

## The Politics of Anthologizing Women's Writing from India: The Role of Translation

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emergence of an Indian Literature across various periods of Indian history, and the dependence of this national literature upon the anthology form. It investigates how the politics of the anthology form, specifically those of women's writing, are closely linked to the politics of gender and nationalism, paying close attention to the exclusions and inequalities that are produced by homogenized notions of Indianness and Indian Literature. Through a comparative analysis of three selected anthologies of women's writing, I analyze how texts are selected for anthologizing, how the anthology is arranged and narrativized, how the reader's reception of the text is guided through its formal aspects, and how much space is given to translation and translators. The crucial role of translation in the production of such anthologies is underlined throughout the paper, and I contend that feminist translation praxis could be a viable method and approach to intervene in the socio-literary sphere of gender and nationalism.

### INTRODUCTION

The anthology form, due to its readability and its ability to provide a narrativized literary history, is a popular form for collating women's writing (Kilcup, 2009). Gilley (2017) has argued for an analysis of the relationship between anthologies of women's writing and feminist praxis, albeit in the context of third wave feminism in America. She contends that multigenre anthologies in particular have been crucial for the feminist movement, specifically for women of color feminism, since such anthologies have the ability to accommodate multiple points of view, multiple forms and styles, and thus address multiple issues (p. 144). Further, the anthology can bring about new feminist solidarities and scope for collective action that go beyond the material labour of producing a literary anthology (Gilley, 2017).

While this holds true generally in the context of anthologies of women's writing (which remain popular among both academic readers as well as 'lay' readers in national and transnational contexts), the politics of anthology making are complicated in the postcolonial context. This is especially because in these contexts, where the (re)discovery and prop-

agation of a national literature is a political project for newly emerged governments, literary histories serve the purpose of promoting national consciousness, national integration, and a retelling of history (Lockard and Sandell, 2008). The anthology here has a unique function and has historically been used to construct the body of a national literature

Therefore, the anthology can be seen as a specific kind of literary production that has a dialectical relationship with national literature as a whole, and this relationship is fraught with political questions about gender, nationalism, and literary citizenship. The fact that anthologies of Indian Literature, owing to the linguistic plurality and diversity of India, are only made possible through translation brings up pertinent questions of how translation can then serve as intervention, especially in the context of women's writing.

The question of how women's writing from India is archived and anthologized is central to this paper. Specifically, the paper intends to further an understanding of the historical forces that make this specific kind of literary-cultural production possible, and thus to elaborate upon the different kinds of

hegemonic power that influence such production. The paper argues that in order to subvert the exclusions and inequalities that such anthologies can naturalize, feminist translation can be a possible means to make an intervention not only in terms of which works are translated and therefore included into the global literary marketplace, but also to ask critical questions of the text itself, with special regard to the categories of gender, nation, caste, community, and literary subjectivity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework for this paper is based on two main areas of research. The first is Indian literary history, using which I trace how the category called Indian Literature has been constructed. The second is the theory and practice of feminist translation.

Although literary anthologies such as the *Therigatha* were produced and disseminated in the precolonial period, the idea of Indian Literature as a unified and definitive category emerged only in the nineteenth century as a direct result of Orientalist interest in the literature and culture of India (Raveendran, 2006, p. 2558). Scholars like Wilhelm von Schlegel (the first person to use the term "Indian Literature" as a theoretical category in his translation of the Bhagavadgita in 1823) Albrecht Weber<sup>1</sup>, and M Garcin de Tassy<sup>2</sup>, were among the first to collate studies on the history of Indian Literature and their work became the definitive scholarship on the subject, thus laying the foundation for what is considered Indian and what is considered Literature.

However, these anthologies of Indian Literature conflated Indian Literature with Sanskrit Literature, which was one of the classical languages of the subcontinent and used by a minority of elites who exercised their hegemonic control over who could learn the language and who could not. Moreover, in the Orientalist imagination, the literature of Ancient India (which was thought of as predominantly Hindu) was the 'true' Indian literature, and that of Medieval India (conceptualized as Muslim dominated) was decadent and deteriorated (Raveendran, 2006, p. 2560). As Aijaz Ahmad (1994) argues, this narrativization of literary history constructed a false unity between the multiple languages and literatures of the subcontinent, privileged Brahminical High Textuality, and propagated ahistorical notions about the homogeneity of the colonized Other. Such a periodization of history, which was linked to the colonial intellectual fashions of the time, has largely been left unproblematic in post-Independence India, and in fact contributes to communal notions of a lost Hindu glory that must be regained (Deshpande and Deshpande, 2011, p. 1312) while continuing to shape popular discourse on Indian culture and literature.

Post-Independence, the newly formed Government of India set up institutions and bodies for the preservation and propagation of Indian literature, art, and culture. The Sahitya Akademi, established in 1954 under India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a dedicated institution for Indian Literature with the broader political purpose of national integration through the dissemination of a national identity. However, as GN Saibaba (2008) points out, there is a continuity with Oriental scholarship that is adopted without question, and the colonial associations of Indian Literature continued to persist within the nationalist reformist project

(p. 62). Indian Literature, therefore, insofar as it refers to a national literature, is not directly equivalent to literature/s of India and has a specific history and politics associated with its usage (Raveendran, 2006, p. 2558).

