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Bridges Across Broken Tongues: Translation, Transcreation, and the Politics of Loss in Modern Indian Poetry

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Abstract:
Translation enables Indian poetry to circulate across linguistic communities, but it also changes the relationships among sound, meaning, cultural memory, and readership. This article examines translation and transcreation as interpretive practices through which poems acquire new forms and audiences. It draws on selected arguments by Roman Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, Sujit Mukherjee, A. K. Ramanujan, Lawrence Venuti, and Tejaswini Niranjana. Rabindranath Tagore's English self-translation and Priya Adarkar's translation of Arun Kamble provide concrete points of discussion. The article distinguishes unavoidable formal change from politically consequential erasure. A poem may lose a sound pattern without losing its social argument, alternatively, elegant fluency may conceal caste conflict or the authority of a marginalised voice. The expression 'broken tongues' is therefore treated as a metaphor for interrupted relations among speakers and readers, not as a description of defective languages. The article argues for accountable creativity: translation should acknowledge its interventions, preserve meaningful differences, and make its choices available for critical examination.

Keywords:
Modern Indian Poetry, Translation, Transcreation, Linguistic Diversity, Poetic Form, Self-Translation, Dalit Poetry, Cultural Memory, Translator Visibility, Politics of Loss.

1. Introduction:

A poem communicates through more than its stated subject. Rhythm, syntax, sound, register, and cultural associations contribute to the experience of reading it. Translation must therefore decide how these relationships can operate within another language. The problem becomes particularly complex when a poem carries experiences associated with a specific community or a socially contested form of speech. Reproducing a general meaning may leave important relationships unrecognised. At the same time, insisting on complete equivalence can make translation appear impossible before its choices are examined. This article considers how translation and transcreation negotiate these difficulties in the circulation of modern Indian poetry. It connects theoretical arguments with selected examples, asking what kinds of loss matter, who determines their importance, and how creative intervention can remain accountable to the poem and its speaking position.

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2. Objectives of the Study

The present research is undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine the significance of translation and transcreation in the interpretation, circulation and cultural representation of modern Indian poetry across linguistic boundaries.
2. To analyse the challenges involved in transferring poetic meaning, rhythm, imagery, linguistic structure and cultural associations from source languages into target languages.
3. To investigate the relationship between translation, cultural identity, linguistic diversity and the preservation of social and historical experiences represented in Indian poetry.
4. To explore the theoretical perspectives of Roman Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, Sujit Mukherjee, A. K. Ramanujan, Lawrence Venuti and Tejaswini Niranjana in understanding literary translation and transcreation.
5. To examine the role of self-translation, translator visibility and creative adaptation in shaping the reception and interpretation of translated poetic works.
6. To analyse selected examples from Rabindranath Tagore's English self-translation and Priya Adarkar's translation of Arun Kamble's poetry, with particular attention to cultural meaning, linguistic authority and social representation.
7. To distinguish between unavoidable formal transformations and politically significant losses involving caste identity, marginalised voices and culturally specific expressions.
8. To evaluate the importance of ethical responsibility, interpretative transparency and accountable creativity in preserving meaningful differences while facilitating cross-cultural literary communication.

3. Significance of the Study

The present study holds considerable significance in comparative literature, translation studies, Indian English literature and contemporary discussions concerning linguistic diversity and cultural representation. Modern Indian poetry emerges from a multilingual literary environment in which languages carry distinctive histories, social relationships, cultural memories and poetic traditions. Translation enables literary works to reach readers beyond their original linguistic communities, but the process also transforms the relationships between language, meaning, form and cultural identity. Examining these transformations is essential for understanding the opportunities and limitations of literary communication across linguistic boundaries.

The significance of this research lies in its investigation of translation and transcreation as interpretative and creative practices rather than mechanical processes of replacing words from one language with their equivalents in another. Poetry communicates through rhythm, sound, imagery, syntax, metaphor and culturally embedded expressions. These elements do not always possess direct equivalents across languages. Consequently, translators must make decisions concerning the

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preservation, modification or creative reconstruction of poetic features. Such decisions influence how translated works are understood within new literary and cultural contexts.

