

Translating Chitra Mudgal's novel - *Post Box No.203, Nala Sopara*: theory and praxis

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Abstract

This paper aims to make a study of the theory and praxis of my translation of Chitra Mudgal's Sahitya award winning Hindi novel - *Post Box No.203, Nalasopara* into English. The paper engages with the challenges of translating from *bhasa* such as Hindi into English which is so different from it. Moreover, this book uses a Hindi which is a cosmopolitan, drawing heavily from Gujrati, some Marathi and Punjabi. This increases the challenge of translating into English keeping the nuances of these languages into the target language. The applicability of theories of translation has been discussed in the act of translation, making it intelligible for readers of another culture. The paper also discusses the aspects of untranslatability faced in the act of translation from Hindi to English. The importance and difficulties of negotiating the artistic and aesthetic qualities of the original text into the translated text has also been discussed in the context of my translation.

Keywords: *Translation, Theory, Culture, Untranslatability, Aesthetic.*

This paper aims to make a study of my translation of Chitra Mudgal's award winning Hindi novel - *Post Box No.203 Nala Sopara* into English as part of a Sahitya Akademi translation project. It is an epistolary novel about the life of a transgender. It opened up a whole new world for me, widening my perspective, sensitizing my indifferent self to the issues of trans identity, emotions, problems and politics on an intellectual and emotional level. As a translator the text held its own challenges of translating from a Hindi which is cosmopolitan, drawing heavily from Gujrati, some Marathi and Punjabi into English. English has such a wide readership that it is impossible to fully negotiate the culture and vocabulary of it as the target language.

After a text is translated, a scholar may evaluate it to see which theories or methods the translator has applied. Translation is a complex process. Critics have formulated many theories about translation over the ages. Richardson dives deep into the nature of translation, "there remains a gap between what I want to say and what the language will let me say (or even think)." (Richardson 267) He dwells upon the impossibility of accurate communication, "We can never understand anyone's meaning in its pristine state." (Richardson 267) He looks upon written or spoken language as an act of translating what we think. He argues that reading is also an act of translating as "...we are translating the text into our experience." (Richardson 267) He compares a translator to an anthropologist, "...both are entrusted to interpret the experience of other cultures for those who lack knowledge of them." (Richardson 267-268) Thus, the role of a translator is difficult as well as problematic.

Analysis of a translation entails the study of the theoretical framework. Richardson divides translation theories into three categories. 1) It is assumed that all languages are equivalent to each other and so it is possible to find corresponding words, sentences and ideas in other languages and cultures. 2) Literary translation demands a greater involvement. Spivak, herself a translator says "Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate." (Spivak 398). The translator needs to get into the skin of the text in order to convey the experience the author intends the reader to experience. Translator's task is to bring the writer to the reader who is unable to understand his/her language. Publishers look for lucidity in the translated work as if it was written in that language. 3) The third form of translation is called 're-invention.' Here the translator recreates the source text somewhat freely breaking the bounds of the language. Within the rubrics of such a translation Richardson calls Joyce's *Ulysses* a translation of *The Odyssey*. (Richardson 272)

Language is a living entity which is constantly changing and evolving. Dingwaney and Maier argue that translation is,

"...the creation of complex tension. That is translation, ideally, makes familiar and thereby accessible, what is confronted as alien, maintaining the familiar in the face of otherness without either sacrificing or appropriating difference. This means that the translator must have a foot in each of two worlds and be able to mediate self-consciously between them." (Dingwaney 304)

The translator's preoccupation should be to transfer the main idea in the target language. In this transfer, the culture of the target reader is as important as the culture of the source reader. Lokman cites translation theoretician Jiri Levy in his paper arguing that in the translation of a literary work it should not lose its literary value. According to Levy the translated text, the translator and the translation process are equally important. Levy argues that the artistic components of a text can be transferred into another language by replacing them with formal components of that language. Levy treats translation as no less than an art. According to Levy the purpose of translation is to comprehend the original text and transfer the original message. (Lokman 100). So, a translator must have the skill to transfer the artistic and aesthetic qualities of the original into the translated language.

Sociolinguistic theories link translation to communicative theory and information theory, with special emphasis on the receptor's role in the translation process. They do not overlook language structures completely, rather engage with it on a higher level in accordance with their functions in the communicative process. For literary texts these language structures could involve figures of speech or rhetorical devices such as irony, hyperbole, simile, metaphor, etc. So, the translator must have language competence and language performance.