In the 1950s, the debates around modernizing Independent India while simultaneously preserving its cultural heritage took center stage, and the anthology form became ideal since it served both a pedagogical and canonizing function that sought to reinforce an imagined continuity and unity in the idea of India (Srivastava, 2010). The anthology influences meaning-making processes through its very form – namely through the arrangement of texts, the introductions and footnotes, and the complementary texts – all of which give it a sense of comprehensive wholeness and unity (Doherty, 2014).

In the postcolonial literary world especially, as David Damrosch (2014) has extensively argued, there is a demand for literatures from various parts of the world as well as an increasing readership that wants to know more about the multiplicity of voices, ideas, and cultures. The anthology is able to satisfy this demand, providing readers both an experience of multiplicity as well as continuity, and thus it remains an increasingly important literary form.

Keating (2017) argues, in his discussion on the role of poetry anthologies in the emergence of a national Irish Literature, that anthologies have become "representative texts" in postcolonial contexts. In other words, because of their popular and commercial success, they are widely read by both the "interested native and the international reader" and their proximity to the intellectual institutions make them active participants in both canon formation and the formation of a national identity (p. 105). This indicates that the formation of a national literature, of which anthologies are a crucial part, has a two fold function in the age of globalization – the first is that of representation on a global stage, that is, to present an idea of the nation's cultural practices and productions to the rest of the world, and the second is that of self-representation, that is, a critical introspection on the part of those that inhabit the nation about who they are and how they are seen (Dharwadker, 2008, p. 134).

Dharwadker (2008) further argues that in this context, especially for a multilingual nation like India, translation becomes the necessary process of "rendering literatures into a lingua franca or world language" (p. 133) which is a prerequisite to enter the dialectical processes of national representation in the globalized world. Thus translation became a necessity for mutual intelligibility among the 'major' languages, and the stress on unity of language and culture had to be reiterated as a unity despite the visible diversity. Critics like Harish Trivedi (2005) have stressed however, the need to differentiate between literary translation and "cultural translation" where cultural translation has become a buzzword to refer to *all* narratives and experiences related to migrancy. Trivedi's main argument is that it is necessary to separate the two, even while understanding the link between culture and literary translation, in order to avoid the danger of reducing all the nuance and historical specificity of translation activity into an all-pervasive and "novel" activity which allows the so-called First World to erase critical differences that exist in the 'Third World' and render them all under the same umbrella term.

In an analysis of women's writing, I find that feminist translation proves to be a useful strategy of both critical reading as well as re-writing of texts because of its focus on historicity, language dynamics, and broader social concerns of power and equality.

Feminist translation emerged in the late twentieth century as a specific kind of translation practice that challenged the masculinist bent of language and the unequal power relations between the 'original' and 'duplicate', between the writer and translator, thus laying emphasis on the genderedness of writing and rewriting a text (Wallace, 2002, pp. 66-67).

In Lori Chamberlain's (1988) seminal work *Gender and the Metaphors of Translation*, she points out how the language of translation discourse has been gendered since its inception. She argues that gender is engrained into the metaphors used to talk about translation; the roles of the translator, writer, and text are gendered through notions of paternity and patrilineal ownership; and that concepts like fidelity and transparency only work to propagate this skewed dynamic. Later theorists like Louise von Flotow (1991), Sherry Simon (1996), Barbara Godard (1989, 1998), and Ingrid Palmay (2014) take this analysis further, studying the possibilities of feminist translation in material, historical, psychoanalytical, cultural, and linguistic terms.

The other key question that has guided the framework of feminist translation is the place given to translation, and the role of the translator themselves. Despite the innovations in translation, and its indispensability in the globalized world, translations have historically been relegated to a status of inferiority (Federici, 2011), although feminist translators have consistently been trying to change this. Recent work by Claudia de Lima Costa and Sonia E Alvarez (2014) broadens the notion of feminist translation to link them to the academy and knowledge production at large, thus showing the relationship between literary politics, material conditions, and citational practices. Luise von Flotow and Carolyn Shread's (2014) work on the other hand, uses the idea of metamorphosis in translation to question the porosity of I and not-I categories, especially in regard to feminist epistemology. Thus, feminist translation, even as it is linked to the discourse of Translation Studies, has the potential to take off in multiple directions and straddle various areas of study, thus being both versatile and expansive.

The close relationship between the feminist translator and the postcolonialist translator is elucidated by Wallace (2002) who contends that both schools have much in common, and their work seems to overlap not just in their methodology and objectives but also in the choice of texts that they translate. Both schools represent the "once-voiceless rebelling to regain their voice" (p. 71), and in doing so, they embark upon an analysis of categories of self and Other, and question the authority of the institutions that govern and regulate the production of literature. The idea that translation *is* intervention, and that it has the power to change not just texts but also socio-political realities, is essential to both these schools.

In the Indian context, scholars like Tejaswini Niranjana (1998) and J Devika (2008) have theorized that not only are literary works being translated, it is also the postcolonial subject herself who is 'in-translation.' Therefore, a study of feminist translation should also include the representation

of the writer and the translator as subjects who write themselves into the text. Moreover, gender identity or position in the Indian context has to be seen alongside postcolonial identity, caste identity, and linguistic identity.

By revisiting these ideas of feminist translation, and synthesizing them with the literary history of India, I hope to broaden the scope of feminist translation and appropriate it in multiple novel directions in order to interrogate a network of socio-literary politics.

