

Women's Writing Across Contexts: Cognitive and Linguistic Universes

Some Reflections

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Abstract

This project is an attempt to put together contemporary women's writing in some Indian languages with the aim of exploring the linguistic-cognitive universes that these writings might represent or constitute. The material includes short stories, poems, excerpts from books, and autobiographical accounts of women published in magazines. The field work has been conducted in both a public library as well as libraries associated with non-governmental organizations.

The larger context of this work has been to build an archive of women's writing across regional contexts, looking for commonalities of perspective; exploring cognitive universes that challenge the conventional canons of writing and women's writing, and seeing how these relate specifically to the notion of the 'local'; charting the shifts in women's writing post-globalisation; translation of material for curricula; and using multi-lingual material to address pedagogic challenges in a diverse classroom.

This project has been a collaborative effort between faculty and students at the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, TISS. The work of this project is imagined as a starting point for an archive of women's writing in multiple languages that could be translated, organized into themes, and prepared for publication as a reader for the postgraduate women's studies programme.

Introduction

This project was an attempt to put together women's writing in contemporary non-English Indian languages that have not yet been published or circulated, either in original or in English translation, exploring the idea of alternative linguistic-cognitive universes to the dominant that these might represent or constitute (alternate sentence: This project was an attempt to put together women's writing in contemporary non-English Indian languages that have not yet been published or circulated, either in original or in English translation, and in doing so to acknowledge and explore the various alternate linguistic-cognitive universes that exist as a counter to the more visible and dominant ones.) The idea was to work toward a reader containing some of these writings that could also be incorporated into post-graduate women's studies curricula. The work began in and took up most of 2013, and responded to women's writing available in Marathi and Hindi. We begin this paper with some reflections on the contexts of the project, and on women's writing as a field and taught course in university spaces, in different disciplinary contexts.

Background and rationale While engaging with the larger question of whether mainstream literatures, histories, or scientific disciplines have allowed women to write, and/or allowed visibility to such attempts, feminist scholarship has asked the question-do women write? If yes, what have been the terms of entry to that process of representation? What have been the costs? Feminism has examined the attitudes, institutional mazes, and rules of form that have governed this entry, as also the strategies women have historically employed for gaining access to representation.

In this connection the questions that arise are: do women write differently? Is this an expression of different subjectivities, experiences? Do they show up the world from a different perspective? Does women's writing challenge the notion of the 'rational mind'? These questions have mostly come up in the charting of sexual difference, whether in philosophy or science, marking the metaphor of the rational, masculine against that of the emotional, feminine

Further, what are the feminist perspectives that may constitute or be interpreted through women's writing? What are the challenges that feminist writing may offer to literary canons? The sense is that feminist writing might offer new *genres* as well as

create new *contexts and thematics* to challenge existing ones. *Écriture féminine*, as a discursive field evolved in the work of French feminists, the idea of mimetisme – a challenging of patriarchal representations in Irigaray, or the refocussing of entire tracts of history and literature by authors like Jean Rhys or in critical feminist work by Gilbert and Gubar are only a partial case in point.

Through an examination of different kinds of material, not necessarily all written by women, and not only written text, the field of women's writing has gone back and forth with these questions. We have looked at representations of women as non-writers, the terms of entry, women's strategies, and sexual difference – all of which contribute to the field that has come to be called women's writing. Some more recent contexts and challenges have emerged here. “Women's Writing” may convey different meanings than “Women Writing”. The former offers greater possibilities of stability as well as stasis than the latter, which is in constant danger of exploding the category or the field. We must also engage, therefore, with a critique of the naming, its potentials for stereotyping, its cultural and disciplinary roots.

As part of an M.A. Course on Women's Writing, we at the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies have been trying to collate resources from different contexts of women's lives – regional, political, cultural, and literary and thematise them in various ways that take into account these questions. We realised that apart from certain kinds of writing by women already legitimised by feminist understanding of marginality and vulnerability – writing from the margins of patriarchal privilege, for instance – the material available is not extensive. We also realised that this material is easier to collate in a multilingual format, since most of it is already available in languages other than English, partly owing to the fact that these are women writing comfortably in non-English languages. This project was, in part, an extension of that realisation.