The study is particularly significant because it distinguishes between formal loss and socially consequential erasure. Changes in metre, rhyme or sound patterns may arise from linguistic differences, whereas the removal or neutralisation of caste-based experiences, cultural conflicts and marginalised perspectives may substantially alter a poem's social meaning. This distinction provides an important foundation for evaluating the ethical dimensions of literary translation.

The research also contributes to understanding the role of translators in shaping cultural representation. The theoretical perspectives of Roman Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, Sujit Mukherjee, A. K. Ramanujan, Lawrence Venuti and Tejaswini Niranjana provide valuable frameworks for examining linguistic transformation, literary continuity, transcreation, translator visibility and the relationship between translation and power.

Furthermore, the selected examples of Rabindranath Tagore's self-translation and Priya Adarkar's translation of Arun Kamble demonstrate how translation may expand literary readership while raising questions concerning authorial authority, caste identity and cultural interpretation. The study contributes to contemporary translation scholarship by emphasising responsible creativity, transparency and respect for linguistic differences. It highlights the importance of translation as a means of intercultural understanding without treating linguistic diversity as an obstacle to be eliminated.

4. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, analytical and interpretative research methodology to examine translation, transcreation and the politics of loss in modern Indian poetry. The research is primarily based on textual interpretation, theoretical analysis and selected literary examples. It seeks to understand how poetic meaning, linguistic form, cultural memory and social identity are negotiated when literary works move between languages. The study emphasises the relationship between creative transformation and ethical responsibility in literary translation.

Research Design: The study follows a qualitative literary research design incorporating descriptive analysis, theoretical interpretation and comparative textual examination. Translation and transcreation are investigated as literary and cultural practices through which poetic works acquire new linguistic forms and readerships. The research focuses on interpretative relationships rather than experimental investigation or quantitative measurement.

Primary Sources: The primary literary examples comprise Rabindranath Tagore's English self-translation in Gitanjali, particularly Poem 35, and Priya Adarkar's English translation of Arun Kamble's Which Language Should I Speak?. These examples have been selected purposively because they illustrate significant questions concerning authorial translation, linguistic identity, cultural representation and the preservation of socially meaningful differences.

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Secondary Sources: The secondary sources include theoretical and critical writings on literary translation, transcreation and cultural representation. Important works include Roman Jakobson's on Linguistic Aspects of Translation, Walter Benjamin's The Task of the Translator, Sujit Mukherjee's Transcreating Translation: An Indian Mode, A. K. Ramanujan's on Translating a Tamil Poem, Lawrence Venuti's The Translator's Invisibility and Tejaswini Niranjana's Siting Translation. These works provide conceptual foundations for examining the linguistic, aesthetic, cultural and political dimensions of translation.

Method of Analysis: The selected texts and theoretical arguments are examined through close reading, thematic interpretation and critical analysis. Particular attention is given to poetic form, linguistic structure, cultural references, translator intervention, authorial authority and the representation of marginalised voices. The study distinguishes between formal transformations that may arise from linguistic differences and interpretative changes that may affect the social significance of poetic expression.

Theoretical Framework: The research draws upon linguistic theories of translation, philosophical perspectives on literary continuity, Indian discussions of transcreation, theories of translator visibility and postcolonial approaches to cultural representation. These perspectives are employed as complementary interpretative frameworks rather than as a single unified theory.

Comparative Approach: The analysis considers different forms of literary mediation, particularly authorial self-translation and translation undertaken by another writer. Tagore's English Gitanjali and Adarkar's translation of Kamble are discussed to examine distinct questions of literary authority, cultural meaning and linguistic identity. The study does not claim to conduct an exhaustive source-text and target-text comparison where the relevant original versions have not been examined directly.

Scope of Interpretation: The research is limited to selected theoretical works and literary examples relevant to modern Indian poetry. It does not attempt to provide a comprehensive history of Indian poetic translation or establish universal standards applicable to every linguistic tradition.

5. Discussion

The analysis of translation and transcreation in modern Indian poetry reveals that literary translation involves a complex negotiation between linguistic form, cultural meaning, poetic expression and social representation. Indian poetry emerges from a diverse linguistic environment in which literary traditions are shaped by distinctive historical experiences, regional identities, social relationships and cultural practices. When poems move from one language into another, they acquire new possibilities of readership and interpretation. However, this movement also requires decisions concerning the preservation, transformation or reconstruction of poetic features that may not possess direct equivalents in the receiving language.

