



Gender, Class, and Spatiality in Regional Indian Literatures in Translation

Divya A

Associate Professor

Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Madras,

Chennai, India

divya.iitmadrass@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article offers diverse contexts and perspectives, historical and contemporary, on the emerging domain of regional Indian literatures in translation. Ranging from analyses of the comparative merits and attributes of regional Indian literatures in translation and Indian Literature in English, theories of translation, the role of the translator in the meaning-making process, and the ideology behind literary canon formation, the paper throws light on various arguments about the nature and function of the regional literary work, its translation, and its place and function in the global arena. The article also critically maps out a range of translated literature including regional poetry, and fictional texts such as Rabindranath Tagore's "The Hunger of Stones", Kamala Das's "Summer Vacation", Amrita Pritam's "Stench of Kerosene", Perumal Murugan's "The Man Who Could Not Sleep", Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, and Sundara Ramasamy's *Tamarind History* in order to unearth the qualities of the regional and their narrative and thematic implications for class and gender identity, and trajectories of modernity, progress, and development. I argue that these literatures that have emerged from manifold spatialities mediate and negotiate in their narratives anxieties and problems that impinge on individuals caught in the mesh of intersectional and constricting socio-cultural axes.

1. Introduction

Regional Indian Literatures in Translation is an exciting and emerging field of literary study that is increasingly gaining popular as well as academic attention among the larger reading public and the scholarly community. It has become quite apparent that the world of “Indian literature” is constantly expanding its boundaries to become more inclusive of a multitude of voices. With the mushrooming of literature festivals and prizes for translated works— such as *Jaipur Literature Festival*, *Gateway Literature Festival*, *JCB Literature Prize*—shining the spotlight on literatures in regional Indian languages in translation, this literary domain seems to have come of age. Significantly, the kinds of Indian recognition for translated works in the form of specialized literary festivals and awards seem to indicate that there is perhaps an indifference to, or a lack of urgency in seeking, recognition from the western, global arena, and that there is a gradual acknowledgment of the creative productions of regional literatures that have emerged from distinct spatio-cultures.

1.1. Literature review

The major criticism that is posed against Indian writers who write in English is that their target readership is primarily the English-speaking audience outside the nation. The argument is that the works present selective snapshots of India through a language and idiom that seamlessly allow the foreign audience to “read” India with minimum discomfort and also continue to feed the West’s preconceived oriental assumptions about the land and its culture. This critique is historical as this assumption also exposed one of the ideologies of translations in the colonial period which performed what Tejaswini Niranjana termed “strategies of containment”(1992: 3) that ultimately “reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonized” (1992: 3). The English translation that reconfigures the local narratives with a view to foreign consumers offers a reoriented people and a changed culture.

The major recognition afforded to certain best-selling Indian works written in English is also considered to be problematic as such works push the vernacular literatures into the margins :Amit Chaudhri writes that the massive recognition to Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* has made the novel into “a gigantic edifice that all but obstructs the view of what lies behind” (2002: 75). In the context of the hugely successful postcolonial Indian novels, Chaudhuri writes that the intention of the West seems to be an acknowledgment and celebration of inclusion and multiculturalism which is a mirror of their own modern Western self.

Ainsur Rahman states that the “standard curriculum in a western university usually includes writers such as R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Arundhati Roy” (2007: 169). The choice of these Indian novelists in English as subjects of academic study and research also stems from the understanding that these writers “retain a more recognizable frame of reference” (Rahman 2007) in comparison with those who write in the lesser-known regional languages, and thus represent India in a more understandable format for the audience outside the nation.

The marginalization of the regional literatures on the world arena is well-documented. Vimala Rao while mapping the various reactions in the context of translations points out two significant perspectives. One, the argument that “the greater the superior quality of the regional work the harder it is to translate”(Rao 2003: 137). Two, the conviction that the “regional writer does not need international prominence; he just needs prominence in his own language” (Rao 2003). The first notion is part of the faith that the “pure” regional literature is untranslatable, and the latter is slightly parochial in its belief that it is irrelevant to bring the regional onto the global plane. Such perspectives are disturbingly akin to what I would term “regional orientalism”, a cultural consciousness that apparently seeks to protect its authentic regional quality by simultaneously projecting it as mysterious, unknowable, and irreproducible for the foreign target audience, the other. The delimitation of the dissemination of particular literature ghettoises certain types of creativity and cultures through a reorientation of hierarchy.

