
Remapping Stylistic Boundaries: Translating Early Oriya Women's Literature

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Abstract

In this essay, following the practice of Italian academic-novelist Umberto Eco, I shall describe my own experience as an archivist/ editor- translator. I shall concentrate on the analysis of texts that I discovered in the course of seven years of my research in the area of early women's writing in Orissa. I shall suggest that as an archivist- translator- editor, I was acutely conscious of my role and responsibility although I may not have succeeded in all my efforts. I viewed my role basically as a sympathetic male critic who must remain "faithful" to the spirit of womanly texts. The "authenticity" in the female experience I was seeking to describe and record, I knew, must attempt to make sense of the choice of a specific idiom, style and diction in many of the original texts. To a casual observer or reader, these demands must appear specious or excessive. But to a discerning critic and self-conscious narrator of the female literary experience/ sensibility, far from being commonplace, these aspects, are a crucial matter of understanding literary imagination.

Translation Studies in India has not been blind to the role of gender in the theory and practice of translation. Yet sufficient notice has not been taken of the complex process involved in the archival recovery and translation of texts by literary women in regional languages. This is both surprising and regrettable. For, some of the best work in the field of gender/cultural studies today happens to be archival in character. Filtered through several variables, it includes but does not exhaust the colonial contexts of the early women writers, the style and register of the "womanly" texts produced and

disseminated, the role, conscious or unconscious, of the archivist – translator-editor, and finally the perceived compulsions of the target language, publishing industry and readership.

What is gained and what is lost in this exercise? Perhaps only the archivist – translator would know. Clearly, most readers would not have access to the original texts or the archives. He/she would probably seek direction for help in the critical introduction, bibliography and citations in the volume concerned. About the complex trade off between the original and the translated version, and above all, the precise transformation entailed in idiom, style and diction, in conformity with the dictates of the female voice and narrative vision, would be missing. Publishers' editors, generally for reasons of space, are averse to unraveling these detailed creative processes. Feminist critics, on their part, tend to focus primarily on cultural and ideological factors of the social-scientific kind. Problematic areas in women's experience and creativity are most often not traced to issues in translation practice. Contradictions and ambivalence in women's voices are generally traced to biographical, autobiographical and ideological factors. Attention is seldom drawn to the very act of translation. In a self-validating manner, the critic-translator participates in the concealment of his/her own role in the rendering of the final translated product.

In this essay, following the practice of Italian novelist-academic Umberto Eco, I shall describe my own experience as an archivist/editor – translator. I shall concentrate on the analysis of texts that I discovered in the course of seven years of my research in the area of early women's writing in Orissa. I shall suggest that as an archivist- translator- editor, I was acutely conscious of my role and responsibility although I may not have succeeded in all my efforts. I viewed my role basically as a sympathetic male critic who must remain "faithful" to the spirit of womanly texts. The "authenticity" in the female experience I was seeking to describe and record, I knew, must attempt to make sense of the choice of a specific idiom, style and diction in many of the original texts. To a casual observer

or reader, these demands must appear specious or excessive. But to a discerning critic and self-conscious narrator of the female literary experience/ sensibility, these aspects, far from being common place, are a crucial matter of understanding the literary imagination.

II

The literary women of Orissa who adorn my Hall of Fame, invariably came from a typically middle class background. They accepted domesticity, conjugality and childbearing responsibilities imposed on them by society while attempting simultaneously to participate in the wider, social and political domains. Some like Sarala Devi, Kuntala Kumari and Abanti Rao were more fortunate. Aside from their intrepid nature, they were also blessed by a set of more favourable circumstances: sympathetic parents and spouses, upper class background, responsive to the world of literacy and culture, and the inheritance of a tradition of public service and social empowerment. Many participated in events of national significance such as the freedom struggle, social reform movements, and campaigns for widow remarriage and trade union rights. Some authors, widows themselves, painted sympathetic sketches of widow protagonists such as Bilasini.

How do these factors have a bearing on their writings and on their ideological and narrative vision? More importantly, how did this impact the way I valorized these texts from the many that I came across and judged their emergence in their new incarnations in English? It seems to me that such questions, unanswered so far, are not peripheral to my original project; they are central to the basic task of feminist literary research in India.

