

Subaltern Archive and the Translator's Responsibility: Ethical Negotiation in the Representation of Bhojpuri Folk

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Abstract

Bhojpuri is widely spoken on the land of western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. The language also has a significant hold amongst the global diaspora communities as a second language in Nepal, Fiji, Mauritius, Suriname and others, yet has been systematically marginalized by the mainstream literary canon as folk or rustic despite being a vital source for social critique. This paper interrogates translation as a profound mode of epistemological engagement, not as a mere linguistic transfer. A radical gesture toward what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's terms as 'epistemic freedom' (1986). This research, grounding itself in the works of Bhikhari Thakur whose drama tackles the structural violence of caste, migration, and gender centers on the 'between language and culture' framework explores the ethics of rendering Bhojpuri poetry into English; it further extends into the devotional couplets of Mahendra Misir and the anonymous oral tradition of Bhojpuri speaking women. This research tries to address the central ethical dilemma: How does one carry these voices across languages without flattening their visceral effect? The paper draws upon the concept of 'intimate responsibility' given by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) and argues for a translation praxis that rejects 'domestication' in favor of Lawrence Venuti's 'foreignization' (1995). Such preserves the strangeness and cultural logic of the original texts and resists the colonial habit of treating the non-dominant languages as raw material for western or mainstream consumption. Incorporating Tejaswini Niranjana's critique of 'epistemic violence' (1992) and Susan Bassnett's (2014) emphasis on performance, the analysis suggests that the translator must account for rhythm, tone and essence inherent in Bhojpuri's oral roots.

A refined linguistic analysis of the affective suffixes (-wa, -iya) reveals a fidelity of feeling that exceeds literal conversion. Through thick translation, this work demonstrates how translation serves as a counter-archive, a form of reclamation for poetics dismissed as parochial. Ultimately, the study posits that 'translational justice' is an act of solidarity that insists on Bhojpuri's presence as living, urgent literature, serving as an essential instrument for decolonial futurity and cultural survival.

Keywords: Bhojpuri Folk, Cultural translation, Ethical translation, Linguistic marginality, Oral tradition

Introduction:

Language is a repository of collective memory. It is not a neutral vessel, it carries culture and most importantly, language is a site of intense political struggle. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1996) in his paper *Decolonizing the Mind* argues that the reclamation of indigenous language and literary forms is an important act of epistemic freedom. When we speak, write or translate a

marginalized language, we take part in a radical movement towards decolonial future. The language Bhojpuri which is so spoken across the globe by more than half a million people but yet remains paradoxically invisible in the mainstream literary discourse must be located within the framework of epistemic freedom.

Bhojpuri holds a very precarious position in the linguistic landscape. From the rural heartland of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to the Black Waters territories of Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, and Trinidad, it is a language of migration, labor and resilience. It gets boxed in as 'folklore,' seen as something rural, raw, and unpolished rather than a legitimate medium for literature. While English and standardized Hindi hold the prestige, Bhojpuri is often treated like a relic, its profound social critique ignored simply because it lacks the polish of the metropolitan elite. To center Bhojpuri in literary discourse is, therefore, to challenge the very foundations of who gets to speak and whose voice is considered civilized.

The title of this inquiry, 'Subaltern Archive and the Translator's responsibility: Ethical Negotiation in the Representation of Bhojpuri Folk' signals a departure from translation as a mere linguistic transaction but a profound mode of cultural and ethical engagement. The central challenge lies in highlighting the voices that have long existed in the shadows of both literary canons and political histories. We listen to the Shakespeare of Bhojpuri, Bhikhari Thakur, Mahendra Misir and most crucially, we listen to the anonymous Bhojpuri women whose voices live on through oral traditions; songs of longing, labor and resistance.