Such a provincial attitude, fortunately, is not widespread. K Satchidanandan states that “When a work in an Indian language is translated into English, it entails the representation of a regional culture for a more powerful national/Indian culture; when made available outside India, it involves representing a national culture for a still more powerful international culture which today means Western culture”(Satchidanandan). The subtext that informs this perspective of Satchidanandan is the notion of inclusion, heterogeneity, and multiculturalism, a phenomenon that is emphasised in the postmodernist approach to perceiving the world. The diverse construction of identities, be it in relation to regional or Indian literature, is a feature that is to be acknowledged, and this crucial aspect of legitimating difference and multitudinous voices can be mapped creatively through the project of translating regional literatures, thus offering the works to as wide a reading public as possible.

In addition to the aspiration for a widening public readership, academic engagement in classrooms, involving an expanding literary canon for study including regional Indian literatures via translations, would significantly reshape and enlarge thematic concepts associated with the Indian literature curriculum taught not only in Western universities but also in Indian universities.

The need for world literature to be inclusive of regional literatures stems from the basic assumption that the literary canon cannot be composed of works written originally in English from the metropolitan and urban centres. Nor is the notion that entry into the canon implies the necessity of creative works produced originally only through global and influential languages such as English tenable any longer. By inscribing regional creativity onto the global stage through translations, hitherto unknown and lesser-known cultures and people with their own ways of life are brought to the curiosity, appreciation and critique of a much larger humanity across the globe.

Moreover, what is further crucial in the process of translation is the awareness of the translator to be knowledgeable not only in the language that is to be translated but also about the culture and history of the language community. Gayathri Spivak asserts that “Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader” s/he will not be able to “respond to the special call of the text” (1993: 183). Spivak stresses the importance of translating the rhetoricity of the language, and warns that if transferring content is the primary intention of the translator then there is a betrayal of the text (1993: 191). Her arguments underline the necessity of expertise in the original language of the text so that the translation rendered is “not just a purveyor of social realism” and a “literalist surrender” (Spivak 1993). A well-known translator of contemporary Tamil fiction into English, Kalyan Raman, also emphasizes the need to comprehend the cultural contexts of the language: “Literary texts in any Indian language (other than English) emerge from the literary tradition of that language and from the life and history of that language community. We need a discourse in English on translated texts that is alive to these contexts and is also able to meaningfully map these works to a wider Anglophone milieu.” (Raman).

Raman’s stress on the need for a discourse about the “life” and tradition of a language community that is to be translated is a crucial point as a lack of awareness of the contexts of a community would indeed produce a less than sympathetic, or even a spiritually inaccurate mapping of that regional work.

While Spivak argues for creativity, Raman draws attention to the nuances of the culture that could potentially be lost in a less sensitive translation of the culture's creative product.

Nevertheless, in addition to the need for fidelity towards the source culture and language, the agency of the translator has its function in the practice of translation. A.K.Ramanujan states that a translation is to be "true to the translator no less than to the originals" (1973: 12). He goes on to clarify that the process of translation is about "choice, interpretation, an assertion of taste, a betrayal of what answers to one's needs, one's envies" (Ramanujan 1973). The identity of the translator thus also becomes inscribed on the translated work. In other words, translation is rewriting, and retelling, in a self-conscious manner with an eye out for a range of emphases from personal predilections to cultural effects of the source and the target languages. In contrast to Spivak, Ramanujan boldly brings in the proclivities of the translator as important factors in the process of recreation, thus sounding a note of negotiation instead of an apparently pure transfer of creativity from the writer of the "original" work.

Though there is now a growing consensus in the academia that the translator and the translated work are as significant as the creative writer and the "original" text, in the popular imagination there is perhaps a persistent stigma of "second-handedness" associated with the translations. Mini Krishnan, an editor at the Oxford University Press (India), highlights the marginal position of the translators and hails them as "The most unacknowledged tribe in the publishing world, they received financial and credit equality with authors only very recently. Why, even today, famous translators like Gita Krishnankutty do not always make it to the covers of the books they create!" (Krishnan). The subtext that the translators are not as sacrosanct as the original creators continues, thus explaining the lack of emphasis on the mass circulation and celebration of the identities of the translators in the publishing market.

Further, in the contemporary context there is still a belief that "translations don't sell", implying that the creative output from the various indigenous regions of India are somehow less literary for a wider national and international audience.

Nilanjana Roy indicates that once in a while there are a few publication breakthroughs in terms of the sales figures of works such as Shankar's *Chowringhee* (translated by Arunava Singha) and Bhaht's Tamil pulp fiction anthologies, which seem like exceptions that prove the rule (Roy).

