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## Translating the Untranslatable: Challenges in Rendering Maithili Dialects and Cultural Nuances into English

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### ABSTRACT

Translation is the crossing of linguistic boundaries, and Maithili is a language in the deep cultural identity of Mithila. The dialectical complexities of Maithili, idiomatic complexities, and deeply cultural allusions make the task of translation really difficult. This paper seeks to discuss the complexities of translating Maithili into English by focusing on the dialects, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded elements that resist direct equivalence. This deconstructs the case of the translator of the seminal Maithili short story collection *Ekta Akash* by Shefalika Verma, examining the dilemma of fidelity to the source versus accessibility in the target. It addresses Issues of transliteration, cultural substitution, and creative paraphrasing in dealing with linguistic and cultural barriers concerning the obligation of the translator toward the safeguarding of the cultural soul of the source text without compromising coherence for readers across the globe. It centres this translator in a cultural mediator's position, and at the very forefront is the imperative call to address this tension of fidelity and linguistic adaptation. Thus, it adds to discourses in general regarding challenges in and strategies for regional Indian literature translated into world languages.



## Introduction

Translation is a dialectic play between languages and cultures. Often, cultural transference suffers because of linguistic faithfulness in the translation process. In Susan Bassnett's own words, "Language is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that defines the social identity of a community" (Bassnett, 2014). The translation of such languages as Maithili, which has histories dating back centuries over the traditions, myths, and rituals of Mithila, into a tongue as potent with cultural content as English proves rather a Herculean exercise.

Maithili literature is very vibrant in oral stories and songs besides short stories from the earliest lyrical compositions by Vidyapati of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It narrates the area's ethos related to societies, rituals, festivals, and human values in family relationships. Translation of such Maithili literature into English does not necessarily call for simple linguistic expertise; it necessitates much cultural sensitivity toward the context that gives this language to it. Eugene Nida stresses "Translation involves much more than finding lexical equivalents; it requires a transfer of meaning from one cultural context to another" (Nida, 1964).

Shefalika Verma's *Ekta Akash* is the cultural and linguistic thickness of Maithili literature. Her stories are thick with regional dialects and idiomatic expressions that really capture the daily life scenario of Mithila's people. Therefore, translating such a piece into English becomes the kind of challenge one faces in terms of conveyance of dialectical difference, idiomatic expression that should be preserved as used, and culturally relevant mentions that should not be blurred.

Being a regional language, Maithili is not only a means of communication but also a repository of cultural identity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her analysis of translation as cultural transference, says, "To translate is to surrender to the rhetoricity of the original, understanding that the very structure of language inscribes culture" (Spivak, 2012). This would mean that a translator is a cultural intermediary who needs to cross the barrier of the linguistic and cultural divide, thereby maintaining the integrity of the source text.

Translation from Maithili to English often loses the richness of the oral form, which is so beautifully attained through rhythm, tone, and performative element. Thus, sayings and idioms in Maithili are fundamentally rooted in local contexts and world views. The literal translation will, most likely, not communicate their cultural resonance, whereas a creative adaptation might very well distort the original meaning.



This paper examines these complexities with a close reading of *Ekta Akash*. By analysing specific examples from Verma's stories, it sheds light on the translator's dilemmas in maintaining linguistic fidelity while making the text accessible to English-speaking readers. Furthermore, it discusses strategies like transliteration, cultural substitution, and creative paraphrasing that can aid in negotiating the challenges of translating Maithili's linguistic and cultural nuances into English. As Lawrence Venuti adds, "Translation always involves a degree of interpretation, and the translator's choices inevitably shape the reader's experience of the text" (Venuti, 45).

With the above discussion, this paper tries to contribute to a greater discussion on translation studies that underlines the importance of regional linguistic and cultural identity in the global landscape of literature.

### **Review of Literature**

The very job of translation studies works as a complex mediation of both the language and the culture. It implies the role of the translator as a mediator of the culture. Eugene Nida says "Dynamic Equivalence" insists more on cultural and contextual meaning rather than word-for-word translation (Nida, 1964). This principle is very important in the translation of regional literature, like Maithili, which carries the burden of cultural identity and tradition.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks in *The Politics of Translation*, the original cultural rhetoric of the text needs to be kept in place, and during translation, its cultural sense must be respected, without infusing into it the worldview of the language, it is being translated into (Spivak, 2012). Lawrence Venuti from *The Translator's Invisibility* actually goes on to criticize such usual tendency of translations so that they domesticate the texts through strategies which foreground their foreignness to preserve an authenticity (Venuti, 1995).

Shefalika Verma's *Ekta Akash* presents a singular case for such debates. Previous scholarship on regional Indian literature has underlined the problems of translating oral traditions, dialects, and cultural idioms in English. There is a critical gap in providing specific strategies to balance fidelity to Maithili's linguistic richness with the readability needed for translations in English.