This project was a specific attempt to explore women's writing from different linguistic contexts, posing them as also cognitive contexts. In other words, rather than being an articulation of static “difference”, the hypothesis is that it is in an intersection between women's writing, “local” ways of life, livelihoods, cultural practice, and the different linguistic universe of the local, that a different cognitive universe might be found. This project, therefore, was less interested in exploring the

stereotypical ties of women-domestic-private-imaginary spheres or in challenging them; it was more interested in exploring the possible hyphen between the cognitive and the linguistic that might be made possible through writing by women. This might also be extended into the alternative models of knowing the world available in this writing. This in some sense was the core hypothesis of this project.

Following on this, some of the larger research contexts involved engaging in primary and pilot work towards building an archive of women's writing across regional contexts, looking for commonalities of perspective, exploring cognitive universes that challenge the conventional canons of writing and women's writing, and seeing how these relate specifically to the notion of the 'local', charting the shifts and staticities in women's writing post-globalisation, translation of material for curricula, and using multi-lingual material to address pedagogic challenges in a diverse classroom.

This project was a collaborative effort between students and faculty. The proposed outcomes for the project were as follows: –

1. Collection of material in Marathi and Hindi, working with the themes of body, sexuality, violation, and pleasure.
2. Translation of the material into English.
3. Preparation of a bilingual digital version of this material – the original and the translation into English - for incorporation into the syllabus of the M.A. in Women's Studies at TISS.

The nature of material ranged from oral histories to prose and fiction, written by women, individually or collectively. The final outcome was visualized as a compendium of writing by women in Marathi and Hindi on the above themes and this compendium would be incorporated into the M.A Women's Studies syllabus at Mumbai campus. At a later stage, the compendium could also be incorporated in the M.A Women's Studies syllabus on other other campuses.

Methodology: The material selected was both written and other. Major focus was given to the former published or written during the period from 2008-2013. Translations were undertaken by the same team of students and faculty trained in Women's Studies, since it is perspective rather than the literal translations that were being sought. Following on this project, it is hoped that the work will grow

towards the aim of building an archive of women's writing consisting of unpublished or untranslated material written between 1980 to the present in multiple languages, that could be translated into English and thematised into more themes, and prepared for publication as a reader.

Accessing the field

Founding the category of women's writing anew with some of these perspectives in place, in Bombay, Pune, and Jharkhand gave us several insights both on the field and on the analytical categories of marginalization we were going in with. One of the first exercises in the project involved collection of material for the purpose of translation from Marathi and Hindi into English. The themes we were engaged with broadly dealt with women's literature on the topics of sexuality and violence. But the objective was not to document literature which only dealt with these issues in a very direct manner. For instance, we were interested in writings by women in the form of medical literature on women's health or even autobiographical narratives that spoke of violence and sexuality, but perhaps in a less direct manner. The pieces selected had an obvious variety to them, from thoughts on women writing to some very personal experiences that have acted as emotional triggers in both the writing and reading. An underlying aim was also to pick up issues that are perhaps not easy to talk about. . All the pieces either express ideas in such a way that they only make sense through writing or they celebrate the process of writing and expressing in a powerful way.

We were also interested in collecting material in forms other than mainstream prose published by acceptable or well-known publishing houses because we thought that the latter usually originates from sections of society that are privileged enough to access mainstream language and education. Restricting ourselves to such sources would have limited the cognitive universes we could access. So, we proposed to seek literature in such forms or dialects of the languages in which people from marginalized communities or locations speak or write.

Since one of the objectives of the project was also to understand political spaces and how women have accessed and written through these spaces, we chose to conduct the field work in a public library as well as libraries associated with non-governmental organizations. We started field work with the library associated with Akshara, a

feminist NGO engaged with preventing violence against women in Mumbai. The second phase of the field work was carried out in Pune using a public library called Pune Nagar Vachanalaya and a library named *Aksharsparsha*, a trust managed by women influenced by feminist principles and the women's movement.

These spaces helped access to not just books with fictional prose in it, but also autobiographical narratives of diverse women and trans* persons through women's magazines. For instance, one women's magazine published an issue focusing on sex workers and their lives. Two narratives from this issue were chosen as they contrasted in terms of one concentrating on the rhetoric of choice, while another talks about violation. Magazines were also an interesting medium to explore the form of short stories, rather than only looking at longer pieces of fictional prose. As spaces for marginalized voices too, as also access points for our work, this was an important experience; a short story by a Dalit woman writer – a category we had framed in feminist discourse – was sometimes to be found in a perhaps mainstream women's magazine rather than in overtly feminist spaces.

