

Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House": Translation as Socio-cultural Documentation

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Abstract

The culture and tradition of a society is preserved through literature. Every text is embedded in the socio-cultural aspects of the society. Translation can also serve the purpose of documenting and preserving a society's culture, tradition and customs. This paper attempts to explain how a translated text, documents the socio-cultural aspects of the particular society in which the original text is written. Ambai, a Tamil writer, is known for her excellence of language and her social consciousness. In Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House", the concept gets complex, because in this short story, the writer records the mundane routine of Rajasthani women. She writes in Tamil about the Rajasthani culture and the treatment of women in their society. So, the text itself is an amalgam of Tamil narration and Rajasthani culture. This story is translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The translated work also becomes a documentation of the Rajasthani culture and the position of women in their society. It reaches a wide range of audience, when the text is translated into a language like English. Thus, this paper compares the original text and the translated text to elucidate that translation can be used as a tool to preserve the culture and traditions of a society.

Keywords: Ambai, *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*, translation, literature, culture, society, women

C. S. Lakshmi is an Indian Feminist Writer, who writes under the pen name Ambai. Her Tamil short stories are known for realistic and feministic aspects. Her works are translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. This story talks about the treatment of women in Rajasthani society. The life style of women in the society, their values, customs, traditions and beliefs are portrayed very realistically in this story.

Any society, irrespective of their language, traditions and customs, has volumes and volumes of literature. Writers use literature as a tool for Socio-cultural documentation. Literature of a society is restricted to a particular region because of the language in which it is written. That is when translation comes into play. When a work of art is translated into various other languages, it gives an opportunity for the world to get an idea about the socio-cultural aspects of a different society. If not for translation, no one would be able to access other language literature.

There is a false notion that translated works lack originality, and Translators are mere imitators. But a translator too puts equal effort and creativity, just like a creative writer. A translator must have in mind the socio-cultural aspects of the language in which it is translated, without distorting the meaning and essence. For example, season like summer is so hot in our region. It wouldn't make sense if a translator, translates "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day" literally, in a country where summer is unpleasant. So, a translator must know the socio-cultural aspects of both the target language and the original language.

This story "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" is a hybrid text because, it records the mundane routine of Rajasthani women and their culture and customs, in Tamil language. Thus, it is a mixture of Tamil syntax and Rajasthani context. The writer records the position of Rajasthani women, their mundane routine and their submissive role in Rajasthani society. As she is a Tamil writer, she records all these in Tamil language. Thus, Tamil readers also get a view of the life of the women in Rajasthan. Though the text is contextually set in Rajasthan, it is written with such reality and universality, that Tamil readers could also relate with the situation of those women.

The writer has used certain certain Hindi words in transliteration. For example, the characters are addressed as ஜீஜி (Jiji), பப்பாஜி (Papaji), படி ஜீஜி (Badi-jiji), பாபிஜி (Babhiji). The names of the beverages and food items are also transliterated from Hindi to Tamil. For example, பிகானீர் சேவ் (Bikaner sev), கேஸர் கஸ்தூரி (Kesar Kasturi), சாய் (chai- tea), மேதி பரோட்டா (methi paratha), கபாப் (kebab). Ambai uses the transliterated Hindi words of the food items and the relations because they are culture specific. This gives Tamil readers a basic understanding of the food items and the way they address the relations. As this novel is about the life of women which is tied to the kitchen, the author uses the exact words in Tamil translation to give the real flavor. The translator too uses the same transliteration of these words, except for சாய் (chai). Chai or tea is something that is common in every culture, either west or east. So as tea is a common beverage, the author uses the English term itself.

It is a stereotype that a woman must excell in the art of cooking, to impress her husband and his relatives. In fact, there is even a local proverb, that the best way to reach a man's heart is through his stomach. Kitchen and Women are believed to be twin souls. Most of the time in a woman's life is spent in the family kitchen. It has been a normal practice in India that it's the duty of the woman to cook at home and husband go to work outside. In fact, the girl children are brought up from their childhood with a hint that they must learn cooking, which is an inevitable art for a woman to survive in her husband's home. Even the toys given to a girl child will be Kitchen set or utensils. This story realistically portrays the stereotypes and practices followed commonly not only in Rajasthan but also in all Indian states.

This story revolves around the life of elder and younger women in a Rajasthani family. Papaji is the head of the family and Jiji is his wife. Bari-Jiji is Papaji's Step mother. And there are three daughter-in-law. Kishan's wife is Minakshi. She is a rebel in the group of submissive wives. The story opens with the description of the kitchen. The house has rooms like railway compartments and the kitchen is very small with a small basin that too without a ledge. As the water from the tap leaks

while washing the dishes, the kitchen is filled with dirty water. They have to stand in the water and cook, which causes chapped heels. It is a tradition to give gold bangle to the daughters-in-law who cooks delicious dishes. The author gives an ironic comment that, as soon as one gets the bangle from the head of the family, they also get the ointment for their chapped heels. This symbolically shows that they are losing so much in order to get appreciation from their husband. “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.” This shows the vanity of their practice in presenting the gold bangle which is just a symbol of appreciation that cannot ease their pain while standing in the dirty water. Though the rebel daughter in law Minakshi asks Papaji to extend the kitchen and build a bigger basin, he never considers it.

