

## TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE WORK OF SUDHA MURTHY

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper explores the interplay between translation and cultural dimensions in Indian literature, with special reference to the writings of Sudha Murthy. It begins by sketching major frameworks of translation studies and cultural theory, then discusses how cultural dimensions like language, identity, power, tradition and modernity are mediated through translation. The paper then turns to Murthy's work — her bilingual practice, her cultural milieu, and how translation (both of her texts and into her texts) carries, transforms or negotiates cultural meaning. Finally, I examine implications for Indian literary culture, translation practices, and cultural understanding in a multilingual society. Dr. Anuradha Ghodke Assistant Professor Department of English Pratibha College of Commerce and Computer Studies Chinchwad Pune*

**Keywords:** translation, cultural dimensions, Sudha Murthy, Indian English literature, Kannada literature, bilingual writing, cultural identity.

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### **Introduction:**

In a multilingual and multicultural society such as India, literature often functions in and across several languages; translation becomes a bridge between languages, regions, cultures, and readerships. Translation is not simply a linguistic exercise; it is a site where cultural dimensions—identity, power, tradition, modernity, collectivism vs individualism—are negotiated. This paper argues that examining translation through the lens of cultural dimensions illuminates how writers and translators mediate cultural meaning, and how texts circulate beyond their original contexts.

The prolific author Sudha Murthy, writing in Kannada and English and being widely translated into other Indian languages, provides a rich case. Her work reflects her cultural rootedness in Karnataka, her awareness of modernity, her concern for social values, and her bilingual/multilingual sensibility. By

examining her writing and translation practices, we gain insight into how cultural dimensions play out in translation, and how translation in turn influences cultural meaning.

This paper is structured in four parts: (1) an overview of translation studies and cultural dimensions; (2) discussion of key cultural dimensions relevant to Indian (and translated) literature; (3) an analysis of Sudha Murthy's work in relation to translation and cultural dimensions; and (4) implications and conclusion.

### **Translation and Cultural Dimensions: Theoretical Framework:**

#### **1. Translation as Cultural Mediation**

Translation scholars often emphasize that translation is more than lexicon-for-lexicon substitution: it is a negotiation of meaning across languages and cultures. As Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere note, translation involves rewriting, rewriting in the sense of

transformations shaped by ideologies, poetics, and cultural contexts. Translation, therefore, involves cultural mediation: the translator must decide what aspects of the source culture to foreground, what to domesticate or foreignize in the target culture.

In multilingual societies like India, translation often involves language pairs with different cultural histories. Translating from a regional language (say Kannada) into English (or vice versa) brings up cultural dimensions of centre/periphery, local/global, standard/non-standard, and power structures of language. Within literary translation, issues of readership, accessibility, and cultural representation become acute.

## 2. Cultural Dimensions

A useful way to examine how culture influences and is influenced by translation is via “cultural dimensions.” While originating in comparative sociology (e.g., Geert Hofstede’s dimensions such as power distance, individualism vs collectivism, long- vs short-term orientation) we can adapt them to literary and translation contexts. Pertinent dimensions might include:

- **Language and identity:** Language carries identity, cultural memory, regional and class signifiers. Writers who switch languages or have their work translated engage issues of linguistic identity.
- **Power and centre-periphery:** Which language is dominant (e.g., English) and which marginal (regional languages)? Translation often reinforces or resists power dynamics.
- **Tradition vs. modernity:** Literary texts may reflect traditions and modernising impulses; translation might alter the balance of tradition/modernity in the target culture.
- **Collectivism vs individualism:** Cultural value systems might emphasize community, family, caste, region; translations may or may not preserve these

values or shift them.

- **Cultural specificity vs universality:** How much does the translation carry culturally specific elements (rituals, local topography, idioms) versus how much does it generalise for universal appeal?

