

Beyond Words: Negotiating Language and Cultural Meaning in Select Gujarati Short Stories in Translation

Dr. Purvi Pandya

Email Id: purvihp123@gmail.com

Abstract:

Translation plays a crucial role in facilitating communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Beyond its functional significance, translation enables the circulation of literary, cultural, and intellectual traditions, allowing diverse voices to participate in global discourse. Translation is not only a linguistic transfer from one language to another but a complex process which requires negotiation of cultural meanings, identities, values, and contexts. This paper highlights the ways in which language and culture is represented in selected translated Gujarati short stories. This paper also examines the linguistic and cultural backgrounds in translation of Gujarati idioms, proverbs, dialectal expressions, social practices, customs, beliefs, symbols. In this way, the paper highlights that the translator negotiates with linguistic and cultural references while translating the Gujarati text into English to retain the tone, context and original meaning of the text. The literal translation may not be possible in communicating the cultural significant embedded expressions and meaning. By translating Gujarati short fiction into English, and communicating the linguistic and cultural context into another language, this paper also creates opportunities for cross-cultural discussion and questions cultural specificity, equivalence, untranslatability, and representation in translation. Thus, the target text is not simply a linguistic reproduction but a dynamic cultural text that reincarnate the source text.

Keywords: Gujarati short stories, literary translation, language, culture, cultural meaning, translation studies, cultural identity, untranslatability.

In an increasingly interconnected and multilingual world, translation plays a crucial role in facilitating communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Beyond its functional significance, translation enables the circulation of literary, cultural, and intellectual traditions, allowing diverse voices to participate in global discourse.

The growing influence of English as a global language has intensified the demand for translations of regional literary works. While English facilitates wider circulation, it also introduces challenges related to cultural representation and interpretive authority. This study responds to these challenges by examining how Gujarati cultural realities, idiomatic expressions, and gendered experiences are negotiated in translation, emphasizing the translator's responsibility as a cultural mediator.

Gujarati literature possesses a rich tradition marked by distinctive narrative forms, cultural practices, and thematic concerns. However, its presence in English translation remains limited when compared to other

Indian literatures. The translation of Gujarati fiction, especially works by women writers, contributes to a more inclusive literary canon and fosters intercultural dialogue.

Theoretical Insights:

Translation theory has evolved through foundational works and critical debates that reflect broader shifts in linguistics, philosophy, and cultural studies. Friedrich Schleiermacher's lecture "*On the Different Methods of Translating*" (1813) marks a pivotal moment in translation philosophy, introducing concepts that remain central to the discipline. Schleiermacher distinguishes between two principal approaches: moving the reader toward the writer (foreignization) and moving the writer toward the reader (domestication). He asserts, "There are only two ways of translating: either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him" (Schleiermacher 49).

In "*After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*" (1975), Steiner redefines translation as not simply the transfer of text between languages, but as the essential process underlying all communication and interpretation. Steiner situates translation at the center of human understanding, arguing that even within a single language, meaning is always mediated, negotiated, and, to some extent, translated.

In "*Toward a Science of Translating*" (1964), Nida distinguishes between "formal equivalence," which stresses close adherence to the form and content of the source text, and "dynamic equivalence," which aims to elicit a comparable response from the target audience. Nida states, "The goal of dynamic equivalence is to produce in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message, first in meaning and secondly in style" (Nida 166). His systematic approach, rooted in linguistics and communication theory, transformed translation practices and established the groundwork for subsequent theoretical and practical developments.

Sussan Bassnett expands the argument in her book "*Constructing Cultures*" that translation is not only a linguistic act but also a form of rewriting that shapes literary canons and cultural identities. She notes, "no translation is ever produced in a vacuum; every text is translated within a specific cultural and political context" (Bassnett and Lefevere 8). Bassnett's scholarship has been pivotal in conceptualizing translation as a dynamic and culturally situated process.