Following Nida, translation is looking for equivalence between source language text and target language components. Every translator has his/her own way of working, still the basics are similar. It can be said that the translator begins by looking for 'formal equivalence' i.e. a 'word for word' translation of the source text. Then the attention shifts to 'dynamic equivalence' in seeking equivalence in content and form between source and target language when the former becomes impossible to attain. It is sometimes required to translate a sentence of say four words into ten words in the target language in order to convey the legitimate meaning. This is mainly because of the difference in the grammatical structure of the languages, so that the meaning can

be conveyed. But equivalence theory has its limitations especially when it comes to transference between Hindi and English which have different grammatical structures and cater to different cultures. There are numerous examples of this difficulty cited later in the paper where either sentences had to be expanded or contracted to convey the meaning in the target language.

Minakshi Mukherjee points out that translating an Indian language or *bhasa* into a European language is not equivalent to translating into another *bhasa* which shares many commonalities of structure, grammar, culture and vocabulary:

“Translating a text – say from Hindi to Bangla or from Marathi to Kannada- is a far more natural and satisfactory activity both for the translator and reader than when the same novels are rendered into English, where negotiating semantic and cultural hurdles to achieve equivalence of meaning tends to be a relatively uphill task.” (Mukherjee 188)

Having undertaken this mammoth task, I share my experience, the challenges I faced and ways in which I negotiated them with examples quoting the original Hindi lines and their rendition into English. In the paper I refer to myself as ‘one’ to indicate how I went about it. One begins by trying to translate sentences word by word in the first draft. It’s like breaking down the whole structure and rebuilding it brick by brick. With every editing the eye catches and works on the finer details which cannot be comprehended right away.

One begins with understanding the words, phrases and sentences i.e. what the author wants to say. A single reading of the text is never enough to facilitate translation; multiple readings are required. One has to get immersed in it before unravelling it and recreating it in a different language as proposed by Spivak.

Next one takes into account how the author says it, so one has to grasp the literal intentions as a whole. A sentence can be ironical, satirical, hyperbolic etc. Recreating the mood, tone, feeling is the challenge. In the text *Post Box No 203 Nala Sopara*, there is supposedly one narrator, but many voices speak and it was a task to separate these voices, just enough to make it intelligible to the reader.

Every author has a certain style which is extremely difficult to reproduce in the translated text. It has been said that a translator must have language competence as well as performance i.e. as per linguistics the knowledge of the language and ability to use it. There are words and phrases in Hindi in the text which have an impact on Indians which cannot be replicated in the target language English. The translator has a lot to negotiate, s/he doesn’t only have to work on style but prioritise the meaning when the style becomes non-negotiable. Sometimes one has to make compensations in other places when it is not possible to replicate the style by one’s creativity.

Post Box No 203 Nala Sopara being epistolary has a very informal, personal diction. There is a single narrator but there are many voices, and each have a different way of speaking. There are multiple characters from different ranks of society and accordingly the choice of words, manner of speaking, sophistication and tone change. India is a multilingual country and almost every Indian knows more than one language and there is a rich interchange and adaptation of vocabulary between the *bhasa* languages.

As a translator I tried to strike a balance between faithfulness and lucidity. My intention was very clear, that the reader must be able to grasp the sense that is being conveyed, the meaning should not be lost even at the cost of lucidity. Grammatically Hindi and English are very different as are all Indian languages, working around that was sometimes tricky to convey all that is being said with the same emphasis.

Post Box No 203 Nala Sopara has a protagonist from a cosmopolitan set up in Mumbai, hailing from a Gujrati family travelling to Delhi, interacting with Punjabis and people from the Northern part of the country. As the region and identity of the Hindi speaker changes, so does the Hindi, in the words and salutations used at the outset with differences in the style of talking etc. The challenge in an English translation was to retain these regional nuances and differences to preserve the cultural essence of the source text into the target text.

