



# ETHNO-LINGUISTIC ELEMENTS IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S THE MOTH-EATEN HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER AND THE BRONZE SWORD OF THENGPYAKHRI TEHSILDAR

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## Abstract:

Ethnolinguistics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the relations between linguistic and cultural behaviour. It is a part of anthropological linguistics which deals with the study of interrelation between a language and the cultural behaviour of those who speak it.

This paper attempts to explore the elements of ethno-linguistic in the novels of Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The Bronze Sword of Thengpyakhri Tehsildar*. Both the novels are written originally in Assamese language. In the translated version, of both the novels, the translator has used many words of the original language. This paper is an attempt to analyse the use of original words used in the folk stories, folk songs, idioms and writing structures in the translated version. This paper will also try to examine if the elements of ethnolinguistics helps to carry the essence of the original language and also to see if it helps to retain the emotions.

Key words: ethnic language, regional language, ethno-linguistic, translated work

The two novels under scrutiny which are written by Indira Goswami originally in Assamese are *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The Bronze Sword of Thengpyakhri Tehsildar*. The translated version of both the novels contains many words from the original language. Indira Goswami was the descendant of Gossain family of a sattrā in Karup district of Assam. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is written in Kamrupi dialect and she had made use of original words generously in the translated version. Baydak, Scharioth and Il'yashenko in their article "Interaction of Language and Culture in the process of International Education" states: "Language as an exclusively human phenomenon cannot be studied in isolation from

culture” (pg. 14). The different disciplines which study the relationship between language and culture are Cultural linguistics, ethnolinguistics and sociolinguistics. The authors also explain the correlation between cultural linguistics and ethnolinguistics: “Cultural linguistics and ethnolinguistics unite on the basis of common objectives: to study the interaction of two different codes – language and culture. Ethnolinguistics, as well as cultural linguistics, is a complex science, but ethnolinguistics studies the interaction of linguistic, ethno-cultural and ethno-psychological factors in the functioning and development of the language” (pg. 15).

Zang and Ge in their research paper “Study of the English Translation Strategies of Dialects in contemporary Chinese Fiction – A Case Study of Goldblatt’s English Version of Red Sorghum”, explains: “Dialect is a kind of local language, which reflects the local culture, customs and personalities of the local people and different backgrounds. Dialect is also the carrier of cultural communication, through which people can better understand the local customs” (pg. 37). The authors also explain how the use of dialects helps the readers understand the local culture in a better way also helps readers to understand the emotions: “The use of dialects in literary works can make people's images more vivid and effectively highlight regional cultural characteristics. At the same time, it can stimulate readers' emotions and arouse their resonance. The use of dialect will help reproduce the local culture and lifestyles” (pg. 37). The authors also state: “In addition to being a tool for communication, dialects also have strong regional characteristics, and carry the lifestyle and thinking mode of local people” (pg. 38).

In her paper titled “Language and Ethnic Identity”, author Vally Lytra observes: In the Introduction to the *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*, Fishman (1999: 4) reflects on the link between language and ethnic identity thus:

Although language has rarely been equated with the totality of ethnicity, it has, in certain historical, regional and disciplinary contexts, been accorded priority within that totality. (pg. 10)

David Elmes in his article “The Relationship between Language and Culture”, observes: “The culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ: because they value certain things and do them in a certain way, they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do” (pg. 2). The relationship between language and culture is so strong that one cannot be understood without other: “Edward Sapir, in his studies with Benjamin Lee Whorf, recognized the close relationship between language and culture, concluding that it was not possible to understand or appreciate one without knowledge of the other” (pg. 12).

The novel under scrutiny, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (TMEHT), is written and translated by the author Indira Goswami, herself. According to the ethnolinguistic theory proposed by Mohammed Sa’Adeddin, the translator performs number of roles. The translator reads the source text, perceives it and produces the target text.