English is a language which always favors the metropolitan structures that marginalized Bhojpuri. The act of translating these songs into English is fought with peril. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) rightly warns that translating texts of the subaltern is never neutral. It requires a relationship of 'intimate responsibility.' The translator is not simply converting words but is entering into a relationship of accountability with the vulnerable speaker. The question remains, how do we translate such voices, rhythms, metaphors and lived histories without flattening their affect and without displacing the cultural world they emerge from?

This study is not simply about poetry but about power. Translational justice is being explored as a form of engagement that does not surrender the text to sound natural or fluent in English. If we erase the strangeness of Bhojpuri to make it sound comfortable or fluent in English, we engage in what Tejaswini Niranjana calls 'epistemic violence.' This molds the indigenous perspective to fit in the western categories of knowledge, looting them of their internal coherence and complexity. In order to translate languages like Bhojpuri, one must follow what Lawrence Venuti (1995) calls 'foreignization.' One must preserve the metaphors, the syntax, and the visceral rhythm of the original, even if it creates a sense of discomfort for the target reader.

Fluid, emotionally resonant, embodied and a living one is the Bhojpuri archive. Its oral traditions are dynamic articulation of the present layered with histories of caste violence, feminine endurance, and diasporic grief, not simply some echoes of the past. Be it the people singing *biraha* during the harvest season or the indentured labors carrying those songs in their heart across the ocean, Bhojpuri folk songs are voices that contribute and carry in themselves a vibrant literary culture that demands more than mere documentation. They demand a translation that honors their 'fidelity of feeling' (Trivedi, 2005). Meaning in this context is not just in the words, it is in the rhythm of the *dholak*, the tone of the performer, and the ritual setting of the song.

This paper explores how translation serves as a form of reclamation for cultures, for memories and for poetics that have been sidelined as parochial. By utilizing a 'thick translation' approach, one that uses annotations, cultural notes, and rhythmic markers, we can build a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994). In this space, Languages does not need to be rescued, they simply need to be heard on their own terms. This paper argues that through humble and rigorous translation we can move toward a radical Bhojpuri storytelling that refuses silence and insists on its own radical presence in the world.

Literature review

This study is situated within three intersecting fields of scholarship: the postcolonial translation theory, the politics of Bhojpuri linguistic archive, and the gendered dimensions of oral performances. Taking these fields in consideration, this study argues that translating Bhojpuri is not just a technical transfer, but a site of 'epistemic freedom' (Thiong'o, 1986).

The theoretical foundation of this study is largely based on the cultural shift that states that translation is always embedded in power dynamics. Lawrence Venuti (1995), in *The Translator's Invisibility*, says that the dominant translation strategy is 'domestication,' that smoothes the idiosyncrasies of the source to produce an easy to read English version. Venuti argues that this is an act of ethnocentric violence that removes the otherness of the original text.

This study is further deepened by Tejaswini Niranjana's critique in *Sitting Translation* (1992). She explains how translation was historically utilized by colonial administrators to create a suitable identity by making it static or putting it into manageable categories. Spivak (1993) further refines this ethical obligation of 'intimate responsibility' in her work *The Politics of Translation*. She warns against the appropriation of Third World texts by translators who prioritize accessibility over originality.

Within the Indian literary landscape, G. A. Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903) remains a foundational text. Alok Rai (2001) in *Hindi Nationalism* elucidates how the standardization of Hindi in the 19th and 20th centuries structurally silenced regional variants like Bhojpuri, relegating them to the status of 'folk' rather than 'literature.'

Against this backdrop, Bhikhari Thakur emerges as a critical site of inquiry. B.N. Verma (2012) highlights Thakur's role as a social reformer whose work highlights the codified trauma of the migrant labor economy. V. Mishra (2007) in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* explores how this migration of language created 'structure of feelings' (Williams 1977) that connected Bihar to plantation colonies abroad.

Significant scholarly focus of also there on the gendered dynamics of the subaltern archive. Sherry Simon (1996) in *Gender in Translation* argues that women's voices are often doubly marginalized reminding one of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) calls a 'silenced past.'

