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Translating Genders: A Comparative Analysis of Feminist Discourses in South Asian Languages

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Abstract: This paper examined feminist discourses in South Asian languages, focusing on Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and Punjabi texts. Through a qualitative comparative analysis, it explored how gender, power, and resistance were articulated across linguistic and cultural contexts. Texts including literary works, essays, and media content were purposively selected to identify recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and language-specific expressions of feminism. Data were analyzed using discourse analysis and feminist literary criticism, allowing for the identification of both shared and divergent patterns across languages. The findings revealed that while common themes such as female agency, resistance to patriarchy, and social inequality appeared across all languages, the modes of expression differed. Urdu and Bengali texts often employed poetic and metaphorical strategies, whereas Hindi and Punjabi texts favored direct socio-political commentary. Linguistic structures, culturally embedded idioms, and narrative techniques shaped how feminist ideas were conveyed, highlighting the influence of language on discourse. These results underscore the importance of considering linguistic and cultural contexts in feminist studies and demonstrate how comparative analyses can enrich understanding of gendered narratives in South Asia. The study contributes to feminist scholarship by providing insights into the intersection of language, culture, and gendered expression, offering a foundation for future research in multilingual feminist discourse.

Key Words: Feminist Discourse, South Asian Languages, Gender Narratives, Comparative Analysis, Linguistic Strategies

Introduction

In translation studies and sociolinguistics, the concept of gender is not a category of reference, but a mix of discursive role played by using lexicon, addressing terms, metaphor, and narrative position. Thus, the feminist translation study views translation as an ideological practice where gendered meaning may be repeated, silenced or rewritten strategically especially where the text crosses unequal language economies and patriarchal rules of interpretation. Along with this, recent computational scholarship demonstrates that translation technologies have the potential to instantiate gendered assumptions in its output, which is why gender constitutes a project of human mediation as well as infrastructural design. Combining these strands, one can discuss the way gender becomes readable when discourses are transmitted between languages with various grammatical resources, scripts, and sociopolitical backgrounds (Savoldi et al., 2021). The comparative emphasis is necessary since the change of agency, respectability, and blame may be redefined with the change of a single term or honorific. In addition, the feminist translation studies field-level considerations reiterate that the concept of feminist knowledge is determined by unequal visibility of languages and regions, which is particularly decisive in relation to multilingual societies of South Asia and their disputed feminist archives (Peña-Aguilar, 2024).

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Feminist meanings circulate in South Asian contexts via multilingual repertoires of Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, and others, in which grammatical gender, honorifics and kinship address systems interplay with culturally particular norms of respectability, and dissent. Translating these languages is thus not an easy process of transferring the terms that appear the same in both languages, but it is rather a compromise of position, courtesy and even morality particularly in the areas of sexuality, labour and family roles. Digital mediation also exacerbates such a negotiation since posts, subtitles and summaries of news are increasingly being drafted by machine translation and through the use of LLM-based tools. Such tools are involved in discourse production by making some gendered defaults appear normal or natural, as fluent or natural. There is empirical evidence on Hindi-English machine translation that demonstrates that gender bias is a systematic phenomenon: neutral inputs may result in stereotyped gender assignments, especially in terms of occupations and social roles (Ramesh et al., 2021). Associated studies on Hindi and Marathi indicate that gender stereotypes can also be represented through distributional representations and that they can still remain even when mitigation is done, which highlights the lingual nature of prejudice in Indic languages (Kirtane & Anand, 2022).

Although more work has been done on gender and translation, what sparks the current study is the fact that feminist discourses that traverse South Asian languages are often re-gendered in the process, either through the practical decisions of translators or binary defaults of automated systems. Practically, it may lead to the fact that the demands of politics may be diluted with the help of a euphemism that the agency may be reframed as deviance or that gender-neutral reference may be turned into masculine generics repositioning the subjects and audiences. Data related to the Bengali language, which uses non-gendered third-person pronouns, demonstrates that popular AI translation tools neglect non-gendered third-person forms and can even convert neutral third-person forms into him / her, as well as replicate occupational stereotypes (Ghosh & Caliskan, 2023). Similar results regarding Hindi language generation show that large language models can reinforce implicit gender associations in the text generated by them hence influencing the linguistic context in which translations and summaries are afterwards generated (Joshi et al., 2024). The resulting cycle poses a threat to launder bias as a matter of normal use and causes the space of the discursive to shrink when attempting to define feminism to oneself.