There are many words and ideas that are not translatable, retaining the original and providing the meaning in the glossary helped maintain the lucidity of the novel:

1. Indian languages have more kinship terms than English and these terms change depending upon the region of the speaker. For e.g. - "*Ba*"- mother in Gujrati (Sriwastav 204) "*pappa*" -father in Gujrati (Sriwastav 207) "*dikra*" -son in Gujrati (Sriwastav 205), "*mota bhai*" - elder brother in Gujrati (Sriwastav 207) "*Bhabhi*"- sister-in-law in Gujrati (Sriwastav 204), "*ben*" -a generic term meaning sister to address all women in Gujarati (Sriwastav 204), "*mama*" -maternal uncle (Sriwastav 207) "*bhai*" - brother (Sriwastav204), "*bauji*" -father in Punjabi (Sriwastav124) "*biji*" -mother in Punjabi (Sriwastav 204) "*samdhan*" -Mother-in-law of son (Sriwastav 208)

Now one might say that *Ba* and *pappa* could easily be translated as father and mother...but that would only convey the meaning not the emotion. I have used these terms creatively as well...for instance...I use the Gujrati word for mother *Ba*, most often but I have also used the word 'mother' in places - *Ba* says- "Your father did take you to visit a specialist, didn't he?" (Sriwastav 4) The reader is introduced to the father in this line given the impression that he did his duty towards his son. Just after this, in a few lines, Vinod says that he tried to keep up the hope raised by his mother that someday there would be a solution to his problem. But his illusions were shattered and for the first time he condemns his parents for his state.

Here I use *pappa*- father in Gujrati (Sriwastav 207) to emphasize the intimate relationship of trust, as it foregrounds the deep sense of betrayal he faced. He says--- "You my mother, you and *pappa* jointly put me into the hands of butchers, like an innocent goat" (Sriwastav 5) Here he distances himself from her ...so a less intimate term- mother. Later on, in the text MLA Ji asks him to address him as "*bauji*"- Punjabi for father (Sriwastav124) ...as he looks upon him with affection...but when Vinod realizes that he is using him...he stops calling him '*bauji*' ...so once again this gives the sense that these terms are very intimate carrying the weight of emotions...without which they lose meaning.

2. The place where the transgenders live with their Sardar is called "*thikana*" (Sriwastav 208) I have retained the word because I couldn't find a suitable alternative in English...it is not home, nor is it shelter, it's a place they are forced to inhabit.
3. Greetings used in the text confirm to cultural nuances -"*adaab*" (Sriwastav 204).
4. Festivals referred to such as "*rakhi*" (Sriwastav 207).

5. Names of deities- *Jwala Devi* (Sriwastav 206).
6. Ethnic and regional denominators - "*Kachhi*", "*lungi*", "*salwar kameez*" (Sriwastav 206, 207, 208).
7. Similarly, words denoting the food items, here from a Gujrati, Punjabi cuisine, have been retained in the translation e.g.- "*thepla*", "*khandwi*", "*shrikhand*", "*aloo paratha*", "*balushahi*", "*kulfi*" etc (Sriwastav 208, 206, 208, 206).
8. Words used to abuse e.g.- "*kalanki*", "*karamjala*", "*barkhordar*" (Sriwastav 206,204)
9. Sounds like "*ufff*", indicating irritation, "*uhoon*" in a romantic mood "*dhab, dhab*" sounds of the head racking in pain, were retained as these are not translatable. (Sriwastav 135, 80).
10. Idioms in the vernacular could not always be replaced by a similar idiom in the target language- e.g. "*Sheikh Chilli*", "*gudri ka lal*" (Sriwastav 208, 206).
11. The words- "*ganga jal*", "*mandal kamandal*," "*Lakhsman Rekha*" - have mythological connotations. (Sriwastav 167, 207, 206).
12. There are several terms for transgenders in India...I have used "*Hijra*" and "*Kinnar*" at times for specific reasons.... otherwise, I use the general term transgender...Tiwari Ji says, "*Hijras would best be addressed by hijras*" (Sriwastav 143) this burns Vinod's ears. The word transgender would fail to create the same impact for it sheds all illusions, unmasks his benefactors and throws another betrayal on his face.
13. Lines from songs in Hindi (Bollywood) and a Gujrati lullaby ... I retained the original and kept translated meaning in brackets as follows - "*(hum pe ye kisne hara rang dala, khushi ne humari hume maar dala)* Who threw this green colour at me... my joy killed me" (Sriwastav 108) to allow the reader a treat of the original sounds of the vernacular.
14. In a scene where Vinod hallucinates...he is suffering from extreme cold and is shaken ...I have kept the Gujrati, "*Jyostna tu mara room ma?*" (Sriwastav 81) to jolt him back to reality!