Susan Bassnett (2014) words that in oral traditions, meaning is performative aligns with Harish Trivedi's (2005) notion of 'fidelity of feeling,' suggesting that the translation of Indian literary forms must account for the emotional essence rather than just literary equivalence. S. Yadav (2015) also examines the *Birha* tradition as a counter-narrative to official histories.

To bridge the gap, Kwame Anthony Appiah (1993) conceptualized 'Thick Translation.' This methodology encourages the use of annotations, which supports Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of 'Third Space,' where translation does not seek an equivalence but creates a new space of negotiation.

Research Methodology

A departure from the traditional philological approaches moving instead a structural framework grounded in decolonial ethics and subaltern studies is required for translating Bhojpuri folk poetry. Because Bhojpuri exists at the intersection of caste-oppression, rural marginalization, and diasporic displacement the act of carrying it over to the global *lingua franca* of neoliberalism and colonial legacy, English, demands a rigorous guardrail to prevent the dilution of its specific cultural affect. This study processes four critical frameworks to construct a methodology of translational justice.

Intimate responsibility and the subaltern subject: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gave the concept of 'intimate responsibility' in her work *The Politics of Translation*, establishing the idea's foundational ethical pivot. Spivak argues that while dealing with a subaltern, a translator must surrender to the text and treat the text as a living articulation of a marginalized subject rather than a passive object of study. Intimate responsibility dictates that we do not prioritize fluency for the English reader over the clutter of the source culture. By attending to the silences and the untranslatable soul-residue of the Bhojpuri verse, we enter into a relationship of accountability with the speaker, ensuring that their specific socio-political location is not homogenized into a generic folk identity.

Foreignization as Political Resistance: This study adapts Lawrence Venuti's (1995) strategy of *foreignization* to make this responsibility operational. Venuti argues that domestication; a translation that reads so smoothly that it makes the translator invisible, is an act of ethnocentric violence. In translating Bhojpuri, domestication would involve stripping away local metaphors with western or normative ideas of the target language. By intentionally preserving the strangeness, unique syntax, affective suffixes and specific environmental imagery in translated text we force the English reader to acknowledge the text's otherness, thereby honoring its cultural difference rather than flattening it for convenience and fluency.

Sitting Translation and Epistemic Violence: Tejaswini Niranjana through her 1992 work 'Siting Translation' provides a crucial historical lens. Niranjana explains in her work that how translation was used as a tool of 'epistemic violence' during the colonial era to construct an Indian identity fit for European consumption that was both fixed and primitive. This study argues that Bhojpuri has always been a victim to such a colonial gaze, hence, often categorized as non-literary or dialectal in contrast to Hindi or English.

An ethical framework must, therefore, actively resist these colonial habits. It must refuse to treat Bhojpuri as raw material to be refined into literature, instead, it must treat the folk archive as a sophisticated system of knowledge, a counter-archive that possesses its own internal coherence and intellectual rigor.

The Body and the Performance Archive: Finally, Susan Bassnett's work on performance and translation reminds us that meaning in oral literature is not confined to the lexeme. Bhojpuri poetry is inherently kinetic and communal. Drawing on Bassnett, this framework treats the poem as a performance script. The meaning resides in the rhythm of the labor song, the tone of the lament, and the gestural history of the speaker. Translation, in this case, is an act of cultural mediation that seeks to carry over the performance energy of the original.

By using these four methods together we can move towards 'thick translation' (Appiah, 1993) that makes use of annotations and critical glosses. This framework aims to create a 'third space' (Bhabh, 1994) rather than an English equivalent.