Besides short stories, poetry and autobiographic accounts in magazines, parts of short stories and excerpts from books were also included. These choices were made on several counts. In one case, we made the decision to include a short story set in a residential complex which talked about the surveillance practiced on single women in spaces which cannot be defined as either public or private. This story was written by an upper caste woman and it talked about regulation of female sexuality in a manner that is commonplace and yet not talked about adequately. In another case, we selected relevant excerpts from an autobiography of a *Hijra* identified person. The objective of the project, through the stories we selected, was also to question the narrow defined understanding of the category "woman".

The process itself was, sometimes, a personal journey of power and empathy – an empathy experienced in accessing various forms of expression. These were writing of the experience of cultural-social practices and norms, norms whose power we too felt as we reflected on our own location in the research. Some of the work involved looking for unpublished writing in Hindi by women and these writings could be in the form of short stories, poems, and real life stories. One of our entry points was *Aawaz-e-Niswan* (AeN), a Bombay based women's organization which works largely

with Muslim women. Travelling to the organization that was embedded in the local community and their ways of life was part of the experience of understanding the contexts of the lives of women whose writing we accessed, as also understanding the specific organizational history and campaigns for rights of women vis-à-vis community and the State Recognizing patterns of oppression, possible expressions of resistance, and the collective nature of such resistance that some of these writers experienced as part of their struggle, proved to us to be a context inseparable from the texts we accessed. [Vital too, therefore, was the learning from the stories. Some stories were about experiencing mainstream development as displacement, globalization as migration and fragmentation of family and kinship networks. Some were of experiencing the demolition of the Babri Masjid as a moment of violence and of redress available from feminist organizations, as well as a moment of constriction of mobility for Muslim women. Yet other stories were of Gujarat 2002 as a moment of collaboration with other organizations in the context of justice, of 2003 as a time of concentration on formal and informal education for young girls displaced in communal violence; all stories that formed a backdrop to the writing by women that we accessed in AeN. And as students and researchers within feminism, we confronted both our own privileges and our own biases as we interpreted the field.

The books taken from AeN for review were written by women. “*Ink Se Bhare Mere Ye Hanth*” and “*Bardhte Kadam*” are outcomes of various writing workshops organized in AeN. Those workshops, hours of collective intellectual work, discussions and debates, not only gave women a space to share their experiences in a safe space, but also with the writing came confidence. And with their work getting published and going out into the public domain, it was an achievement for both the organization as well as of individuals. The languages used were mostly Hindi or Urdu. Many of the authors were not formally literate and the language they used was not flowery. Their writing was informed by experience and was rich in expressions. . As researchers comfortable in Hindi and English, we still felt the loss in translation as we walked through the material on the experience of communal riots in and around Mumbai and Maharashtra, broken marriages, polygamy, domestic violence, child marriage, or dowry death.

Another organization we approached was *Vacha*, an NGO based in the Santa Cruz

area of Bombay. Vacha emerged as a women's group during the 1980s. It was initiated by women active in the women's rights movement and was started as a resource centre to address need for space for discourse, resources and collective action. *Vacha* focuses on issues of women and girls through educational programmes, resource creation, research, training, campaigns, networking and advocacy. From 1995, it has focused on working with adolescent girls and boys, with a special focus on girls. It believes in the ideology of empowered girls (through education, awareness, exposure and opportunity) and sensitized boys to make society and world a better place to live. *Vacha's* publications focus on health and rights of women, sexuality, domestic violence, politics, education, economics and gender.

"*Khulti Parate: Sexuality and Us*", that came out of this space, has a segment dealing with the lives of sex workers . The story written in lucid Hindi, gives an insight into the life of a young girl who was offered a job and money, brought to the city of Delhi from a village of Jharkhand, and then sold to a brothel.[She adapts to her new life thinking that if her parents, community, and villagers come to know of her source of income, she would be stigmatized and degraded in society; in addition, there would be no livelihood option to support her family In this story, the female protagonist talks about normative social perspectives on sexuality and sex workers. It focuses on several primary questions pertaining to perspective: why is sexuality mostly associated with women, why it is a taboo subject, why and how does it become a matter of pride and shame in a woman's life, what is the 'correct' age to initiate talk on sexuality in Indian society, how does it become a tool to oppress women and why only women. .