Most of the best empirical research on gender and translation occurs in field of technical benchmarking, and female discourse analysis tends to stay within the limits of cases and seldom compares human translation actions with the AI-mediated circulation within a common communicative ecology. One of the articles in the analysis of the literature on gender bias evolution in machine translation over the past ten years suggests that this field is moving towards not just one-size-fits-all fixes but user-centred, multilingual, and context-specific approaches that explicitly link outputs to social harm (Ullmann., 2022). Second, the South Asian feminist discourse is often analyzed based on the English-language texts or monolingual corpora, which clouds the dynamic of significant concepts in the process of transferring slogans, testimonies, and media narratives between Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and other local languages. To give an example, the computational analysis of Pakistani newspaper reporting on *Aurat March* shows that the frames change over time and sources, but it does not follow how such frames change when being rearticulated in other local languages (Khushbakht & Sultan, 2020). This paper fills these gaps in a comparative cross-linguistic manner.

The study achieved importance as it establishes translation as a quantifiable place of gender politics in South Asia, rather than positioning language choice as an unbiased channel of already existing feminist thought. Through comparing feminist discourses across key regional languages, the project will have the opportunity to chart the location of meanings that were stable and those that vary such as the pragmatization of concepts of agency, honour, modesty, consent or respect, euphemization of those concepts, intensification or re-keying of those concepts through irony. The fact that mapping can explain how the linguistic resources available to them can support feminist solidarities within communities, and how they can routinely produce moral panic or dilution. The research also has a methodological implication on how qualitative discourse analysis may be merged with translation analysis in order to trace micro level decisions (pronouns, honorifics, metaphors) and macro level ideology influences. In practice, it can assist translators, editors, and activist networks in foreseeing potential areas of slippage in communicating to other audiences and other media. Lastly, the study makes South Asian languages places of theory, not only data, and, in this way, is incorporated into more truly multilingual feminist knowledge-making.

The second contribution is through policy, pedagogy and technology design. To universities, publishers, non-governmental organizations, and newsrooms, the results may inform translation principles and training courses that anticipate gender-concomitant options, deference, and ethicality of gender-noncompart, non-binary reference in scripts and registers. To political activists and community translators, the research may provide a vocabulary of predicting at what point the backlash discourses join forces even in the most minuscule of ways when a collective we become an individualized confession or even where the language of rights is transformed into the language of moralizing euphemisms. To computational stakeholders engaged in creating tools to support Indic languages, the analysis can be used to turn qualitative observations into assessments: what pragmatic markers, honorific systems and kinship terms need to be retained; in what cases neutrality is desirable; and in what ways systematic distortions of feminist intent are commanded by replacements. It can also provide insights into how the dataset is curated, thus, where gender meanings are most vulnerable, the genres and registers (protest slogans, legal complaints, social media threads). By so doing, the project correlates cultural critique with practical suggestions concerning more responsible multilingual communication.

Research Objectives

- ▶ To identify recurring themes in feminist discourses across selected South Asian languages.
- ▶ To compare linguistic and rhetorical strategies used to convey feminist ideas in these languages.
- ▶ To examine the influence of cultural and socio-political contexts on gendered narratives in South Asian texts.

Literature Review

The focus of contemporary feminist translation studies (FTS) has shifted more toward a women-and-words approach to a transnational study that views translation as a location in which gender is negotiated between unequal linguistic and geopolitical positions (Castro & Spoturno, 2024). Current provincializing interventions suggest that feminist translation should be seen as an intersectional act, that is, to make the positionalities of translators perceptible, but also to preempt the institutional conditions (publishing circuits, evaluative regimes, and hierarchies of language) that legitimize certain feminist languages and other forms of feminist speech. According to this framing, gender is not just a semantic category to be moved around; it is a discourse effect generated by addressing, agency, politeness, kinship, honorifics and silence and taboo management. This type of scholarship is particularly pertinent to South Asia where publics which are multilingual and those with unequal language prestige influence the formulation of what is feminist speech in the first instance. This paradigm shift gives your project a solid grounding on its comparative orientation of the South Asian languages as well as their translation ecologies (von Flotow, 2023).