Discussion:

The Subaltern Bard and the Poetics of Displacement:

Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971) represents the most potent manifestation of subaltern agency in the Bhojpuri literary archive. Born into the barber caste, a community situated on the lower rungs of the traditional varna hierarchy, his emergence as a playwright, poet, and performer was not merely a literary phenomenon but a social insurrection. Unlike the high modernist poets of the metropolitan centers who looked toward Europe for stylistic cues, Thakur's modernism was forged in the heat of the rural and the migration hubs of the early 20th century. His work occupies a liminal space between oral tradition and printed drama, rooted deeply in the *Naach* folk theater tradition. His theater was a theater of the displaced, catering to the millions of laborers who migrated from the Bhojpuri heartland to the jute mills of Calcutta or the *Kala Pani* colonies across the oceans. What Raymond Williams (1997) calls a 'structure of feeling' is very well articulated in Thakur's work. A specific, lived experience of the subaltern that was yet to be codified by official histories.

Bhikhari Thakur's most iconic work, *Bidesiya*, serves as the definitive chronicle of the Bhojpuri migration experience. 'Bidesiya' (the foreigner) is not any ethnic other in this poetic drama but the husband who has left for the city leaving behind a widowed household. The linguistic core of this displacement is captured in the plea:

"*Bidesiya jaa na ja, mor jiyara ghabraaye.*"

Searching for English equivalents is not enough to translate this line. The term *jiyara* is derived from 'ji' which refers to life-force while *ghabraaye* denotes a visceral, bodily trembling. Contextually, this 'trembling' is not a domestic anxiety, it is an articulation of economic abandonment. Migration in Thakur's work is observed as a rupture of the eastern social system. Translating *jiyari* as 'heart' or 'soul' can risk sanitizing the physical dread that migration imposed on the women left behind. Thakur forces the audience to confront the wounds of the labor economy. This is a task the translator must carry over by maintaining the percussive, urgent rhythm of the original verse.

Bhikhari Thakur never romanticized folk, instead, he was a champion of the marginalized. He delivered blistering critiques of the internal rot within the Bhojpuri speaking belt using his poetic authority. In *Beti Bechwa*, He confronts the commodification of young girls sold into marriage to

elderly men. The language here is sharp, ribald, and confrontational. The voice of the girl in Thakur's poetry is not of silent suffering but of vocal defiance.

Similarly, in *Gabarghichor*, Thakur questions the foundation of patriarchal inheritance and family legitimacy. The play centers on a dispute over the biological versus social paternity of a child born while the husband was away for fifteen years. Thakur uses the character of the wife to destabilize the "moral" authority of the husband, suggesting that the labor of the mother grants her a higher "claim" than the legalistic claim of the father.

The Challenge of Translating the *Naach*:

Translating the works of Thakur means translating performance as well. His poetry was written to be staged, to be enacted, often featuring gender-fluid performances where men played women's part (*Launda Naach*). The language shifts between erotic, political and the devotional reflecting the fluidity.

As Susan Bassnett suggests, the meaning is in the 'gesture.' In Thakur's work, the use of sound words and repetitive refrains mimic the clatter of the train taking the migrant away. To translate these smoothly is to silence the village square. The translator must instead aim for a 'rhythmic fidelity' that allows the English reader to hear the crack in the singer's voice. Bhikhari Thakur remains the 'People's Bard' because he did not only write about the subaltern, he wrote as a subaltern, turning his work into a language of universal human suffering and resistance.

To rigorously engage with the Bhojpuri poetic archive, one must transcend the superficial gloss of vocabulary and descend into the language's intricate morphological syntactic and phonetic architectures that constitute its distinct epistemological world. A deeper look into the Dialectical Stratification of the language shows that in the performative text of Bhikhari Thakur, the language is percussive, relying on the auxiliary *-ba*, *-wa*, and a density of retroflex sounds to create a rhythmic urgency essential folk theatre. However, as the language migrated across black waters to Mauritius and the Caribbean, it underwent a profound structural shift resulting in a more egalitarian linguistic structure closer to indenture system. The language employs diminutive and affective suffixes which function far beyond simple indicators. When a speaker modifies a noun, shifting from *Piya* (beloved) to *Piyawa*, they are not merely describing a person, moreover, they are injecting a vocalic sign into the syntax. Adding a suffix loads the noun with intimacy, vulnerability, possessiveness or lament and thus loads the noun with emotions which might not necessarily be inherent to the word. To translate the sentence:

'Mora piyawa bideshwa gailen'

Simply as 'My husband went abroad' is to compromise the emotional depth of the sentence taking away its subjective ache. This essentially is an act of epistemic violence as Niranjana calls it. *Bidesh-wa* denotes the specific locus of separation.

