



## FICTIONALISING THE BIOGRAPHY: A CASE STUDY OF C.K JANU VIA CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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### ABSTRACT

Cultural Translation, an effective tool for examining translations of cultures in texts in the zeitgeist of postcolonialism, gathers momentum in the present scenario as it gives voice to the marginalized. This paper, focusing on Cultural Translation as a counter discourse in the postcolonial context looks at Tribal writing – a biography, particularly problematizing its identity as a construct and their assertion of the self through writing, especially by analyzing the cultural context of Kerala. But it seems that Cultural Translation evokes the unresolved question again, that is, whether a culture can be translated, especially when it deals with tribal literature and how far it is possible. This paper focuses on the case-study in the translation of the biography of C.K. Janu and how the text is being read in the society whether as a sudden grown mushroom under the light of media, whether the problems of Dalit are rightly addressed comparing both the source text and target text.

Key Words: Cultural Translation, Tribe, Adivasi, Source Text, Target Text, ideology

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### INTRODUCTION

The process of writing has its own politics. It should address the power dogmas and norms of writing in the society. It can manipulate the normality in perspectives and even construct the dos and don'ts in the society. At the same time the world of writing is complicated with the transactions of the publishers, publishing houses, translators and their ideologies. The unwritten rules regarding publishing a text is very intricate which may affect the powerful writings too. Some can really challenge and break the shackles and make a discourse in the society, especially when they come from a marginalized group, silenced through generations. Most of the post-colonial texts are the attempts to 'write back' by asserting the self and identity mainly when they are from a marginalized group. In the context of Kerala a few texts are written making a

debatable discourse recently and they represent marginal groups in the mainstream society. This paper focuses on analyzing the biography of C.K Janu, a Tribal woman leader in Kerala through the concept of cultural translation.

### Relevance, Space and Context of the biography of C.K. Janu

Life stories and self-narratives are gathering momentum in the present scenario of Kerala. Being written in a particular society and expresses their views through the medium of writing is highly political act too. The marginalized groups/ people get attention through their life stories and self-narratives and it is the most remarkable thing in the cultural context of Kerala. C.K Janu (the vibrant leader of the tribal group in Kerala), Nalini Jameela, (a sex worker who is marginalized by the morality codes of society), Sr. Jesmi (an ex-nun who was

silenced by the patriarchal norms of Church) and the like have published their self-narratives recently in Kerala. These words and utterances of these women shock the Kerala society at least for a short span of time. Among the three C.K Janu's life story and NaliniJameela's were written by somebody else, saying that they are illiterate or 'semi-literate'. But unlike NaliniJameela, C. K Janu knows how to read and write, though she is not educated in the traditional sense. In an interview, she openly points out that she is working on her autobiography and she is unhappy that *Mother Forest* is treated as her autobiography. This is the way of direct marginalization of a tribal woman, making her 'illiterate' and 'semi-illiterate', and she also allegedly points out that her so called autobiography is published by Bhaskaran is a detailed interview about her life and experiences and she allows him to publish it as a book. But when the questions he asked are removed in the text it gets the 'face' of an autobiography which has some ironical statements in it. So in this paper, *Mother Forest* is treated as her biography and it analyses how far this work is being read in the society, whether as a sudden mushroom by the help of the media or the vibrant leader who has to go miles to solve the problems, and how their problems are rightly addressed by making a case study. It also analyses the problems of cultural translation in the Target Text of C.K JanuvinteJeevithakadha.

#### **A brief content of the biography *Mother Forest***

Janu was born in Thrissileri in Wyanad district of the southern Indian state of Kerala. She belongs to the Adiya tribe, one among the thirty five tribe clans in Kerala which together constitute 3.5 lakh of population. Actually the story she has told to Bhaskaran, the famous cartoonist in Kerala, is about the history of Adivasis and their futile struggle for survival for years and their attempts to get their land back. She shares reminiscences about her childhood, how it is deeply associated with nature, forest and soil and then how the interference and transactions of the civilized society have changed everything, and how the Zemindari system makes the real owners of land mere dependents, what is the role of political parties in their life, why they are attracted towards it and the ways through which the

party operates and marginalizes them within. She does not have an initial and the Literacy Programme Coordinator has given the initials at the age of eighteen. The marriage and such practices have less important in their community and she has got his man at the age of eighteen, but she does not want to be a married woman and left him. She believes in the strong bond among women in her community and she shares the hope that only through them the changes will occur. She reiterates the need for the land and their inevitable relation with the land throughout the text, but the main drawback of the text is that it fails to establish it reasonably. It seems to give importance to romantic notions and the wild imaginations rather than the real problems faced by an Adivasi.