## 2.3 Translation and Cultural Dimensions Intersect

When a literary text is translated (or when a bilingual author produces in two languages), these cultural dimensions become salient. For example:

- A writer who originally writes in Kannada may translate or allow translation into English — what gets lost or gained in the process?
- Cultural references, idioms, social norms may not map neatly into target languages. The translator (or bilingual writer) must make choices about domestication (making culture accessible) or foreignization (retaining difference).
- The reception of translated text in different cultural milieus may privilege universal themes or downplay regional rootedness.
- Thus, translation acts as a crucible for cultural dimensions: it reveals what is *translatable* culturally, what resists translation, and how translation mediates cultural change.

## 3. Sudha Murthy: Translation, Culture, and Literature

### 1. Profile of Sudha Murthy

Sudha Murthy (born 1950) is an Indian author, engineer and philanthropist, whose writings span children’s literature, novels, short-stories, non-fiction, and travelogues. She writes in Kannada and English; her books have been translated into many Indian languages. Her cultural rootedness is in Karnataka (she studied in Kannada medium school) and she has spoken of how she “thinks in Kannada” though often writes in English. (The Federal) Her themes frequently include Indian family life, social values, culture, women’s identity, ethics, and compassion.

## 2. Bilingual Practice and Translation

Murthy's bilingual practice brings translation into her creative process. In an interview she said:

"For the first 50 years of my life I wrote in Kannada ... The emotions that I put in my writing come to me in Kannada ... I think in Kannada and then write in English." (The Federal)

Thus, she is both author and informal translator of her cultural-linguistic self: the content arises in Kannada, the expression may appear in English or get translated. Further, as one article noted:

"Her novels are always written in Kannada first and then translated into English... She studied in a Kannada medium school... My English writing is equal to what you will find in a class XII book." (Bangalore Mirror)

This practice tells us several things:

- Her primary cultural-linguistic identification is with Kannada; English is a second (or later) medium.
- Writing in English and/or allowing translation into English and other languages means her work travels beyond her original cultural-linguistic milieu.
- The translation (either self-translation or by others) holds the opportunity and risk of cultural mediation: what is preserved, what is adapted.

## 3. Cultural Dimensions in Her Work & Their Translation

Let us examine how the cultural dimensions noted earlier play out in Murthy's work and its translation.

### 1. Language and Identity

Murthy's identity as a Kannada-speaking woman from a middle-class Indian background is embedded in her writing. Language is central: she acknowledges thinking in Kannada, writing in English, and being translated into other languages. This multilingual identity situates her at the intersection of regional culture (Kannada)

and pan-Indian/international reach (English). Translation of her work thus involves carrying a Kannada cultural identity into other linguistic frameworks.

For example, in an interview she said:

"I write from life. I studied in a Kannada medium school... and I learnt English only in college." (Bangalore Mirror)

Thus the translation of her work must negotiate her Kannada-rooted idioms, social milieu, and cultural memory into English (or Hindi, Tamil, etc) readerships. The translator (or the author when she writes in English) must decide how to render Kannada cultural references (names, customs, rituals, local geography).

## 2. Power and Centre-Periphery

### (English/Regional Language Dynamic)

In India, English continues to occupy a dominant position in the literary market and global readership; regional languages sometimes sit in a peripheral position. Murthy's bilingual practice therefore participates in this dynamic: by writing in English (or translating into English) she accesses a broader readership; by writing first in Kannada she retains regional authenticity. However, translation involves negotiating between centre (English, mainstream) and periphery (Kannada, regional culture).

Her statement that her novels are first written in Kannada and then translated into English indicates a choice to preserve regional origin before moving to the "centre." But English translation may also mean adaptation (domestication) for wider readership. The translation must manage regional cultural particularities without losing them, while making the text accessible in English.

### 3. Tradition vs Modernity

Murthy's texts often balance traditional Indian cultural values (family, community, morality) with modernity (urbanisation, globalisation, women's education, professional identity). For instance, one of her novels deals with the conflict between materialism and idealism in modern India. (madhu-madhusree.blogspot.com)

Translation in this context means that the cultural dimension of tradition/modernity is made available to non-Kannada readers; but the translator must decide how much of the traditional cultural context (rituals, caste, local life) to explain or adapt. The translated text may read more "modern" or less culturally distinct than the original; or conversely, retain traditional markers that may seem foreign to the target readership.