III

The first example I would like to cite for my purpose is a story called "Bilasini", written by Kokila Devi. Born in 1896 as the fourth child of Bhagvata Prasad Mohapatra and Radhamani of

Talapada village of Badrak, Orissa, Kokila was the sister of the eminent Oriya writer, Lakshmikanta Mohapatra. Married in 1916 at the age of 20 to Managobinda Das of Khantapada, Kokila, (literally cuckoo), became a widow in 1927.

In “Bilasini”, Kokila, the poet, nationalist and activist portrays the plight of widowhood and the conflict between the reality of erotic desire and the world of spiritual sublimation.

The choice I faced as a translator of this story was to decide whether to keep the opening paragraph of “Bilasini” as it is, or to skip it and go directly to the main story, which is more dramatic in content and style.

The tale opens with the description of the approach of evening. There is a cascade of images; items are piled up, one after the other, almost in an archaic romantic style: “Gold lotuses”, “birds returning to the nests” setting sun casting an unusual “slow of vermilion,” “hanging bats” making the hollow of the trees “fearful”. As Kokila Devi writes:

The day was already over. The setting sun cast an unusual glow of vermilion. Hundred of red gold lotuses bloomed in the vast empyrean. Notes of farewell resonated in the four corners. Birds returned to their nests, their parting melodies resounding in all directions. The indigo of the distant mountains gently merged into the vast azure. Soon the blue of the forests turned dove-gray. Hundreds upon hundreds of bats hanging from the branches in clusters made the hollows of the trees look fearful. There was darkness everywhere. Darkness covered the heart. A dark curtain suddenly dropped. All became still and immobile.

All of a sudden, the *Tandava* dance of Nature stopped. The heart overflowed with joy. In uneven rows, millions of stars ascended and escorted the queen moon to the sky. Moonbeams flooded the earth. It was as though the

goddess of nature had recovered her youth. (Mohanty 2005:95)

The paragraph by itself may appear to be part of a “period” style. A translator-editor, keen to plunge headlong into the story of forbidden love of a widow may wish to skip it altogether. On the other hand, a closer look at the position of this opening vis-a-vis the rest of the story indicates that the opening is absolutely essential. It is integral to the basic design of the tale.

What is important to understand from the point of view of the discerning translator is that the opening paragraph, by offering the description of a familiar dusk, in a somewhat poetical manner, is not simply there to help create a context. Its commonplaceness is significant. For the third paragraph inaugurates the dramatic story of Bilasini's illicit love as seen from the narrator's point of view.

Sitting in the courtyard in front of our house, I was lost in thought. Suddenly my blood quickened and the stupor was gone. I heard the conversation of two persons at the wall facing the rear enclosure to the house. The voice was soft, the tone indistinct. Slowly, I got up. I craned my neck in the direction of the voice and yet could not grasp everything. Driven by curiosity, I listened more attentively. (Mohanty 2005:95)

The atmosphere of a profound serenity evoked in the opening paragraph contrasts sharply with the sense of foreboding and disquiet that characterizes the life of Bilasini until she reaches the holy town of Brindavan. The end of the story, following the dictates of similar tales, sublimates erotic love into spiritual ardour:

O, what heart-touching melodies! Could there be such wonderful sweetness in the voice of a woman? My mind and heart were filled with joy; I began to pay attention in a state of intoxication. But surely she could not be a human person! She must be a demoness with a human body!

The woman gradually approached and I was stunned by what I saw. Never could I imagine that a female could be so beautiful! Nor could I ever conceive that there could be such luster in her eyes! My waking consciousness could not bear such thoughts for long. My head automatically bowed at her feet. The Goddess lifted her eyes full of divine love. I was stunned by what I saw. The beating of my heart stopped. After much effort, I called out once, 'Bilasini!' Tears rolled down my cheek. My voice was choked. I looked around and spotted no one. Was I awake or asleep? (Mohanty 2005:98)

IV

Similarly, the translation of early Oriya poet Reba Ray's memorable composition 'Nirabe' merits our consideration from the gender point of view. Married to litterateur, Sadhu Charan Ray, Reba was a pioneer of female education in the state. Niece of Bjkta Kavi, Madhusudan Rao, she was the founder of the 'Model Girls' school', which later merged with the historic 'Ravenshaw Girls' School', Cuttack. In all her works, Reba combined her interest in gender identity with larger philosophical and existential concerns. Deeply lyrical and moving, her poems and short stories appeared in *Utkal Sahitya*. 'The Sound of Silence' is a characteristic example. Widowed at the age of 22, Reba passed away on 7 August, 1957.

