

My Long Journey of Translation

Prashanti Talpankar,
Associate Professor
DM's college & Research Centre

Respected members of Sahitya Akademi, my fellow felicities and friends, It is my proud privilege to stand before you to narrate my translation journey with "That Long Silence" the famous book written by Shashi Deshpande.

My experience of translating the novel "That Long Silence" by Shashi Deshpande was a long journey indeed. The entire experience enriched me as a human being and as a writer.

I had lot of experience of translating non-literary materials for different NGOs in Goa related to mental health, education, cancer, children's rights etc, but I had never tried my hand at a literary piece.

Shri Pundalik Naikji, Konkani Writer and the then convenor of Konkani panel of Sahitya Akademi, asked me whether I would like to translate any novel in Konkani and I immediately thought of this novel; "That Long Silence" by Shashi Deshpande. This novel was part of a third year B.A. curriculum under Goa University for almost 6 years. I always thought our students should enjoy such a book also in Konkani, our mother tongue. So when I got the opportunity, I grabbed it.

Sometimes you read a book and you fall in love with it. But in this case, when I first read the Novel "That Long Silence", I hated it. I found it very dark and dingy. The characters very lively, and yet I felt everything about them was cloudy. I wondered why such a complex book was introduced for undergraduate students. But at the same time there was something charismatic about the plot. So quite often, when I was alone, my thoughts would go back to the characters in the novel. Hence when I got the chance, I jumped at it.

I happily sat at the desk to translate the novel. I looked at the pages and thought, "hmm.... two hundred pages! The book is divided into four sections, well; I should be able to finish it in six months considering my college schedule". But as the days passed by, I realised, translating any literary work is not as easy as translating non-literary one.

I realised that I needed to master the art of translating all over again. So I looked up on the internet, and then asked for tips from different people like versatile writer and translator Mukesh Thali, poet, writer and translator Ramesh Veluskar and writer, journalist and translator Sandesh Prabhudesai. After speaking to them I felt I had taken up an impossible task. I may not be able to do justice to the assignment. So many times I felt I should write a letter to Sahitya Akademi saying I am unable to complete the work. But every time I felt low, my husband would say, don't worry, you will be able to do it.

Before I started with the translation, I had done my little research on Shashi Tai and her writings where in most of the reviewers had said that the novel "That Long Silence" is a book of feminist writings. But as I started getting glimpses and insight into the story I felt otherwise. In fact when I met Shashi Tai at the Goa Literary Festival I asked her whether her story is about feminism and she said No. "It was just my anger and dark thoughts that I gave vent to," she said. And while translating the book that vent she spoke about seared through me. Her story is about a middle class ethos, middle class mentality and the middle class struggle of keeping up the pretext and being hypocritical.

When I sat down to translate the work I realised I couldn't proceed. The plot of the story had hidden personalities with their emotions, their background and different cultures. It was difficult for me to identify with the characters and their culture. They seemed unknown to me. I had thought translating this story would be like a piece of cake but it was a very challenging task. I struggled with it for almost a year and realised something was amiss. I had read the story twice. Thought that was not enough. So I read it once, twice, thrice.... and after I read it for the fifth time I got the grip of the plot.

This book has four parts; The novel discusses life of Jaya, the protagonist. The first part is about her current life, the dilemma that she and her husband are faced with, her memories of her marriage and her attitude towards life. The second and third parts deal with different relatives from both the sides of the family and the delicate networking of the family, her interaction with them, her views about them and the self. The last part is about ruthless self-searching and soul-searching that she does within herself.

When the author tells her story it is laced with profound philosophy.

Her opening paragraph starts like this: "To achieve anything, to become anything, you've got to be hard and ruthless. Yes, even if you want to love the whole world, you've got to stop loving individual human beings first. And if they love you, and they bleed when you show them you don't love them, not specially, well so much the worse for them! There's just no other way of being a Saint. A painter. A writer."

The whole para floored me. English can be expressed in passive voice. Some things in English can be expressed in one word with a comma, full stop or other punctuations. Whereas Konkani being the Indian language is more vivacious and active than English. Sometimes it is next to impossible to express concepts, ideas in one word. I just sat with the book, stared at the paragraph for a long time. That is the time my husband stepped in and translated the paragraph for me and said, "see how easy it is". Of course, neither I found it easy nor did I agree with him. And I decided that I would start with the third part, which I felt was comparatively easy to understand.

I realised that if I translate this work word to word from English to Konkani it would be my utter failure. I needed to understand the characters, their culture, the words, the phrases, proverbs and find the equivalents, if any, in Konkani language. I also realised I needed to keep certain phrases as they are because they are not translatable. I didn't want to be stubborn and translate something just for the sake of translating.