#### **The identity politics of *Mother Forest***

C. K. Janu has the culture- based identity and it is the way a human being constructs the identity especially from a marginalized culture. And he observes that this identify is a counter one for the hegemonic ideology. For the construction of this identity, a Dalit/ tribe goes back to the experiences of the past which naturally paves the way for the understanding of forest and nature which in turn makes a positive leap on the study and preservation of them. Dr. P. K Pokker observes in a different way in which it reveals the identity politics of the community:

C.K.Janu's auto/biography explains the identity of an Adivasi who belongs to the scheduled tribe. Accordingly the tribes who had to depend upon the forest for their livelihood suffer from poverty as their right to possess forest has been denied. She remembers her early days and constructs her own identity in the light of her new understanding. She came in touch with the mainstream life by way of participating in literacy work and left politics. Later she deviates from the left to focus on tribal issue, which is only one among other issues for the left. However the social movements such as literary work and left labor union activities led her to identify her own social position.

(<http://www.pkpokker.com/dalit.html>).

The rapid progressive changes in the field of Translation Studies stimulated the formation of a new branch- cultural translation which is a broad term in which understanding a Target Text means understanding a different culture. It gives impetus for the study of marginalized cultures-ethnography. The insatiable curiosity of human minds to know more is clearly visible by the new developments and practices in the academic level too. The historical amnesia for a marginalized group can be cured by this new focus if the voice is written. Janu's biography is an attempt to proclaim the space and identity of Adivasis and this chapter focuses on the importance of it in the cultural context of Kerala.

#### **The role of land and language in the biography of C.K. Janu**

Since land is the inseparable part from the Adivasi life, Bhaskaran, the chronicler, focuses on the need of the land than the language. In the introduction he says: "they are the real owners of the soil. It is the reality we practiced to forget. The retrieval of their land is the only solution because it is their rudimentary need" (8). He observes that she calls the struggle for land to Adivasis not as a political one, but a struggle against another culture. She thinks that the retrieval of their land helps them to retrieve their culture. He seems to address the Kerala society as a whole which is unaware of the problems of tribal community. "The language (of them) seems scattered and protruded as an aftermath of its transactions with the mainstream society" (9), adds Bhaskaran. It is the same language Janu speaks, apparently simple and scattered, but highly political and polemical. And this same powerful language creates the difference. When we analyze a community, their language and its peculiarities are important understand them because language is culture specific.

Janu speaks with a particular tone and rhythm. Her dialect is specific to her community which has a musical tone in it. The orality of their language is part of their tribal identity. She uses the words like 'nammal' (we) even in the place of 'njan' (I). It indicates the community feeling deeply enrooted in their speech. Bhaskaran maintains the way she speaks in the Source Text, but when the work is translated it is an enigma for the translator.

When the text is compared with the Target Text, it is to be found out that how culture of a particular community is represented in the hegemonic language like English.

#### **Cultural Translation as a tool for translation**

Cultural translation is the recent development in translation after the word by word translation and sense by sense translation. It is an attempt to take the reader to the author. It is not simply a translation of culture but a scrutinized analysis of the power relations and ideology associated with the production and translation of a text. It also examines how the problems of diaspora, migrant and the culturally silenced or othered populations of Dalit in general. As it deals with the present systems of ideology and power manipulation, it is inevitably linked with present system of thoughts as well as ethics. It also related with HomiBhabha's concept of hybridity and ambivalence as it gives room for the experience of all. It has a subjective perceptive, at the same time it analyses every nuance of texts to focus the cultural specificity and deviations from the Source Text. In this paper, cultural translation as a tool is limited to translating a culture and analyzing the changes occurred in Translated Text.

#### **A critical analysis of the translation of C.K .JanuvinteJeevithakadha**

C. K. Janu's biography was translated to English by N.RaviShanker in the year 2004. It has to address a wider and broader group of people and the problems discussed in the text will be read in different light, because the cultural context is different. The changes and differences start from the very title of the text itself.