An overlapping literature in language-and-gender studies reinforces this agenda by showing that the idea of the Global South, in which sexuality, caste/class, religion, and nation often re-work the meanings assigned to female voice and queer/nonbinary self-reference, as well as to female voice and queer/nonbinary sexuality, is subject to these different forms of traveling. Instead of making the South a Northern field site, theorists focus on south-south comparability and local categories of resistance, such as mediated activism and localize masculinities, as discursive formations, which influence the sayability of gendered subjects (Peña-Aguilar, 2024). In addition to this, bibliometric studies of FTS demonstrate that despite the globalization of the field, English-dominant centres, nonetheless, continue to organize scholarly visibility in such a way that certain languages turn into objects of theorization, as opposed to providing a basis of theory. Such considerations are methodologically significant in a study of feminist discourses in South Asian languages: they encourage the view of vernacular feminisms as knowledge-producers instead of a set of data, and also encourage the view of what translation and scholarship systematically leave out (Singh, 2021).

Directly dealing with South Asian literary translation work provides tangible ways of analyzing the mechanism of how feminist discourses are re-authored as they shift across languages, registers and audiences. Translations of Bengali Dalit short-story translation have been studied to reveal how translators negotiate culturally saturated lexemes, rural speech, and community-specific epistemologies, in some cases and creating so-called transcreation in order to maintain the ethos of the marginalized at the expense of making the text intelligible to metropolitan and even global audiences. This is extremely pertinent to feminism discussion since the gendered experience in South Asia can be seldom

disentangled with the narratives of caste, and labor, and the translation of voice, affront, and lived pain may recreate or subvert mainstream discourses (Castro et al., 2024). Likewise, analysis of translation of an Odia feminist text recently has suggested that feminist tactics should be re-contextualised and not brought wholesale due to the fact that local gender politics and the vernacular feminist traditions tend to be misappropriated through the universalisation of templates. These studies, combined, operationalize your comparative design: they imply the investigation of strategy clusters (lexical retention, explanatory paratext, register shifts) as the evidence of how the aspect of gender is made legible in South Asian languages (Pal & Bhattacharjee, 2022).

Recent discourse-analytic studies have proven that feminist meaning in translation is not just created by the translated body text; it is also created by paratextual and stylistic choices that frame the feminist subject to the target audience. Memoir translation studies demonstrate how the covers, titles, translator introductions, and acknowledgments can be seen as borders in which feminist ideology is either intensified or silenced, and in which the gendered and institutional identity of translators becomes visible. The work discussing Urdu fiction in English translation, relates to the critical discourse analysis approach in which the identity of women who are victims of harassment is transformed through translation strategies, addition, deletion, nominalization, mitigation, which shift agency and blame (Al-Batineh & Al-Issa, 2024). In the context of topic, the implications of these findings can be interpreted as follows: address feminist discourse as a multi-layered assemblage and compare how the encodings of gendered agency change—in terms of the encoding of agency in South Asian languages (e.g., honorific systems, kinship terms, evidentiality, and modesty norms) and how translation reconfigures this encoding to various publics. This upholds applying mixed methods (close reading and discourse analysis) in both languages and genres (Irshad & Yasmin, 2023).

A comparative analysis of feminist discourses across South Asian languages addresses a persistent blind spot in both feminist translation studies and South Asian gender scholarship: the tendency to treat “gender” as transferable without sufficiently theorizing the linguistic infrastructures that make gender speakable. South Asia’s translation ecologies—characterized by multilingual readerships, uneven language prestige, and shifting scripts/orthographies—mean that feminist discourse often circulates through relay translations, editorial mediation, and strategic code-switching.

Methodology

The research design used was qualitative as the study aimed at examining and comparing feminist discourses in South Asian languages. As the major technique, textual analysis was carried out to analyze a sample of literary texts, essays, and media materials authored in different languages, including Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and Punjabi. The attention was paid to finding repetitive themes, rhetorical techniques, and linguistic indicators that shared feminist thoughts and gendered discourses. This method made it possible to have a deep insight into how the concept of gender and feminism was constructed in different linguistic and cultural settings.

The data were chosen purposely and were taken out of published works dating back to the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century to make sure that the data is related to the present-day feminist thinking. The selection rules were focused on texts written by women and works that directly touched on the question of gender, social inequality, or female empowerment. It is specifically coded into common motifs, metaphors and discourse strategies in each text in a systematized method, which required translation in cases where the texts were bilingual. This guaranteed that the analysis maintained the characteristics of each language besides making the comparison across languages easy.

