

Indian Writing in Translation: Narrative Paradigm and Thematic Concerns

Dr. Premila Swamy D

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities,
Ramaiah Institute of Technology, Bangalore, India.

dpremilaswami@gmail.com

Abstract

Short story as a literary genre is a popular form of creative expression. A single incident or few incidents may form the plot, characterization, themes and setting of the short story. Many writers have tried their hands with this form before exploring into writing novels. Indian writers like R.K Narayan, Ruskin Bond, and Anita Desai have written stories in English. In this study, I have chosen the translated works of Indian writers to analyse the composition and narrative pattern of the stories. Two translated works in English are taken for study; one is Amrita Pritam's short story 'The Stench of Kerosene' and the other is C.S.Lakshmi's 'A Kitchen in the corner of the house'. The first is originally written in Punjabi and the other story taken for study is originally in Tamil. Two female writers belonging to different geographical territory, but writing short stories for their creative expression are taken for exploration. The paper explores how the writers vary in their narrative patterns but raise gender concerns and question structures that afflict both the sexes.

Key words: Narrative, repetition, metaphor, gender, construct, structures

Introduction and Background study

Narrative strategy is a plan, a way and an art of expressing the story to the reader. It not only helps the narrator to narrate the story but also to articulate the intended thematic concern. Be it fiction or short story, the writer adopts various methods and techniques to convey the various undercurrents of the plot. In the contemporary scenario, the traditional linear method of narration with a beginning, middle and a happy ending with a realistic approach gave way for more explorative forms. Indian writing in English and the translated works in English no doubt have come with various techniques of narration. Usages of myths, tales, folklores, fragmented narratives, multiple voices, revisiting the epics, magic realism are such postmodern tendencies in the art of narration. India's past and history is also interwoven into the text. Contemporary writers use history as subtext to unfold the constructedness of many

ideas, concepts and truths and to interrogate the concept of nation and nationality. Another striking character is the use of Indianized English. Coining of words, usage of regional words and phrases, code switching and code mixing are employed to bring in flexible English resonating the cultural nuances. Thus Indian literature in English and Translations have broken new grounds in form, techniques and themes.

In this paper, two regional writers, namely Amrita Pritam and C.S.Lakshmi who basically write in the native tongue are taken and the translated text is taken for study in terms of narration and thematic concern. Amrita Pritam was a remarkable Punjabi writer of poems, short stories and novels. C. S. Lakshmi is a Tamil writer who majorly wrote short stories. Both the writers take their themes from the life that surrounds us, more often focussing on the social aspects of the middle class families. Family becomes central to the plot. The two short stories taken for comparative analysis are Amrita Pritam's Stench of Kerosene and C. S. Lakshmi's A Kitchen in the corner of the house. The thematic concern of the writers in these two short story is family, tradition, beliefs and gender issues. The paper will focus on the narrative dimension and also on the tussle between tradition and gender performance.

Textual Interpretation and Analysis

Amrita Pritam, an Indian novelist basically wrote in Punjabi and Hindi. She is known for her remarkable work Pinjar which was later made into a film with the same title. Her works deal with partition of India and concerns for the underprivileged and women. She has received Sahitya Akademi award, Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan for her notable works. The short story 'Stench of Kerosene' by Amrita Pritam was originally written in Punjabi and later translated into English by Khuswant Singh. It has a third person narrator who represents the author herself and gives details of the actual happenings in the characters of the story. The story has a village setting; hence nature becomes abundant as the story moves. The story begins with the sound, the neighing of a mare. Guleri, the female protagonist longs to visit her parent's house which was on high ground, a few miles away from her husband's village. We get to understand that even though her parents' house was close by, she was not allowed to visit them every year after harvest. The harvest season and festival becomes a metaphor of joy, meeting and social gathering. This season is highly anticipated.

“Guleri always counted the days to the harvest. When autumn breezes cleared the skies of the monsoon clouds she thought of little besides her home in Chamba. She went about her daily chores-fed the cattle, cooked food for her husband’s parents and then sat back to work out how long it would be before someone would come for her from her parent’s village.” P 102

When it was time for Guleri to leave for her parent’s home, she pleaded her husband Manak to come during the harvest festival. But Manak insisted her to stay back. But Guleri did not give in to Manak’s request and started her journey to her parents place. Manak accompanied her to some distance and on the way she pleaded him to play his flute which she carried along. Guleri’s journey and the music from the flute becomes symbolic. The music foregrounds the impending danger. The reader gets a sense of some disturbing element to happen.