In the Malayalam Source Text, the title is *C.K JanuvinteJeevithakadha* (The Life Story of C.K Janu). But when it is translated to English, the title has been changed as *Mother Forest, the unfinished story of C.K. Janu*. The very title seems to give a metaphoric representation of C.K Janu merged into tribal living as well as into the forest. The (mis)representations start with giving colours of exoticism, strangeness and wilderness to the life of an Adivasi. The attribution of mother forest seems to give the impression that the readers should understand from the very title that the text deals

with an Adivasi/ Dalit. 'Forest' for the mainstream society is the place of wilderness, dense and strangeness, sometimes for fantasies. Since 'mother' stands for affection it is quite ironical in the title and it creates a kind of curiosity in the receptors. It is strange for the mainstream society that the forest can be a mother for somebody. That affectionate strangeness can be seen in the very title itself and it automatically arouses curiosity to read a fantasy, not with an effect of understanding a human being, but somebody else. The 'otherness' in the title seems to be a deliberate attempt to make a division between the ethnic and major cultures. It seems a deliberate attempt to create the exotic other. It indicates that she is 'natural' as well as aboriginal. The language constitutes the societies and the perceptions of this language may affect the normality practiced in the society. It is the language of the mainstream society deliberately creating a 'cultural other' which is inferior and has strange practices. In the text, Janu says: "no one knows the forest like we do. The forest is mother to us. More than a mother, because she never abandon us" (5). It seems that the image has taken from these words of Janu, but in the title the focus turns to her and her life. This is a deliberate attempt to maintain the binary between the elite and the tribe. It is essential in the society, because 'the othering' seems to help to define ourselves.

The power play of identity politics is quite visible in the title. When a tribal woman constructs her own identity with her experiences in the past mingled with present, the interference of the society makes it ridiculed or keeps it as the other always. It is a hindrance in understanding and explaining what a tribe is. It reiterates the wrong romantic notions of Adivasi. When they indulge in the struggle for retrieving the land, the message is misleading that they want to retreat themselves to the forest. That kind of isolation is no more possible. So the attempt to marginalize those people through 'naming' or labeling should have been avoided. It does not matter how fluent and transparent the translation is, the 'invisibility' of the translator is a myth; especially when a culture is translated from a marginalized group.

The orality of the language seems to be the puzzle to the translator. The tone of the language and its rhythm is untranslatable. But the Target Text should not resemble to the factual narration like any other biography, since here the Source Text narrates the things as if she were speaking. To maintain the intonation of her utterances, the translator assumes a new pattern in which the sentences are more lucid. In the translators note he says: "the upper cases in the first chapter, in a sea of lower cases, are used to indicate the stresses in Janu's spoken language. The first chapter was treated differently from the second, because I felt that it was closer to Janu's inner world, while the second was more polemical and belonged to the outer world" (xii) . In the first chapter the translator uses the small letters even for beginning a sentence, and 'I' is 'i'. (It reminds one of Alice Walker's *Color Purple*, where Celie cannot assert herself with. It is the technique adopted by the translator to indicate the stress she has given in her speech. The attempt is limited in the first chapter only, since the second is more related to the outer world as the translator mentioned in the note. It is also difficult for the translator to distinguish her usage of 'nammal' as singular or plural. It is the context determines the meaning; even then she uses 'nammal' for denoting herself. But the translator avoids the usage of 'we' in the context of 'I'. It is the lacuna of English language that there is no apt pronoun to indicate 'nammal' from 'njanggal' but only 'we' to denote the meaning of both. In the translator's note he adds: "I had to settle for using I or we, as the context demanded. This is the one compromise I had to make with great reluctance, perhaps sacrificing accuracy for clarity" (xi).

There are certain words even their words which cannot be translated like 'koottu', 'kundankozhi', 'kudi' 'gaddiga' 'erumadam' 'muttal' and the like. Even though the words are explained in the glossary these words are deeply enrooted with the culture. Even the rituals they are doing are not described even in the Source Text. For example the word 'kudi' can be replaced by 'hut' or 'home' according to the context. But the word 'kudi' is used by the tribal people only. The significance of the word cannot be maintained in the Target Text. It is

quite different from the mainstream society and these words are used by those particular communities. So 'Cultural Translation' is under erasure especially when it is associated with marginalized culture. How far their culture can be represented to another language seems to be a debatable issue. The untranslatable words and rituals cannot be effectively mentioned through the footnotes and glossary.

**Some instances of Cultural Gaps created in the Translation**

The author's introduction to the English edition describes the brief history of Adivasi in the Kerala context. It describes how they are silenced through generations, how they fell prey to two kinds of slavery (one that existed traditionally and the other after the arrival of his migrants), and about the Adivasis in general. But it is not in the Source Text, since the book is published and limited in the context of Kerala. Since Bhaskaran is the cartoonist, he dedicates the Source Text to the owners of the bodies who stood in front of him as the model for his drawing, but in Target Text he rewrites it "the owners of all those bodies that stood before me during my travels in Wayanad" (viii). He includes some cartoons in the Source Text but they are absent in the Target Text.