### **Methodology**

This paper takes a qualitative approach in trying to understand the issues that come with translating dialects of Maithili and cultural subtleties into English. This is in the context of Shefalika Verma's *Ekta Akash*. The methodology is segmented into three main stages.



First, a close textual examination of some of the selected short stories by *Ekta Akash* is done in order to identify linguistic, idiomatic, and cultural elements specific to Maithili. Second, available English translations of the text are analysed to observe the approaches taken for the transference of culture and language. Special attention has been paid to the handling of dialects, idioms, and culturally specific references.

Third, the study incorporates theoretical frameworks from translation studies, including Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence and Lawrence Venuti's foreignization and domestication strategies, to assess the effectiveness of translation choices. Additionally, insights from critical works on cultural mediation in translation help contextualize the findings.

This methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of the translator's role in preserving Maithili's cultural identity while ensuring accessibility for English readers.

### **Linguistic Variety: A Dialectic Challenge**

Maithili dialectal diversity introduces a high dimension to the translation process, and in the case of each dialect of language, not just at the level of phonetics and syntax, an impression of socio-economic, geographic, and cultural distinction prevailing among different areas of the Mithila region. The challenge for the translation, though, remains in dialectical variety as in its subtleties lies lost the source text of it when these have to be translated without becoming either incomprehensible to native speakers of the new medium.

The dialects of Madhubani and Darbhanga stand testimony to this complexity: one from Madhubani dialects is lyrical and full of idioms in expression, a culture which is deep within this region, and in Darbhanga dialect plain and conversational etc., that goes toward making a difference in a narrative voice in Maithili. For instance, in Shefalika Verma's *Ekta Akash*, characters converse to their being in dialects as nuptially wedded to the self and the context. This could be deindividualize and desanitize the very same voices in the translation into the English language if there wasn't enough of the regional dialectic characteristic of Maithili in them.

They have to either standardize the dialect to read easily or leave it as it is in the flavor, which only serves to preserve cultural authenticity. On the other hand, keeping the flavor of the dialect may make aliens from their cultural and linguistic backgrounds alienated in understanding the literature. Nida adds, "No translation that aims at bridging a broad cultural gap can expect to eradicate all vestiges of the foreign background" (Nida, 1964).



The choice of dialect also imparts an effect on the linguistic as well as the cultural content of the text. Dialects in Maithili are not just variations of language; they carry regional history, socio-economic hierarchies, and traditional wisdom. For instance, idioms specific to an area may depict feelings or conceptions that cannot be translated as direct equivalents in the English language; in such cases, the translator needs to employ innovative devices like paraphrasing or even contextual footnotes.

Ultimately, the challenge of translating Maithili's dialectical variations underscores the translator's dual responsibility as a linguistic mediator and cultural custodian. By balancing the need for fidelity to the source text with the demands of the target audience, the translator contributes to the global appreciation of Maithili's rich linguistic and cultural heritage.

### **Idiomatic Expressions: The Untranslatable Essence**

Idioms can be a linguistic and cultural mirror to the values, beliefs, and worldviews of that community. In this regard, Maithili posed enormous challenges in translating idiomatic expressions into English: these expressions are layered meanings tied to local customs, traditions, and mythology.

For example, the Maithili idiom “धरती के बेटा” (son of the soil) has two sentiments: pride in being an agricultural person and an indigenous connection to the land. A literal translation into English doesn't begin to do justice to these cultural associations; it loses richness and depth. Another instance, “सात जन्म के बंधन” (bond of seven lifetimes) draws from Hindu cosmological beliefs about reincarnation and eternal relationships. While it is translatable into something in English, the phrase's cultural significance and underlying symbolism require context for English-speaking readers to grasp its full intent.

Now, as far as the mechanism of construction is concerned, idioms relate undeniably to cultural specificity, hence more or less resistant to direct equivalence in another language. Eugene Nida pointed to the fact that “idioms can rarely be translated literally without losing their meaning” (Nida, 1964). This makes it imperative for the translator to use strategies such as creative paraphrase, in which the meaning of the idiom gets translated into an equivalent idiom in the target language. For instance, the Maithili idiom “दूध के जले छाछ फूंक के पीते हैं” (somebody burnt by milk blows on buttermilk) could be translated into English as “once bitten, twice shy,” retaining the spirit of what it means, yet set within its own cultural context.

Another good method for handling some information there is the use of footnotes.



## Cultural Nuances in Literary Contexts

Maithili literature is a concatenation of culture within the context of Mithila, where rituals, festivals, family, and oral traditions shape the stories into narratives. A hurdle comes in translation because, while translating, one not only renders the language but also transfers the culture that gives the text its essence.