Mohammed Abu-Risha in his article, “Investigating Ethnolinguistic Theory Across Language Communities” observes that:

Cultural awareness which is triggered in texts, is the set of values and beliefs which are prevalent within a given society or section of a society. It could refer to the achievements of a society in art, music, theatre and literature, to the habits, customs, social behaviour and assumptions about the world by a group of people, or could refer, as social discourse, to the social knowledge and interactive skills which are required in addition to the language system (McCarthy & Carter 1994: 150-151). (pg. 56)

With this background, this paper will try to analyse the use of original words in the translated versions and also scrutinize if it helps to carry the essence and emotions of the original language to the readers.

In the novels, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The Bronze Swaord of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, the author and translator, Indira Goswami and the translator Aruni Kashyap has used many words from the source language in the translated versions. The use of words from the source language in the translated version, helps to add the local flavour. It aids in adding authenticity to the text. It assists to create the setting and the atmosphere for the plot, characters, event or place in the novel. The original words from the source language, helps to give depth to the characters. It immerses the readers into the fictional world. It helps the readers to understand the culture of a specific region. Sometimes, certain concept does not exist in the target language, those words need to be kept as it is as it cannot be translated. Certain words are very culture specific, if they are kept in the source language, it helps the reader to understand the culture and tradition of that place.

The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker is set during the pre-independence era in the Kamrup district of Assam. It is the story of a small *sattra*, where traditional authority is in the hands of the religious head Gossain. The author has woven a beautiful plot with many threads as ownership of land, opium eaters, rising power of communism, feudal system, widowhood and transition period.

In this novel, Indira Goswami has used many words related to flora and fauna of South Kamrup district. It makes the reader aware of the wide variety of flowers, trees and birds, which can be observed in south Kamrup district: “The soft fragrance of *sewali* flowers floated in the still air” (TMEHT, 1). “The bright moon played with the languidly waving leaves of the jatti bamboo” (TMEHT, 3). “A *fesuluka* bird flew close over his head crying its sweet notes *coo!coo!*” (TMEHT, 3). Through out the novel, the author has kept many such words from the original texts pertaining to nature, like *bijulee* bamboo, *kachindariya* grass, *bankuhun* plants, *ou* fruit, *rohu* fish, *rabab tenga* tree, *kamini* tree, *jangur* leaves, *godhuli-gopala* bush, *leteku* fruit, thorny *kutuha* bushes, *bogori* fruits, *shalike* dhutia snake, *machuagom*, *hulungagum*, *marigum* – types of snakes, *bokul* tree, *bhatara* bushes, *katahi jamun* trees, *arum* plants, *malbhog* bananas, *barali* fish, *ketaki* flower, *dudhkhadi*, *gahara*, *pama* trees, *hadgnasha* creeper, *dhakar* bird. This creates a pristine landscape in the minds of the readers.

The author has also used the proverb used in Assamese, though she had given the translation, the text is able to give the reader the feel of the soil of Assam:

*Sudrar halowai bai hal*

*Bamunar halowar katha he sar*

(Bullocks of Sudras plough the field, bullocks of Brahmin only talk, talk and talk) (TMEHT 45)

The author has also used folk songs in the original language and given its meaning which gives the glimpses of the Assamese culture to the reader. The men are carrying Giribala in the palanquin and singing:

*Aste Aste ya mere Sunder Rana*

*Agate ya mere Sunder Rana*

*Aa! Ee! Dhat!*

*Aa! Ee! Dhat!*

(Oh! My handsome Rana

Walk softly, go slowly forward

Oh! My handsome Rana

Walk softly, go slowly forward

*Aa! Ee! Dhat!*

*As! Eee! Dhat!!* (TMEHT, 202)