5.1. Translation Beyond Word Substitution:

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"Roman Jakobson distinguishes translation within a language, translation between languages, and interpretation across different sign systems. He also argues that poetry presents particular difficulties because formal relationships carry meaning, making creative transposition central to its movement between systems."[1]

This account challenges the assumption that accurate translation consists simply of replacing individual words. A dictionary equivalent may communicate a reference while failing to reproduce emphasis, association, or tone.

For poetry, the relevant unit of interpretation may therefore be a relationship among sounds, images, or grammatical structures. A translator must decide which relationships are most significant and how to make them perceptible in another language.

Loss begins to become analytically useful when it is specified in these terms rather than treated as an undifferentiated failure.

5.2. Translation and the Continuing Life of a Poem:

"Walter Benjamin describes translation in relation to the continuing life or afterlife of a literary work. His argument moves beyond the assumption that a translation exists only to transmit information to readers unable to understand the original."[2]

This perspective permits translation to be understood as participation in literary history. A poem can enter new conversations and acquire meanings through encounters with unfamiliar readers.

However, continued circulation should not automatically be equated with faithful representation. Wider recognition may depend on selective interpretation.

The distinction matters because translation can preserve a work's presence while altering the terms on which it is understood. Critical reading must therefore ask both what becomes available and what the new presentation encourages readers to overlook.

5.3. Transcreation and Responsible Recomposition:

"Sujit Mukherjee discusses transcreation as a mode of translation associated with creative reworking in Indian literary practice, drawing particularly on P. Lal's formulations and activity. His account treats the term as part of a developing discussion about how a work can be recreated for another linguistic setting."[3]

Transcreation can acknowledge an intervention that a narrowly literal model would conceal. A translator may reshape rhythm, syntax, or arrangement to produce an effective poem in the receiving language.

Yet creativity does not remove responsibility. The label cannot justify an arbitrary replacement of the original's voice or social position.

A useful distinction is therefore between recomposition guided by the work's relationships and rewriting that makes the work merely a vehicle for the translator's preferred concerns.

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5.4. Sound, Form, and Ramanujan's Translational Practice:

"In 'On Translating a Tamil Poem', A. K. Ramanujan examines the difficulty of carrying poetic relationships across linguistic systems. His discussion shows that Tamil metrical and sound patterns do not possess straightforward English equivalents, and that apparently comparable devices can have different functions in different traditions."[4]

Although the essay addresses classical poetry, its relevance here concerns a modern poet-translator's account of mediation. It demonstrates why the loss of a particular formal device need not end the inquiry.

The more useful question is what that device accomplishes. A translator may seek another means of creating emphasis or connection, while acknowledging that the result is a transformation.

This approach makes the comparison of versions an examination of choices rather than a simple inventory of missing features.

5.5. Tagore and the Authority of Self-Translation:

"Tagore's English 'Gitanjali' identifies its poems as prose translations made by the author from Bengali. Poem 35 brings together freedom from fear, access to knowledge, truthful speech, reason, and national awakening within a compact English prose-poem."[5]

Self-translation complicates the division between author and translator. The author's authority accompanies the new version, but it does not remove the need to distinguish versions and literary contexts.

The English poem can be analysed for its own arrangement of images and aspirations. Claims about what it omits or transforms, however, require comparison with its particular Bengali source. That distinction guards against treating an internationally familiar English text as a transparent substitute for the entire source-language work. Recognition of the self-translation should coexist with recognition of its specificity.

5.6. Fluency and the Concealment of Mediation:

"Lawrence Venuti argues that fluent translations can create an appearance of transparency, making a translated work seem as though it were an original expression in the receiving language. This effect can conceal the translator's labour and the interpretive choices involved in producing the text."[6]

Applied to Indian poetry, this framework raises questions about what smoothness requires. An unfamiliar pattern of address, a marked register, or an unresolved cultural reference may be removed to meet expectations of effortless reading.

The result need not be inaccurate in every respect. The concern is that fluency can make its own costs difficult to notice.