Harish Trivedi has made in-depth analysis of translation in India and the Global South. In his influential essay "*Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation*," Trivedi argues that "the Indian practice of translation cannot be fully understood without reference to the colonial encounter, which made English both a language of power and a bridge between Indian languages themselves" (Trivedi 6). Trivedi emphasizes the vibrancy and diversity of Indian literary traditions, observing that "translation in India is not simply a transfer of meaning, but an act deeply embedded in questions of identity, ideology, and cultural politics" (Trivedi 10). He clarifies that translations among Indian languages foster inter-regional dialogue and national cohesion, while translations involving English facilitate broader global exchanges and the negotiation of modernity.

To sum up, translation is not just a language exercise; it is also a place where different cultures, histories, and ways of knowing can come together and talk. The variety of frameworks, such as equivalence, functionalist, postcolonial, and deconstructive paradigms, shows that translation is both a practice and a way to think critically. It looks at ideas like faithfulness, authority, and identity, and it stresses how important it is for the translator to have control over how meaning is made in different situations.

Translation in India and Gujarat:

India is a country rich in linguistic and cultural diversity, and has long held a prominent position in the history of translation. To quote Sujit Mukherjee,

“What we don’t yet have in India is a theory or theories of translation. This may be because we have been practising translation for so many years – so many centuries, in fact – that we forgot to stop and theorise.”

Translation theory and practice in India have been influenced by longstanding multilingual traditions, colonial interactions, and post-independence cultural politics. The field has developed from ancient scriptural translations to contemporary academic frameworks that address issues of identity, power, and globalization. Given the multitude of languages spoken across its various states, India can be viewed as both a linguistic and a translation hub.

Translation theory in India synthesizes global frameworks—cultural, hermeneutic, feminist, and postcolonial—with local realities such as multilingualism, identity politics, and social justice. This body of theory emphasizes that translation is not a neutral act but a dynamic practice that negotiates meaning, power, and representation within a linguistically diverse nation.

Gujarati literature, which has developed over more than a thousand years, constitutes a significant and dynamic tradition within Indian literary history. It includes a wide range of genres such as poetry, prose, drama, and folklore, each reflecting the cultural diversity and historical complexity of the Gujarati-speaking community. Throughout its history, Gujarati literature has articulated the experiences, aspirations, and values of Gujarati society, creating works that engage with both universal themes and regional distinctiveness. From classical devotional poetry to modern fiction, Gujarati literature continues to develop, providing critical insights into the region’s history, culture, and identity. According to Mansukhlal Jhaveri,

“Gujarati literature, though rooted in the medieval bhakti tradition, has shown remarkable adaptability, absorbing influences from Sanskrit, Prakrit, Persian, and later English, while retaining its regional ethos.”

- (History of Gujarati Literature, Sahitya Akademi, 1978)

The evolution of the Gujarati short story illustrates its significant adaptability and resilience amid shifting historical contexts and literary movements. Originating in moralistic and reform-oriented narratives, the genre has progressed through phases of realism, modernism, and post-modern experimentation. Throughout these transformations, it has documented the changing social and cultural milieu while serving as a medium for self-reflection and societal critique. By encapsulating complex emotions, interpersonal dynamics, and existential questions within a concise narrative structure, the Gujarati short story continues to engage, challenge, and inspire its readership. Its capacity to convey the core of human experience in a succinct yet meaningful way secures its lasting relevance and stature within the literary canon. Consequently, the Gujarati short story persists as a dynamic and influential literary form, reflecting both the particularities and the universality of human existence.

Cultural Stigma of Widowhood in Ek Cigarette Ek Dhoopsadi by Ila Arab Mehta

Ila Arab Mehta is a prominent contemporary feminist writer whose work interrogates women’s desires, frustrations, and existential dilemmas in domestic and social contexts. In her narratives, ordinary objects acquire complex symbolic significance, as illustrated by the line: “Ek cigarette ane ek dhupsadi, stri na swapna ane tyag na pratik chhe” (“A cigarette and an incense stick are symbols of a woman’s dreams

and sacrifices”). Through such imagery, Mehta’s narrative elevates the mundane into a nuanced expression of longing, repression, and selfhood.