Along with this, there are many words from the regional language which are used in the English version. The author introduces readers to the various clothing styles which are used in rural Assam like *Chaddar, gatala, endi chaddar, uttariya, pat silk dhoti, muga silk, Shantipuri dhotis, telach, barkapurs, Punjabi* and *mekhela*. The readers also get familiar to the various types of jewelries used by women in Assam like *Phutis, dugdugee, galpata, tolas, and chandrahaar*. The author makes the readers familiar with various places like: *Haveli, dhekal, kharam thowa, hathi bandha bakari* and *bhaghar*. The author also introduces readers to the various delicacies of Assam like *Pantabhat* – an authentic recipe of Assam which very popular among the rural folks, *labara, rahar dal, ghee* and *kharika joha* rice. Some words which are part of the everyday conversation of the rural folk like: *Maichana, Naksa, kushti, siddha, urmals, thagis, peerahs, mukcha, Chiko, Baduli chaki, dohar, telarbhar, dulis, Kaamlas, khurpi*. Some words which have religious connotation like *gotra, Dhanu prayaschita, chandrayana prayaschita, Shari festival, Basanti puja, Chandhi puja* and *Vaisnava Ahnic Puthi* explains the religion centric ways of living of the characters of the novel. There are some words which gives a rhythm to the language like *Jatar katar burhi, baap-re-baap, Hari, Hari, Hari, Ai chikau! Ai chikau!*. There are certain terms which does not exist in the translated language, in such

case the translator needs to use the same words: *Kaniya sabha* – An assembly of opium-eaters where they sit together and smoke opium with areca nut leaves, *Golokdham* – A game of dice. The board has various portraits of Hindu gods and goddesses. The final goal of the players is *golokdham* which is considered as the abode of lord Krishna, Radha and Gopikas, *Kalia* - the wind instrument.

These descriptions create vivid images in the mind of the reader and the original words are able to make sure that the reader gets that olfactory experience.

The second novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* (TBSTT), is a story of Thengphakhri, from Bodo community in Assam, who worked as revenue collector officer during the colonial period. She eventually leaves the job and joins the freedom struggle of India. The background of this novel is rural Assam and various references to the local language enhance the reading experience of this novel.

The British officers have learnt the local language to make things easy while dealing with the locals, so there are references where they communicate in Assamese and also in English: “*Eibur beya thai*, these places aren’t safe!” (TBSTT 13). This novel also has the description of nature in abundant. When asked by Macklinson Sahib, Thengphakhri tells him the names of the different trees like ghugura, bokul flowers, raat ki rani flowers, pirali-sundari flowers, ghonta-karna flowers and jarul trees. She also worries about the Sali-paddy which may get destroyed by the wild elephant: “The sali-paddy was ripe and swaying in the fields and it was quite possible that the elephants had come down to eat this” (TBSTT, 44).

Agriculture and farming are very close to Bodo hearts. Thengphakhri is also worried about that the vanishing of different rice varieties: “Even we have lost chunks of our aampakhi, nengeli, batok-pakhi, siyalsali, hatsali paddies. And so much more!” (TBSTT 72)

There is reference to the clothing style of Bodo women and their jewelry also: “She had packed not just her riding breeches but also a couple of dokhonas, faroumegoms, daukho-gadodokhona that was the colour of doves’ wings, flowery sadors and even a pair of extra boots” (TBSTT 67). “On her neck she was wearing a chondrohar that her mother had left for her before dying, a talinglora in her ears and a gonthoni-bali on her nose” (TBSTT 68). 108

While coming back from her official tour, Thengphakhri does shopping for her family: “She was also bringing Lakhsibilash oil and tablets for different kinds of ailments, a container of koni rice and a large shawl called bor Kapoor” (TBSTT 108).

The person who is roaming in Bijni kingdom and enlightening people to walk on the path for freedom is Khorgeshwor Sutradhar. Thengphakhri decides to join him.

There are references to the folk songs also. Few of the them the author has translated into English but one he has kept in the original text along with explanation. This song has different rhythm which makes reading a pleasure:



“Ladong fadong

Ladong fadong

Gou goiba dongbe! Moun bahkhria!

Our homes have been destroyed because of our addition to liquor. (TBSTT 11)

The author has used the original words from the rural people’s everyday conversation like: Bathou-altar, Narayani coins, the homemade brew of Bodos – kjumai-jou or laupani as it is known in some parts of Assam.

Translated versions of both the novels have many references to the original text which helps the reader to understand the essence of the Assamese language and culture. Even if the reader does not check the meaning of these words in English language, still use of original text in the translated versions helps to carry emotions which touch the chord of the readers.

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