Reba begins by underlining the leitmotif of her lyrical composition. The metaphor of silence used recurrently becomes an objective correlative to physical, existential and spiritual states of the persona:

In silence I came to this world
 And my life will sing unceasing,
 In silence will my life forever
 Her songs of silence sing. (Mohanty, 2005:87)

One after the other, the stanzas reiterate the dominant theme, bringing in a cascading set of imagery and metaphors that

consolidate the overall effect: sunrise, sunset, birds, beasts and flowers, indeed, throughout the circumambient universe there is all pervasive silence:

In silent sky the crescent moon
In silence floats she by
She sings her glory as she glides
In silence smiling, high (Mohanty, 2005:87)

Soon, there is the overwhelming presence of silence. From the physical there is the progressive ascension to the spiritual levels. It is out mortal life that is the subject of reflection:

In silence when it's time to die
Will Death hold me in warm embrace?
In silence will I go,
Of friends or kin will leave no trace. (Mohanty, 2005:89)

As a critic translator, I was beginning to have a sense of unease about the gender aspect, when I came to the penultimate stanza. And sure enough, there was the female voice, so far absent in the poem that seeks urgent articulation:

Silent, shorn of strength, is woman
Beside a man forever strong
When she cannot even cry for you
For fear of loud-voiced man so long (Mohanty, 2005:89)

It is commonly believed that mystical or spiritual poetry generally eschews ideological issues and takes recourse to the routes of idealization or escapism. However, in Reba Ray, we find the simultaneous use of both, uncovered in the process of translation.

I encountered a similar problem while translating Sarala Devi's "The Rights of Women" ("Narira Dabi"). Sarala was the first Oriya woman to take part in the national Satyagraha movement and to court arrest. She is best remembered for her essays and critical writings. Hindustan Granthamala, Cuttak, published "Narira Dabi"

in 1934. Sarala's essay on the need for the freedom of women brings to mind early writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf and Indian feminist like Pandita Ramabai. Sarala writes in a detailed fashion and uses an expansive style.

A translator-editor conscious of the need for a dramatic beginning may be impatient with the opening of the essay. Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, the opening remarks of Sarala may appear to lack freshness.

There is much agitation in today's world over the question of independence of women. Both in the West as well as in the East, one hears, in one voice, the demand that women should become free. The campaign has made headway in Western countries. In the East, however, it is still at the stage of inception. Nevertheless, there is little doubt, that the agitation will bear fruit in the near future. (Mohanty, 2005:153)

The decision I had to take here as translator-editor was whether or not to keep this paragraph and similar others or omit them altogether ensuring a more readable translated version. After all, the account of women's oppression that Sarala underlines at the outset seems to be fairly commonplace today, given the relatively emancipated status of women in the present day world.

How then would a keen editor try and project the radical nature of Sarala's feminist thinking?

I decided that regardless of the response of the feminist press I was aiming at, I was going to retain Sarala's essay in its entirety. For one thing, Sarala's views in many parts of the essay may seem less remarkable now. But I had to bear in mind the context in which she wrote, especially, her lack of formal or higher education. (She had studied up to class seven). She was virtually self-taught. She came from a fairly conservative background. Given the constraints she faced, her assessment of the plight of women in the historical and contemporary context was truly incredible. I

realized that as an admirer of Sarala Devi, the best action of mine as a translator-editor would be to retain the essay as it was in the original. I had to be loyal to the spirit of the essay. To tamper with it either for the sake of brevity or readability, or to make it sound more radical in our present context would be to grossly violate the original spirit. Worse, I would be disloyal to the context in which the essay was written. Equally, inauthentic would be the author's feminist thinking.