A cultural word “कोहबर,” the ceremonial room with iconic motifs for newlyweds, which is recurrently depicted in Shefalika Verma’s tales. This word has shades of new beginnings, closeness, and continuance of tradition. In translating “कोहबर” into English, transliteration or footnotes would normally be used for explanatory purposes. However, as Nida points out, “No translations can perform full justice to the cultural meaning and emotional baggage of source language terms” (Nida, 1964). Here lies the limitation with the endeavour of translating these culturally loaded terms without taking away the punch for the source audience.

In addition, another complicating factor in rendering translation is that Maithili literature has a strong oral tradition. The performative nature of phrases and idioms in Maithili renders sense only through rhythm, rhyme, and intonation. For instance, folk songs or proverbs in the texts often lose their music and cultural vibrancy when rendered into written English. Creative adaptation retells meaning but at possible cost to authenticity and aesthetic texture.

Festivals, systems of family, and rituals very often depicted in Maithili literature also give cultural richness to it. For example, festival celebrations “Chhath Puja” are events with spiritual and communal depth.

## Navigating the Emotional and Literary Aesthetics

Maithili literature is characterized by deep emotional depth and some distinctive literary aesthetics inextricably tied to the cultural ethos of the region. Translation into English is thus a task which poses special challenges for the translator, when s/he has to chart the nuances of language on one hand and of psychology and culture on the other. The emotional and poetic depths of the Maithili texts rarely have a translation equivalent in English; in such a case, mere literal translation would be more or less inappropriate to capture the essence from the source text. Meanwhile, overly interpretive translations expose a high risk of blurring the authenticity of an original work.



For instance, lyrical descriptions of Mithila landscapes by Shefalika Verma in her *Ekta Akash* have cultural and emotional attachment right at the core of the narrative. Green rice fields, serene lotus ponds, and rhythmic life of Mithila are not merely description; they are symbolisms of the identity and heritage of the community. These elements might not carry the importance they carry if translated literally, and a more adaptive approach must ensure that cultural richness is preserved.

Metaphors used, repetition to emphasize, idiomatic expression add flavor and emotional dimension to the narration. And in this connection, such creative work through transliteration or contextual glossing or poetic paraphrasing is required in order that the flavor of literature is brought into the foreground but keeping it within relatability to the target culture. Well, the success story of treading through such trials is for making Maithili literature accessible and emotive, yet preserving its own emotional-cultural integrity in an English guise.

### **Challenges of Literary Style and Syntax**

Maithili literature contains unique literary styles and syntactic structures that are usually hard to handle in translation. One of the most typical features of the Maithili is its use of repetition to emphasize something. It is the feature of style, giving rhythm to the text and imbuing it with emotional intensity. This works quite fine within its own linguistic and cultural environment, but translated into English, this would seem not only redundant but also break the flow of the text.

Similarly, authors in Maithili make frequent use of metaphors that are culturally specific to the region and its traditions, landscapes, and social practices. For example, metaphors like “माछ मखान मिथिला के पहिचान” (fish and makhana are the identity of Mithila) capture such aspects peculiar to the region—cultural and ecological. Such metaphors usually need nuancing between literal accuracy and cultural resonance, in most cases requiring paraphrases or explanatory notes.

One of the challenges is that non-linear narrative styles in Maithili reflect oral storytelling traditions of Mithila. More often than not, stories would weave multiple timelines, perspectives, and digressions into a tapestry of interconnected stories. The risk of translation of this narrative structure into English, which prefers linearity and clarity, lies in the possible loss of depth or natural flow in the text.

This sets before the translators the task of balancing the stylistic and syntactic integrity of the original text with making the translation accessible and engaging to an English-speaking audience.



## Good Translation Techniques

Maithili literature requires the best translation strategy to maintain the language and cultural richness of the source. A good translation should include the use of transliteration, cultural substitution, and creative paraphrasing.

### 1. Transliteration and Glossing

Transliteration captures the phonetic essence of culturally important terms so that it holds up to its originality within the target text. A gloss provides the reader with interpretative notes about the context culturally. For example, transliterate “पाग” as a traditional head gear, along with an interpretation about what it is such that: “a head ornament to signify respect and status at Mithila”. And, for sure, the translation carries that cultural uniqueness along which helps in understanding.

### 2. Cultural Replacement

This method involves the substitution of elements in the source language with culturally similar elements in the target language. For example, the festival as ingrained in any culture as “सामा-चकेवा” can be substituted by an equivalent festival in the culture of the English. As pointed out by Venuti, 1995, even though this kind of cultural replacement would save the original context, it would, however, distance readers from the source culture.