## METHODOLOGY

Since the objective in this paper is to probe the relationship between anthologies, national literature, and gender by using literary texts, a qualitative research design was employed due to the flexibility and room for subjectivity that it allows for. Specifically, I used a comparative approach to the research statement, selecting three anthologies of women's writing from India in order to search for similarity and variation between the texts. As is the case with comparative research methodologies, this examination of individual texts was structured through the application of theoretical concepts, and extrapolations were drawn from the results of the examination to make broader arguments about the concepts at hand (Mills, 2008, pp. 100-1). Within the domain of Translation Studies, this research falls under the context-oriented culturalist model (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2014, p. 205), drawing from cultural studies, feminist studies, and literary studies in order to foreground the socio-political context and implications of translation.

Sampling strategy is integral to the success of comparative studies and since my sampling size was relatively small, I used a theoretical and purposive sampling strategy (Mills, 2008, pp. 101). The criteria for selection included the historical moment in which the anthology was produced, who it was published by, and the works that are included in it. I have chosen three anthologies of women's writing that collate works translated into English. These are – *Truth Tales: Contemporary Stories by Women Writers of India* (first published in 1986, although I refer to the 1990 edition here which has a Preface by Meena Alexander) edited by Kali for Women, *Women Writing in India Vol 1* (1991) edited by K Lalita and Susie Tharu, and *Unbound: 2,000 Years of Indian Women's Writing* (2016) edited by Annie Zaidi.

Once the anthologies were selected, I proceeded to conduct a close reading of these texts in order to do a content analysis along the theoretical lines that have been described below. The advantage of using content analysis here was that it is interpretive and thus useful for identifying both conscious and unconscious meanings that have been written into the text (Julien, 2008, p. 120). Since my study is concerned with the deeper relationship between literary production and socio-political conditions, this method was particularly useful in bringing out both the explicit literary meanings (what the text professes to say) as well as its implicit politics (what is obscured from view). Close reading requires that the reader look for "clues" within the text and pay attention to all aspects of the text and its structure (Beehler, 1988, p. 40), and thus there is a dialogue between the text and the reader, which is admittedly subjective, but it opens the text to a

chain of interpretations and associations that can be drawn, which in this case was vital to the study.

The close reading was conducted with the objective of engaging with the following theoretical questions. Firstly, the inclusions and exclusions that are contained in the form and arrangement of the texts in the anthology were studied, and by extension what these selection choices can reflect about the politics of gender and national belonging. Secondly, the question of how the text grapples with the public/private divide that is often imposed upon women's writing was interrogated. Thirdly, the explicit and implicit ways in the anthology deals with the question of women's literary subjectivity were focused upon, and the last criteria was with regard to the language question and how much space and importance was given to the varied languages of India and to translators. Once these questions were analyzed with respect to each anthology, a comparative analysis was carried out to highlight the similarities and differences, and possible causes for these variations.

As is the case with most qualitative research, especially in the field of literary studies, no one truth or meaning can be claimed (Beehler, 1988), but what I offer here is one interpretation of the texts and issues at hand, which has been based on substantive research and rigorous analysis.

### SOCIO-LITERARY MECHANISMS OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

The anthology is a collection of texts, some of which are excerpts, which when read together produce a notion of the whole. Bloom (1999) refers to the anthology as a "bizarre textual synecdoche" in which a part of a text attains canonical status as if it were a self-contained whole (p. 406). The texts selected for an anthology of contemporary women's writing produce the effect of finding out about the actual nature, the truth of contemporary women's experiences, and their place in literary history.

In this section, I will demonstrate how an anthology of Indian women's writing is inevitably based on inclusions and exclusions, which then reinforce the idea of national literature which is in turn linked with the idea of national culture and citizenship itself.

The anthology, as a form, is constructed through a process of selection, and hence it always presents questions on inclusion and exclusion. Since the anthology form also heavily influences canon formation, and is an important pedagogical tool, these inclusions and exclusions come to define categories such as national literature, canon, and women's writing (Srivastava, 2010). Even though anthologies of women's writing (as well as other 'particularist' anthologies of queer writing, Dalit writing, etc.) emerged in response to the under-representation and systemic exclusion of writers and texts from the nationalist literary anthologies, these too are produced through their own logic of selection, which then produces other inclusions and exclusions in the emergent canon.

In all three of the selected anthologies, the selection mechanisms differ in their criteria and objective, but the main areas in which they operate are language, translation, and geopolitical identity. It is through these categories that 'Indian woman' as well as 'Indian women's writing' come

to exist as theoretical and literary notions. For the feminist translator, who is interested in a context driven translation practice as well as in dismantling the processes of canonization, interrogating the politics that drive these inclusions and exclusions is a prerequisite.

The earliest published anthology of women's writing in India that I will be studying is *Truth Tales* (1990) which is a collection of seven short stories written by women authors who had by that time already gained popularity and acclaim to varying extents. All the stories use the short story form, which can be explained in part to the fact that around the time of its publication, there was an "explosion of Indian fiction in English" which used either the short story or the novel form, and claimed a space in the internationalist literary sphere (Srivastava, 2010, p. 154).

In the Introduction to *Truth Tales*, Meena Alexander explains that the anthology intends to present a conflict between "a traditional and exclusionary past... and a modern and evolving present" (p. 13). The operative conflict here is presented as the exclusion of the past, of a pre-modern traditional, and the openness of a supposedly modernized present. The principle of selection for the anthology is supposed to be that of representation – representing voices from so-called New India, which challenge the "ritually prescribed status of the feminine" as maternal and nurturing (Alexander, 1990, p. 13).