This leaves the translator with a difficult mandate to find equivalents capable of carrying such distinct, proprietary grief. It requires seeing these suffixes for what they truly are, emotional markers, as unique to the speaker as a fingerprint.

Bhojpuri also relies on a complex network of pronouns to indicate the social gap among people. It is a system that indicates respect and intimacy and authority with precision. Through these honorifics, the language represents the social hierarchy, carving out distinct boundaries between the speaker and the one being addressed. The distinction between the non-honorific *Tu/Te* and the reverential *Ruaa/Raur* is a map of caste and power. When a subaltern speaker addresses a feudal lord or a caste superior with a dismissive *Tu/Te*, it topples the hierarchy verbally with its intimacy and dismissiveness. Modern English, however, flattens this distinction with a universal 'You.' This makes translation difficult for the ethical translator.

Without 'relational footnoting' or the strategic use of social distinction through language, the subversive power of the original text evaporates. Thus, refining the linguistic analysis of Bhojpuri requires an acknowledgment that its grammar is never neutral.

Anonymous Storytelling and the Biraha of the Fields

While Bhikhari Thakur became a named, modernistic anchor for Bhojpuri Literature, a vast portion of the Bhojpuri archive remains anonymous, preserved in the collective memory of women. This feminine-counter archive exists primarily in oral genres such as the *sohar*, the *biraha*, and the *kaharwa*. In these verses, the Bhojpuri woman is not merely a subject of the poetic gaze, she is the narrator, the critic, and the witness to the structural violence of caste, patriarchy and the migrant economy.

The *Biraha*, or the song of separation, is the foundational aesthetic of the Bhojpuri heartland. While classical Hindi/Sanskrit literature often romanticizes *Viraha* as a state of aestheticized longing, the Bhojpuri *Biraha* is a grit-filled articulation of economic and emotional abandonment. The women left behind in the villages of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh are not simply longing for their partners but also managing the ruins of a household fractured by the money-order economy.

For instance, the recurring trope of the beloved leaving for *Pardes* (the foreign land), the *Pardesi* husband is often viewed with a sharp, ironic edge.

One popular verse says:

'Kahe ke kaam na aayil, mor piya pardeswa jaayil.' (What use was my devotion, when my beloved left for distant lands?)

Given the economic state, this is a political cry. It challenges the virtue of the migrant husband, suggesting that his economic mobility is predicated on her domestic immobility and suffering. As Sherry Simon (1996) argues in *Gender in Translation*, women's voices in folk traditions are often muffled by male translators who see only the material or the melancholic and miss the subversive. To translate the *biraha* ethically, one must capture this underlying rage, the texture of the voice that grinds grain while critiquing the global labor market.

Other forms like *sohar* are that are traditionally sung to celebrate the birth of a child (usually a son) provide another site for linguistic subversion. These songs do fulfill a patriarchal function

on the surface but the lyrics often mock the father, mother-in-law, or the local midwife, that creates the carnivalesque space where domestic household hierarchies are inverted.

Attention towards 'cultural meditation' as Susan Bassnett calls it, is required while translating the *sohar*. The meaning is not just in the celebration of birth but in the communal laughter shared by the women performers. A literal translation often fails to transfer the satirical wink in the verse. A way that a women used to assert her presence and voice in the household which otherwise demands her silence. Domestic wit and ribaldry must be preserver as characteristics of these oral performances resisting the urge to sanitize them for the English audience.

