

Gendered Construction of Female Identity: A study of *King Lear* and *Ashru Tirtha*

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Abstract

Shakespeare's plays have been lauded for creating witty, intelligent and strong willed women characters but what is interesting to note is that these characters finally subscribe or submit to the patriarchal order. In the late 1970s and 1980s, with the discourses centered around feminism, many critics began an examination of gender in the works of Shakespeare. It provided a space to understand the variety of ways in which Shakespeare responded to gender identities. In *King Lear*, it is seen that the female characters challenges the dominant father and thereby a powerful patriarchal ideology. Keeping these motifs in mind, this research paper is an attempt to look into the Assamese translation of the same text titled, *Ashru Tirtha* (1948) by Atul Chandra Hazarika. The primary objective of the paper is to analyse the representation of women characters in Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Ashru Tirtha* with reference to its original text *King Lear*. The representation will further reveal the role of ideology in constructing the female characters as well as the basis for discussing the issue whether the translator can be regarded as a sexist or feminist. The paper also aims at uncovering the role of language in legitimizing male supremacy.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gender, translation, ideology, feminism

Gendered Construction of Female Identity: A study of *King Lear* and *Ashru Tirtha* **Introduction:**

“*Frailty thy name is woman*” (Hamlet, Act 1Scene2)

To begin with the above quoted line, the adjective “frail” can be considered as one of the significant expressions to understand Shakespeare's view on womankind as ‘weak’ and ‘frail’. Just as in reality, women in Shakespeare's plays are also seen to be bound to the rules and conventions set down by the patriarch society. No doubt, Shakespeare's plays have been lauded for creating witty, intelligent and strong willed women characters but what is interesting to note is that these characters finally subscribe or submit to the patriarchal order. For instance, the death of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* can be interpreted as society's unacceptability of a ‘strong’ female ruler. Thus, Shakespeare's text cannot avoid some of the socially acceptable practices in the presentation of women characters.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, with the discourses centered around feminism, many critics began an examination of gender in the works of Shakespeare. It provided a space to understand the

variety of ways in which Shakespeare responded to gender identities. Here, gender refers to the division of male and female and also to the 'specific' qualities attributed to each as masculine and feminine. In patriarchal culture, gender is a mode of thinking that projects masculine as hierarchically superior to feminine. The asymmetrical man/woman binary is so thoroughly embedded in our institutions, thoughts or actions that it appears to be natural. It is therefore difficult to approach gender as something not given but accomplished, not natural but constructed. The question of gender made it clear that certain roles were determined for women in society by a particular ideology. The refusal to play according to the 'constructed' roles was seen as 'deviant' and 'unnatural'. For instance, the participation in the public world of power politics and social welfare were deemed as a masculine preserve and therefore out of bounds for women. The territory of women was restricted and they were made to accept frailty as being natural.

If we take the example of his tragedy *King Lear*, it is seen that the female characters challenge the dominant father and thereby a powerful patriarchal ideology. The strong and powerful women like Goneril and Regan are presented as being unchaste and unwomanly. They are considered to be an embodiment of evil, by their male counterparts, whose survival would definitely pose a threat to the society. The other character Cordelia is seen resisting the patriarchal power by refusing to play a part in Lear's drama. Her resistance towards Lear breaks the harmony of the play which is later on restored by forgiveness and death. So in a way we can see that Shakespeare's women strive to resist the patriarchal order but are often setback or marginalized at one point or the other. Keeping these motifs in mind, this research paper is an attempt to look into the Assamese translation of the same text titled, *Ashru Tirtha* (1948) by Atul Chandra Hazarika. In this translated version, we find that the translator is very much careful in retaining the scheming of the sisters to procure love of their father and the endless machinations to obtain power. What becomes interesting to note is that both the characters –Regan and Goneril- are a clear picture of power associated with evil but the horridness of the characters seems to be minimized as compared to the original text. Other than this, translator also uses different tools to assert masculine power in the text.

Aims and objectives:

The primary objective of the paper is to analyse the representation of women characters in Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Ashru Tirtha* with reference to its original text *King Lear*. The representation will further reveal the role of ideology in constructing the female characters as well as the basis for discussing the issue whether the translator can be regarded as a sexist or feminist. The paper also aims at uncovering the role of language in legitimizing male supremacy.

Research methodology:

In this paper, both analytical and descriptive method has been adopted to study the Gendered construction of female identity in Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Ashru Tirtha*. The analysis has been made on both primary and secondary sources and data. The text chosen for to study serves as the primary source of information while secondary sources are comprised of the edited books and eBooks that have been selected to appropriate in the paper.