Translating Mehta’s work demands careful attention to both literal and metaphorical dimensions. The translator should maintain the richness and nuance of the imagery while ensuring clarity for readers unfamiliar with Gujarati culture. Preserving the cultural significance of domestic symbols alongside their feminist implications allows Mehta’s allegories of longing and sacrifice to resonate across linguistic and cultural contexts.

“The portrayal of widows in literature serves as a reflection of the societal attitudes towards gender, tradition, and personal autonomy.... The shifting portrayal of widows in literature is deeply intertwined with changing social and cultural contexts.... The postmodern perspective allows for a more critical and diverse examination of widowhood, challenging established norms and offering new possibilities for representation.” (Thirumurugan 155)

The story “*Ek Cigarette Ek Dhoopsadi*” by Ila Arab Mehta offers a nuanced critique of the cultural stigma attached to widowhood. The narrative establishes a significant cultural contrast between two generations of women, positioning Ba and Shubha as representative figures of distinct historical, emotional, and ideological contexts. Through this generational perspective, the text examines how cultural frameworks influence responses to widowhood, suffering, and the formation of personal identity.

Ba, as a member of the earlier generation, exemplifies the traditional ideal of womanhood, grounded in duty (dharma) and spiritual devotion (bhakti). Her life demonstrates a culturally endorsed model of resilience, wherein personal grief is integrated into familial responsibility and religious faith. Her widowhood is contextualized by her role as a mother, which provides emotional stability and social legitimacy. This role enables Ba to transform her suffering into caregiving and moral guidance. The eventual professional success of her daughter reinforces the cultural narrative that sacrifice and endurance lead to meaningful fulfillment. Ba’s life thus illustrates a culturally idealized path in which spirituality and duty serve as mechanisms for coping with loss.

In contrast, Shubha embodies the modern generation, whose experience of widowhood is characterized by psychological conflict and emotional fragmentation. Widowed within four months of marriage, she is deprived of companionship as well as the culturally stabilizing roles of motherhood and extended domestic responsibility. Her youth amplifies her sense of loss, leaving her to confront unfulfilled desires and unresolved emotional attachments. Unlike Ba, Shubha does not derive immediate comfort from traditional structures such as religion or familial duty. Instead, she remains in a state of internal conflict, especially when faced with the prospect of new romantic attachment.

Shubha’s characterization also reflects shifting cultural norms. As an independent woman who smokes, she departs from Shubha’s characterization, further reflecting evolving cultural norms. Her independence, as evidenced by her smoking, marks a departure from conventional ideals of feminine behavior. This detail is symbolically significant, representing both autonomy and alienation. While it indicates liberation from traditional constraints, it also highlights her emotional unrest and lack of stable grounding. Her reluctance to pursue a new relationship demonstrates the enduring influence of cultural expectations regarding widowhood, even within a modern context that appears to allow greater freedom. Ba’s life is structured by clearly defined cultural roles that provide meaning and direction, whereas Shubha’s experience reflects the ambiguities of modernity, where increased freedom is accompanied by emotional uncertainty and existential conflict.

From a cultural perspective, the narrative highlights the evolving nature of social values and coping mechanisms. It emphasizes the limitations inherent in both traditional and modern frameworks, demonstrating that neither ensures emotional resolution. Rather, it is the interplay among culture, experience, and personal agency that ultimately determines how individuals navigate loss and reconstruct their identities.

Cultural Symbolism and Resistance in Bandhani by Bindu Bhatt

Bindu Bhatt is recognized for integrating cultural traditions into feminist narrative frameworks. In her story Bandhani, the traditional textile art serves as an extended metaphor for women's constrained yet creative existence, as articulated in the line: "Bandhani stri na Jeevan nu bandhan ane kalpana nu pratik chhe" ("Bandhani is a symbol of a woman's bondage and imagination"). The intricate patterns of tie-dye reflect the paradox of restriction and artistry in women's lives, where limitation is intertwined with resilience and creative expression.

