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Between Language and Culture: A Comparative Study of Hijam Anganghal Singh's *Jahera* and Its English Translation

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative study of Hijam Anganghal Singh's Manipuri novel *Jahera* and its English translation by E. Sonamoni Singh. It examines the transfer of linguistic, cultural, religious, and stylistic elements from the source text into English, with particular attention to idioms, proverbs, culturally specific expressions, and figurative language. The analysis draws on Eugene Nida's theory of equivalence, Lawrence Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization, Susan Bassnett's approach to cultural translation, and Gideon Toury's descriptive perspective. The study finds that the translation effectively communicates the novel's central narrative, themes, and emotional dimensions, while certain culture-specific meanings and stylistic nuances are inevitably modified or reduced. It argues that the translation represents a process of cultural negotiation in which accessibility to English readers is balanced against the preservation of the source text's linguistic and cultural identity.

Keywords: Hijam Anganghal Singh, *Jahera*, E. Sonamoni Singh, Manipuri literature, Literary Translation, Cultural Translation, Equivalence, Domestication, Foreignization.

INTRODUCTION

Translation has played an important role in the movement of literature across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Although translation has existed for centuries, the development of Translation Studies as an academic discipline has encouraged scholars to examine translation not merely as linguistic transfer but as a process

involving culture, history, ideology, and literary representation. Susan Bassnett emphasizes the close relationship between language and culture in translation, while Eugene Nida's concept of equivalence draws attention to the relationship between the source text and its effect upon the target reader. Thus, literary translation involves negotiating between the linguistic structure and

cultural context of the source text and the expectations of the target language.

Translation assumes particular significance in India because of its multilingual and multicultural literary landscape. Indian literature is produced in numerous regional languages, each possessing distinctive histories, cultural traditions, literary conventions, and modes of expression. Translation into English has enabled many of these regional literatures to reach readers beyond their original linguistic communities.

The translation of Manipuri literature into English is particularly significant because Manipuri literary works are closely connected with the cultural and social life of Manipur. Manipuri, or Meiteilon, contains culturally specific expressions, proverbs, idioms, religious references, customs, and social practices that may not have direct equivalents in English. Consequently, the translator has to negotiate between preserving the cultural identity of the source text and making it accessible to the target reader. The problem is not simply one of finding equivalent words but of transferring meanings that are embedded within a particular cultural context.

Hijam Anganghal Singh occupies an important position in modern Manipuri literature. His literary works reflect various aspects of Manipuri society and culture and are known for their emotional depth and use of culturally rooted language. Among his important works, *Jahera* holds a distinctive position. The novel centres on the relationship between Kunjo, a Meitei Hindu youth, and Jahera, a Muslim girl. Their love develops within a society shaped by religious and social boundaries, making their relationship a conflict between individual emotion and established social expectations. The novel consequently explores not only love but also religious identity, social restriction, community, and individual freedom.

The cultural rootedness of *Jahera* makes it an important text for translation studies. Its language contains expressions and references whose meanings are closely connected with Manipuri society. Such elements create challenges when the text is transferred into English because the target reader may not possess the same cultural knowledge as a reader of the original. The English translation by E. Sonamoni Singh, published by SahityaAkademi in 2004, provides wider access to Anganghal's work and contributes to the circulation of Manipuri literature beyond its original linguistic community.

The present paper undertakes a comparative study of Anganghal's Manipuri *Jahera* and its English translation by E. Sonamoni Singh. It examines how linguistic and cultural elements are transferred from Manipuri into English, with particular attention to idioms, proverbs, culturally specific terms, religious and social references, figurative language, and emotional expression. The study draws upon Nida's concept of equivalence, Venuti's notions of domestication and foreignization, Bassnett's understanding of cultural translation, and Toury's concept of translation norms. It argues that the English translation successfully communicates the central narrative and thematic concerns of *Jahera*, while certain culturally embedded expressions and stylistic nuances undergo modification or reduction. The study therefore considers the translation as an act of cultural negotiation between accessibility and the preservation of the source text's linguistic and cultural identity.

