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Reading Harimohan Jha's *The Bride*, translated by Lalit Kumar: A Masterly Appraisal in Shared Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

Most people believe that translation entails creating a copy of the original. However, as no two pieces of art can be exact replicas of one another, this is rarely the intended outcome. However, translation allows the translator to serve as a link between two communities, two languages, two cultures, and, ultimately, two worldviews. It allows the translator to invent something altogether new in that way. The translation is also a freeing activity since it does not entail reconstructing lexicon after lexicon. It gives the translator a great deal of freedom. When exercising such liberty, chapter names may be introduced in places where they are absent. These interventions may also result in changing the title or the addition of the proper references, as well as the repair of typographical mistakes and revisions to the narrative flows and chronology. In other words, the translator is given the 'authority' to represent two different cultures as an ambassador. This is precisely the situation with Lalit Kumar's expertly translated novel, *The Bride*, which was released by Harper Perennial.

Keywords*: Harimohan Jha, The Bride, Translation, Jeevan Yatra, Maithil.*

How do we define translation? It is an exposé of a text, in its numerous connotations, into another language, perhaps in the ways the original author had intended. Translation theorists tell us that translation has to be simple so that the clarity and precision of the original text is carried forward in the translated text. On the other hand, this may be seen as a complex, simulated and counterfeit art, since by using another language, one envisages to be someone he/she is not.

Most people assume the translation is about making a replica of the original. However, this is hardly the objective as no two works of art can be mirror images of one another. But translation empowers the translator to be a bridge between two languages, two cultures, two communities and by extension of the argument, two worldviews. In that sense, it enables the translator to

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create something entirely new. At the same time, because translation does not mean the reconstruction of lexicon after lexicon, it is also a liberating exercise. It endows the translator with considerable autonomy. The exercise of such autonomy may amount to, in some cases, the Introduction of chapter titles where those are missing. Such interventions may also lead to the correction of typological errors, revision of narrative flows/chronology, renaming the title or inserting correct references. In other words, the translator is bestowed with the 'power' to be a cultural ambassador—ambassador not of one, but two cultures. This is exactly the case with the book, The Bride, translated by Lalit Kumar, published from Harper Perennial with aplomb.

My dialogue in this research is to deal with the issues related to translation of *The Bride* with the limelight on the following points:

- Translation as a mode of representing pan Indian identity through Harimohan Jha's Kanyadan translated as The Bride
- Glitches of translation of a signature/cultural text like The Bride--linguistic, cultural, semanics and lexical
- Language functions vis-à-vis the translated text
- Translation of The Bride: bringing home the culture
- Translation as 'automatic writing' by the translator, Lalit Kumar

Harimohan Jha is one of the most popular authors of modern Maithili literature, known for his satirical writings. After receiving his education at Patna University in English literature and philosophy, he became a philosophy professor. He was born in the hamlet of Bajitpur, located in the Vaishali district of Bihar. In addition to being a prolific poet, writer, satirist, and critic, he was also a warrior against various forms of superstition. Jha was honoured as the "Vidyapati of modern Maithili prose," and his autobiography, *Jeevan Yatra* (The Journey of My Life), earned him the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award after his death. However, his fame rests on his first novel *Kanyadan* (1933), which was first serialized in a Maithili periodical called Mithila. Translated as The Bride by Lalit Kumar, it is the first-ever translation of a classic Maithili novel into English.

On the one hand, several novels written during the colonial times in languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and Odia are available in English translation, and on the other, not even a single

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classic novel from Bihar was hitherto brought out in English translation. The present translation has tried to bridge that gap by making this Maithili classic accessible to non-Maithil readers who will savour the description of Madhubani paintings, the clouds and rain, the wedding songs, and the robust Maithil humour. Apart from these, the novel can also be read as a historical document to understand how colonial modernity affected the lives of people in Bihar as The Bride has many references to modern education, English-educated youth, khadi, and Maithili script; but its main concern is female education and ill-matched marriages. The novel represents the social taboo against women's education in early twentieth century rural Mithilanchal, in fact, entire India of the given period. Harimohan Jha ventured to write a pan Indian story on seminal subjects like the plight of a girl child, women's issues, education, gender issues, patriarchy, social anathemas, public perceptions of women's identity politics, the storyline being of a deeply emotional human relationship – when, probably, no other writer in Indian literature had even conceived such a complex plot.