The stories include one about a poor Brahmin woman who has to resort to selling her breastmilk (her breasts too the story insinuates, and by extension her reproductive labour, and her body) in order to survive, one about a doctor mourning the death of her husband and trying desperately to sneak a cigarette with her prying mother-in-law in the house, and one about a doll maker who finds success and passion in her profession and supports her ex-lover's wife<sup>3</sup>.

These stories clearly foreground class and labour in terms of the theme. They are selected because they present a notion of what the New Indian woman is like – what kinds of labour she performs, how she is compensated for her labour, her struggles, and the opportunities open to her. But even within this selection, it is important to note that most stories are about women in urban areas, thus underscoring that the place of the New Indian Woman, who is both modernized and modernizing, is in the rapidly developing urban areas and away from the rural economy and society that is seen as being outside of modernity.

To understand the impetus and the implications of a representation-centered selection criteria like this one, one must first understand where the anthology is coming from and whom it is targeted at. *Truth Tales*, which is published by the Feminist Press at CUNY, represents what is essentially a post-colonial anxiety, most visible in texts from the 'Third World' which aim to have transnational audiences. It is the anxiety of the English speaking, English teaching Indians who are based in Western nations, finding themselves compelled to present such anthologies within the postcolonial discourse. The anthology seeks to prove a point about the New Indian woman, that she too performs labour and she too is conscious of her womanhood and the inequalities it presents – like her Western counterparts. Through the notion

of this particular kind of Indian woman, the claim for Indian women's writing and their place in literature is made.

It is significant to note here that while the symbiotic existence of nationalism and literary anthologies has been made clear, the relationship between nationalism and Hinduism and subsequently Hinduism and literary anthologies must be explored too. The historical moment in which the idea of an Indian Literature came into existence, is the same moment in which a canonical kind of Hinduism (often claimed as the 'true' Indian religion) became concretized. Both the formation of the literary canon (in which anthologies played a crucial role as explained earlier) as well as the formation of canonical Hinduism had certain notions in common – uniform beliefs, canonical texts, prophetic traditions, clerical institutions, and adjudicable bodies of prescription (Ahmad, 1994, p. 260).

The logic of canon formation therefore is the same in both cases, and both are linked to nationalism in the sense that they are essential to the formulation of a hegemonic Indian culture and tradition, which in turn creates the Indian consciousness, and the Indian subject.

The role of translation, in creating and propagating these notions of Indian Literature has also been influential, since it is through translation, most often translation into English, that the relationship between non-English languages of India has been eroded and replaced by a top-down relationship that places English at the center and privileges translations into English (Saibaba, 2008). It is in English that canonical texts are primarily translated, and these translations themselves become canonized by their inclusion in anthologies and pedagogical frameworks.

When viewed in this context, it becomes apparent that in an anthology like *Truth Tales*, the claim of women writers to belong to the body of Indian Literature does not problematize what being Indian itself means and whether Indian can be seen as a definitive and concrete category on its own, because its focus is on presenting an idea of unified Indianness to a transnational audience.

Despite the fact that English translation has been essential to Dalit writing, in broadening the readership of the work, as well as in creating a body of Dalit literature (Kothari, 2013, p. 62), caste, a pressing social inequality that has historically stratified Indian society, is downplayed and left undiscussed in the anthology, while class and gender are an important part of each short story. This serves as an example of how this notion of Indianness operates and how 'upper' caste Hinduism continues to be the unsaid norm of Indian Literature, whether it is written by men or women.

Hence, women writers from non-dominant languages, women writers who are writing from/about rural areas, and writings by Dalit and Adivasi women writers are excluded. Their writings find no place in this anthology because the challenges they present to the essentialized notion of Indianness destabilizes the very foundation that the anthology is based upon.

The inclusion of these voices then, must be the focus of the feminist translator. If their objective is to radically broaden what counts as literature, and challenge the powers that regulate it, they must actively translate and engage with texts

that bring forth the discontinuities and uncomfortable truths of Indian literary history, and thus disrupt any fixed notion of Indian Literature.

### THE PRIVATE/PUBLIC DIVIDE

In the dedication to *Women Writing in India Vol I*, the editors Susie Tharu and K Lalita write –

*For all the writers  
we have not been able to include,  
for the many that we do not yet know.*

From the point of the reader's entry into the anthology, it is made clear that this is how an anthology functions – by including and by excluding, by seeking to include and having to exclude, by knowing and not knowing. Once the fact that there is a selection criteria behind the production of the anthology has been made clear, the editors explain their selection criteria by explaining the direction that the anthology takes. They have picked not the most well-known writers but instead have chosen texts that provide insights into the private and public worlds of women simultaneously, thus doing away with that distinction altogether.

This is especially important because women's writing has often been relegated to the sphere of 'sentimental,' 'subjective,' private (often equated to domestic) life, not only in the Indian subcontinent but in major anthologies of Western women's writing as well (Kilcup, 2009, p. 302). In *Unbound* (2015), for example, editor Annie Zaidi mentions in the beginning of the Introduction the ways in which women's writing has been dismissed as 'domestic fiction' or 'kitchenized' fiction – work that is not deemed worthy of serious literary discussion or critique.