DISCUSSION

The comparison of Hijam Anganghal Singh's *Jahera* with its English translation demonstrates that literary translation is fundamentally an encounter between two linguistic and cultural systems. The translator is not dealing only with words but with a complete cultural environment. In *Jahera*, the social world

of the characters is inseparable from the meaning of the narrative. The relationship between Kunjo and Jahera develops against religious and social boundaries, and the consequences of their relationship are determined by the cultural values of the society represented in the novel. Translating the novel into English therefore requires the transfer of both the narrative and the cultural context in which the narrative operates.

One of the most significant difficulties is the translation of culturally embedded expressions. Anganghal's language reflects the linguistic environment of Manipur and incorporates expressions whose meanings may extend beyond their literal definitions. A particular expression may simultaneously convey an action, an emotion, and a culturally recognised attitude. When such an expression is translated literally into English, its surface meaning may be retained while its cultural associations become less visible. Conversely, when it is replaced by a familiar English expression, the meaning may become more accessible but the cultural character of the source text may be weakened.

Original Manipuri line:

"Chilhao thidaba kabokang faoba yumbal
fattare macha masu tadare" (Anganghal5)

English translation:

"Even the water hyacinth which chooses
no fertile area seems to be in bad
shape." (Sonamani 4)

The comparison of the above lines can be examined through Nida's concept of equivalence. The translator changes the linguistic form but preserves the intended meaning and effect, so the translation can be understood as an attempt to achieve dynamic equivalence. However, the cultural image contained in the original expression is itself significant, the replacement of that image results in cultural loss. This distinction between

communicative meaning and cultural meaning is essential in analysing the translation of *Jahera*.

Idiomatic expressions provide another important example. Idioms are closely associated with the cultural and linguistic habits of a particular community. Their meanings cannot always be understood from the individual words that constitute them. Anganghal's use of idiomatic language contributes to the naturalness and cultural character of his prose. In translation, however, an idiom can be rendered literally, replaced by an English idiom, or paraphrased. Each strategy produces a different result.

Original Manipuri idiom:

"Mangda mani khunba" (Anganghal 7)

English translation:

"Finding jewels in the dream" (Sonamani
6)

The expression is translated literally and the cultural imagery is preserved, but the English reader who has little or no knowledge of Manipuri idioms may find it unfamiliar. This problem corresponds closely with Venuti's distinction between foreignization and domestication.

Foreignization allows elements of the source culture to remain visible within the target text. Domestication, on the other hand, adapts the source text to the linguistic and cultural expectations of the target reader. In the case of *Jahera*, both tendencies may be observed in the translator's treatment of culturally marked expressions. The preservation of Manipuri names and cultural references allows aspects of the source culture to remain visible, while the restructuring of sentences and adaptation of expressions contributes to the readability of the English version.

Proverbs present an even greater challenge because they embody the collective experience and worldview of a community. A

Manipuri proverb may employ an image derived from local life that is immediately recognisable to a Manipuri reader. The same image may not carry an equivalent association for an English reader.

Original Manipuri proverb:

“Inakkhunba tarana lairaba ama sougatpa ngamde” (Anganghal 1)

English translation:

“It is a fact that ten well-to-dos cannot support a poor” (Sonamani 1)

The analysis of this example shows that the translation preserves both the proverbial meaning and the cultural image. The general meaning is retained and so, the translation achieves a degree of semantic equivalence. The translation also allows the target reader to encounter an element of Manipuri cultural expression.

Religious and social terminology is equally significant in *Jahera*. The central relationship between Kunjo and Jahera is shaped by their different religious identities. Religion therefore functions not simply as background information but as a major structural element of the novel. The characters’ social identities determine how their relationship is perceived and what consequences it produces.

Original Manipuri passage:

“Numit khuding brinda mnakta changduna‘nangdi sati na onbani satini hai eina ningba thungjage’ haiduna khoirmmi”(Anganghal 146)

English translation:

“Everyday she goes near Brinda (tulsi plant) bows down praying ‘You are Sati incarnate’ as allow me to fulfill my desire.”(Sonamani 142)

The translation of such “Brinda” into “Tulsi” demonstrates the difficulty of transferring culturally specific concepts into

English. The English word may communicate the general idea but fail to convey the historical or social associations attached to the Manipuri term.