The Bride is a reformist novel; it is a part of 'Witness Literature', if I may. The protagonist is the representative of a society based on a collective traditional belief system where ethics regarding women's role was historically entrenched in specific socio-cultural constructions of the society. Through this molten, breathlessly told the tale of a girl named Buchia, Harimohan Jha has exasperated his intentions to authorize liberation to Maithili womanhood, and Lalit Kumar has aptly brought it to the notice of the readers through this translated book which rather reads like an independent book. The biggest irony of translation theory is that a successfully translated text should not read like a translation; rather, it should read like an original work. Lalit Kumar engages with translation as 'automatic writing', if I have the liberty to go Yeatsian here.

The novel revolves around the bride who is 'no sooner married than abandoned.' (Foreword, Professor Harish Trivedi). The text has been written in the pan-Indian context, and it problematizes a 'companionate marriage' (Foreword). Lalit Kumar, is, indeed, like the author Harimohan Jha, a 'critical insider', who carries forward some of the concerns of the novel in his enriching Introduction. To quote Professor Trivedi:

> "These included the denial of education to girls, child marriage, the giving of dowry, and incompatible marriage of a bride either to a young man who was college educated and thus alienated or to an old man who was often widowed or bigamous. Another major issue was the Hindu Religious Prohibition against widow remarriage which left many girl widows condemned to lifelong deprivation of any kind of personal gratification or social status, in many cases even before they had reached puberty." (Foreword)

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With a view to genuinely appreciate the skilled translation of Lalit Kumar, Professor Trivedi writes:

> "For example, when the bridegroom lifts the bride's veil, he expects to see a 'real peach'—an idiomatic English phrase used by Lalit Kumar which surely matches or even exceeds whatever Maithili phrase Jha might have used. On such evidence, this seems to be a peach of a translation, and should help the novel win a new generation of readers." (Foreword) The primary concern of the novel is 'the yawning gap between the education of boys and that of girls.'(Lalit Kumar: Introduction 7).

Set in rural Mithila of the 1920s, The Bride narrates the story of an English educated young man, Chandi Charan Mishra, who comes to a small village to marry his friend's sister. Kumar writes:

> Educated in Banaras Hindu University, Mishra is totally cut off from the ground realities of rural India. His worldview is forged by reading English books and watching Hindi films. As a result, he wants his wife to be a good orator, poet, singer, writer, tennis-player, artist with a good sense of humour and, above all, as beautiful and elegant as the film-star Devika Rani. But he is duped into marrying an illiterate country girl. His dreams are shattered when he sees his wife, Buchia, an uneducated and unsophisticated village girl. He decides to run away from the village quietly the night they meet. The immature girl and her mother are left in tears whereas the jealous villagers rejoice. This gap between the expectations of an English educated groom and the realities of the village becomes a major source of humour in the novel (Emergence of Novel in Maithili, 111).

During Harimohan Jha's period, Mithilanchal had become culturally stagnant and it witnessed the fecund superstitious, complex, callous rituals, and women occupied a low status in medieval and early modern society and therefore Jha took up the challenge of attacking the orthodox segments of Mithila and became an ardent advocate of women empowerment. The irony stems from the fact that the land of Mithila was traditionally known for producing female scholars such as Sita, Gargi, Bharati, and Lakhima Thakurain. And in colonial times, women were the "other" and consigned a subordinate position. Only 1.3% of women got the opportunity to study in Mithilanchal at that point. Counter to this ungainly backdrop, and the British occupied Mithilanchal in 1803. The dejected condition of women underwent a rhytidectomy due to the Western humanism that emerged along with English education. One owes a debt of gratitude to the minute written by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835 as well as to Henry Rickets, A.J.M. Mills, G.F. Lockburn, and T.E. Ravenshaw, all of whom have made significant contributions to the expansion of educational opportunities. The age-old tenets of patriarchy were given a thorough examination thanks to the freethinkers' notions of tolerance, logical insolence, and open-mindedness. It was made easier for the inhabitants of Mithilanchal to reevaluate their naiveté as a result of the growing significance of education and the Introduction of western ideals. Additionally, the acts of Christian missionaries contributed

