

CHALLENGES IN LITERARY TRANSLATION: A STUDY OF MEANING, CULTURE AND EMOTION IN TRANSLATIONS

*** Mrs. Jayashree Vilas Nalawade**

* Assistant Professor, BV's Yashwantrao Chavan Law College, Karad

Abstract:

Language connects people by sharing emotions and thoughts, yet its diversity creates barriers. Translation bridges these differences, allowing literature to travel globally. It is not a mere word-to-word conversion but an effort to carry the spirit, rhythm, and emotion of the original work into another language. In literary translation, this becomes complex as it involves imagination, cultural context, and poetic rhythm.

This paper explores the major challenges faced in literary translation, especially while translating Marathi poetry and spiritual literature into English. It highlights issues like preserving rhythm, conveying spiritual depth, and maintaining cultural beauty, while balancing accuracy and artistry. Translation is shown as both an art and a responsibility that requires linguistic skill, emotional honesty, and cultural sensitivity.

Keywords: Translation, Literary Translation, Marathi Poetry, Culture, Meaning, Rhythm, Spirituality, Emotion, Global, Communication.

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Introduction:

Language reflects the soul of a community. Each language carries its rhythm, worldview, and emotional tone. Translation acts as a bridge that connects these diverse worlds. In English literature, it enables global literature and cultural understanding, yet literary translation is far more challenging than technical translation.

A poem, novel, or spiritual verse embodies artistic expression and cultural identity. Capturing this essence in another language is like transplanting a living tree into new soil—it survives but must adapt.

This paper explores the challenges of literary translation and how translators struggle to preserve meaning and emotion. Translation is not mechanical substitution but a creative process demanding cultural understanding, empathy, and imagination. It allows readers to experience the voice of another culture.

For example, the Marathi line “देवा तुझ्याविण कोण आपुला?” (“O Lord, who is ours without You?”) carries simplicity and devotion. The literal translation conveys meaning but not the devotional bhav present in Marathi rhythm.

Thus, the paper examines why translation is a true artistic challenge — blending meaning, sound, and spirit — especially in poetic and spiritual works. It highlights translators as cultural interpreters and co-creators who connect worlds.

Objectives:

This study examines real challenges through examples from Marathi poetry and spiritual writings. It aims to prove that translation is the transfer not only of language but of life, culture, society and philosophy.

Objectives include:

- Understanding translation as a creative art, not a mechanical task.

- Highlighting unique challenges in Marathi-to-English translation.
- Analysing transformation of spiritual and emotional depth.
- Balancing accuracy and aesthetics.
- Stressing cultural and contextual understanding.
- Suggesting practical approaches for literary translators.

Challenges in Literary Translation:

1. Rhyme, Rhythm, and Sound:

Poetry lives through sound. Marathi poetry, especially devotional verses, has natural rhythm and rhyme. For instance:

“जीव लाविला गोड नामी, सुखाचा झाला सागर थामी.”

Literal translation: “I fixed my heart upon the sweet name, and the sea of joy came to rest.”

Meaning is correct, but music disappears. To retain beauty, one might adapt:

“My soul clings to the sweetest name,
And joy now rests, a gentle flame.”

Here, exactness is sacrificed for poetic feel. Translators constantly balance meaning and rhythm, proving that translation is reconstruction, not copying.

2. Spiritual and Philosophical Depth:

Saint-poets like Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram, and Namdev blend poetry and philosophy. Words like Dnyan (spiritual knowledge), Bhakti (devotion), and Shraddha (faith) lack precise English equivalents.

Example: Tukaram’s Ovi —

“आम्ही त्याचिया गावी, आम्हांसी ठेविला भावी.”

Literal translation: “We belong to His village; He has kept us as His own.”

Though accurate, it misses the Marathi emotion of surrender and divine connection. Such spiritual nuances are hard to convey; hence, devotional translation becomes a sacred challenge.

3. Cultural Expressions and Local Imagery:

Marathi literature reflects Maharashtra’s soil, traditions, and festivals. Concepts like Pandharpur Yatra, Vitthal standing on a brick, or Aarti carry deep cultural resonance. Translating Vitthal Aarti simply as “prayer to the Lord” erases its cultural essence.

Translators must decide whether to retain such words, explain them, or replace them. Each choice changes the reader’s experience, making cultural untranslatability a major obstacle.

4. Emotional Equivalence:

Emotions are expressed differently across languages. Marathi expresses devotion or sorrow softly, while English sounds more logical and direct.

“देवा तुझ्याविण कोण आपुला?”

“O Lord, who is ours without You?”

The tenderness of “आपुला” has no true English counterpart. Translators can reproduce emotion only by creating a similar emotional space.