The notion of women's role in public life has been questioned and theorized in some depth in the Indian context. Partha Chatterjee's (1989) work about women in colonial and post-Independence India draws a distinction between public and private, inner and outer spheres, the home and the outside (p. 624). He argues that if the outer sphere represents the material world, the inner sphere contains the spiritual and ideological worlds. If colonialism affects the outer sphere of life, then the onus of protecting the integrity and purity (theorists like MSS Pandian and G Aloysius<sup>4</sup>) have argued that the inner sphere is essentially caste) falls upon the women, who are relegated to the inner sphere.

Even within the emergent nationalist discourse before India's Independence in 1947, the position of women as upholders of spirituality, religiosity, and tradition was propagated and deified (Tharu and Lalita, 1991, pp. 143-59). From these anthologies, especially *Women Writing in India Vol I*, it is clear that women were in fact affected by and responding to public events and debates that were shaping their worlds. Even the writings of those who were not directly writing about social issues, or writing to get published, are reflective of the times they lived in, their material conditions, and the ideological debates of the time.

As Zaidi argues in the Introduction to *Unbound*, the domestic is extremely political – caste and patriarchy, have their own oppressive logic within the private domestic sphere which is often the site of the proliferation of exclusionary

practices (xi). Therefore, writings about the 'private' lives of women, cannot be dismissed and are not only important social documents and testimonies but also constitute a specific kind of literary production that demands rigorous analysis.

The simultaneous and intertwined exploration of public/private experiences of gender that an anthology like *Women Writing in India Vol 1* consciously attempts to do is also made possible by the fact that it includes a range of literary forms – poems, letters, essays, life stories, folk songs.

For instance, in the case of Savitribai Phule, a social reformer who opened a school for girls and 'lower' caste students, whose poems are her most widely known works, the editors choose to exclude those and instead include a letter that she had written to her husband and fellow revolutionary, Jotiba Phule. This inclusion does not brush aside her significant social contributions as a teacher, writer, and anti-caste thinker in favor of her personal relationship with her husband. It achieves the opposite, in fact, by showing how her reflections on their work together are written about in a piece that is affectionate, not written for public consumption but still focused on public life.

Another issue that emerges, especially in anthologies of so-called Third World writing is that literary texts are forced to take on the role of social documents. This is not to say that all literary texts are not influenced, even produced, by the economic and social conditions they are produced in. But when literary documents become conflated with transparent testimonies to social reality, when all writers are forced to carry the tag of being the native informant who writes an absolute truth unhampered by creative licenses and literary devices, there is the expectation of a 'true' image of cultural diversity (Srivastava, 2010, p. 153).

In *Truth Tales*, this issue is most visible. The thematic focus of *Truth Tales* is on the labour of women which the world relies on, exploits, and never fairly compensates. As stated in the Introduction to the anthology, *Truth Tales* is about protagonists and their relation to material conditions. While this approach provides thematic unity, it presents these categories of woman, and women's labour as pre-existing and absolutely transparent.

In other words, instead of finding the intersections and differences of public and private, it simply equates the two. In the Introduction, Alexander argues that "in speaking, they [the women] have decolonized themselves," and this is presented alongside the focus on materiality, ignoring the very material untruth to this statement – that speaking alone cannot decolonize the Indian woman, and the speaking of the few well-known writers that the anthology contains is in no way representative of the decolonization of the speaking Indian woman-subject or of their supposed "refusing of Othering" (Alexander, 1990, p. 12).

Because the text claims that simply by virtue of being Indian woman writers, these writers have defeated forces of exclusion, it obscures the fact that the category of Indian woman is stratified by class and caste, and because of its lack of critical attention to how public and private worlds are constructed, it too ends up excluding and othering certain women. The themes of the short stories are only those that would be described as feminist – themes of love, body, sexuality,

motherhood, and agency – but because they are framed in the binary of traditional versus modern, old as bad and new as freeing, it reads as a vindication of the third-world woman's self-awareness without capturing the conflict that even present-day modernity, unequally distributed, presents to women both in their public and private worlds.

The title *Truth Tales* operates with the same logic, of showing the 'truth' of Indian women's experience, a truth that is unproblematized and absolute. It leans towards an identity politics approach that takes the private to be directly equatable to the public, without critically engaging with material historical questions of class and caste, in shaping truth and identity in literary writing both public and private.

On the other hand, in *Women Writing in India Vol 1*, which takes a clearly stated historical approach, texts are arranged in chronological order in the two sections – Literature of the Ancient and Medieval Periods, and Literature of the Reform and Nationalist Movements. Through the chronological arrangement of texts that often contain historical context or women's responses to historical events, a narrative of the nation is created through multiple small texts.

For example, the fact that Sarojini Naidu's Presidential Address, showing her involvement in public life as well with the women's question, is followed immediately by Rokeya Sekhawat Hossain's short story *Sultana's Dream*, which explores a utopian world in which gender roles are reversed. This arrangement hints at the historical shifts that are happening in the nation through these two pieces, constructing an ideal continuity between the two. Therefore, even as the editors take an approach to anthologizing that is inclusive, historically informed, and straddles public and private life without privileging either, the narrative of nationalism is still being constructed through the very arrangement of the selected texts.

In *Unbound* the arrangement of texts is done by diving the texts into the following themes – Spiritual Love, Secular Love, Marriage, Children, Food, Work, Identity, Battles, Myth and Fable, Journeys, and Ends. Unlike the other two anthologies, *Unbound* does not claim a historical arrangement, nor does it encourage the reader to find historical relationships between various writers, texts, and contexts.