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to this. The establishment of British administration in Mithilanchal brought with it the continuation of secular education and the maintenance of a spiritually objective environment. *The Bride* tells the tale of how education for girls and women was first made available in the fictional country of Mithilanchal. I am tempted to look at the character of the writer himself, Harimohan Jha, from Masculinity Studies standpoint where a man is taking the responsibility of the construction of the female characters in the plot. The author is a feminist, like Rabindranath Tagore, Fakir Mohan Senapati and Premchand. Buchia, the bride, was not just involved in taking formal education, even before any formal education she had acquired comprehension to learn Maithili books and had a commendable fortitude to learn. The eagerness, energy and jubilation of Buchia are not accepted by the conventional society. Harimohan Jha is a social analyst, crusader and an artist of complex thoughts, and he problematizes the complex human and social issues in the plot. Buchia faces the starkest disparagements of the society. With their delusions about women's education, people create a cocoon around her. In fact one can even find a vicious circle of female-patriarchy in the plot. Some women characters personify the inconsiderate world to restrain Buchia from the liberating encirclements of modernity. Sabhagachhi had come to life, and there were people rushing about in every direction. The entire location gave off the impression of being a fairground. The wise and experienced persons of the region held the belief that the pakad tree would die as soon as the number of Brahmins who had gathered there reached the threshold of one hundred thousand. And the tree eventually died off. Nothing but paags could be seen on the heads of Maithil Brahmins as far as the eye could perceive in any direction. They were both wearing white paags when all of a sudden it began to sprinkle, so they quickly unfolded black umbrellas over them. It seemed as though a whole flock of swans had all of a sudden changed into crows. The bride, as the lone voice against the social taboo, endures numerous trials and tribulations. She withstands humiliation and indictments in her passion to achieve social solidarity. It is a thought-provoking memorandum that both the vanquished and the victimizer are women in many cases, yet it does not reduce the austerity of women's subjugation in this plot. On the contrary, it elucidates the problematics of feminism in an inclusive way.

Kanyadan is a satire that relates the tale of an unsuitable marriage between an English-educated young man named C. C. Mishra and an illiterate village girl named Buchia. The narrative is told with a lot of humor. The book not only serves as a reliable resource for comprehending the influence that colonial modernity had on Bihar, but it also provides a window through

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which we can gain an in-depth familiarity with the cultural characteristics that set Mithila apart from the rest of Bihar. These characteristics include Madhubani paintings, wedding songs, and Sabhagacchi, which was once a center of learning but has since been transformed into a marriage market. It is regrettable that an English translation of this historically significant piece of Indian literature has not been made accessible up to this point in time.

In Jha's book, the main focus is on mismatched marriages, which the author first approaches in a comedic manner. Towards the novel's conclusion, however, the tone shifts to a more serious one as a result of the angry flight of the groom, C. C. Mishra, which causes the bride, Buchia, to break down in tears. The book's twelve chapters produce two different worldviews: the first is the contemporary world of English educated youngsters, and the second is the world of unlettered rural ladies. Both worldviews are presented throughout the novel. As the plot develops, the Anglicized protagonist is compelled by the rural ladies to recognize that his true name is Chandi Charan Mishra. This nicely creates a dichotomy between these two worlds, which is then elegantly broken as the tale continues. When he is tricked into marrying a thirteen-year-old village girl named Buchia, his goal of marrying a lady like Devika Rani is destroyed, and the reader is left wondering who is more devastated: the groom or the bride. The author's sympathies lie with the bride, who is being punished for no fault of her own, and this is made abundantly obvious in the novel's last chapter, which is named "The Bride's Tears." The novel's sarcastic dedication suggests that it is an effective indictment of a culture that makes use of many forms of deceit in order to tether "an innocent she-calf to a circus horse in the cart of marital life." The female protagonist Buchhi Dai's flimsy knowledge of the outside world reflects the hopeless situation of education and progressive approaches in contemporary Maithili society, despite the author's use of satire to express his displeasure with the pervasive starkness and ignorance in the lives of Maithili women.