5. Multiple Meanings in Ancient Texts:

Sacred texts like Dnyaneshwari or Bhagavad Gita contain layered meanings. Words like Dharma, Maya, and Karma hold spiritual, ethical, and philosophical senses. Translators act as interpreters, carrying intellectual responsibility beyond language.

6. Maintaining the Poet’s Voice:

Each poet has a unique tone—Tukaram’s simplicity differs from Dnyaneshwar’s philosophy. Uniform translation styles flatten individuality. The translator must balance the poet’s original voice with the target language’s natural tone—a deeply personal challenge.

7. Ethical and Emotional Responsibility:

Translating sacred literature carries moral weight. Misinterpretation can distort faith and culture. Thus,

translators must work with humility and honesty, treating translation as an act of devotion and respect.

8. The Untranslatable Element:

Some essence—sound, emotion, or divine energy—always remains beyond translation. Accepting this limitation makes translation both impossible and beautiful. A good translator creates a living version that breathes in a new language.

Reflection:

These challenges prove that translation is an artistic and emotional endeavor. The translator must bring life to words while respecting culture and faith. Translating Marathi literature into English keeps regional voices alive and universal.

Outcomes and Observations:

1. Deepened Cultural Understanding:

Translation promotes mutual cultural awareness. Marathi works introduce readers worldwide to Maharashtra's devotion and traditions. Translators gain respect for both languages, becoming bridges of cultural exchange.

2. Encouragement of Creative Thinking:

When rhyme or rhythm fails to fit, translators invent new expressions. For instance, the Marathi line:

“भावे पाहण्या देवा, नेत्र होती निःशब्द”

Literal: “To see the Lord with feeling, the eyes fall silent.”

Creative version:

“In love I see my Lord so near,
My silent eyes forget the tear.”

This recreation makes the translator an artist, not a technician.

3. Preservation of Regional Literature:

Translation revives old texts for modern readers. Rendering Abhangas and Ovis into English ensures the survival of Marathi saints' voices in global culture. Through translation, Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar reach readers across continents.

4. Building Empathy and Sensitivity:

Translation develops emotional intelligence. Translators must feel the poet's heart. Without empathy, translation becomes mechanical; with empathy, even simple lines convey profound warmth.

5. Strengthening Language:

Each translation enriches both languages. Marathi terms like karma, guru, and bhakti have become part of global English. Thus, translation enhances both linguistic systems, allowing mutual growth.

6. Promoting Global Literary Unity:

Translation reveals that emotions like love, faith, and sorrow are universal. When English readers feel moved by Tukaram or Dnyaneshwar, it shows that literature unites hearts beyond borders.

7. Translation as a Research Tool:

Translation supports comparative and linguistic studies. Analyzing multiple versions of the Bhagavad Gita, for instance, shows how translators' beliefs shape meaning. Hence, translation becomes a tool for cultural and academic exploration.

8. Inspiring New Writing:

Many translators evolve into writers. Working deeply with another's style inspires original bilingual works blending Marathi rhythm with English expression, enriching both traditions.

9. Realization: Perfection Is Impossible, Beauty Is Possible:

No translation is flawless; something is always lost. Yet what replaces it may be equally beautiful. Translation adds new shades to literature, keeping it alive and evolving.

10. Time Limit:

It's very difficult to complete task within given time. Translators need time to understanding, more perfect vocabulary, geographical and emotional touch. Its creative art.

Summary of Observations:

Translation is not a secondary task but a vital creative act that:

- Builds cultural bridges,
- Preserves heritage,
- Inspires creativity, and
- Teaches empathy and depth.
- Meaning can travel even when words change — that is the enduring beauty of translation.

Conclusion:

Translation, particularly of literature, is a deeply human act — born from admiration and sustained by love. The translator carries not just meaning but emotion, rhythm, and soul across languages.

Between Marathi and English, this task bridges two cultural hearts — one rooted in devotion and rhythm, the other in logic and universality. The translator's duty is to preserve balance with sensitivity and humility.

The challenges of rhyme, spirituality, cultural imagery, and layered meanings show that translation is more than linguistic work—it is moral and emotional craftsmanship. Translators of saints like Tukaram or philosophers like Dnyaneshwar carry centuries of faith through words. A single choice — between bhakti and “devotion,” dnyan and “knowledge” — can change how a culture is perceived.

Translation, therefore, demands both artistry and responsibility. Translators must sometimes choose feeling over literal accuracy to preserve truth of spirit.

Though perfection is unattainable, every translation gives new life to the original.

These challenges shape translators into thinkers, artists, and bridge-builders between civilizations. Translation keeps cultural memory alive while connecting the present to the past. It is not just linguistic transformation—it is the act of keeping feelings alive across worlds.

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