Manak and Guleri had been married for seven years but she had never borne a child. Manak’s mother had made a secret resolve to get him remarried during this period. This made Manak plead Guleri to not leave him which she had no clue about. Manak is true to his wife but customs make him to obey his mother. His mother brought him a second wife, paying five hundred rupees. The narrative says

“Obedient to his mother and to custom, Manak’s body responded to the new woman. But his heart was dead within him.” p104

When Guleri learns about his second marriage, she soaks herself with kerosene and sets to fire.

The title of the story generates a sense of suspense and at the end brings in the element of surprise. Kerosene signifies fire and there is an arousal of impending danger. This technique of foregrounding is often used by writers to slowly reveal the catastrophe. The sad music played by Manak through the flute is again indicative. A flute suggests music to be cherished but here it is a melancholic tune that is played. Though the story uses third person narrative, yet Guleri’s point of view is also presented. The story also has brief dialogues.

The language used is no doubt simple, concise and easy to comprehend. Abundance of Indian words like the names of people, places and things set the tone of an Indian English fiction.

Usage of Imagery, similes, metaphors and repetition is a way of conveying the story. As the story has a village setting, lot of images associated to the village life and nature finds place in

the narrative. The story takes us through the simple lives of village dwellers and how harvest festival embodies joy, promise and togetherness. The much anticipated harvest festival this time becomes a doom for the central character Guleri. Although Manak did not directly indicate his mother's intention he tried his best to convince her not to visit her parents. His mother waits for this time to get him remarried.

It is to be noted that gender plays a crucial role in the lives of men and women. Even in the remotest village, it has a significance decision making character. Gender, as observed by many theorists is deeply rooted in our psyche, tradition, culture and beliefs. We are constantly in the clutches of gender codes set by social codes. Patriarchy and gender consciousness is something one is confined to.

Dominant discourses like patriarchy enforce women's primary role to attain motherhood. In Indian customs, we have rituals for attaining puberty, baby shower and so on to glorify fertility and motherhood. The attainment of motherhood in Indian social structures becomes a symbol of pride for the family. If a son is born, it is more gracious occasion of the women. Such is the social structure and these structures become so rigid that it almost becomes natural and common. In the story, we find Manak caught in these social structures. Although, he is fond of his wife, he has no say to his mother's words. In one way, women seem to be the torch bearers of tradition and beliefs and are more rigid in practicing the same. Guleri's mother in law pays and gets her son a second wife just to bear him a child. Being childless is considered to be a flaw. But it is noticed in the narrative that Guleri is very cheerful, young and dynamic. The narrative is not suggestive about Guleri's unhappiness for not bearing a child for the family. Through this, Amrita Pritam, the writer is perhaps suggesting that although we may accept our flaws, our limitations and try to lead a normal life, the social codes are dominant forces that do not permit it. These structures need to be revamped for the betterment of the society at large.

The narrative also suggests that it is not only women but also the male members who need to think and act as per the gender roles. Gender performance is normalcy. Through this short story, the writer seem to question these social structures, gender performance and rise voice for subverting such 'normalcy'.

Men try to suppress their emotions like sorrow and do not display them in public as it is expected by the said 'codes'. Even men become slaves to customs and practices. The text explores man-woman relationship. In a patriarchal power structure, both man and woman

succumb to circumstances, social codes and tradition. Emotions are suppressed. Older women seem to be the torch bearers of traditions and customs which are passed down. Psychological pressures insist men and women to behave in a certain way.

‘Why do you croak like an old woman?’ asked his mother severely. Be a man’ p104

This command is given by Manak’s mother. She represents the older class of women who are torch bearers of tradition and endorse patriarchy.

The other text taken for comparative analysis is Ambai’s short story ‘A kitchen in the corner of the house’ written in 1988. Ambai is pen name of C.S Lakshmi. All her works are originally written in the Indian regional language Tamil but are available in English, translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. In Ambai’s works food and cooking become integral part of the text. Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator says, “She uses examples of food and cooking to highlight certain themes in her work: frames and boundaries; order, control and power relations within boundaries, and pleasures outside them.”