Alexander Fraser Tytler says that a translated text must replicate the style of the original text. There are instances where there are very short sentences in the original...but in translation I had to merge a few to make the meaning clear. For e.g. when the protagonist talks about the pain in his mother's feet...how he would press his mother's feet to his chest and fall asleep... Here the author creates an intensity that escalates the feeling of the protagonist ...not only through words but also through sentence construction. Regarding style and manner, translation theorist Alexander Fraser Tytler's says that it should be the same as that of the source text. If the source text is racy at some point the translation should bring the same effect and if it were slow, mundane and introspective the translation should have the same impact.

I have followed this pattern in translation but in one or two places I have merged them keeping intact the pace, intensity and meaning of the text. I have used a comma instead of a full stop to merge sentences:

“तेरे पांव अब भी सूजते होंगे न बा। मैं उनकी उँग लियों को कैसे चटखायुं। कैसे दूर करूँ उनकी थकान। थककर डबल रोटी से सूज जानेवाले तेरे उन पावों को मैं चूमना चाहता हूँ। उनकी टीसैं हर लेना चाहता हूँ उन्हें छाती से लगा कर सोना' चाहता हूँ। हफ्ताभर! नहीं, दररोज ! नहीं, महीनो ।

नहीं, पुरे वर्ष । सं चत कर लेना चाहता हूँ ताउम की नींद। जितनि भी मल जाए। फर चाहे जितनि रातें पलक झपकाए बिना गुजरें। बैठे -बैठे कटें। करवटें भरते बीते या पूरी रात टहलते हुए। बस सेह लूंगा। शकायत नहीं करूंगा कसी से की इसी लए अनमना हूँ की रातभर सो नहीं पाया।(Mudgal 08)

Translated as:

“Your feet must still be getting swollen isn’t it *ba*? How do I crack your knuckles now? I want to kiss your tired feet, puffed as fluffy bread. I want to soothe their ache. I want to press them to my heart and sleep. A week! No, every day! No, for months! No, the whole year! I want to store away sleep for a lifetime, as much as I can. Then I won’t care for the sleepless nights that may pass, sitting through the night, turning on my sides or strolling. I will bear it endure the pain and will not complain that I am restless because I couldn’t sleep all night.” (Sriwastav 02)

There are many such lines where sentences have been merged and also lines comprised of a single or double words that had to be expanded to transmit the meaning which shows that it is not possible to find ‘equivalence’ as proposed by Nida, in the target language due to the huge difference in grammatical structure and linguistic difference between Hindi and English. The line - “रात है, बात है, घात है, साथ है, मात है” (Mudgal 148) was rather difficult to break down in English. This is a speedy and alliterative line which builds the tension in the novel at this juncture. The alliteration couldn’t be achieved in the target language, so I tried to retain the tension and urgency in the following way- “It is a menacing night of random talks, people and defeat!” (Sriwastav 134)

Readers of the English language should get a taste of the culture the original language, I have retained words and phrases from the original text largely because these are rooted in the culture and there are no direct equivalents in the target language. The novel beautifully paints the cultural milieu of a cosmopolitan Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi setting with characters from different strata of society.

Translator theorists like Jiri Levy treat translation no less than an art form as mentioned earlier. The translator is expected to reproduce the artistic and aesthetics of the original text into the translation. This is extremely difficult taking into consideration the difference in grammatical structure, linguistic and cultural differences between English and Hindi. I have tried to negotiate the nuances of the language that is being translated in my efforts to retain rhetorical devices as far as possible to transfer the style, tone, mood. E.g. “ताप से पघलती सुनहरी बर्फ सा चेहरा। उस चेहरे की खामोश सुबक सी फूटती श्रीण धाराओं में कल -कल, छल -छल नहीं, पकड़ से छूटते अवलम्बन की पघलती आशंका रिस रही है” (Mudgal 83.) Translated as - “A golden face, like ice melting with warmth! The silent sobs of the face broke not into the splosh-splash of streams, but into the oozing of the apprehensive loss of a support. ...” (Sriwastav 72) Here I have retained the alliteration in a different sound set in Hindi associated with flowing of streams, with a similar sound set in English...echoing the joy associated with it...to the sound ‘रिस’...meaning flowing very slowly...to ‘oozing’ in English ...that is associated with pain.