In Harimohan Jha's social criticism, the bride is posited as being stuck between tradition and modernity, which thwarts her goals and holds her responsible for breaking her obligations as an Indian woman. The outgoing child who formerly didn't hesitate to speak out about her ambition for study is unpredictably quieted at one point. She is relegated to the outside of her little world as a subaltern lady, leaving the center behind. She carries the exiled persona of the quiet, 'cant talk' third-world lady as she is abrasively shuttled between nature and civilisation. The bride retreats from life because she is held responsible for events beyond her control. She is forbidden to vanish into primordial obscurity; instead, she must endure a terrible void as the

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target of challenging treatises written at the time, which will eventually silence her. The problematic discourses in this historical context juxtapose Maithili culture with its inherent canon with non-Western humanistic rationality. The bride's fate is indeed tragic, but the moral implications it conveys via its story and character have an impact on the reader of today's literature. The bride raised her voice when she was vocal, and also through her silence and through her tears. Her silence inquests, even today. Precisely, she created solidarity in sisterhood. The paradox is that, the bride forsakes all her dreams of emancipation and falls prey to an unreasonably predominant scheme that she herself does not comprehend and accept. But that was the situation of pre-colonial Mithilanchal. The story of the bride was relevant and timely, and this is what Lalit Kumar discusses in his engaging and academic Introduction. Apart from the complex issues related to gender, Kumar also problematizes caste and points out that the author approaches the institution of caste through irony and humour. To quote him, "Kulin Brahmins sometimes misused this position of social superiority and married several times into the families considered socially inferior to them. Unlikely as it might sound, there were instances of one Kulin Brahmin having taken as many as thirty wives, although such practices existed outside Mithila too—in Bengal and Assam, though further research is required to identify the similarities and differences among them." (Lalit Kumar Introduction 11)

Humorous tone and satirical undertones are handled by Kumar throughout the text, and these are the unique features that make his book an independent text, like 'automatic writing.' Lalit Kumar makes the best of translation by maintaining and retaining colloquial expressions while he problematizes the social implications of different types of marriage:

'O exalted one, why didn't you tell me this beforehand?' He asked, salivating. 'Here at Sabhagachhi, we receive all sorts of marriage proposals.The first is called a khankhanoua wedding where the coins pour out from the hands of the groom's father, producing a khankhan sound. Simply put, the bride's family get plenty of cash. The second is known as a tantanoua wedding where the groom's father feels tantan or ecstatic on receiving one thousand rupees from the bride's side. And the third is a thanthanoua wedding where both the parties are thanthan or paupers, they get nothing from each other. Well, you see, I assumed that you would go for the first. A large number of men come here wearing a dirty paag like yours and give girls in return for money. How could I have known that you ae here to pay the groom! But now that I see you belong to a well-to-do family, rest assured that I will find you a suitable match.

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Count yourself fortunate because as it happens, one such proposal is up for grabs in Sabhagachhi today. If this alliance is fixed, consider the girl lucky.'(The Bride 56)

Here the novelist through irony and humor launches a scathing attack on ill-matched marriages. Further, he gives a counter discourse through gentle humour and satire to the gender binaries presented by a hegemonic society in the following lines:

> 'Forgive me, please'. The girl cooed like a dove amid the ear piercing sound of the chorus and added, "Four centuries, selfish men have led helpless women by the nose, forcing them to dance to the runes. I have avenged the wrongs to women. And therefore I resolved to grasp the man who wants to marry me by the nose and lead him to the ceremony. Only then may I have friendly conversations with him. I hope you won't object to this." (The Bride 127)

There is also an interesting discussion in the text about bride price when Mukund narrates his story of betrayal and embarrassment by a girl's family:

> "A girl's family from Juranpur approached me at Sabhagachhi. The marriage was settled for forty rupees. I spent two rupees extra to get the genealogy prepared. Just before we parted, they asked me for money. I ungrudgingly gave them the forty rupees, as promised. But unfortunately, a one rupee coin turned out to be counterfeit. By then, I had run out of money. So I tried to persuade them that I would pay the one rupee later. After all, I was the groom. But all my pleas fell on deaf ears. In the end, a widower from Majhoulia paid them forty rupees. The girl's father happily accepted him as son-in-law. I kept watching helplessly." (The Bride 60-61)