Bhatt's employment of textile symbolism positions feminist consciousness within indigenous cultural forms rather than external to them. This metaphor indicates that, even within inherited structures of tradition, women create spaces for imagination and agency. While translating Bandhani, the translator should maintain the significance of textile imagery, avoiding its reduction to mere decorative detail. By preserving the complex interplay between bondage and creativity, translation allows the narrative to integrate tradition and modernity, thereby enhancing its relevance in the present era.

Bandhani by Bindu Bhatt explores deeply rooted social traditions and beliefs associated with widowhood in Indian society. The narrative demonstrates how cultural norms regulate women's behaviour, attire, and emotional expression following the death of their husbands. In many traditional communities, widows are expected to wear plain white garments and lead a restrained life as symbols of mourning and social purity. These practices serve as cultural markers that reinforce patriarchal authority over women's bodies and identities. Through the character of

Sudha, the story reveals the psychological consequences of such cultural expectations. Sudha's decision to wear colorful clothing and the subsequent disapproval from neighbors illustrate the constant societal surveillance and judgment faced by widowed women who challenge prescribed norms. The symbolic significance of the Gujarati textile tradition known as Bandhani is central to the cultural meaning of the story. Bandhani sarees are traditionally associated with festivity, joy, and feminine beauty in Gujarati culture. However, widowed women are culturally discouraged from wearing such colorful garments, as they are expected to embody mourning and renunciation. By permitting Sudha to wear a Bandhani saree and subsequently gifting one to Chanchal, Mukta Ba challenges these rigid cultural expectations. The saree thus emerges as a potent cultural symbol of resistance against oppressive customs and the reclamation of dignity and individuality by widowed women.

Moreover, the story exposes how cultural traditions can simultaneously nurture and restrict individuals. While certain customs promote community cohesion and familial care, others impose severe limitations on women's freedom and identity. Through the contrasting experiences of Sudha and Chanchal, the narrative demonstrates how widows from different social backgrounds encounter similar cultural restrictions, though their circumstances vary in intensity. Ultimately, the story critiques the cultural mindset that equates widowhood with lifelong austerity and suffering, and it advocates for a more humane and progressive interpretation of tradition.

These stories highlight the dual nature of cultural traditions. Culture provides continuity, identity, and social cohesion. It imposes restrictive norms, particularly on women, by regulating behaviour through expectations related to widowhood, marriage, domesticity, and morality. Narratives namely *Bandhani* and *Ek Cigarette Ek Dhupsali* critically expose these constraints, demonstrating how cultural practices perpetuate gender inequality and emotional suppression.

The lexical richness and emotional density of Gujarati vocabulary further challenge the notion of one-to-one correspondence, as demonstrated in *Ek Cigarette Ek Dhupsali*. Terms such as “મલન” and “કચરો” are not solely descriptive but also deeply affective, embedding layers of irony, grief, and existential fragmentation. The metaphor of the shattered vase exemplifies what J. C. Catford identifies as a situation requiring significant translation shifts, in which structural and semantic transformations are unavoidable.

Conclusion:

Translators working at the intersection of cultural and linguistic theory encounter significant challenges in balancing textual fidelity with cultural resonance. Linguistic approaches emphasize precision and fidelity, while cultural approaches stress adaptation and contextual meaning. Achieving equivalence across cultures is often impossible, leaving translators to negotiate between preserving linguistic form and ensuring cultural intelligibility. The result is a constant balancing act, where translators risk reductionism if they privilege linguistic detail over cultural meaning, or distortion if they prioritize cultural adaptation at the expense of textual fidelity. Translating Gujarati fiction into English constitutes both a creative and critical practice, requiring simultaneous engagement with language, culture, and ideology.

This integrated approach contributes to broader discussions in translation studies and literary criticism by demonstrating how regional literatures can be interpreted and represented in a global context while retaining their distinctive voices and complexities.

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