### 4. Collectivism vs Individualism / Cultural Specificity vs Universality

Murthy's stories frequently foreground Indian middle-class life, community values, family ties. For example, one study on her work discusses "the representation of Indian middle-class life" in her short-stories. (BPAS Journals) The collectivist orientation (family, community) and culturally specific value systems are central. When translated, these dimensions may be "flattened" towards universality (e.g., a generic "family drama") or may retain specific cultural markers (Indian festivals, local customs).

Thus, translation of Murthy's work is a site where the tension between cultural specificity and universal appeal is negotiated. The translated text may aim for universality (which may reduce cultural distinctiveness) or may emphasize specificity (which may make it less accessible to readers unfamiliar with the culture). The translator/author must strike a balance.

### 4. Examples from Sudha Murthy's Work

While space does not allow an exhaustive case-by-case translation analysis of all her texts, a few observations illustrate how translation and cultural dimensions manifest in Murthy's work.

- In an interview, Murthy said that she "thinks in Kannada, then writes in English." This means the cultural "feel" of the text originates in Kannada language habits, idioms, local worldview, which then must be recast in English. (The Federal)
- Her novel *House of Cards* (originally published in Kannada as *Paridhi*) deals with a young woman relocating from a village to the city, confronting materialism and cultural change. An article states:
- "Her first novel, 'House of Cards' ... explores the conflict between materialism and idealism ... conventions collide with western sensitivities in the Silicon Valley of India." (madhu-madhusree.blogspot.com)
- Translation of such a text must handle rural-urban binaries, local culture of Karnataka, as well as "westernised" contexts of Indian cities. The cultural dimension of tradition vs modernity is vivid.
- Murthy's short-story collection *Wise and Otherwise* consists of real-life anecdotes from across India. One study summarises:

"Her books have been translated into all major Indian languages ... She writes in simple style, draws from wide canvas of experiences in her life."

The translation into multiple Indian languages (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali) indicates the circulation of her cultural content across linguistic borders; yet such translation must deal with region-specific cultural references being "received" in different cultural milieus.

### 5. Translation and Cultural Negotiation in Murthy's Work

From the above we may draw how translation in Murthy's context becomes cultural negotiation:

- **Preservation of regional culture:** By writing initially in Kannada, Murthy anchors her work in regional culture—topography, language patterns, local customs, idioms. Translation into English (and other languages) must preserve that anchoring without alienating readers.
- **Accessibility:** Murthy aims at accessibility (her English reportedly “is equal to what you will find in a class XII book”). (Bangalore Mirror) Thus her texts and their translations aim to be accessible across social strata, which means translation must be simple and clear rather than experimental. This accessibility reflects a cultural dimension of democratic readership.
- **Cultural universality with Indian specificity:** Murthy’s themes (women’s empowerment, social values, family, middle class) are universal, yet embedded in Indian cultural specificity. Translation must navigate preserving cultural specificity (festivals, Indian names, caste references) while offering universals for broader readership.
- **Multilingual circulation:** Her books are translated into many Indian languages, which shows circulation of culture within India—not only into English but into regional languages. One source notes: “Her books have been translated into all major Indian languages.” This intra-national translation is fluid, but still cultural mediation is required.
- **Negotiation of identity and power:** The fact that Murthy’s work moves from a regional to a national/international readership through translation raises questions of which cultural values are highlighted, which are muted. Translation may domesticate or foreignize cultural elements. For example, if the translation simplifies or omits caste references, the cultural dimension shifts.