In the theoretical domain, however, alternative arguments that make a case for the historically rigorous understanding of the concept of translations in India are prevalent. Tracing its roots historically, Ayyappa Paniker asserts that the practice of translation in the pre-colonial period was not understood as “a literal word- by-word rendering of the original from the source language to the target language” (1998: 39-46). Instead “retellings” and “recreations” were the common practice through which the “original” works were dispersed across the various Indian languages. The central texts that were thus retold were the religio-legendary literature such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The practice of colonial translations is further problematized as the ideology of the colonial regime sought to reorient as well as map local identities and culture via translations to suit the needs of the Empire. Shibani Phukan argues that there is a continuous “translating consciousness” in the Indian culture that understands this practice as “new writing”; transcreation”; “a creative act”, and thus the “original is not sacrosanct” (2003: 29). However, the instances that are offered to justify the translating consciousness are the religio-epics where the dissemination of the content is the most vital intent.

2. Research questions

The central questions that guide this article are: what are the regional attributes that can be elicited from the literary text? ; what are the thematic and ideological implications of these regional characteristics embedded in the literary artifacts? In each of the following case studies I briefly map out the literary text in terms of the vectors of regional attributes, cultural codes, with the textual significance ranging from choice of diction to the peculiarities of local cultural contexts analysed through the English translation. The study, while illustrating the nuances of the regional fabric that showcases the distinct nature of the lifestyle of a population, also underlines the crux of the texts that is about human tendencies to love, envy, forgive, discriminate and accumulate. The common threads that bind humanity connects all regional literatures, all world literatures together.

3. Discussions

The Hunger of Stones and the Regional Resistance to the Colonial: In Tagore’s *The Hunger of Stones* (1895) the regional elements from the natural landscape seem to symbolically and literally battle against the inroads made by the British Empire on Indian soil.

The powerful wind carrying sand grains from the River Shusta and the dead leaves of the Aravalli Mountains snatch away the sola topi and English jacket from the Indian tax collector who works for the British Empire, and he never gets his accessories back. The storyteller states that: “a sudden whirlwind swept down, carrying the sand of the Shusta and dead leaves from the Aravallis like a pennant, and bore away my jacket and my hat. They went cartwheeling through the air: a sweet chorus of laughter swirled along with them, rising through several octaves, sounding every note on the scale of derision, until finally it dissolved into the sunset” (Tagore 10).

The ridicule lacing the laughter from the ghostly women of the marble palace is a subversive attack that originates from the landscape of Barich in the Indian landscape. In other words, the act of retaliation arises from the spatiality of the regional, the local, and the indigenous spatiality. This forceful divesting of the signifiers of British hegemony is the most significant and powerful moment originating from the elements of indigenous nature in Tagore’s work. Such a metaphoric resistance is one of the ways in which the regional subverts the authority of the colonizer. **Kamala Das’s “Summer Vacation” and the Regional Resistance to Societal Structures** Kamala Das’s “Summer Vacation”, set in Kerala, captures the intense loneliness of a family in the aftermath of the death of a young mother. It depicts through the regional setting of a *tharavad*, a distinct type of residence in Kerala, how the grandmother and the child cope with the loss. The aged matriarch at the helm of the *tharavad* — a traditional domestic structure of the higher castes in Kerala with separate parts of the house reserved for access to different sections of the community — lays bare the axes on which the society functions. Such an illustration in the story itself becomes a way of resisting such a practice by drawing attention to it.

The text narrativizes resistance through a crucial event. A dark female servant and her child from the underprivileged caste are directed to work and eat in the darkened *vadakinni* (Northern block), and the spatiality seems to consume them into its darkness. In contrast the other space *tekkinni* (Southern block) is used to socialize with women from the village who are apparently within the accepted caste structure. In a remarkable act of unconscious resistance, the heir to the *tharavad*, questions the stale food offered to the servant’s daughter forcing the matriarch to reoffer the needy child fresh food. While the spatial categories codify the caste discrimination in the society, this regional text of Kamala Das illustrates the particular nature of discrimination, thus embedding resistance to societal structures within and through the text.

In a conflated set of rebellions performed by the story, the servant who is accused by the young heir of thieving tamarind from the *vadakkini*, turns around fiercely to sharply point out the class divide between the child and her, and thus puts the confused child in place. The regional text thus resists the different kinds of oppressive structures in society through its peculiarities and uniqueness.