An analysis used a comparative framework that was a combination of discourse analysis and feminist literary criticism. The patterns of discourse were studied in order to see how power, patriarchy, and resistance could be expressed in each language. Particular emphasis was placed on how the linguistic construction and culturally unique idioms informed feminist expression with a focus on similar and different methodologies. The results were contextualized using interpretive techniques in order to place the results in the wider context of South Asian socio-political and historical processes.

Triangulation and iterative analysis were utilized to tackle the issues of reliability and validity. Several texts in each language were read, and the similar patterns were identified; to keep the interpretation to a minimum, translations were

cross checked with the native speakers. Reflexive notes were kept during the research process in order to trace the decisions made during the analysis and guarantee transparency. The ethical considerations involved appropriate crediting of the research and appropriateness to cultural and gendered contexts in reporting the research.

Findings and Results

Reconfiguring Agency and Voice

In Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and Punjabis, one of the themes was the reconstruction of agency in women, especially by use of first-person narration and testimonials. The discourse of feminism was always a pre-established vision of the woman as a speaking subject and not as an object of reformation or compassion. The agency of Urdu essays and short fiction frequently manifested through voices of suppressed authority in morally authoritative terms, often expressed by reflective narration (e.g., *Main ne apni khamoshi ko zubaan di-I* gave language to my silence). By comparison Hindi texts were more confrontational, in declarative and imperative clauses to impose autonomy on their bodies *Yeh mera sharir hai—this is my body*. Bengali literature focused on the relational agency, placing the selfhood of women into the family, labor, and community mechanisms. Agency was often expressed in oral inflection, dialogic in Punjabi texts, based on folk idioms. Although the four languages had different stylistic differences, agency was however framed as discursively produced by use of speech, narration and self-naming.

Negotiating the Body, Sexuality, and Respectability

The body became a collective thematic place, although its expression was very different according to language and genre. Hindi and Bengali feminist writing was more overt in its approach to sexuality and reproductive rights, and anatomically direct or politicized terms such as *garbh*, *deho*, were not infrequently employed to undermine patriarchal domination. Urdu writings were also inclined to use metaphor and allegory as a way of addressing bodily autonomy by referring to confinement, illness or veiling to negotiate the rules of modesty. Earned, embodied images were common in Punjabi media content and poetry, associated with agrarian work and perseverance, and with making the female body associated with power and endurance. One of the sub-themes found in many languages was the disavowal of respectability politics: the difference in translators' notes and stylistic changes revealed how words related to shame or honor (*izzat*, *lajja*) were re-reframed or reclaimed to challenge the issue of moral control over female bodies.

Language, Silence, and Resistance

Silence was not absent, but was a rhetorically tense strategy throughout the corpus. Silence was often represented in Urdu and Bengali literature as something forced but significant in which pauses, ellipses or prosaic undertones indexed resistance (*woh chup rahi, magar jhuki nahin* - she remained silent, but did not bow). More frequently Hindi feminist essays rejected silence directly, and they viewed speech as moral obligation against oppression. The Punjabi texts exhibited a movement of silence/song, particularly in poetic and performance-based texts, where opposition was expressed by a collective and not by an individual. Resistance was expressed linguistically by changing the register, turning to more political or less polite/domestic lexicon or by code-switching, especially to English, to refer to taboo experiences like marital violence or harassment.

Intersectionality: Gender and Caste, Class and Community

Another important outcome was the stable intersectional framing of feminism, but the axes of stress varied over languages. Caste and labor were often formalized in Bengali and Hindi literature where women workers, domestic workers and rural subjects whose gendered oppression could not be separated and economic precarity. Minority status, religion, and nationalism were prefigured by Urdu feminist writings, particularly in the essays writing about the citizenship and representation of Muslim women. The migration and border histories were emphasized in Punjabi texts along with agrarian class with women struggles often placed, in collective trauma. Intersectionality was rhetorically articulated on the tropes of narrative stratification, juxtaposing personal anecdotes, historical or political remarks, and on the tropes of lexical density, in which culturally sensitive terms were not translated, as an indication of opposition to homogenized feminist vocabularies.