It is an anthology that is solely reliant on these thematic categories, categories which in fact fragment women's writing (and experiences) into arbitrary and often overlapping categories. It does not take into consideration that women's writing could be about sex, for example, and only provides categories of either Marriage, or Children, or Secular/Spiritual Love. It does not recognize that in a society hierarchized by caste, Work, Food, Marriage, and Identity are not mutually exclusive sections, and in fact construct each other. The categories "Journeys" and "Ends" are critically meaningless, since all narratives have a journey and an end. The anthology sacrifices history in favor of a forced thematic unity, instead of finding a way to collaboratively use both, which both other anthologies have done to varying extents.

Moreover, since *Unbound* contains very brief excerpts (such as three pages of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*), it gives the reader a feeling of being able to merely glance into Indian women's writings without having

to exert themselves in trying to contextually understand them or creatively engage with them. This is an aspect of World Literature that may act as a trap. David Damrosch (2014) has stressed the need to evaluate literatures not in a passively consumerist mode, but with a willing and open mindset that is able to appreciate and critically interrogate different texts, in order for World Literature to be a productive category and not just an oversimplified and exoticised commodity of World Literature fad.

The reductive logic of the thematic sectioning is reiterated in its title “Unbound,” which plays directly into the false notion that Third World women have always been bound and repressed (and to the same extent by the same institutions) compared to their Western counterparts, and their unbound-ing can only happen when their works and identities are traded as commodities of World Literature.

The task of the feminist translator is to interrogate the theoretical categories that form literature and literary histories, and to challenge the inequalities that are inherent in the way these categories are formulated. In the case of writing about public life versus writing about private life, the *versus* needs to be substituted by *and*, since neither can exist in isolation. The public informs the private, and the private gives specific anecdotal meaning to the public. The nationalist aspect of ‘Indian Literature’ pervades both public and private, whether it does so by dismissing women’s writing as uninformed about the public sphere, or by deifying and fixing the woman’s place in the private sphere.

Moreover, in the narration of the nation, caste more than class is invisibilised in national literature. This erasure does not automatically stop operating in an anthology of women’s literature which claims inclusion and equality, as I have shown in the previous section. It is only through close attention to the boundaries between public and private that the translator can and must bring attention to what the text holds, what it hints at, and what it attempts to obscure.

## WRITING BY WOMEN, AS WOMEN

Indianness is a category that is bestowed upon writers in retrospect. India and Indianness only existed as a unified category after the nationalist movement in the nineteenth century. However, the Theris who wrote the *Therigatha*, the Sangam poets, and the Bhakti poets, are all included in anthologies of women’s writing, even though they could not have imagined themselves as belonging to an Indian nation-state. Yet there are contemporary women writers, who are citizens and subjects of the Indian nation-state whose work does not find space in these anthologies.

Thus, it is clearly not enough to just be a woman living within the political boundaries of India for her work to automatically become a part of the category of Indian Women’s Writing, and the politics involved in this framing refer again to questions of nationalism and literature.

Some postcolonial anthologies aim to fulfil their “burden of representation” by simply including what appear to be the most diverse voices without actually fostering an engagement with the internal logic of the anthology structure (Srivastava, 2010, p. 152). In the case of *Unbound*, the aim

to have maximum “representation,” only means that there are a large number of writers technically included in the text, but without any context, or even with a large enough section of their writing for the reader to gauge context from the text itself. Without the necessary critical apparatus to make sense of the text, there is a seeming insistence upon the unity in diversity trope that hints that the only factor that brings these text in conjunction with each other is their Indianness and no other context is required.

This notion is counter-productive for any anthology which wishes to challenge structures of power that restrict women writers, because it homogenizes difference, allows the literary obliteration of the marginalized, and directly plays into the narrative of cultural nationalism and ethnonationalism (Kilcup, 2009).

The stated objective of *Unbound* is to engage with the experience of the past as well as the present – to see how gender shapes experiences then and now, the solidarities that emerge, and a possible history that women can trace themselves back to. The text includes writing by women from different classes, castes, and regions – Mirabai and Karikkal Ammaiyar, Bama and Baby Kamble, Romila Thapar and Nivedita Menon – but their writings are placed solidly under the umbrella of women’s writing about women’s experiences. In such a case then, it is solely the idea of the Indian nation that is the link between all these gendered experiences – it is because all the texts are by Indian women that their experiences are supposed to be able to be knitted into a unified history, and this assumes that all women who are Indian citizens can be seen as equals which is obviously far from the truth.

On the other hand, *Truth Tales* uses the “Pedagogy of Diversity” (Kilcup, 2009, p. 311) in that it goes beyond representational diversity like in the case of *Unbound*, instead using a pluralist and particularist understanding of femininity in order to explore and question identities. It selects writers that are already part of regional language canon, and places them together in a different canon – that of Indian women writers who have feminist writings. The Introduction to the text introduces concepts like female power, fluid selves, and bodily truth, placing the text within the discourse of second wave feminism which emphasized on sexual difference and a rights-based approach (Tharu and Lalita, 1991, pp. 12-37).

In selecting works of contemporary writers that have been selected for being opposed to “ritually prescribed status... and veneration,” it again sets up the dichotomy of traditional versus modern in which the richness of Indian society lies in the “multitude of fluid selves that are possible” (p. 13). Such a vision implicates the self in taking onus of its own liberation, makes national cultural development the objective of that liberation, and implies that indeed anything is possible for the self, notwithstanding the historical and systemic marginalization that is institutionalized and violently restricting.