Harimohan Jha's *The Bride* is a timeless achievement, and Lalit Kumar makes it a part of world literature with this seminal and pertinent translation. He does complete justice with the book. This story is an allegory for enlightenment and liberation. He creates an icon of the Renaissance whose wretched tone is beyond our judgement. The Utkal Mahila Conference held in Berhampur in 1924 by a group of women, including Reba Ray, Sailabala Das, Kuntala Kumari Sabat Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and Malati Devi made their seminal contributions at revolutionizing the Indian society vis-à-vis women's education. Through this book, Hari Mohan Jha and Lalit Kumar have created a masterly appraisal and shared pragmatism for those women's cause. They were, if I may, 'The Bride's Sisters' in solidarity with their commitment to education. I won't suggest that they particularly emancipated society to the fullest, but they definitely challenged the gender dichotomy and carried forward the bride's spirit towards social reform. The Bride sheds light on the strange and archaic customs that are prevalent in the Mithila area of Bihar. The author is able to properly portray the inhabitants of Mithila as well as their day-to-day existence via the use of writing that is filled with emotions. He describes the unrivaled significance of marriages and the traditions that accompany them in the life of the Maithil people, many of which are being practiced today.

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In contrast to Buchia, the bride, her sister-in-law is a bibliophile who likes reading publications published in the Hindi language and is content with her marriage. She is married to a kind man who seems to value having a wife who is intelligent and well educated. The fact that she is well-read and intellectual contributes to the tension that exists between her and her mother-in-law.

This book, *The Bride*, locates the female protagonist in the convinced shades of Indian and world languages, cultures and people and contextualizes the reconstruction of Maithili identity. The book is a loud and clear attempt to introduce Maithili gender and social discourses to the contemporary world readers as a multi-layered text. It does antedate the postcolonial reading to bring out its contextual significance from various angles, through translation of a signature text of Indian literature. The translator Lalit Kumar becomes a part of history with the publication of this book. This book, undoubtedly, is his labor of love. Putting so many ideas and debates together, contextualizing them, giving them coherence and cohesion is no easy job.

Harimohan Jha also opposes the offensive marriage marketplaces of Mithila known as Sabhagacchi. In these markets, women are treated as commodities and are traded for money or the opportunity to move up in caste. As a result of the trading of women, monetary transactions take place. People are attempting to push the bounds of caste and traditions with the assistance of modern education, and Jha catches a society that is engaged in a war against itself — the contemporary vs the traditional. Harimohan Jha uses humorous examples to demonstrate how the hypocrisy and avarice of Maithil Brahmins may be seen in action. In addition, he draws attention to how members of the ruling caste mistreat those who work in domestic service. When a domestic servant from Mithila travels to other parts of India, he is taken aback to discover that his caste does not carry the same weight as he was led to think it did.

According to Dr. Johnson, the process of translation is to 'change into another language, retaining the sense', which is indeed the basic objective of this book. The translator has interpreted the text under broad-spectrum heads including the title, the organization, the paragraphing and sentence connectives, shifts, metaphors, cultural words, proper names, neologisms, so-called untranslatable words, indistinctness, meta-language, puns, sound-effects, alliterations, assonance, onomatopoeia, symbols, allegory—and made an assessment of the whole to accomplish precision. He also admits having taken some liberties in his attempt to strike a delicate balance between originality and readability. I assess, there is a bright future of this translated book. The reader has to decide, what kind of authority has the translated

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version of The Bride have on the language, the literature, the ideas in its new locale? The Preface and the Introduction are very important, they successfully attempt to consign this translation in a foreign atmosphere, and to interpret the text linguistically as well as culturally. The future of the book, to some extent, depends on its availability and accessibility in foreign languages, Indian languages departments, universities, the embassies and cultural centers. The book will not only appeal to common readers but also will be immensely useful to students of Indian literature, anthropology, sociology and gender studies.

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