Analysis:

The Indian engagement with Shakespeare began almost from the initial phase of the Indo-British encounter and continues till date. Shakespeare exists in the Indian cultural and literary life in two

different forms. The first existence as the ‘Elizabethan Shakespeare’ is found in the curriculum of the education system. The second type, the ‘Indian Shakespeare’, is found in the forms of appropriations of various kinds through translation, adaptation, performance etc. Shakespeare’s appropriations in the form of translation were mostly domesticated to bring a native flavor to its readers. Atul Chandra Hazarilka’s *Ashru Tirtha* (1948) is one such example where the translator changed the title, settings, name of the characters, and the official ranks to accommodate Shakespeare’s *King Lear* to the interest of the target readers.

In the text *Ashru Tirtha*, the influential patriarchal figure Lear was renamed as Pratap Singha, the King of Kamrup and his daughters Goneril, Regan and Cordelia as Jhanabi, Jamuna and Saraju respectively. Although he changes the name of his characters, he tries his best to retain the characteristic traits of the characters as found in the original. The change in the name can also be looked at as a strategy employed by the translator to bring the characters home and thereby manipulate it accordingly. A careful reading of the names suggest that King Lear as Pratap Singha stands as a symbol of power and influence, then the names Jahnabi and Jamuna gives us references to the two great rivers. But this renaming process seems quite political on part of the translator which reveals him as sexist. As we know that if a river flows in its own course, there is peace and harmony. But if the river changes its course, it is destructive and devours everything that impedes its path. We can relate this idea with gendered construction of female identity where women are asked to behave according to her assigned roles. If she goes against the parameters of the society, she is no longer ‘the angel in the house’. It is quite evident in *Ashru Tirtha* where we encounter this sort of marginalisation of women in the words of an official: “...gutei prithivi r tiruta jati tuwe hobo raikhyokhi”(Ashru Tirtha, pg. 94)

In the late sixteenth century England, Patriarchy meant the power of the father over everyone in the household including servants and apprentices. Early culture was hierarchical, with women under the rule of the men. They were believed to be less rational than man and were deemed to need male protection and guidance. Women were treated as ‘property’ of their fathers and handed over to their future husbands through marriage. Men were the bread earners and the woman had to be obedient house wives and mothers. These happenings privileging male dominance and women marginalization of late sixteenth century England is also seen in the context of Assam. The status of women in Assam varied according to caste, class and religion. Although their position was relatively better when compared to most of their Indian counterparts, there remained many social obstacles for the Assamese women. There existed dual standards of power, status and morality for the male and the female due to the existence of a patriarchal society. The private or the domestic space was identified with the women and public space or that of the outside world with men. What stands common between the two is the role of the father as a powerful patriarch ideology.

We see that both the original and the translated text seem to revolve around this ideology. The harmony of both the text gets disrupted the moment when the younger daughter decides to resist her father and not take part in her father’s game. At that very instant, the power of the father is challenged and the daughter chooses her own course of action. There are many instances in both the original and the translated text where the father “the patriarch” tries to re-assert his influence over the counter sex. What is interesting to note is that this assertion seems to be stronger in the translation than it was in the original. For instance when Pratap Singha says :

*Narir hambol toi tapta ashrujal
 Purukh moi jiba srestha nar
 Naakibi mukhot kolonkor rekha” (Ashru Tirtha, pg.70)*

This quoted instance seems to be more assertive than what Lear says :

*And let not women’s weapons , water- drops
 stain my man’s cheeks!
 (King Lear ActII, Scene iv, pg.270)*

Here we can take another instance where Lear’s “ *Nothing will come of nothing*”(King Lear, pg.172) seems more powerful in the words of Pratap Singha when he says: “*Nidiu nimati hoi thakibo tumak; diya muk homidhan husposto bhakhare*”(Ashru Tirtha, pg.18) . It is clear through these lines that the speaker very visibly voices the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object or “Other” to man as the dominating subject who is assumed to represent humanity in general.

Just like the original text, the female characters in the translated text too are expected to break through the traditional gender roles by resisting it. For instance, Jhanabi and Jamuna are more active and have more political knowledge than their husbands. But it is quite ironical that when women are at once seen exerting a great deal of power and influence, they are often being set back or marginalized at other points; there is no certainty. Although the male characters generally fail to notice or refuse to acknowledge women’s authority, they are significantly affected by it. In order not to lose authority over women, men often condemn women as shrews or scolds. Therefore we can see that, be it in the original *King Lear* or its translation *Ashru Tirtha*, the male counterparts never shy away from referring women with derogatory terms or curses. For example, in the translation we see that the women who oppose to the patriarchal set up are often referred to as the embodiment of evil with the use of words such as *Ghrinita, Raikhoki, Pikhasi, Papiyokhi* etc.