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Translator visibility can counter this effect through credited authorship, clear edition information, and concise explanations of significant decisions. Such practices help readers understand what kind of access the translation provides.

5.7. Translation as a Political Relationship:

"Tejaswini Niranjana examines translation as a practice implicated in unequal power relations. Her analysis of colonial representation challenges the assumption that translating another culture necessarily produces neutral knowledge about it and considers the possibility of translation as resistance and transformation."[7]

This framework shifts attention from individual wording to the authority surrounding a version. Selection, publication, and interpretation can influence which forms of cultural life become representative.

For the present argument, the political question concerns who is permitted to speak and under what conditions that speech becomes recognisable as poetry.

A translation may expand access while also fitting a work into an established image of its culture. Responsible criticism must keep both possibilities available rather than presuming either betrayal or liberation in advance.

5.8. Caste and Voice in 'Which Language Should I Speak?':

"In Priya Adarkar's translation of Arun Kamble's 'Which Language Should I Speak?', the speaker encounters conflicting demands from a grandfather and a Brahmin teacher. One commands attachment to inherited speech, the other demands linguistic correctness. The concluding question exposes the pressure created by these competing authorities."[8]

The poem makes language a relationship of belonging and discipline. Correctness is not presented as a purely technical matter, it is spoken from a socially authoritative position.

Its movement into English creates a further interpretive challenge. Readers need to perceive that the conflict concerns unequal claims over speech, not merely a choice between two vocabularies.

This example gives the article's concern with loss a specific form. If a translation neutralised the conflict between the voices, it could preserve the general topic of language while weakening the poem's social argument.

5.9. Distinguishing Formal Loss from Social Erasure:

Not every change in translation carries the same consequence. A sound pattern may be impossible to reproduce directly, while an omitted social distinction may result from an avoidable interpretive decision.

The distinction requires close reading. Critics should identify what has changed, how it functions in the source, and what the receiving text offers in its place.

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A translation can compensate effectively for one formal loss while creating another difficulty. It may also preserve unfamiliar words without making the relationships surrounding them intelligible.

An adequate assessment therefore moves beyond the opposition between literal fidelity and creative freedom. It asks whether the translation preserves the poem's significant tensions and gives readers sufficient grounds to encounter them.

5.10. English Mediation and the Question of Representation:

English can provide access across linguistic boundaries, but no single translation can represent all the differences within a literary culture. An anthology or selected volume necessarily presents a limited arrangement of voices.

The critical issue is whether that limitation remains visible. Readers should be able to distinguish a particular selection from a comprehensive account and a particular version from the only possible English expression.

Translation between Indian languages also deserves consideration within this discussion. Treating English as the inevitable destination can restrict the imagined routes through which poems encounter new readers.

The metaphor of a bridge is most useful when it allows several crossings rather than suggesting that one privileged route exhausts the possibilities of communication.

5.11. An Ethics of Accountable Creativity:

An ethical translation does not need to claim that nothing has changed. It should make important changes answerable to the work being translated.

This requires identifying the source text, crediting the translator, distinguishing translation from freer adaptation, and explaining consequential interventions where necessary. Parallel texts and multiple versions can assist readers without implying that every reader must become fluent in the source language.

Such practices connect creativity with scrutiny. They allow a translation to function as a poem while remaining open to comparison.

The central obligation is to preserve the possibility of further encounter. A successful version should encourage attention to the work's language, history, and speaking position rather than presenting its own interpretation as final.

6. Conclusion:

Translation and transcreation enable Indian poetry to reach new readers, but they also reorganise the relationships through which a poem communicates. Sound, form, cultural association, and social voice cannot be assumed to move together without change.

The examples considered here show why loss must be identified precisely. Tagore's self-translation raises questions about authorial authority and the distinction between versions.

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Adarkar's translation of Kamble makes the social conflict within linguistic choice especially visible. Theoretical accounts clarify how creativity, literary continuity, fluency, and power affect these encounters.

The expression 'broken tongues' therefore names interrupted recognition rather than linguistic deficiency. An ethical bridge does not erase difference to make passage effortless. It provides access while acknowledging mediation, preserving significant tensions, and leaving readers free to compare, question, and seek other versions.

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