I remember as I was doing my daily chores of going to work, teaching, looking after my household, looking after sick relatives, I was all the time brooding about the characters from "That Long Silence." And at that time I realised one strange thing. The story in English looked very distant, but as I went about translating it in my mind, I felt I knew these characters. I had seen such characters around. The whole base of the story was Indian. And in regional language, different dimensions of the plot had come out crystal clear.

The story revolves around a middle class home-maker Jaya who is very happy in her little nest of "hum do hamare do". And is suddenly shaken up from her dream-world when her husband tells her that he may be arrested in a corruption case and therefore needs to go undercover. That is the time Jaya starts thinking to herself. The small little tiny doubts that used to gnaw at her, surface. She realises the intricate hypocrisy that underlies our society. The ponderings during the exile period makes her come out of the cocoon that she had woven around herself. Jaya, the protagonist, goes through an emotional metamorphosis from being Jaya, to Suhasini and Jaya again. She tries her best to become a typical Indian woman who puts everybody else's needs before her own, failed which, her thought process channels itself back on the self- realisation track. It is somehow a simultaneous description of a woman oppressed by different traditions and expectations of others and at the same time oppressing herself and a woman trying to break the oppression at the same time. It is an excellent auto-narrative piece of literature that truly brings out the emotional ups and downs of a common Indian woman and the society.

When I finished reading the novel eighth time, I felt I was ready. Dr Sachitanand (2011) has said that we Indians orally keep translating from one language to another in our minds because there are so many languages around us. As I started translating the novel I realised many sub-plots had not touched my heart when I read it in English. But as I was translating in Konkani I was identifying with the characters. The patterns and emotions were becoming clearer in Konkani.

The characters in the Novel are basically from Karnataka but some of them had Marathi background. I was translating the novel in Konkani. I wanted the novel to have Konkani flavour. So while translating **instead of doing literal translation I opted for lateral translation.**

To quote few examples:

The protagonist says “*the illusion of happiness- yes, I had to let it go*”. Here I could have translated the sentence word to word. But it would not have looked natural nor it would fit in the nature of Konkani language. So wrote it as “*khoshecho bomado... hai , mhaka to foddchoch podlo (meaning balloon of happiness, yes I had to break it)* instead of “*khoshyecho moh, hai mhaka to sodchoch podlo*”

That had been the first months of my pregnancy, the smell of oil and spices had made me sick
“*Mhaka tenna dis gel’le ani tel ani masaleachea vaasan mhaka vonkaare ietale*”

The Konkani word for pregnancy is Gurvar, which I did not use. Because the colloquial term is *dis gel’le*. And the Konkani word for sick is *duent*. But I translated it as *vonkare ietale*, which means getting vomiting feelings.

At times I came across words which did not have meaning as such or if I had written them as they are in the books, it would have perfectly fitted in the translation but I decided to understand **the meaning and translate it sense to sense**.

To quote few examples:

Phoo dreams, who cares

Aavay, sapna go, Konak padlam tanchem!

Cultured! Damn! Damn!

Susanskari! Zak marli!

They spoke it as if it was a real language, easy and fluently

Tanchi svatachi mai-bhas zal’le bashen tim English askhalit ani sa haz kashi ulaitalim .

I also came across words in English which had equivalent words in Konkani which I was not familiar with. I would look up the dictionary, ask elderly people, ask my colleagues till I manage to get the words that I hunted for. It also happened that in English certain concepts or things have single word. For example courtyard and a veranda. It has different words in Konkani as per the location. I managed to get those words.

Another best example is the author’s note on one page, before you start reading the novel. It explains the relations, like Appa and Aai means Jaya’s father and mother, her paternal grandmother is ajji, her father’s brothers are kakas etc. As a translator I realised I need not translate the author’s note because all of us across the country understand these relations perfectly. You need it only in English.

The most difficult task however was to get the flow of her narration and the meaning of what the author wanted to say. Interpreting and carbon-copying what Shashi Tae wanted to say was a difficult task. At times I felt that I had failed to capture what she wanted to say. At all such places I would put a question mark and keep going back to it, till I got the essence of the whole concept. Luckily, since the plot had Indian and regional background translating the cultural nuisances was not difficult.

After completing the translation I went to T.Y. B.A. class and read out one part of the translated work. The expressions on the students’ faces and the discussions that followed me gave me confidence that my translation was not bad.