This illustrates the difference between lexical equivalence and cultural equivalence. Lexical equivalence asks whether a word in the target language corresponds to the word in the source language. Cultural equivalence asks whether the target expression communicates the social and cultural significance of the source expression. In the translation of regional literature, cultural equivalence is particularly important because cultural meaning often forms an essential part of the literary text.

The representation of social identity is also central to the novel. Kunjo and Jahera are not represented merely as two individuals in love. Their religious and social identities influence their relationship and determine how society responds to them. The translation successfully communicates this broad conflict, but certain cultural implications may become less immediate for readers unfamiliar with Manipuri society.

Original dialogue:

‘Kunjo: Artha d khngde, luhongaba nupina nupa mayum chatpa da kaptunachtli. Chenlakpa nupina kappa di ngasi da makhangi.” (Anganghal 238)

English translation:

“Kunjo: I do not know the meaning why a bride goes weeping when she goes to the house of the groom. But I have known only today for the first time the weeping of a girl when she elopes.” (Sonamani 237)

A comparison of the dialogue demonstrates how the English translation reduces the emotional intensity and social implications of the original. Dialogue is particularly important because speech often reflects identity, social position, emotion, and

interpersonal relationships. Changes in vocabulary or sentence structure can consequently influence the way a character is perceived by the target reader.

The emotional language of Jahera presents another area of interest. Love, longing, separation, fear, and suffering are central to the novel, but these emotions are expressed within a particular cultural environment. An expression that carries strong emotional resonance in Manipuri may appear more neutral when translated literally into English. The translator must therefore attempt to reproduce not only the semantic content but also the emotional force of the original.

Original emotional passage:

“Jahera: Kari haina nungsiriba, eidi yum panba ngmoi haijaba nttra nungshiba nupi amana kaptuna haijabada khangba ngamba nangna nungshiba khngbra?” (Anganghal 239)

English translation:

“How do you love me? Have I not told you that I cannot marry and be a wife to you? You take no care to what a woman you love prays weeping. How can you understand what love is?” (Sonamani.238 and 239)

The comparison of these passages demonstrates the extent to which the translation produces an equivalent emotional effect. Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence is particularly relevant here because the correspondence between the two texts depends not merely on the transfer of individual words but also on the response produced in the target reader. The English version conveys Jahera’s emotional conflict and resistance, although differences in syntax and expression alter some of the intensity and rhetorical force of the Manipuri original.

Anganghal’s use of figurative language creates another challenge. Metaphors and images frequently emerge from the cultural

environment of a literary work. A metaphor that is natural and meaningful in Manipuri may sound unusual in English if translated literally. On the other hand, replacing it with an English metaphor may preserve its general function while changing the cultural image.

Original figurative expression:

“Asina haidokpa yadaba awaba mei aduna Jahera asi loudana kare, yaidana kanglabani.”(Anganghal 16)

English translation:

“Hence the unspeakable fire of sadness chars Jahera even without being baked and dries her up without being roasted.”(Sonamani 15)

The comparison of this figurative expression demonstrates that translation involves a series of interpretive choices rather than the reproduction of a single equivalent. In the English version, the imagery of “fire of sadness” is retained, while the figurative structure is adapted to produce a comprehensible expression in English. Although the translation conveys the emotional intensity of Jahera’s suffering, the restructuring of the original expression also produces a different stylistic effect in the target language. This example therefore illustrates the translator’s negotiation between preserving the imagery of the source text and ensuring fluency and accessibility in English.

The stylistic features of Anganghal’s prose also undergo transformation in translation. Manipuri and English possess different grammatical structures, rhythms, idiomatic patterns, and literary conventions. A sentence that produces a particular rhythm or emphasis in Manipuri may require restructuring in English. Such restructuring is often necessary to produce natural English, but it may also alter the stylistic texture of the original.

The translation therefore occupies a position between formal fidelity and target-

language fluency. It retains the basic narrative and cultural setting while adapting linguistic structures to English. From Toury's perspective, these choices can be considered in relation to translation norms operating within the target literary system. The English version's emphasis on clarity and readability consequently shapes the translator's rendering of culturally and stylistically marked expressions.