Amrita Pritam's "The Stench of Kerosene", and the Regional Resistance to Patriarchy: While the matriarchal power remains benign and seems to be in a process of transition in Kamala Das's story, in Amrita Pritam's "The Stench of Kerosene", it brutally snuffs out the romance and life of the central female character, a childless wife. A Punjabi mother sneakily gets her son married for the second time when her childless daughter-in-law goes home for the annual holiday. While there is no matriarchal structure in the state of Punjab akin to that of Kerala where privileged women inherit the *tharavad* and matrilineal surnames are passed down, the debilitating hold of the Punjabi mother over her son in Pritam's "The Stench of Kerosene" can be seen through the ramifications for the barren daughter-in-law who douses herself with kerosene and sets herself on fire upon hearing the remarriage of her husband.

Ensuring a child for the family becomes the sole and lethal function of the mother who becomes the custodian of patriarchy, and the son mutely perceives her as being unfeminine, and devoid of emotional attributes. In this sense, the mother is no different to Pappaji the patriarch who physically restricts and resists the physical as well the spiritual freedom of the women of his household in Ambai's *The Kitchen in the Corner of the House*.

In her story, Pritam's choice of the local spatial elements of the corn fields and the blue bell wood perform cultural function as they communicate more viscerally and figuratively the relative positions of the male and the female gender on the societal grid. When the lover, Manak suggests that Guleri is akin to unripe corn that is full of milk, Guleri rebuts his emphasis on her sexuality and states that unripe corn is meant for cattle, thus refusing to be the object of his lust. Further, Guleri later refers to the bluebell wood that is traditionally believed to cause temporary deafness to those who pass through it to mock Manak's taciturnity and refusal to divulge the reasons behind his demand that she refrain from her holiday that year. Her figurative parallel suggests a subconscious awareness of the structures of the male psyche that is deaf to the needs of the female.

The regional attributes of the Punjabi landscape in this story are intended to metaphorically suggest the patriarchal bind of the vulnerable female character in the story.

Yet, the signs of breaking the boundaries of patriarchy ultimately seems to come through in the shocking rejection by Manak of his male baby and heir who apparently stinks of the kerosene used by Guleri to set herself afire.

Perumal Murugan's "The Man Who Could Not Sleep": Resisting Social Climbing through

Regional Metaphors: The short story captures the tragic consequences of social climbing for a young man called Murugesan whose dreams of building a house with brick walls and block tiles in the village literally collapses because of the Machiavellian envy of a poverty-stricken elderly man who has never been able to climb out of the rut of poverty. In Murugan's story the regional fabric of the Kongunadu is clearly seen through an array of cultural references such as *karupattii*, palm jaggery that the worker Murugesan is given to eat in the textile mill to prevent tuberculosis. "Karupatti" literally comes from the confluence of words *karruppu* and *katti*, literally meaning "black solid" in Tamil, the language spoken in Tamil Nadu.

The free "karupatti" that Murugesan sells off crucially comes to signify the ambition of the hardworking young man who risks his health to build a house of his own.

Murugan's language illustrates the subtle nature of the conflict fracturing the society depicted in the narrative. While references to Tamil words such as *thatha* for grandfather and *paisa* for paise are transliterations, capturing the language literally in English, there are idioms that are almost a literal translation in the English text by Kalyan Raman: "once they sprouted wings, he had sent his young ones out to seek their food", and "as they said, he hadn't even sprouted three leaves yet" (Murugan 2017). More importantly, such proverbs or sayings reveal that the society perceives human development in terms of the animal and the natural world. In other words, there is a raw fight for survival, and competition for material success in society. Such imagery also draws attention to the cultural structures that define relationships between the young and the old, and it is disseminated through regional cues, thus revealing the narrative's interest in the power dynamics of social climbing. The narratives of hierarchy/the old order are entangled with the trajectory of slight social advancement by the young, and all these come to a head in the project of house building in the story text of Perumal Murugan.

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* and the Postmodern Regional Resistance to Patriarchy:

In *Nagamandala*, Kannada folklore is creatively adapted for a contemporary audience, with the play possessing dual endings, implying a plurality of possibilities. The conflict between orthodoxy and modernity in the context of gender liberty is probed through the guise of post-modern solutions to the problem of Rani who is trapped in the predicament of having two men playing the role of her husband. The first solution offers the suicide of the magically minimized Naga, who hangs himself from the locks of Rani, and the restoration of Rani and her husband Appanna who sees her as a goddess, not as a woman who is equal to him, as she had passed the snake-ordeal successfully. The alternate solution of absorbing/hiding Naga forever into the tresses of Rani presents the modern resolution as it radically offers Rani scope to accommodate the lover into her body and life. The illicit sexuality is weeded out in one ending, but retained in the other through a bodily reorientation of Naga. Karnad's own English "translation" of his Kannada play and the cultural translation of the folklore for the contemporary world therefore accommodates simultaneously the traditional attributes of femininity and masculinity, as well as significantly restructures them by permitting the central male and female characters to transgress their conventional gender roles in society.