How false would have been my position had I persisted with my desire to see a more "radical" Sarala becomes clear when we come to the heart of her essay. It becomes apparent when she begins to quote extracts by justice Meccard's Judgment:

I maintain that the husband can never own the wife's body. It is her own property and not her husband's. She can leave her husband at her will; she can choose her business or join the political party of her choice. She has full right to decide whether or not she is going to get a child and at what point of time. No one can keep a woman under his control on the basis of the fact that he is married to her. The women of this country have won independence; they are citizens and not slaves. They can turn their wishes into action. One does not get pleasure of married life from the codes of rules and regulations. The success of marriage depends on mutual compassion, mutual considerations. Mutual forgiveness, mutual sacrifice, and above all, a mutually shared morality. (Mohanty, 2005: 157-158)

VI

As a translator I continued to face temptations to embellish many texts that appear to be somewhat straightforward in the original. Nandini Panigrahi's "Call of the Chimney" provides a characteristic example of this kind. Written as a literary response to the important issue of the trade union movement in Orissa,

Nandini's tale captures the tragedy of protagonists Siba and Phula who become victims on account of industrial capitalism. The author uses thinly veiled characters such as Siba, (mythologically, Shiva the creator) and Phula (literally the flower in Oriya) to buttress the significance of the tale. Siba, the mythological creator, gets ruined just as "Phula" the flower withers away due to the onslaught of the chimney that symbolizes the ugly factory system. It uproots people from the natural habitat and destroys the symbiotic relationship they share with Mother Nature. As Nandini writes:

As usual at the crack of dawn, Siba rose and with this prized sickle set out for the fields. It was a rain-drenched morning of *Shravana*, the breeze blew gently. Layers upon layers of chirping birds flew in the vast sky. A curious tremor of joy passed through the thick foliage. The sun, an orb of vermilion, was a miracle in the east. Siba's gaze went past the playful movement of nature. Clutching his sickle with a firm grip, he walked on, his mud-laced feet plying through the filed the paddy saplings seemed engaged in a love play with the zephyr. (Mohanty, 2005:235)

The ending of this ideological tale might sound a trifle melodramatic. I decided to retain the last paragraph nevertheless. It is based, I thought, that the author's original voice was left intact:

With the limp child on his shoulder, Siba proceeded, and holding Phula's hand plunged into darkness and rain. In a soft subdued voice, Phula said,

"Shall we never return?"

"Yes, we shall, one day. Only after ending the lines of masters and their Savors!"

A blast of cold wind from the North drove them to the other pole of the world-into the arms of millions of creatures like Siba. (Mohanty,2005:237)

VII

Translating Bidyut Prabha's poem "Pratighat", (The Assault) proved to be quite a challenge. Not only was the unique rhythm of the original nearly impossible to capture in an alien tongue, more significantly there were a number of regional and gender markers that were extremely hard to transfer. Matching equivalents were simply not there. A translator aiming at a pan-Indian audience might therefore be tempted to flatten out the differences in idiom and registers. However, all through, I attempted to retain these specific markers. For Bidyut Prabha and the women of her times, household work involved grinding the spices. There were no "Sumit Mixies" then. Similarly the physical agony of a housewife with two children is captured in terms of references to Kerosene and fuel. Blowing fire into a mud oven is different from cooking over gas stove. Here too, I have invariably retained the original. The output, I know, may fall short in terms of the original cadence, but hopefully the poem in the English version retains an authentic flavour of the original and symbolizes the dilemma of a mother who also is a poet:

The grinding is half done.
Where are you,
Eldest daughter-in-law?
Unmindful of Chores
That lie piled up
Until nightfall!

'Am I a bonded laborer?
Am I to be sold daily
Only for this house?
Work, work and more work!
From morning till night!
Tell one,
Is there nothing else
To Life?'

writing is the balm
 for all my pain.
 It's the glory of my sorrow.
 Writing is rain-soaked woods.
 It's the music of cloudbursts
 During the month of *Sharavana!*

I wish I could speak of
 The joy that gathers in my heart.
 Like a flame
 In the mouth of storm,
 My poetry
 A luminous lamp! (Mohanty,2005:229-230)

Thus 'translation and gender' continue to be one of the most exciting but neglected aspects of current scholarship and cultural criticism. In this essay, I examined a few of the Oriya texts such as those by Kokila Devi, Reba Ray, Sarala Devi, Nandini Satpathy and Bidyut Prabha to explore the gender dimension latent in translation practice. As I have tried to show, my role as an archivist, translator-editor dealing with early women's literature in Orissa revealed many problematic areas and blind spots that are usually glossed over. An awareness of these aspects, I have argued, would empower the translator to be loyal to the spirit of the original texts, and 'true' to the context in which they were produced. In the process the translator can become an effective mediator between gender and culture.

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