at least informed him.

In the morning soon after the door of Suren's study opened, Purna found him pre-occupied with files and documents but she decided to bring up the matter nonetheless. While she was talking, Suren took out his spectacles and looked at her once in a while still busy with his piles of papers. Her expectations to get some reaction from Suren were shattered as he seemed the least perturbed.

Suren finally responded, “It is the woman's fault. Such business should never be run on credit. The money should have been collected at that moment as such clients lack stability. How call girls make money instantly by demanding Rs. 1000 or 1200 without any scope of bargaining? One needs to shell out the sum instantly for such luxuries. Lalsingh turned out to be quite a formidable creature.”

In a hurt tone, Purna answered back, “But how could he not pay the woman and go away? And it was so foolish of him to give our address.”

“Like any other business, there is a scope of cheating here as well,” uttered Suren in a matter of fact voice.

She felt the urge to say something but the words refused to come out of her mouth. Meanwhile Suren continued : “Lalsingh goes home once a year, should he observe enforced

celibacy till then? Women like these run their business on clients like Lalsingh. You have only to keep your eyes open to see more. Perhaps you are expecting too much.”

Purna almost stopped hearing Suren. She couldn't help ruminating into her past. Some years back she had been to Delhi for five months to nurse her sick mother. After coming back, immediately she had to go to Canada for Annu who was undergoing a treatment for depression and everybody had said that she, being a sister-in-law, must play the role of a surrogate mother. How she hated the grey walls of Annu's apartment, yet had to put up with it and stayed there for four months. In between she had to travel to other places leaving back her husband several times. Whenever she went, Suren would always comfort her, “Relax...I'll manage.” Why he never wanted to accompany her or stopped her from going? He never ever confessed to her that he would miss her even if she went for a long duration. No, Suren had never said any such thing. She moved away from Suren who had already resumed his work.

She could hardly get a wink of sleep all night and then it was almost time for her to wake up in the morning so she decided get out of bed. While brushing her teeth, she looked at her face in the mirror carefully. She splashed plenty of cold water on her face to get relief from her burning eyes. After patting her face dry, she touched her cold cheeks with her fingers. Looking at her tired eyes, she found in herself a reflection of the woman who had come for Lalsingh the previous morning.

She quickly went towards Annu's room saying, “Get up Annu....it's already seven thirty....”
