



Challenges in Translating, Queer Literature into Indian Regional Languages.

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Abstract

Queer literature in Indian languages is a newly emerging concept. Even though queerness was a part of pre-colonial India, queer characters were always presented with negative connotations after the colonization, till recently. In this scenario, queer people writing about their own experiences are also observed with a suspicious eye even in recent times. Most of the writings are in English and the only way for those texts to reach the public is through translation.

This research paper concentrates on selected queer translations from queer magazines like Gaysi, mainly focusing on comic pieces and personal writings of queer people translated into the regional language, Malayalam. The observations in this research paper are based on my first-hand experience in translating these texts to Malayalam.

This research paper focuses on the problems that arise in translation while translating queer texts. The limitations of language such as lack of pronouns out of the concept of gender binary, lack of cultural context which could include queer people to set the background of the text, lack of acceptance from the readers as queerness has not yet been normalized, and the inhibitions to be open to the discussions dealing with sexuality and unconventional narrative styles are some of the challenges that a translator would face while translating queer texts from English to Indian languages.

Keywords- Queer literature, LGBTQIA+, Homosexuality, Gender binary.

Introduction



The recent decisions of decriminalizing homosexuality by the Supreme court which lead to the open discussions of LGBTQIA community has created an awareness in our Indian society. This awareness has led to an increasing acceptance of such topics in different platforms such as literature, films, series, and comic and even in personal lives of people. This sensitization is an amazing opportunity to bring in more discussions about the issues associating with the representation of Queer community and the challenges that they face while struggling for an acceptance from the society by adopting different strategies.

Literature is as always said, ‘a way of living’ and thus queer literature has a significant role in introducing the hetero-normative society like in India to an unconventional, alternative sexuality and that way to a different set of values. Even though literature had addressed homosexuality in different ways even before centuries, the new forms of literature such as comics seeps into the new generation a lot more faster than the serious reads. Thus queer literature is spread across adopting genres such as comics and graphic novels and a whole lot of other creative forms like stand up comedies.

In this scenario it is imperative to look into the growth of queer literature in regional languages also. Since most of the pieces either appear in online magazines like Gaylaxy, Labia and Gaysi or some other social media platform very often these works are never noticed by the people who are not privileged with the access of English language. This creates a lack of sensitization towards queer community in a regional level. In order to overcome this drawback, magazines like Gaysi have started translating their works into regional languages. This research paper focuses on the problems that arise while translating some of these works into the regional language, Malayalam.

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One of the significant problems that we face in translation of queer literature is the lack of terms or absence of queer vocabulary. Even when there are existing terms for some of the words, those words are always accompanied with a negative connotation. The terminology to address transgenders in Malayalam was ‘Bhinnalingam’ which would literally mean people with



strange or different sexual organs or sexuality. As this term was identified as derogatory, it was recently removed from the official usage. (*Deccan Chronicle*)

In the excerpt “Bi The Way” appeared in Gaysi, the writer is talking about the misconceptions of the people about being bisexual and as a translator it is very difficult to find an equivalent term to bisexual in Malayalam. Terms like Gender – Binary, heteronormative or homosexuality lack proper terms in Malayalam and sometimes even when they exist, they are colored with lot of negativity that the mere use of the word would be perceived by the people in a negative manner. An anonymous writer has shared his views on the digital platform, In Plainspeak. His article titled, “The Absence of a Queer Mother Tongue” talks about the same issue in Bangla language.

Therefore, it’s not really a surprise that when it comes to identities that defy the notions of ‘gay’ and ‘straight’, we fall back on the same often bigoted euphemisms our parents (and their parents before them) taught and continue to perpetuate. These euphemisms, shrouded in their sense of forbiddingness and scandal, often turn into slurs and an unconscious ‘othering’ of queer identities. In Bangla, words like ‘onnyorokom’ (a derogatory term for gay people), ‘meyechhele’ (a derogatory term for transgender people), both of which imply sexual deviance, are liberally thrown around to refer to queer sexual orientations instead of terms with positive, healthy connotations.

(In Plainspeak)

In this case it is a Herculean task to introduce ideas like gender fluidity. A lot of terms in Malayalam related to work like a teacher or a carpenter has a female specific and male specific term which makes it very difficult to introduce the idea of gender fluidity. Thus the ideas that the queer literature tries to convey through the particular use of language is lost in translation. Lack of choice in pronouns is also another problem that a translator could face while translating a queer text. This was a concern in English language expressed by many writers but an alternative of gender neutral pronouns were suggested in order to bring in equality. Thus words like Zie and Sie were coined to denote gender neutrality. Even though ‘they’ can be used for signifying a



single person in Malayalam, who is of feminine gender, again the problem of gender neutrality arises and a whole lot of confusion is to be addressed.

Most of the queer comics in the magazines and popular films talk about queerness, set in an urban background where most of the characters lead an elite life. Those characters in the comics would be cracking jokes with lot of terms which would make sense only in English language. This shows the lack of scope for the readers of regional languages to seep in to the cultural background set in these comics. Most of the comics are set in an urban background and they speak very openly about sex, drinks and relationships whereas there is a clear gap when it comes to addressing the existence of queerness in different strata of society irrespective of the social status or lifestyle of the people. Even though it is important to introduce the regional readers to this culture of extreme freedom and expression it is also essential to introduce the readers with queer relationships set in rural background, which would be more relatable and also which will instigate many thoughts. Thus the myth of queerness associated to modernity and the imitation of western culture could also be eliminated.

Language is an evolving phenomenon and it is capable of transformations. As society moves forward through realizations and rectifications, these changes should reflect in the languages also. Thus restructuring the languages including the regional languages is essential. This would lead the society into acceptance of diversity in every level.

Works Cited

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