The food habits and hospitality of the Rajasthani people are also portrayed in this story. The men will never leave their neighbours without having a meal or a snack or at least a sherbet. Papaji says “How can we allow you to drink plain water? At least have some sherbet.” So Jiji goes and prepares not only sherbet but also kebabs and egg fry. Papaji also orders Jiji to bring the methi parathas prepared in the morning. “The visitor would be forced to accept defeat. ‘All right then. Let me eat my meal with you.’” This shows their love to serve their guests and neighbours with delicacies and beverages. “On a small stove, in the corner of the kitchen, there was always water boiling for tea. If anybody they knew appeared at the threshold of the house at meal times” This shows that they won’t prepare food for the guest after they had arrived, rather they will always be ready with supplies in case any guest arrives at the meal time. This also shows people used to visit each other’s house and there was a strong sense of bonding and love among the kin, unlike these days.

The author also shows a different side to this story of hospitality. Though the women in the house keep serving the men and others with food, beverages and snacks, their efforts went unnoticed. The men in the house acted as if “all that delicious food which enslaved the tongue appeared as from a magic carpet.” Their dedication and hard work to prepare all the food, went unnoticed. The women in the house too, acted as if they are doing their duty and they expect nothing in return.

The politics within the women in the family is also shown in this story. Jiji is like the “queen” of all the other woman in the house. She was married at the age of 15 and the first task given to her was to knead 5kg of flour. During that time Bari-Jiji was the head and the holder of the keys. But after the death of Bari-Jiji’s husband, she was overthrown from her throne. Then Jiji became the holder of keys. The other woman in the house must cook what is ordered by Jiji. She has the right to monitor everything from the spices they use to the oil that is left over. After the death of Bari-Jiji’s husband, she was barred from eating meat or drinking Kasthuri kesar. She was served a plain vegetarian meal. This also shows how the widows are treated in that society. It also explains how a woman’s position in the house is given by her husband. It was the order of the society that without her husband a woman is nothing. This shows the patriarchy followed in their society.

All the daughters-in-law are well educated but they are made to serve the men at home. Even Jiji says that she wants an “educated, fair skinned, quiet” bride for her son. Minakshi is a well read and educated woman. Radha bhabhiji is also a graduate in maths. But all her ability in calculation was

useful only when they are arranging things for a trip. She was found “muttering to herself, ‘The children have to be bathed. It might be a good idea to take two or three extra pants in a plastic bag. Priya sometimes forgets to ask. I must roll up five or six rugs for spreading on the grass. How many tiny babies will there be? Four. Milk powder. Glaxo for Minoo. Archana’s baby takes Lactogen. Mustn’t forget the packet of biscuits. Mine only likes salty ones. If there aren’t any, we’ll stop on the way. Otherwise the child won’t stop crying. And he hates that. Sugar. Mustn’t forget the spoon. Serving spoons. Plates.” All her academic talents were restricted only to count the number of babies in the house and calculate the amount of food needed for them.

Kusuma Bhabhiji is also an MA in Politics and diploma in French. “It seemed that collecting a diploma in some language or the other was a necessary part of waiting for marriage. If the bridegroom had a job in foreign parts, then it seems the knowledge of a foreign language would come in useful.” This shows the pathetic plight of the women, where their education is not seen as empowerment rather a preferable quality to be eligible for a “perfect daughter-in-law”. Even the kids are brought up in a way that a boy child says that he aspires to become a pilot and the girl child says, “I’ll make the thapatis in my house.’ ‘How cleverly she talks,’ Jiji laughed.” A kid whose speech is not fully developed is conditioned that she has to stay at home and cool all day like her mother.

When Jiji got married, her mother told her two important mantras that are to be followed by a woman. “Take control over the kitchen. Never forget to make yourself attractive” These two were the goals of a woman. Only at the end of her life she realises the importance of ‘self’. So long she believed that it’s the kitchen and the key that gave her the power, but when Minakshi asks her who she really is, it dawns upon her.

“Jiji, no strength comes to you from that kitchen; nor from that necklace nor bangle nor headband nor forehead jewel.

Authority cannot come to you from these things. That authority is Papaji’s.

From all that be free

be free

be free.

But if I free myself . . . then . . . what is left?”

It is a rhetorical question that nothing is left of her identity other than the kitchen. Thus, the end of the story calls for all the women to go into an inner journey to find out their real self.

Though this story is set in Rajasthan, it is no way different from the lives of the women in Tamilnadu or any other state. Thus, the translated story not only serves as a documentation of the socio-cultural aspects of Rajasthani society but also a wide range of Indian culture where women are treated the same. Thus, the translated work serves as a tool for documenting the food habits, their hospitality, their treatment of women, the plight of married woman and the life of a widow, and also the conditioned minds of the girl children. Thus, all these aspects are brought out in the translated work and it serves as a Socio-cultural document.

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