Another embodied genre of Bhojpuri are the work songs, such as *kaharwa* and the *jatsari*, sung while working or grinding grain. In these songs, the rhythm of the songs is based on the rhythm of the body. The meter follows the physical exertion of the arms and the breath.

In these songs, women discuss ecological wisdom, caste violence, and erotic agency. They speak of the thirst of the soil and the heaviness of the stone mill. When translating these, the translator must account for what Spivak calls the 'body-text.' The words are inextricably linked to the labor. If we translate the *jatsari* without accounting for the percussive clack of the stone or the grunt of the breath, we lose the epistemic weight of the labor itself.

Storytelling as testimony:

The anonymous women of the Bhojpuri archive perform what can be termed as acts of testimony, archiving histories of survival that the state and the formal academy often overlook. These sons remind us that Bhojpuri is not just a language of 'men and migration,' as often depicted in the works of Thakur, but also a language of 'women and witnessing.'

To translate these voices is to engage if the politics of care. It involves acknowledging the collective ownership of these verses and the resilient poetics they embody. The translator's job here is to make sure that when these stories are presented on the English page, they are not done so as exotic specimen to woo the readers as mere folklores, instead they must be presented as living literature and the undefeated spirit of the women who couldn't be silenced by history.

Annotation as Ethical Intervention:

Traditional translation often views footnotes as a sign of failure. This can, and more than often, means that the translator couldn't find the exact word in the target language. However, in the case of a language so marginalized and marked by caste, as Bhojpuri, footnotes, in reality serve as a tool of archival recovery. It permits the translator to slow down the reader and highlight the complexities that a fluent English sentence would otherwise won't bother about.

Consider the phrase, '*Maai ke godiya bina sooni sooni lage la aangna.*' A fluent English translation might read as 'The courtyard feels empty without mother's lap.' While being linguistically accurate, this translation fails to capture the cosmology of the *aangna* (courtyard). In Bhojpuri imagination, the word *aangana* is the gendered epicenter of the household, a space of ritual, labor, and safety. If we provide the annotation that explains that the *aangana* is the symbolic

womb of the community, we can prevent the English reader from interpreting it as a mere domestic architecture.

Similarly, when we translate other descriptive terms used like *goriya* (a woman of fair complexion), it is of immense importance that we mention annotations to navigate the colorism and caste. In Bhojpuri songs, complexion is not merely an aesthetic standard or beauty but a connotative marker of caste as well as sexual desirability shaped by patriarchal society. We need to provide the English reader with contextual nuances without which the one can easily end up romanticizing the very social ailment that the writer tries to critique. Thus, annotations are important in to unravel the power dynamics of the society as documented or satirized in the original text.

Conclusion:

Bhojpuri language is loaded with artistic merit and critical observations. The fact that it has not received the due literary recognition is a result of systematic marginalization. Bhikhari Thakur's works are formidable critique of migration and caste. In the anonymous archive of women's songs, we discover a resilient poetics of witnessing, a feminine storytelling that uses irony and rhythm to survive economic and emotional abandonment.

The theoretical frameworks of Spivak, Venuti, Niranjana, and Basenett have guided this paper towards a translational praxis that prioritizes intimate responsibility over fluency. This paper understands that to translate subaltern languages in English is an act of solidarity. In doing so, one must refuse to let the wit, context, and nuances of the rural life be flattened in the process.

To conclude, translating Bhojpuri folk is an act of decolonial storytelling. It is an insistence that the experiences of the migrant, the laborer, and the rural woman possess a universal intellectual and emotional validity. By carrying these voices across languages without silencing them, we participate in what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls the 'decolonization of the mind.'

Bhojpuri does not need to be 'saved' or 'civilized' by translation. It is already a vibrant language full of its own life. Translation, when done with humility and rigor provides that space. It allows the percussive rhythm of the *dholak* and the visceral tremor of the *jiyara* to resonate beyond the borders of the village and the constraints of the 'standard.'

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