

Translating Vijay Tendulkar's Kamala: A Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This short research chapter explores the cultural dimensions of translating Kamala. It also highlights the challenges faced by translators, strategies of cultural transfer, and the implications for global readership. The researcher analyzes idioms, metaphors, character portrayals, and the play's socio-political background. This study argues that translation of Kamala is an act of cultural mediation that makes Tendulkar's message globally accessible while grappling with the risk of cultural dilution. Translation is never a mere linguistic exercise; it is an act of cultural negotiation. Vijay Tendulkar's Kamala, first staged in 1981, remains a seminal Marathi play that exposes the exploitation of women within patriarchal and capitalist structures. Priya Adarkar translated this play into English in 1982. While translating Kamala into English involves more than rendering words from one language into another. It requires retaining the nuances of Marathi socio-political contexts, idiomatic speech, and the subtleties of Tendulkar's theatrical craft.

Keywords: Translation Studies, Kamala, Cultural Nuances, Idioms, Gender Politics

Introduction

Translation, as Susan Bassnett observes, is "not only about words, but about making a whole culture intelligible." In the Indian context, translation has historically served as a bridge between regional languages and English, enabling works in Marathi, Hindi, Tamil, and other languages to reach national and international audiences. Vijay Tendulkar's Kamala is a prime example of a play whose translation raises crucial questions about culture, politics, and ethics. Written in Marathi and staged in 1981, Kamala was inspired by a real incident where a journalist purchased a tribal woman in a flesh market to expose the

exploitative trade. Tendulkar transformed this sensational news item into a powerful critique of patriarchy, journalism, and commodification of women. The play centers on Sarita, wife of journalist Jaisingh Jadhav, who confronts the hidden misogyny of her husband and the society at large. Translating *Kamala* into English is not merely a task of linguistic conversion but a cultural negotiation. How should idioms be rendered? Should the translator preserve Marathi expressions, or adapt them for English readers? How can the Marathi cultural ethos—shaped by caste, patriarchy, and political journalism—be conveyed without distortion? This paper attempts to answer these questions.

The Socio-Cultural Context of *Kamala*

While studying the English translation of this play, we, firstly need to understand socio cultural context of the play. The play emerges from several pinpoints which are difficult to use as they were used in Marathi. The play focuses on patriarchal culture. Sarita and Kamala are shown the pray of patriarchy. The gender hierarchies reflected in the play has shown the dominance of male in the play. The play reveals the life of journalist, but the exploitation done throughout the play remains hidden. Kamala is always used as “breaking news,” by Jaisingh. It symbolizes how media sensationalizes the marginalized. Caste, creed and class are also used symbolic in the play. The tribal woman Kamala embodies double marginalization i.e. gender and caste.

Tendulkar’s use of colloquial and rustic dialogues in Marathi increases translation challenge for the translator. They are creating authenticity and realism, but become difficult to use as they are in Marathi. Thus, the translators always have to keep in mind the socio- cultural aspects of any works like patriarchy, gender, exploitation, caste, class and creed in order to maintain originality and trustworthiness of the original work.

Challenges of Translating *Kamala*

- **Idioms and Proverbs**

Marathi idioms often resist direct translation. For example, a phrase like “हातचं सोनं करुन बसला” literally means “turned the gold in hand into dust.”

A literal translation may confuse English readers. The translator must decide whether to use an equivalent English idiom (“missed a golden opportunity”) or retain the Marathi phrase with footnotes. Tendulkar has used many idioms and proverbs in the original work which are either difficult to translate into English or use as they are used in Marathi.

- **Cultural References**

The play contains references to Indian journalism, rural markets, and social customs. Terms like Bai, Mavshi बाई, मावशी (Madam), Malak मालक (Husband), mandai (marketplace), tamasha तमाशा (folk theatre), or gotra गोत्र (lineage) Awwa आच्चा (Madam) may be unfamiliar to non-Marathi readers. Retaining them maintains authenticity but may alienate some audiences.

- **Rustic Dialect vs. Standard Language**

In Marathi, Kamala speaks in a rustic, dialectal form (using words like aga, bāi, mālak, hoy, bāpare), while Sarita and Jadhav use standard, urban, educated Marathi.

Challenge in translating this text into English is English doesn't have such clear, socially marked regional dialect differences that align with rural vs. urban class in India. If Kamala's rustic speech is translated into plain English, the contrast with Sarita's refined speech gets flattened. If rendered into "broken" or "grammatically incorrect" English, it may risk stereotyping or caricaturing her voice.

- **Culturally Loaded Words**

Words like mālak (master), bāi (madam), aga/are (vocatives), and exclamations (ayyā, bāpare) carry cultural tones of subordination, humility, and rural.

Challenge in English

"Master" or "Madam" may sound colonial or Western, losing the local nuance of feudal submission. Exclamations like bāpare! Cannot be fully captured by "Oh God!" or "My goodness!" because the emotional rusticity is lost.

- **Gender and Power Relations in Language**

Marathi allows subtle marking of gender hierarchy in speech:

Sarita speaks politely, grammatically. Kamala uses humble, rustic vocatives that reinforce her subservience.

Challenge in English

English lacks equivalent gendered address forms.

Translator must find ways to show Kamala's lower social and gender position through tone, register, or context, without making her sound cartoonish.

- **Loss of “Cultural Flavor”**

Marathi dialogues carry local color—sounds, rhythm, and social cues of Maharashtra.

Challenge in English

Even with accurate translation, the “Marathi-ness” of speech disappears. Without footnotes, a non-Indian audience may miss references to class, caste, and patriarchy that are implicit in rustic Marathi.

Conclusion

Translating Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* from Marathi into English is not a mere act of linguistic transfer but a complex cultural negotiation. The play, deeply rooted in the socio-political realities of India, reflects the nuances of class hierarchy, gender oppression, journalistic ethics, and the commodification of women. These themes, when expressed through rustic Marathi idioms, proverbs, and dialectal inflections, carry cultural meanings that are difficult to render fully into English without loss of essence. The translator, therefore, faces the dual challenge of preserving the play's authenticity while making it accessible to an international readership. One of the major difficulties lies in conveying local idioms and rustic speech patterns. Marathi expressions often carry layered meanings, humor, and cultural allusions that cannot be directly matched in English. Similarly, the cultural context of patriarchy, feudal attitudes, and rural exploitation demands sensitive translation to ensure that the gravity of Tendulkar's critique is retained. Literal translation risks distortion, while over-domestication may erase the local flavor.

Moreover, the emotional intensity of characters—especially Sarita's gradual awakening to her objectified role—depends heavily on the rhythm and tone of Marathi dialogue. Translating this emotional register into English without flattening it requires creative choices, where the translator must balance fidelity with readability.

Thus, the act of translating *Kamala* is not about achieving word-for-word equivalence but about recreating the spirit of Tendulkar's narrative in another language. The translator becomes a cultural mediator, bridging the gap between Marathi sensibilities and English-speaking audiences. Despite inevitable compromises, translation ensures the play's global reach and continued relevance, allowing Tendulkar's powerful commentary on gender, media, and social exploitation to transcend linguistic boundaries. In this sense, the challenges of translation also reaffirm its necessity and value.

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