Moreover, while there are mentions of class and caste, neither is investigated and gender is posited as a homogeneous autonomous category, which goes back to the problematic notion that the category of Indian woman is unified. Such an approach presupposes that women have a natural or narrative “historical solidarity” which disables a critical

understanding (Spivak, 2000, p. 407). Spivak (2000) further argues that the translator, in her capacity as a re-writer can undo this sort of reductivist notion of the text, by highlighting difference, demanding focused attention on texts that have historically been dismissed and obscured, and refusing to offer the reader any sort of simplistic solidarity with the text on the sole account of being a woman.

The Introduction to *Women Writing in India Vol 1* on the other hand, offers a critique not just of what has become standardized as Indian literature and the inclusions and exclusions it has entailed, but also of feminist frameworks of other women's writing anthologies, thus avoiding the trap of literary nationalism, and instead evaluating writings by Indian women in comparison to writing by women from various other regions.

Additionally, each writer has an introduction dedicated to her life, her history, as well as the context and reception of the work – a section that could greatly benefit the feminist translator and complement her work for the reader. In the Introduction to Muddupalani, an eighteenth century court poet who composed in Telugu, the editors mention the censure she received for what the established poets called vulgarity in her depiction of the erotic relationship between Radhika and Krishna. They also describe how Banglore Nagaratamma, a court poet in the early twentieth century, who was able to see the literary value of the text and transcribed and preserved her work (Tharu and Lalita, 1991, p. 118), which would otherwise have been lost to history. This approach not only provides context but also makes space for intertextual readings. In the case of Banglore Nagaratamma's handling of Muddupalani's work, an argument can be made for it being seen as an act of feminist translation, which points to the fact that translation was used not for preservation, but also as a conscious intervention against forces of censorship and erasure.

Lastly, the question of who is the author needs to be tackled by the feminist translator in approaching women's writing. Because women's writing was often left anonymous due to restrictions on women's writing and reading, as well as due to their deliberate erasure from written history, tracing the writer is not always easy. In many oral cultures, women would compose songs communally which would neither be written down nor printed, or have a single 'writer' to which they were attributed.

Therefore in *Unbound*, when the editor writes that folk literature has been excluded for the reason that it is unclear who the author is, it privileges the voices of lettered women, and disqualifies oral traditions from being considered a part of Indian women's literatures, despite the fact that women have sustained and innovated multiple oral traditions over centuries. It is easy for anthology makers and literary critics to give Mirabai (a woman from a Rajput royal family) authorship of her works and credit for having composed them on her own. Her work finds space in most anthologies of women's writing, even hundreds of years later. But women who composed folk songs, unlettered women, women who were actively creating oral cultures, women who composed songs communally, are excluded on the basis that they are not rightful and credible 'owners' of their work.

It becomes apparent then that belonging unquestionably (perhaps also unquestioningly) to categories of Indian, Literature, and Woman influence which writers are selected into the anthology, and into the body of Indian Literature. The politics of translation are inevitably linked with the politics of the anthology in which the work features, and thus it is the work of the feminist translator to complicate these naturalized categories as part of their attempt to subvert and challenge the powers that govern what 'good' translations of 'good' literature should be.

## THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

As I have explained in the previous sections, the idea of Indian Literature, and the Indian nation itself is constructed through translation. Without translation, the multiple languages and cultures of what constitutes India could not have been assimilated under one body of work. The Indian identity, in literature and in citizenship, is constructed through a series of translations across its many languages, of which English has come to gain the most prominence at least in the pedagogical and literary sphere that we are focusing on in relation to anthologies.

Historically, Indian Literature has aspired to a sort of unilinguality as a means to canonize a scholastic body of Indian literature (Ahmad, 1994). This was aided by the emergence of print culture in the nineteenth century in India, which placed the focus on languages which had a script, ignored those having an oral history and tradition, and facilitated the standardization of scripts into 'languages' (Raveendran, 2006). Thus, while translations among various Indian languages became more complex and more pressing as the 'major' languages became clearly demarcated through print archives, institutional backing, and a growing reading public, the comparative scholarship between various language departments dwindled, leading to a similar idea of unilinguality in which most texts became translated into English instead of other Indian languages, thus English became the language in which "the knowledge of Indian Literature [was] produced" (Ahmad, 1994, p. 250).

This in turn produces its own exclusions and inequalities. In all three anthologies of women's writing that I have discussed here, the texts that have been selected are only from – Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Kannada, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, Gujarati, Telugu, Oriya, and English, which are the so-called major languages of India. Languages like Punjabi, Sindhi, Konkani, Kashmiri, Khasi, Gondi to name a few have no place in 'Indian' Literature, and this further proves that what is excluded from Indian Literature is also often excluded from social and political notions Indianness.

The fact that there are no texts from any of these languages cannot be an oversight, since these are languages and linguistic cultures that have been politically and socially excluded from what is considered 'Indian.' Writing from the North Eastern region of India, for example, has largely been ignored in these anthologies, with the exception of *Unbound*. This exclusion is not just from literary history, but it is also a result of the continuing material and cultural oppression that the region has been subjected to (Das, 2009, p. 19).