The author's notes in the Source Text and Target Text are quite different. When the words are sharp and poignant in the Source Text, it is missing there in the Target Text. He feels guilty to invade the experiences of them. In the Source Text he says:

യഥാർത്ഥമർത്തിലിങ്ങുപുസ്തകംകയ്യരേണൽ  
ആരയൊണനെന്റന്നെക്കൂടുതലജ്ജിപിപ്പി  
ചുവടുതലകുനിപ്പിപ്പിക്കുന്ന്.  
നമുടതൊയരൂപൊതുസമൂഹംഒടുവിലിതാ  
വലിചുവടരിയപ്പടൈക്കൂടുതലിന്നൊജി  
വിതാനുവേങ്ങെട്ടുകൂടി  
കയ്യരേണൽ. (10)

It is not translated to English. It can be translated as: "It is really embarrassing and shameful the knowledge whom we are trespassing. At last the mainstream society which is including us intrudes on the experiences of a marginalized community."

The invasion and encroachment on the marginalized community is there everywhere, not only in Kerala. The powerful always keeps the binary with the powerless making them as the other or diffident. The shame and embarrassment he has when he writes the Source Text, could have been translated because it is pellucid in its aim.

There are some slight variations in the Target Text. When in the Source Text Janu speaks about the 'kunnippayam' they are having in the forest (12), in the Target Texts it is translated as 'kanjippayam'(2). The minute details do not get proper significance while translating.

The Source Text says:

നമുടകാടിലായിലുകളകൊറയെധികംകണ്  
ടിടടുണ്സായിരുന്നൂ.  
അതിന്നൊടപ്പകാണാൻനലതായിരുന്നൂ.  
ഒരുമയില്പീലികണ്ടത്സാലിയുടൈടുത്ത്  
ന്നിന്നാണ്...മയില്പാമ്പിന  
തിന്നുന്കൊണ്കമുടമയിലിന്നൊടുത്ത്  
പൊകുല (20)

It is translated in the Target Text:

"I had seen many peacocks in our forest; it was nice to see them walk. But only a peacock's feather Sally had. Since the peacocks ate snakes, we never used to go near them." (10)

But it seems that the underlined sentence in Source Text tries to convey the meaning that though she has seen many peacocks, she sees the feather of peacock from Sally. It may also indicate the meaning that she is ignorant of the notion of the people from the mainstream society think that the feather will multiply if we keep it without shown to sky. The dilemma in the words is not carefully translated it seems. In the Target Text, it is meant that Sally had only the feather, not the peacock. But it expresses the cultural difference rather than pointing out what Sally does not have. She also mentions about the story which Sally read for her. It was about the animals in the forest which could speak. She says 'never ever saw such animals in our forest' (10). The fantasies of the mainstream society regarding the unknown are teased by Janu through

these words. There is the preparation of the land for cultivation called 'punam'. Janu says about it:

"In the uncultivated forest the trees have to be cut down and the undergrowth cropped. The bushes would be thick with creepers and thorny bushes all to be hacked down with choppers and heaped up with sticks. Then the undergrowth would be set on fire. We call it torching the punam". (1)

This word is used as the transliteration, but later the word 'punam' is completely omitted even though the Source Text mentions about it. Since the words are culture specific it is important to transport the word associated with the land and the soil. There is also one sentence missing while translating.

In Source Text:

കച്ഛവടക്കാർവളകളുകയ്യിലിട്സുതരും.

കുറെപിടിച്ഛവളകളുട്സുതരാനകച്ഛവടക്കാർകച്ഛവടയാസംഒന്നുമില്ലായിരുന്നൂ. (26)

In Target Text: "the vendors used to slip the bangles on our wrists."

The one line is missing which says "they don't have any problem doing like that". She speaks about these vendors in the context where the people who avoid coming near to them and try to exploit them mentally and physically. The vendors never treat them as the other since they are the 'business people' at the time of festivals. For them touching an Adivasi for their business- selling bangles- is not a disgusting thing. Moreover festivals give them opportunities to lighten their time of traumas and strains. There are certain rare occasions in her life that Janu wants to be happened again, and they are related to festivals in Valliyoorkaavu. There the vendors do not show any difference and she notices it.

The Mother Forest, the unfinished story of C. K. Janu provides a good reading; the readability of the book is to be noticed. But the cultural gaps which cannot be filled up by the languages lead to the conclusion that translating a culture with all its impacts is impossible within the limits of the language. The comprehension and reception of culture especially marginalized one lies on the familiarity with the experiences associated with that culture. The

relatively possible translation may not propagate the idea envisaged by Cultural Translation- the significance of the marginalized culture in a complete sense is missing there.

While being translated to English, the Tribal Writings cannot properly represent the tribes due to various reasons. To recapitulate, the reliability of Target Texts will always be in the shadow of doubt though the Cultural Translation seems to be inadequate when it deals with minority cultures.

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