Sundara Ramaswamy's *Tamarind History*: Regional Response to the Forward March

Tamarind History through a powerful mapping of a Tamil regional spatiality captures two very potent domains that drive the human psyche: the business of money-making, and sex. The former is sought primarily through trade of various kinds of products such as textiles, cigarettes and newspapers, while the aspiration to a satisfying sexuality is what motivates trade itself. In other words, the world of women and sex seem to be the rewards that await the men who make it big in the world of business, and this idea is encapsulated in the character of Abdul Khader who clearly believes that the sign of success is in having a very beautiful wife. When not in possession of such a figure, he purchases sex, sometimes forcibly, with beautiful women.

The most self-conscious and overt reference to the novel's obsession with sexuality is evident through the pun on the Tamil words for education and sex. When Isaki the newspaper editor asks Francis, the owner of a printing press, to lend him a measure of the letter 'k', Francis flippantly asks him to replace the word "sexuality" for "education", thus clearly highlighting a significant obsession among many in this story world:

So if I am going to talk about education, I need to use that word a lot, right? Kalvi, that's the word, and I'm short on *k*'s. You've got enough dots to put above the *l*, right? Otherwise just print *kalavi* instead of *kalvi*, it's not like the world's going to end if you print "sex" instead of "education". (Ramaswamy 160)

With these problematic narratives of sexuality and money criss-crossing the regional landscape, the rest of the trajectories that radically reshape the regional spatiality such as modernity, development, and vote- bank politics are complicated and exacerbated by the human desire for survival, accumulation and gratification. The tamarind tree which is at the centre of this universe becomes the most vital marker of a vanishing way of life, and at its destruction the space of the past with all its ways of approaching and accommodating life seems to have been changed forever.

Regional Poetry and Gender Identities in Translation

In regional poetry, what largely occupies centrality are the discourses of existentialism for the male, and the burden of the domestic routine for the female. The regional texture becomes invisible and insignificant at times in the poetic text as the subject is not predominantly inflected through the regional lens. Salma's "Perspective" offers a glimpse into the humdrum routine of the everyday within domesticity, and the speaker is extremely self-aware of the skewed nature of her reality that does not afford her any measure of normalcy and self-satisfaction. The anonymous Bhili poem, "I have girth birth to a son" captures the pride, the assertiveness, or the triumph of the female speaker who demands clothes from her kith and kin because, implicitly, she has earned her reward by giving birth to a son. While the repetitive demand could be part of a ritual with the ritual object being a multi-coloured blouse and sari, that cultural facet becomes problematic in the realization that the woman does not have the space to ask for any other object. The reference to a bat in Salma's poem does not seem to carry any specific regional signification except to indicate a sense of eeriness in the awareness of the female position in the world. In the Bhili poem, a sense of light-heartedness and optimism is traditionally associated with the sparrow whom the mother addresses, emotions that could signify those of the mother who has given birth to a male child.

The male poets, Dilip Chitre and Kedernath Singh, signify larger public concerns, and those are of the existential kind, associated predominantly with masculine preoccupations.

In Chitre's poem "Father Returning Home" the speaker states that "He goes into the toilet to contemplate/ Man's estrangement from a man-made world"(Chitre 2008: 15-16), with the emphasis through repetition on the word "man" indicating perhaps that the problems of this man-made world arise from gender imbalance involved in the process of world building. The suburban train becomes symptomatic of the male entrapped in the wheels of time and technology, and the overburdened male soul is unable to connect at a paternal level of affection with his "sullen children"(Chitre 2008: 20). On the other hand, the irrepressible presence of the male speaker in Singh's "Where Would I Go" underlines the inerasable identity of the male from the world who refuses to leave even after death. The poem captures the most powerful bond between the man and the materiality of the world: "I will remain buried in a register book/under the letters/where my permanent address is written"(Singh 2017: 9-11). The absence of a question mark at the end of the title of the poem, the rhetorical query "Where would I go", is quite significant as the poem is an assertion of the male's timeless privilege in/within the world.

4. Conclusions

Through a contextualisation of the positionalities of Regional Indian literatures in translation, and analyses of a range of literary texts, I have illustrated the attributes of the regional works embedded in their narrative designs and their attendant thematic implications for class, gender, spatiality and identity, while also demonstrating their ramifications for discourses of modernity, progress, and development. These vital literary artifacts that have emerged from diverse regional cultures navigate and exemplify a range of constricting socio-cultural axes that restrict the life satisfactions of the ordinary people in a society.

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