As Das (2009) argues, to demand simply that the radical Shillong Poets, for instance, be included and represented in Indian Literature is counter-productive because their writing critiques the subjugation that the enforcement of Indianness entails, and draws attention instead to the historical conflict of nationalism and counter-nationalism in the region. Instead, a disruption of the nationalist framework can be worked upon, one that foregrounds conflict and contradictions, instead of seeking inclusion into what is basically an exclusionary framework.

Despite the fact that these are anthologies that have been produced through translation, only *Unbound* has end notes on the respective translators, even though they are brief. In *Women Writing in India Vol 1*, the question of translation politics and practices is explored to varying extents in the Introduction to each text, whereas in *Truth Tales*, only the name of the translator is given, with no other context or background information.

This points to the lack of discourse around translation in anthology-making projects, which even as they set out to claim space in literary history for othered voices, end up making the translated work seem like a naturalized and completely neutral, mechanically objective rendering of the source text. As feminist translators have stressed though, these notions are incorrect and only mystify and obscure the political nature of translation (Federici, 2011).

Because the anthology is a pedagogical form, which has historically influenced canon formation, writing about translation is essential to decentering and democratizing definitions of literature –for all languages of India, of which English is only one. To resist hegemonic power over literature and culture is a shared goal of the feminist anthology and the feminist translator, and hence the demand to give space not just to women’s writing, but also to rewritings of women’s writing is a significant one.

## CONCLUSION

After a close examination of the politics of anthologizing women’s writing from India, it becomes apparent that women’s literature, as a subset of Indian Literature (though it sometimes manages to counter forces of nationalism and commodification) is shaped by notions of nationalist belonging. The historical events that have led to such a formulation of Indian Literature and women’s writing in particular have been discussed in detail in the paper, and in essence can be traced back to the colonial project of history writing and the nationalist project of cultural unification.

In my qualitative study of the three selected anthologies of women’s writing from India, it became apparent that even across the span of more than two decades that lie between the publication dates of the first and the last anthology, Indianness continues to be defined in certain ways that give priority to writers, texts, and languages that have historically been accepted as dominant, elite, or ‘essentially’ Indian. Even as these anthologies try to represent and include more diverse voices, especially those that are emblematic of a ‘women’s literary subjectivity,’ they are unable to fully break away from the paradigms of nationalism that continue to define

who can qualify as an Indian woman and what her literary contributions can be. Tellingly, even though much emphasis has been placed on oral forms, *bhasha* literatures, and non classical aesthetics in recent times (thanks in part to the work of literary theorists such as AK Ramanujan, GN Devy, and others), these questions and debates are not given space in the anthologies, which remain filled with conventional literary forms such as poems and short stories, and mostly exclude folk songs and other communal literary productions.

Another key finding of my research was that the notion of translation as being productive and creative literary activity is not to be found in the anthologies. Even though these anthologies are only made possible through translation, there is little to no space devoted to the translators, their own reflections on their own work, the historical background of the translations, and any other contextual information that might have challenged the hegemonic idea of the translated text being naturalized as a mere reproduction of the source text. This is of particular concern because even as the anthologies use a feminist methodology to describe the historical impetus of their work, stress the obscured place of women writers in the canon, and demarcate the possibilities that might emerge due to such anthologization, a similar feminist framework is not used in describing the translation activity itself, even though there exists much work on Feminist Translation.

I propose that Feminist Translation can be a critical method of engaging with women’s writing in theory and practice which can subvert and challenges the unequal power relations that produce a text, in writing and then again in re-writing. In fact, the appropriation of women’s writing from India under the larger hegemonic framework of Indian Literature proper can be resisted by employing Feminist Translation strategies not only in the translation of individual texts, but as a more overarching method to critically investigate the very categories of literature that are often taken for granted – particularly that of writer, translator, rewriter, national, global, and feminine.

The larger objective of such literary interventions in the domain of feminist theory and praxis could then be to motivate political action, by making interventions in literature and language, and by forging solidarities within and outside of the text. Therefore, it is crucial that there is first an attempt to understand how to negotiate the category of national literature, and then to use translation as a way to avoid the dangers of homogenizing women’s subjectivity or experience.

Translation is after all about creating a “space in which [one] simultaneously holds on to and negotiates different sorts of languages, conceptual as well as linguistic” (Niranjana, 2008, p. 134). This statement is useful in summing up this paper, as it succinctly indicates the need to fight linguistic and nationalistic chauvinism in favor of fluidity and multiple points of belonging. The canon is exclusionary, limiting, and repressive, and it gets further and further entrenched, unless there is a sustained and active effort to break away from it. The feminist translator’s concerted efforts to constantly disrupt the canon and the broader framework that enables it is essential and much needed today.

The feminist translator’s work can show the way forward, not only by bringing greater emphasis towards obscured

texts, but also by wresting away texts and writers from the frameworks of nationalism and commodification that constantly attempt to appropriate and regulate them.

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### ENDNOTES

- 1 *History of Indian Literature* (German original, published 1852)
- 2 M Garcin de Tassy's two-volume *History of the Literature of Hindu and Hindustani* (French original, published 1839-47)
- 3 These stories are *The Wet Nurse* by Mahasweta Devi (trans. Ella Dutta,) *Smoke* by Ila Mehta (trans. Sima Sharma) and *The Dolls* by Suniti Aphale (trans. Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni) respectively
- 4 See MSS Pandian's *One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere* pub. Economic and Political Weekly (2002) and G Aloysius' *Nationalism without a Nation in India* pub. Oxford University Press (1997)

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