Another important issue is the preservation of cultural identity. The translation of Manipuri literature into English has a dual responsibility. On one hand, it should make the source text accessible to readers outside Manipur. On the other hand, it should avoid reducing the source culture to a collection of simplified or domesticated expressions. The challenge is to enable readers to understand the text without eliminating the cultural difference that makes the text distinctive.

In this respect, the English translation of *Jahera* performs an important cultural function. It carries a significant Manipuri literary work beyond the boundaries of the Meiteilon-speaking community. The translation introduces English readers to Anganghal's representation of Manipuri society and allows them to encounter themes of love, religion, social restriction, and cultural identity through the perspective of a Manipuri writer. Translation therefore becomes an important form of literary and cultural dissemination.

At the same time, translation is never completely neutral. Every translation involves interpretation. When a translator chooses a particular English equivalent for a culturally specific Manipuri word, the choice influences how the target reader understands that concept. When an idiom is paraphrased, some stylistic features may disappear. When a proverb is adapted, its cultural imagery may change. When a culturally unfamiliar practice is rendered through a familiar English term, the target reader may understand the general idea without

encountering the full cultural significance of the original.

The comparative study of *Jahera* therefore reveals both cultural loss and cultural gain. Cultural loss may occur when a source-language expression has no precise equivalent in English or when its cultural associations are weakened during translation. Cultural gain, however, occurs through the wider circulation of the work. Readers who cannot access the Manipuri original are nevertheless able to encounter Anganghal's literary world through English.

The translation should therefore not be understood simply in terms of success or failure. Its value lies in its ability to communicate the central literary experience of the novel while negotiating the unavoidable differences between Manipuri and English. The English version remains recognisably *Jahera*, yet it is also a transformed text because its meanings are expressed through a different linguistic and cultural system.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of Hijam Anganghal Singh's *Jahera* and its English translation by E. Sonamoni Singh demonstrates the complex nature of translating culturally embedded regional literature. The novel's central story of Kunjo and Jahera is inseparable from questions of religious identity, social boundaries, community expectations, and individual freedom. Consequently, its translation involves not only the transfer of narrative content but also the negotiation of the cultural world represented by the original.

The English translation successfully introduces *Jahera* to a wider readership and preserves its central narrative, characters, conflicts, and thematic concerns. It therefore performs an important role in the dissemination of Manipuri literature beyond the Meiteilon-speaking community. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis indicates that certain

elements of the original are difficult to transfer completely into English. Proverbs, idioms, culturally specific terminology, religious references, figurative expressions, and emotional language may undergo modification or reduction when transferred into the target language.

The theoretical perspectives of Nida, Venuti, Bassnett, and Toury help explain these transformations. Nida's concept of equivalence demonstrates the tension between preserving form and producing a comparable communicative effect. Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization reveal the translator's choices between target-language accessibility and source-cultural visibility. Bassnett's emphasis on cultural translation demonstrates that language cannot be separated from the cultural context in which it operates, while Toury's concept of translation norms helps explain the influence of the target literary environment on the translated text.

The translation of *Jahera* consequently demonstrates that complete equivalence between languages is rarely possible, particularly when the source text is strongly rooted in a specific cultural environment. Yet the impossibility of complete equivalence does not diminish the value of translation. Rather, it highlights the translator's role as a mediator between cultures. Through translation, a regional literary work acquires a new readership while carrying traces of its original linguistic and cultural identity into the target language.

Ultimately, *Jahera* demonstrates both the possibilities and challenges of translating Manipuri literature into English. The English version enables Anganghal's literary representation of Manipuri society, love, religion, and social conflict to reach readers beyond its original linguistic context. At the same time, the changes that occur in the translation reveal the limitations inherent in transferring culturally specific meanings across

languages. Translation is therefore best understood not as a perfect reproduction but as a process of negotiation in which meaning, culture, identity, and literary expression are continually reconstructed. The study of *Jahera* and its English translation thus contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges involved in carrying Manipuri literature into English and emphasises the importance of preserving cultural specificity while ensuring accessibility to the target reader.

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