The superiority of the male over the female is also indicated in the deictic relation between the two language- English and Assamese. The Target Language’s (TL) cultural and linguistic norms demanded making deictic relations conveyed by the pronouns in the Source Language (SL) text explicit in the TL text. In Assamese the pronoun ‘you’ may mean “*toi*” -a form of address that either can be derogatory or intimate depending upon the context. If we go by the context used in the text, the male characters switch from “*tumi*” to “*toi*” in their address to female characters the very moment when they realize that the characters have claimed agency and are acting accordingly. For instance, the time when Jhanabi, Jamuna or Harajhu failed to appease Pratap Singha he switches from “*tumi*” to “*toi*”. In opposition to this, no matter how angry the daughters were, Pratap Singha was always addressed by them with ‘tumi’ followed by terms like ‘*Pujaniya Deuta*’ ‘*Snehmooi Deuta*’ . This not only reveals the dominance of father who should always be revered with respect but also gives us an insight of the TL cultural values, where they do not approve of disrespecting their father.

Now looking into the different traits connected with femininity or masculinity, we find that these are nothing but social constructs generated by the pervasive patriarch biases of the civilization. It is civilization that creates something which they term as feminine. And in the process masculinity comes to be identified as dominating, active, rational, and adventurous; the feminine by systematic opposition to such traits has come to be identified as passive, timid, conventional

emotional etc. Women are then trained to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology of male superiority which forces them to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination. As a result of this, women participated in their own subordination. For example, in *Ashru Tirtha*, Jhanabi and Jamuna who were projected as being strong women gave themselves away in their jealousy for each other which made them rivals leading to their ultimate end. Thus both these two women are seen to be sustaining the patriarchal myth. There are other such instances where the female characters are made to accept this 'frail' position of theirs. For instance when Haraju describes her inability to express love for Lear as "*Sudhra moi- gyanhin tonoya tumar*" (*Ashru Tirtha*, pg.19) – she is accepting her position in the society as a weak person. A more stereotypical presentation of women becomes clear when Pratap Singha asks Jamuna to mend her ways saying "*Etiya u bhal ho toi; Siksha kor histasar bhodro byabahar*" (*Ashru Tirtha*, pg.68).

The ideology of the translator and the target society plays an important role in the final production of translation. Here, ideology can be looked into as knowledge, belief and value systems of the individual (translator) and the society in which he/she operates. Translators are the social and cultural agent who is actively participating in the final production of the translated text. The translator's ideology is visible in one such instance where he tries to maximise the horridness of Regan i.e. Jamuna. There is this instance in the original, where Regan in rage is seen making Gloucester blind by stepping on his eyes. But this level of cruelty seems to be more extreme where Jamuna is seen stepping on Gloucester's chest which traces the sexist ideologies of the translated text. It can be pointed out that this act of cruelty on the part of a woman is designed as an intentional act of consciousness by the translator to indirectly state that women of the target society are forbidden to behave in such manner.

Language, as a system that constructs meaning and constitutes categories, is the main force behind the perpetuation of any ideology. On the one hand language reflects and transmits the world and on the other hand serves as a powerful weapon with which the dominant group maintains their value system and hierarchy on the other. According to the feminist critic language is one of the strategies used by men to fortify and perpetuate ideology. In case of human referents, feminine terms exclusively refer to members of the female sex whereas masculine terms are used for, both members of the male sex and the human beings in general. This idea becomes very apparent when Pratap Singha proudly declares himself as "*purukh moi .. jiba shresta nar*" (*Ashru Tirtha*, pg.) which implies that every language employs words like 'man and mankind' as terms for the whole human race that demonstrates the male dominance.

The silence of Haraju or her inability to express love for her father by declaring: "*Bhasa nai !deuta! Kotha mur nulai mukhot!*" (*Ashru Tirtha*, pg.18) establishes the fact that the right to express oneself has always been a male prerogative. Pratap Singha expresses his thoughts or curses without any interruption. The dominant male denies freedom of expression to the female. They condemn the "other" to silence, to invisibility. The discourses also categorize certain behavior as male specific and others as female specific. For instance, when Pratap Singha warns his tears not to flow because it is a symbol of weakness specified to the women, he is undoubtedly appropriating gender identity to impose a conventional idea of patriarchy.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be said that the distortion of the Original text takes place because the translator writes the text for a completely new set of readers (Assamese readers) and therefore is very much conscious of what the target reader is willing to accept. He tries to conform to the values of the target readers' culture. From the point of view of the target literature, every translation is then subjected to a certain degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose. In the process, the translation may include many changes and become an instance of "re-writing" of the original. Therefore, it is fallacious to think that the translated text is neutral because they have special duty as being representative of the target culture they are produced for. Similar is the case with Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Ashru Tirtha* where he via his act of translation formulates a very marginalized space for women. He introduces *King Lear* in a completely new cultural context to reinforce and sustain the reigning patriarchal ideology.

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