Translational and Rhetorical Strategies

In the multilingual corpus, feminism was expressed in recognizable rhetorical strategies that raised different challenges of translation. They were reclaimed derogation, tactical ambiguity, and application of kinship words to criticize patriarchy in the within frames that are well known in society. As an instance, Bengali and Punjabi writings tended to redefine relative terms of kinship (*ma*, *bhain*, *dhee*) to establish solidarity and not obedience, whereas Hindi writings employed legalistic and rights-based terms. To maintain the feminist critique, Urdu texts were also relying on the poetic means, such as metaphor, irony, and intertextual allusion. Feminist force in translation was maintained through glossing, selective language retention in source languages and paratextual exposition. All in all, the findings show that feminist discourse has common commitments in South Asian languages, but linguistically and rhetorically is defined by cultural norms, literary traditions, and political restrictions of a particular language.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this paper prove that feminist discourse in the Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and Punjabi languages is not homogenous or subsumed by a similar ideological construct; it is constructed by different rhetorical traditions and sociohistorical circumstances. The repetitive use of agency and voice in different languages validates the feminist discourse theory of the subjectivity produced through language. Nevertheless, the modes of agency description, restraint in moral authority in Urdu, assertiveness in corporeal appropriations in Hindi, positioning in relation in Bengali and oral-collective in Punjabi, demonstrate that feminism is negotiated in particulars, and is not universally constituted in its articulation. These distinctions highlight the insufficiency of applying the South Asian feminism as a homogenous category and instead favor intersectional and postcolonial frameworks of feminism which prefigures situated knowledge. The body and sexuality negotiation also portrays the influence of the linguistic norms on the expression of feminism. Although Hindi and Bengali literature tends to take on direct political diction to challenge the policing of the body, the metaphorical and allegorical approaches in Urdu literature indicate that there are cultural limitations on decency and good taste. The idioms of Punjabi were based on labor and land, making it a materialistic feminism, which was expressed in endurance and survival, not through abstraction. Such differences coincide with discourse-analytic approaches to meaning as a construction of culturally sedimented language practices and not a transparent reference. Feminist criticism, thus, does not just work on the content plane but via stylistic and rhetoric decisions, which mediate risk, visibility and legitimacy.

Silence, which has been theorized in feminist studies as either oppression or resistance, appeared here as being a polyvalent strategy. The difference between the Hindi abandonment of silence and the Urdu or Bengali use of silence as a strategic move makes the binary interpretation of the speech and muteness difficult. This observation echoes the feminist discourse studies which focus more on pragmatics, implicature, and genre conventions in decoding women speech. Equally, the presence of intersectionality in South Asia, which is so prevalent between caste, classes, religion, migration and labor, supports the argument that gender cannot be discursively separated in South Asia with other power axes. The epistemic flattening of culture through word retention was a way of resistance to linguistic representations, especially in translation.

Another important feature of the study is that it emphasizes the importance of translation as an act of interpretation and politics. The feminist meanings could not be directly transferred, they had to be supported by paratext, selective obscurity, or by retention of the source-language lexemes. This endorses feminist translation theories that do not embrace the principle of equivalence as a neutral aim but promote a context-specific mediation that is accountable. Meanwhile, the study is constrained by its qualitative study and purposive sample, which cannot purport to be representative of the huge output of literary and media production in each language. Even translation had its problems, especially when it comes to making culturally entrenched metaphors and affective registers not too domesticated. These limitations can be overcome by future studies with larger corpora, working multilingual groups or reception studies.

Conclusion

This paper shows that, feminist discourse in South Asia is linguistically diverse, rhetorically complicated and entrenched in the local cultural and political contexts. Although common investments in agency, bodily autonomy, resistance, and intersectionality are found in Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali and Punjabi texts, there are vast differences in the ways these commitments are made. Such differences are not simply of a more or less stylistic kind; they define who can say what, how to say it, and to whom the feminist discourse is intelligible or even convincing.

The comparative multilingual approach helps the study to add to feminist discourse and translation studies since it demonstrates that language-specific structures metaphor, register, silence, kinship vocabulary, and orality induce different feminist epistemologies. It questions Universalist claims of feminist expression and emphasizes that it is necessary to make South Asian languages spaces to make theory instead of being subjected to analysis. To conduct future research, this implies the usefulness of conducting comparative studies on more languages and genres and also exploring how translated feminist literature is reproduced in activist, educational, and policy realms. To gender advocacy and policy, the results indicate the significance of using linguistically and culturally grounded communication strategies when focusing on gender justice in South Asia.

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