### 3. Creative Paraphrasing

This affords the translator to carry the intent of the source text into a message relevant to the target audience. Thus, the phrase “मिथिला में स्वागत छ” can creatively be paraphrased into “Experience the warm hospitality of Mithila” and make for a sense of place while at the same time bridging cultural gaps.

Each method has its limits at which the translator needs to weigh between fidelity to the source text and readability for the English reader. Taken collectively, all these methods point towards taking the role of the translator as a cultural bridge through which the spirit of Maithili literature reaches an international audience.



## The Translator's Ethical Responsibility

Translation as a function is not just linguistic competency, but it is also a moral responsibility. This therefore presents the challenge of striking a balance between being faithful to the source text and meeting the expectations of the target audience. Lawrence Venuti identified this challenge, “Every translation reflects a deliberate choice to bring the foreign closer or to estrange the familiar” (Venuti, 1995). The translation of Maithili into English is a sensitive balancing act between cultural specificity and accessibility for an English-speaking readership.

One of the biggest ethical questions in translation is misrepresentation. A translator has to decide what to do with uniquely cultural concepts without oversimplification or erasure of all their richness. The very word “पाग” (a ceremonial Maithili headgear) bears layers of cultural meaning-respect, tradition, and social identity. To reduce that into a generic term, “headgear,” one is stripping it of all the cultural resonance. Similarly, the rendering of rituals like “कोहबर” (ornamented bridal chamber), for example, requires than mere linguistic accuracy; this calls for sensitivity to cultural significance.

Another ethical issue arises from the politics of representation. In that case, translating the regional language, Maithili, into the global lingua franca-English risks the homogenizing tendency by which the identity of the source culture is subsumed by the universalizing tendency of the target language. This tune with Spivak's (2012) intuition that translation need not map the worldview of the dominating language onto the subaltern culture but try to represent the rhetorical force of the original.

Strategies for dealing such problems include core cultural terms using transliteration and providing contextual glosses or footnotes. A “foreignizing” approach, according to Venuti (1995), would mean that the translator would have to preserve elements of the source culture and hence emphasize its specificity while resisting the erasure of cultural differences.

Hence, the task of the translator is to find a balance between linguistic loyalty and cultural respect. That is, it not only refers to correct translation but also respects the context of culture and depth that those words carry because, as cultural mediators, translators can ensure that regional literature like Maithili remains authentic and reaches the rest of the world.

## Representation and Power Dynamics



The entire process of translation of Maithili literature from the native to English is much more complicated than just translation as a linguistic exercise: this is cultural and political negotiation, representation, and power. Maithili is regional language/dialect spoken in the Mithila region of Bihar; it has an identity of its own with a unique culture, and this is always at stake, facing dilution when transposed into English, which acts as a global lingua franca often associated with uniformity. In translation, one has to convert Maithili literature into English that will lift it up to readers but can dilute its uniqueness concerning dominant global stories.

This tension underlines the indigenous power relations involved in translation. English as a quasi-global language has an overt or covert hegemony over regional languages-it becomes the language by which these cultures get understood. It therefore becomes the moral obligation of translators to preserve the aura and integrity of Maithili literature within the translation and to find a spatiality in translation between the locality confined to global contexts and such a translation reaching out to global readers.

Translators can work through these dynamics with nuanced thought and consciousness of challenging that power aberration and carving Maithili literature its rightful place on the world stage, not merely as a curiosity but as its rightful, unique contribution to world literature.

## Conclusion

Translating Maithili into English is laborious and multi-casting because it extends far beyond mere linguistic equivalence: the process tries to interlink cultural, emotional, and identity tensorities. Therefore, dialectical variations in this language and idiomatic expressions are needed by the translator both in terms of language skills and cultural sensitivity. These challenges are complicated by the need to arrive at a happy medium between faithfulness and readability for a global audience.

One can never expect that complete equivalence will be a viable prerequisite for translation simply because no two languages have identical linguistic and cultural hierarchies. The translator is, in this sense, a facilitator or cultural mediator between the source and target audiences. In dealing with the dimensions, they adeptly balance out the special techniques of transliteration, glossing, creative paraphrasing, and cultural substitution to save some portion of the emotional and cultural make-up of the source.

The act of translation, however becomes much more difficult when translated in the power dynamics of imposition that await a regional tongue like Maithili in a world language like English.



Translators stand as robust individuals to assure Maithili literature's authenticity, dignity and cultural substantiation on the world literary map.

Thus, the translation of Maithili is not just a process that is unique over others as far as linguistic recycling is concerned but rather creative and ethical. Therefore, a translator would need to balance both the emotional and cultural tensors of both languages to be able to come up with novel ways that would present Maithili literature before the public while still not losing its soul. In that way, Mithila's very rich literary heritage will reach the world.

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