The most difficult task was editing the book. I realised that Sahitya Akademi has finance earmarked for typesetting, but no financial provision for editing. Luckily my husband promised to do the editing. I was wondering whether he could spare time as the editor of a TV news channel. But once he sat down to look at the book he was mesmerised by it. He devoted his entire spare time for the book. But he is a very meticulous translator so he would question my phrases, use of my words, dissect the interpretation. But luckily because I had read the book umpteen times I could face his queries and give my justifications. Sometimes I would agree with my follies. He managed to iron out lots of ‘lumps and bumps’ in the translation and I felt thankful that I had my own editor to enhance the quality of my translation. Once my book was ready I immediately sent to Sahitya Akademi because I was already late by three years. Shri Prakash Bhatramrekarji really showed lot of patience with my delay.

Sahitya Academi doesn't organise any function to release the books, for obvious reasons. May be the number of publications they do are too many and it may be difficult to handle release functions. But I was fortunate to have a grand release function of the book, thanks to the Department of English of Goa University. Madam Dr Kiran Budkuley had organised a special seminar on the book. She called it "*Silence to Deergh Maun Tem: A Voyage of Discovery*". There were four presentations, by the students who had studied the book and also teachers who were teaching it. All of them had also read my translation. Under graduate student Antara Bhide, PG student Ambika Kamat, research student Svetlana Fernandes and Assistant Professor Glenis Mendonça.

I was nervous because it was just not a book release but my post-mortem. Rightly so, not that they praised me throughout. They also criticised me. They had reservations about a terminology I had used in some places and felt my interpretation in some places may not be correct. But it was more positive than negative. And came the reward. All of them said: We could understand the English novel better when we read the Konkani translation.

This was a surprise. Because the normal impression is that translated work can never give justice to the original. The essence of the original can never be translated. But here it was opposite. They felt closer to the translation than the original. They understood the positivity within the book better. To put it in Antara Bhide's words, "To say that the translator of Shashi Deshpande's Sahitya Akademy award winning novel 'That Long Silence', has done an excellent job, would be an understatement. 'Deergh Maun Tem' is not just a journey from one language to another, but a journey that meets the cultural barriers created due to the language of the source text, adding more indigeneity to the target text".

I felt overwhelmed and elated. When I analyse, I feel it's because the culture portrayed in the novel is Indian and it can be justifiably expressed the best only in Indian language. What I received yesterday was an award. But this seminar was a revelation – a Sakshatkar and a real reward for *my long journey*.

To sum up this journey of my translation, I would say literary translation is very difficult because the translator has to understand the style, flow of the narration, meaning and proper interpretation of the content, get equivalents or parallel terminology, understand the cultural ethos and then translate it in such a way that the essence of the original is retained and it also amalgamates with the culture of the target language.

Many people feel translator's job is a very simple and easy task. I feel sometimes we the translators are given step motherly treatment by many publications. When a book is translated, name of the translator is not put on the front page. But Sahitya Academy honours the translators. Some of the publishers also don't provide sufficient fund for translations. For example in Goa, Department of Art and Culture buys books of only the original authors. No financial provision to buy translations. And that's why no publishers comes forward to publish translations.

On the other hand we say that in today's multi-lingual global world translation is very important. Translation is a bridge between communities, societies, culture etc. Jose Saramago says "Writers make national literature, while translators make universal literature". Then why there is no consideration for translators and translations?

I feel the Institutions that deal with Letters and Art should consider some of these humble suggestions:

Along with type-writing and type-setting, please make financial provision for editing. Editing is a crucial part of translation.

Give equal status to the translator by printing his/her name along with the original author.

Allow the translators to express their views on the front page as we allow original authors to do so. If provisions are made to purchase original books, let there be encouragement to buy translations also. This will encourage publishers to come forward to publish translations.

Let me put on record my eternal gratitude to Shashi Tae for writing such a beautiful in- depth story of Indian middle class family. It gives the readers lot of insight into human nature. I want to also thank Sahitya Akademi for allowing me to translate the book and honouring me with the translator's

award. My thanks go to great Dramatist Shri Pundalik Naikji who entrusted the task of translating 200 pages book that was divided in four parts. I would also like to thank Amol Kamat my typesetter for sorting out my handwritten mess of translation and type out everything very patiently. And last but not the least, thanks to Sandesh Prabhudesai, my better half for editing my work. Without his skilful and sharp-eyed editing the flow of the book would not have been smooth.

Before I sign off, please remember the quote of Paul Auster "Translators are the shadow heroes of literature, the often forgotten instruments that make it possible for different cultures to talk to one another, who have enabled us to understand that we all, from every part of the world, live in one world."

Thank you.