I have tried to keep my focus on the sounds of the words and worked accordingly. E.g. The grandson of *Ba* is called *Nanu baba*....and he has some problem in his *nunu* -penis, now this can easily be translated but in the context of the story the genitals play an important role and *Ba* stays back in her son's in-law's house only to ensure that his *nunu* is fixed, enduring criticism, as it is not the norm. I kept the *nunu* also because it rhymes well with *Nanu*so the line goes- "Nanu baba ka *nunu*". (Sriwastav 194)

Again, in a sentence like ...” जनप्रतिनिध के लए सभी जन महत्वपूर्ण होते हैं. भले यह समय उन्होंने वशेष तवज्जो देते हुए मेरी झोली में डाला था मगर बा, दिल्ली का वधायक केवल समय ही न दे, आपसे राजदार भाव से आपकी समस्या से पुरे धैर्य से साथ अवगत होना चाहे तो है न महत्वपूर्ण उपलब्धि” (Mudgal 39) .

I translated this as - “Everyone was important for MLA Ji, a people's representative, he not only gave his precious time to me *ba*, but also tried to be the confidante of my troubles, now that is surely of some import.....” (Sriwastav 33) I didn't translate the figure of speech he used but wrote a simple sentence that gave the meaning. Again, I have taken some liberty in inserting the names or kinship term of the person addressed even when it is not there, or omitted it as required to give clarity or make it lucid. In this way I compensate for the style with my own creativity.

Some similes were translated for e.g.- पक गयी आदत जोड़ में धंसी कील होती है। (Mudgal 59)- “Old habits are like iron nails stuck in the joint.” (Sriwastav 52) Some lines like the following will show how I worked around the nuances of Hindi into English-

“तुमने स्कूल के लए निकलते समय, चुपके से मेरी जेब सरकाए जाने वाले नोट की भांति, "खा लेना जो तेरे मन में आए, बीन्नी!" ढेर - सी दिलासा सरकाई थी मेरे जहन में” (Mudgal...10) translated as : “When I was leaving for school, just as you had secretly slipped a currency note into my pocket saying, “Have something...whatever you like Binni!” you had slipped in a lot of hope into my consciousness!” (Sriwastav 04)

Some lines were very difficult to translate as the images were abstract:

“ऐसी मनः स्थिति में मेरी आँखों से खारा पानी ढुकने लगता है बा! गालों और गले पर कत्थई लकीरें गहरी और गहरी नहरों की तरह खुद जाती हैं। जो कभी सूखती नहीं, न खाली होती है. जब उन्हें ऊपर दिखाना होता है, तभी दिखती हैं एहसास कराने के लए की अपने कत्थई गीलेपन को मेरी उँग लयाँ छू सके। नहीं दिखना होता है तो वे गायब हो मेरे' जिस्म' के अधूरे हिस्से में जाकर जैम जाती है। अँधेरा पए हुए काली बर्फ की तरह।” (Mudgal 30)

These were translated as...

“At such moments, in place of tears, blood oozes out of my eyes. Dark marks of flowing tears become etched like canals on my cheeks and neck, tears that neither dry nor are emptied. They surface whenever they want to, to make me aware that I can touch their

dark wetness. When they don't, they go and freeze in the vacuum of my missing organ, like black ice drunk on darkness." (Sriwastav 26)

I believe there is no perfect translation because even after publication, reading one's work there is a strong urge to edit as better expressions come to the mind. The success of a translation is to be reviewed by the reader. The fact that it was published by Sahitya Akademi gives it a certain value as they have a review committee that screens the work before okaying it for publication. As the readers read it and give their feedback the receptivity of the work is ascertained. The completion of the task with publication of the book leaves a translator with a hankering for the reader's response to one's work. Then there is the dilemma of ownership, having invested one's time, emotion and creative faculties on it as not one's own, gives the feel of surrogacy as it is called someone's else's child at the end.

Translations and translators are being better acknowledged now. The sharing of the Booker Prize 2022 between Daisy Rockwell translator of *Ret Samadhi* with the author Geetanjali Shree and of the International Booker Prize 2025 between Banu Mushtaq and Deepa Bhashti for her translation of Mushtaq's short stories into an anthology - *Heart Lamp* has raised the status of translators and their works. Keya Majumdar sums up the purpose of reading translations, "better human relations will result with widely differing views sharing and comparing their responses through strategies of Interpretation and Reading...to see and feel what other people have experienced, to know what they have they have known in their own ways." (Majumdar 169) The theory and praxis of translation is complex and difficult, but the horizons are widening with recognition of their work, thus encouraging translators to take up translation with care and a mission to transfer literature to a wider audience.

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