Some specific dilemmas and reflections on the translation process

Continuous translation or Complete Translation: Perhaps one of the features of most of these texts was the very candid and spontaneous nature of the narrative. If we read the whole story and then translated the bits, the words would often take on very different meanings and the style would automatically change. Instead to retain the nature of the narrative we took to translating each sentence as we read it, coming back to change words only if required to make sure that the meaning was conveyed in the least manipulated way possible. This is not to say that we did literal translations but the stories asked for a part by part approach rather than requiring

us to look at the gestalt of things. This has perhaps given the narratives a slightly skewed grammar but it has not lost out on the way that the story was told, which we felt is particularly important in a language like Marathi.

On the language itself: Marathi and its varieties, for example. Marathi and Hindi are the languages used in the households of the researchers. . While translating these works, one thing that struck us the most was the difference of expression within the same language. This made the task of translation slightly harder but provided insights into obvious cultural divides within the same linguistic region as defined within nationalist and State understandings. This was reflected in the manner in which Marathi is used in rural and urban spaces and also the manner in which it is used across the caste and class divide. . This then recalls the debate on loss in translation, which is in some sense the core of the project. Does translation make the language more uniform or does the writing lose its varied meanings? In this context an attempt has been made to keep the syntax as close to the original storytelling as possible. Another observation about Marathi is that the language, *for us translators*, would appear to have a rough or raw form of expression whereas English might seem a lot more subtle. We realised our own distance from the languages we were familiar with, in doing this. Relating to language, the spirit of the words used, then, was another learning experience.

Personal and political spaces : There have been several instances in the stories where the personal and the political have merged and even collided. For a person living in a space where this rarely happens or it is something one can choose to not happen, the ways in which aspects of feminist theory are brought out through the simplest of conversations is interesting. Literature has always provided an outlet for this conflict but the pieces that dealt with women's experiences with their own bodies have been even more of an outlet than usual. In the story *Aaichyanaavane* (in the mother's name) the descriptions of sex and sexuality reveal another aspect of language. The words used are everyday words, words that are used in everyday conversations and yet sex is something that is considered taboo and not spoken of in the everyday. We found this contrast interesting and this led us to reflect on whether women's experiences are similar across regional backgrounds.

'Difficult' words : As with any attempt at translation, there has been a certain amount of loss of poetry while doing this project. Considering the nature of the project, at times this came through as jarring. This was seen clearly while short poems were being translated. We found that some words were 'untranslatable'. One such word was *Vitaal* from one of Soyra's poems included in the piece called *ParighaavarchyaBaaya* (Women at the Peripheries/ Women at the Fringes). One can perhaps tell people explicitly that *Vitaal* is used to refer to menstrual bleeding in the sense that it is considered to be unsacred, or translate it as the unhallowed but it is difficult to convey the cultural significance of the term. It might be much easier to convey an experience than a word, it would seem.

The word "ekal" is quite difficult to translate. "Ekal" does mean single but that doesn't entirely convey the meaning. It clubs under one word women in different situations and from different contexts, that may or may not pertain to their marital status. The connotation of the term 'ekal' comes out clearly only while reading the text. . So, in the translation either single woman (/women) or Woman (/women) living on her (their) own has been used. It must be noted however, that this does not entirely capture the sense, which is why we struggled with using alone as well as single in the translations. Ekal is neither as stark as alone nor is it as simply put as the word single. There is a slightly derogatory sense to it but in the text it has been used in an almost subversive way. One wonders whether pointing this out is necessary or whether the translated piece will convey the idea fairly well.

The above discussion shows the various ways in which translation particularly across culturally differently rooted languages can affect the text. This is of course one step away from the elements of interpretation that the researcher brings to the text, and although this was an archival project in some sense, the attempt to thematize and access not only the text but the languages in cognitive contexts, foregrounds the epistemological question much more. The translation itself however made us reflect on the nature of language and the way it is used across spaces. It is our hope that this has in some way come across in the translations.

The translations are attached in full as appendices. Permissions from all authors have been taken over e-mail. Documentary proof of e-mail communication is attached as annexure.

Author Bios

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Dr Asha Achuthan is Assistant Professor at the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, TISS, Mumbai, and was responsible for conceiving the project. The work of sourcing the texts and producing the translations was done by **Shruti Vaidya**, gold medallist in the MA in Women's Studies in the 2011-13 batch, **Shefali Kishore**, also ex-MA of the 2011-13 batch, and **Sae Abhayankar**, who completed her MPhil in WS from TISS Mumbai in 2016. The reflections here have been worked on by the entire team.