## 6. Challenges & Opportunities in Translation of Murthy’s Work

### • Challenges:

- Cultural references in Kannada (names, idioms, local topography) may be difficult to render in English without explanatory glosses, which can interrupt the reading flow.
- Social values rooted in Indian middle-class ethos (family hierarchy, respect for elders, communal living) may seem unfamiliar to global readers; translators must decide whether to adapt or annotate.
- Translation into Indian languages from English (or vice versa) may involve shifts in register, style, idiom; the original “feel” may change.
- Global market pressures: translation may push for universal themes, reducing cultural specificity.

### • Opportunities:

- Through translation, Murthy’s work accesses new readerships, thereby spreading cultural meanings and values across linguistic boundaries.
- Translation allows comparative cultural reading: the same story read in Kannada and English (or another Indian language) can highlight how cultural nuance is mediated.
- Translators and authors can use cultural dimension consciously—choosing to retain local flavour, or to clarify for wider readership.

## 4. Implications for Literary Culture, Translation Practice and Cultural Understanding

### 1. For Indian Literary Culture

Murthy’s bilingual and translated practice illustrates how regional-language authors negotiate a pan-



Indian/international readership. The process of translation here becomes part of Indian literary culture: regional languages feed into English, English feeds back into translations into other languages. This circulation helps overcome linguistic fragmentation. Yet it also raises questions about cultural centrality (Will English renderings dominate?). Murthy's insistence on Kannada first suggests resistance to one-way domination.

## 2. For Translation Practice

Translation practice in this context must be culturally aware. Translators of Murthy's texts should attend to:

- Preserving cultural markers (local names, festivals, social relations) rather than spoonfeeding universalism.
- Balancing readability for target readership with fidelity to source culture.
- Considering target readership's cultural background: an English reader outside India may need more context than an Indian regional language reader.
- Reflecting the author's bilingual practice and cultural identity: in Murthy's case, she is the originator of both languages in some sense; translation becomes co-writing across languages.

## 3. For Cultural Understanding

From a cultural dimensions perspective, translation of Murthy's work offers a lens into crosscultural understanding:

- Readers of translations gain access to cultural dimensions of Indian middle-class life, family dynamics, regional identity, women's roles, tradition/modernity.
- Translation may reduce cultural distance: e.g., themes of compassion, social values may resonate globally; but translation may also

obscure distinct cultural practices, making them generic.

- Translation across Indian languages (not just into English) fosters internal cultural
- dialogue: different Indian linguistic communities reading Murthy in their languages
- may engage with her cultural content differently.

## 4. Limitations and Further Research

While this paper has sketched broad contours, further research might:

- Compare specific Kannada original texts of Murthy with their English translations to examine what shifts occur (lexical, cultural, structural).
- Study reader reception of Murthy's translated texts in different languages: do readers in Tamil or Hindi read differently than English-readers?
- Examine translation of Murthy's texts into non-Indian languages (if any) and the attendant cultural mediation.
- Investigate how indigenous translators negotiate culture: do they domesticate or foreignize? How do they handle caste, regional idioms, festivals?
- Explore how translation affects authorial voice in Murthy's bilingual writing: how does she adapt writing for English audience versus Kannada?

## Conclusion:

In a multilingual country such as India, translation is not a peripheral activity: it is central to literary culture, cultural identity, and readership dynamics. The cultural dimensions of language / identity, power / centre-periphery, tradition / modernity, collectivism/individualism, and specificity/universality all come into play in translation. The work of Sudha Murthy offers a rich site for exploring how a regional-language rooted author negotiates translation, multilingual readership, and cultural mediation.

Murthy's practice of thinking in Kannada, writing in English (or being translated) typifies the layered cultural and linguistic identity of contemporary Indian writers. Her books' translations into multiple Indian languages and into English show how regional cultural values can circulate across linguistic boundaries, while translation simultaneously mediates, transforms, and sometimes flattens cultural dimensions.

For literary scholars, translators, and readers, the intersection of translation and cultural dimensions in Murthy's work reminds us that translation is not simply linguistic transfer but cultural negotiation. It invites us to reflect on what is gained and what is compromised when culture crosses language boundaries. As Indian literature continues to travel globally, understanding these dynamics becomes ever more important.

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