The narrative is set in Rajasthan, a story of a joint family system where Papaji, the being the head and patriarch of the family. His sons and daughters in law and his widowed mother all live together in this joint family system. Kishan, his youngest son has married Minakshi who is from Mysore, south India. She is only one outsider in the family who has come to live in this Rajasthani community. The narrative has lot of food lexical and almost every sentence deals with the process of preparation and cooking of a variety of food dishes. Women seem to spend their maximum time in the process of domesticity. The title of the story echoes the idea of space, the proximity of the kitchen space. In the story, the kitchen space is the most neglected corner. Although the entire family relishes in having variety of meals and the patriarch shows great interest in the display of hospitality and wealth to his guests, this cornered space of kitchen cries for attention and renovation, but fails in vain. The narrative repeatedly describes the exterior of the house and also the kitchen space, bringing the attention of the reader to the spacial zone given to the household and to the members. The story begins with a description of the kitchen:

“A row of rooms lie railway carriages. Right at the end, the kitchen, stuck on in a careless manner. Two windows. Underneath one, the tap and basin. The latter was too small to place even a single plate in it. Underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge. As soon as the taps above were opened, the feet standing beneath would begin to tingle. Within ten minutes

there would be small flood underfoot. Soles and heels would start cracking from that constant wetness. Kishan's mother- called JiJi by everyone – would present a soothing ointment for chapped heels on the very first day one entered the kitchen, cooked a meal and was given the traditional gold bangle". (p49)

Papaji's youngest son, Kishan is an architect. It is interesting to note that much of the narrative goes in the description of the architect of the house and also the process of food preparation. Kishan's wife Minakshi is a south Indian married in this Rajasthan community. The narrative also brings in the idea of insider/outsider concept. For Papaji, Minakshi is an outsider. He doesn't like Minakshi's articulation regarding the inconvenience in the kitchen space and the request for renovation. Women of the household suffered in silence and this was expected from Minakshi too. The kitchen is the most neglected corner space in the house where women spend their maximum time in that darkness. The narrative unfolds thus;

"All the same, the actual details, the concrete facts of the kitchen and its space didn't seem to matter to them. It was almost as if such things didn't actually exist. In their family houses, one crossed the wide stone-paved front courtyard and the main room before reaching the kitchen in a dark corner. A zero watt light bulb hung there. The women appeared there like shadows, their heads covered, their deep-coloured skirts melting into the darkness of the room, slapping and kneading the chappati dough or stirring the fragrant, spicy dal." (P 51)

The title of the story echoes the undercurrents of the social structure. In the social and family structural systems, the kitchen space is relegated to women. Women's labour of cooking and domestic chores is taken for granted and are never valued. The narrative also throws light on the plight of women in our society where women are still confined to domesticity. They cry for personal space. When a outsider like Minakshi voices her concern, she is immediately rebuked. The text also brings our attention to the process of gender construction. When Kishan helps his wife in slicing the onions, Papaji retorts:

"It seems we might as well present you with a gold bangle and be done with it" (P 51)

The bangle is suggestive of feminine identity and Papaji's sarcasm comes in when a male participates in the role of a women.

The idea of processing gender roles is described through the process of food preparation. As gender theorist, Judith Butler says that gender is not natural, but is institutionalized and all

succumb to this because of social and family structures and pressures. This very idea of gender construction and setting the norms needs to be subverted

In the text, Kishan and Minakshi voice their concerns and question traditional practices that suppress both men and women.

The research has taken two short stories written originally in regional language and then translated to English. The first writer being a Punjabi and the second a Tamil writer. The paper explores how two women writers coming from different geographical backgrounds deal with the narrative art and their concerns. Both the short stories have different narrative patterns. The first story 'A stench of Kerosene' has a rural and village setting. It has a pastoral setting. The outside description, of the locale and surrounding has a picturesque effect. The story revolves around a small family. Similes, images and metaphors are used as a narrative device. A small flash back to narrate the past is also used. In the second story taken for analysis, it is the household description and food making process that the narrative technique relies on. The psychological dimension of the characters is not revealed. This happens in the other story taken for analysis. Both the short stories reveal the external, the surroundings but not the inner psychological working of the mind of the characters portrayed. The texts taken for study use different narrative strategies but seem to voice similar that gender is a process of social construction and both men and women fall prey to the gender codes and structures. Both the titles have powerful connotation, the kerosene, the source of inflammation and Kitchen, a space unavoidable but largely neglected. The titles are appropriate to the short story. Both the writers have no doubt addressed the issue of gender formation, social and family structuring and shown how both genders are victims to these structures. These structures need to be relooked, reframed and redefined for the betterment of mankind.

References

A Clutch of Indian Masterpieces, Edited by David Davidar, 2016.

Ambai. A kitchen in the corner of the house, trans., Lakshmi Homstrom, Critical Quarterly, Vol. 34, No. 2 . Pages 49-63 June 1992 Print

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. And ed. H.H. Parsley. London: Picador Classics Books, 1988. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble; Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge 1999. Print.

Das, Bijay Kumar. *Postmodern Indian English literature*. Atlantic Publishers, 2003. Print.

Lyotard Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* . 1979. Print

Short Fiction from South India, Edited by Subashree Krishnaswamy and K. Srilata, 2007

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarchy>