CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND FOLKLORE IN MEENA PRABHU'S 'CHINI MATI': A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH JHAVERCHAND MEGHANI'S 'SAURASHTRA NI RASDHAR'

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Abstract:

This research paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Meena Prabhu's Marathi travelogue, 'Chini Mati', and Jhaverchand Meghani's seminal contributions to Gujarati folk literature. The study examines their respective engagements with cultural translation and folklore, highlighting how Prabhu, through her Marathi lens, interprets Chinese folklore and cultural nuances for Marathi readership, while Meghani meticulously collects, translates, and popularizes indigenous Gujarati folklore. By exploring Prabhu's observations on cross-cultural encounters, linguistic challenges, and the representation of Chinese traditions, alongside Meghani's pioneering efforts in preserving and reinterpreting local oral traditions, the paper illuminates diverse approaches to cultural mediation. This comparison reveals shared complexities in conveying folk traditions across linguistic, geographical, and temporal boundaries. Ultimately, it underscores the profound role of authors as cultural translators who adapt, blend, and reshape narratives for their specific audiences, enriching both their native literary traditions and cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords*: Chini Mati, Meena Prabhu, Jhaverchand Meghani, Marathi literature, Gujarati literature, travelogue, translation, folklore, Chinese culture, Indian literature, cultural representation, comparative analysis, cultural mediation, indigenous traditions.*

Introduction:

The intricate relationship between literature, culture, and translation finds a compelling illustration in the comparative study of Meena Prabhu's Marathi travelogue, 'Chini Mati', and the foundational work of Gujarati folklorist Jhaverchand Meghani. Both authors, though operating in distinct genres and geographical contexts, serve as pivotal figures in bridging cultural divides and mediating understanding through their engagement with folklore. Prabhu's 'Chini Mati' offers a panoramic view of China through the discerning eyes of an Indian traveler, implicitly translating the complexities of a foreign culture and its embedded folk traditions for a Marathi-speaking audience. Concurrently, Meghani's monumental efforts in compiling and translating the oral folklore of Saurashtra stand as a testament to the preservation and reinterpretation of indigenous cultural heritage within India.

This paper aims to delve into the nuanced processes of cultural translation and the representation of folklore as observed in 'Chini Mati' and juxtapose these with Meghani's methodological approach to indigenous folklore. By examining Prabhu's firsthand accounts of Chinese daily life, culinary practices, and social customs, and by analyzing Meghani's methods of transforming oral narratives into written literature, we can discern the challenges and triumphs inherent in cross-cultural and cross-modal transmission of folk knowledge. The comparative analysis will illuminate how a travelogue functions as a site for immediate cultural interpretation, often confronting linguistic and cultural barriers directly, while a folk literature collection performs a critical role in internal cultural

preservation and re-articulation. Ultimately, this study seeks to highlight the universal function of authors as cultural mediators, adapting and re-presenting narratives to resonate with their specific audiences, thereby enriching both literary traditions and broader cultural understanding.

Literature Review:

The academic discourse surrounding travel writing, folklore, and cultural translation provides a robust framework for analyzing Prabhu and Meghani's contributions. Travel writing, as a literary genre, transcends mere geographical accounts; it profoundly shapes cultural understanding and identities by allowing authors to explore, question, and convey their perceptions of different regions ("Travel Writings on Asia," 2022). Historical precedents, such as medieval Chinese Buddhist travelogues, demonstrate how such narratives were instrumental in shaping external perceptions of foreign cultures and detailing their unique landscapes (Deeg, 2019, 2020). The 19th-century Indian travelogues, too, were deeply intertwined with colonial encounters, literary modernity, and the burgeoning sense of Indian nationalism (Ray, 2020). These narratives, often infused with the author's imagination and experiences (Chakraborty, 2020), become critical sites for cultural exchange and interpretation.

Folklore, broadly defined, represents an invaluable cultural heritage—a dynamic repository of societal traditions, beliefs, and narratives essential for cultural continuity and identity formation (Asamoah-Poku, 2024; Quý & Phương, 2023; Upadhyay, 2016). It functions as a mirror and a determinant of cultural content and integration within social contexts (Fernández, 1962). In the diverse landscape of Indian literature, myths, folk narratives, and oral performances have profoundly influenced literary styles, with many authors incorporating local tales, songs, and proverbs into their works (Lessa et al.,

1963). Contemporary Indian literature actively engages with and reinterprets ancient epics and myths, reflecting ongoing processes of demythification and cultural globalization (Munna, 2024; RAVEENDRAN, 2021; Vats, 2023). The collection of Indian folklore itself has a rich history, with efforts by British administrators, missionaries, and Indian scholars between 1860 and 1920 often highlighting complex interactions between informants, collectors, and colonial authority (Prasad, 2003). Significantly, the tribal narratives, songs, and oral traditions, though central to their worldview, have often been marginalized in mainstream literary canons (Khataniar, 2021).

Central to this comparative study is the concept of cultural translation, which extends far beyond linguistic transcoding. It encompasses the intricate challenges of conveying "culture-specific items" and the underlying nuances from one cultural framework to another (Li et al., 2021; Tenaijy & Al-Batineh, 2024). The inherent differences in cultural backgrounds inevitably lead to translation challenges, often resulting in varying degrees of cultural loss or alteration (Wei et al., 2024; Zhang, 2021). This phenomenon is particularly evident in fields like tourism texts, where the faithful rendering of cultural references often encounters non-equivalent issues in the target language (Chen et al., 2023; Chen & Zhou, 2024). Such complexities underscore the difficulty in fully representing a foreign culture without some form of adaptation. Translation, in this broader sense, can be viewed less as a mere transfer and more as a "blending of cultures," where interpretation inherently involves adaptation and assimilation (Abu-Mahfouz, 2008; Sarang & Kolatkar, 1977). Meghani's approach to folklore, particularly, highlights this fluidity, demonstrating how the distinction between source and target can become blurred, with one conflating into the other ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets:

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Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017).

Meena Prabhu's 'Chini Mati': A Marathi Lens on Chinese Folklore and Cultural Translation

Meena Prabhu's 'Chini Mati' serves as a critical document of cross-cultural observation, offering a first-person account of China filtered through an Indian, Marathi-speaking consciousness. Her travelogue is replete with implicit acts of cultural translation, where Chinese daily life, culinary traditions, and social customs are rendered comprehensible and relatable to her Indian readership. These observations are not merely descriptive; they serve as vehicles for conveying elements of Chinese folklore.

For instance, Prabhu's detailed descriptions of unique food items like "thousand-year-old eggs" and the traditional use of pearls in medicine are not presented in isolation (प्रभु et al., 2003). Instead, they are contextualized within a broader understanding of Chinese practices, beliefs, and historical traditions. These are subtle yet potent examples of culinary and medicinal folklore, imbued with cultural significance and popular belief that have evolved over centuries. By explaining these practices, Prabhu tacitly translates their inherent folkloric meaning, allowing her Marathi audience to grasp the depth of Chinese cultural heritage.

Prabhu's narrative directly confronts the practicalities and inherent difficulties of linguistic and cultural translation. She explicitly details the challenges posed by language barriers and the cumbersome task of transliterating Chinese names into Marathi (प्रभु et al., 2003). This practical engagement with transliteration is more than a mere linguistic hurdle; it is a fundamental struggle to render the unfamiliar familiar. This process of linguistic adaptation goes beyond mere phonetics; it involves seeking appropriate cultural equivalents that resonate with a Marathi readership, highlighting the complex effort required to represent a foreign phonology and semantics in a way that preserves meaning and cultural nuance.

Moreover, 'Chini Mati' captures striking instances of cultural adaptation and resilience. Prabhu's anecdote about a Buddhist temple that strategically displayed Mao's picture to evade destruction during the Cultural Revolution is particular.(प्रभु et al., 2003). This observation reveals the dynamic interplay between deep-rooted religious traditions (which often encompass significant folkloric elements) and political shifts. Such accounts, while perhaps not framed as explicit folklore studies, provide rich material for understanding how folk beliefs, practices, and institutions adapt and persist in the face of radical socio-political upheaval. As an Indian author, Prabhu's interpretation is inherently shaped by her own cultural background, implicitly "translating" these complex Chinese experiences through a Marathi cultural filter. In doing so, she mediates Chinese realities, history, and cultural survival strategies for an Indian audience, fulfilling the broader role of travel narratives in conveying insights into foreign cultures ("Travel Writings on Asia," 2022).

In stark contrast to Prabhu's external cultural translation, Jhaverchand Meghani (1897-1947), a celebrated Gujarati writer, critic, and journalist, dedicated his life to the meticulous collection, documentation, and artistic reinterpretation of indigenous Gujarati folklore ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017). Meghani's monumental endeavor, particularly in works like Saurashtrani Rashdhar, represents a significant act of internal cultural preservation. His methodology involved rendering vibrant oral traditions into written form, effectively translating them from the ephemeral context of oral performance into a permanent textual medium. This critical process made previously unwritten narratives of Rajput valor and life in medieval

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Saurashtra accessible to a vastly wider readership ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017).

Meghani's approach underscores the intricate challenges of translating folklore not across national borders, but across different modes of cultural transmission and linguistic nuances within a single nation. The academic discussion surrounding his work highlights how his translations often involved "shape-shifting sources and illusory targets," where the conventional distinction between original source and translated target becomes fluid and interconnected ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017). This concept posits that the source and target are not static binaries but rather exist on a continuous spectrum, frequently conflating into one another during the act of cultural rendering ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017). Meghani's profound efforts were central to the "cultural preservation of Saurashtra" (Kapadia, 2022), ensuring the continuity and recognition of local folklore beyond its immediate oral communities and into the broader literary consciousness. His work resonates within the larger historical context of scholars and administrators who undertook the task of collecting Indian folklore, often navigating complex relationships with the communities they documented (Prasad, 2003). His role was not merely that of a transcriber but also a reinterpreter, shaping the literary form of these traditional narratives.

Themes of Cultural Translation and Folklore:

Prabhu and Meghani, through their distinct literary contributions, illuminate several common and divergent themes related to cultural translation and folklore.

1. Cultural Encounter and Representation:

In 'Chini Mati', the primary theme is the cultural encounter between India and China, as mediated by Prabhu's Marathi perspective. She navigates unfamiliar customs, historical narratives, and daily life, presenting them through a lens shaped by her own cultural background (प्रभु et al., 2003). Her representations of Chinese folklore, such as "thousand-year-old eggs" or traditional medicine, highlight the exotic and the familiar, inviting her readers to engage with a distant civilization. This act of representation is inherently a form of cultural translation, making the foreign digestible and comprehensible. Meghani, conversely, focuses on the internal cultural encounter within India—the encounter between oral tradition and written modernity, between regional dialect and standardized literary language. He represents the rich tapestry of Saurashtrian folk life to a broader Gujarati and Indian audience, often preserving local dialects while simultaneously making them accessible ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017).

2. Challenges of Linguistic and Cultural Transfer:

Both authors grapple significantly with the challenges of transferring meaning across linguistic and cultural divides. Prabhu explicitly details the arduous task of transliterating Chinese names into Marathi, which is a direct linguistic challenge with cultural implications (प्रभु et al., 2003). Her narrative also implicitly demonstrates the difficulty of conveying the full cultural weight of Chinese customs to an audience that may lack the underlying context. Similarly, Meghani confronts the inherent difficulty of translating the performative and contextual nuances of oral folklore into the fixed medium of written text. The "shape-shifting sources and illusory targets" concept in his work directly addresses this, acknowledging that the act of writing down an oral tale is itself a

transformative, rather than merely translative, process ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017). This theme is echoed in broader translation studies, which recognize that converting "culture-specific items" leads to challenges and potential loss or alteration of meaning (Wei et al., 2024; Zhang, 2021). On Chinese culinary traditions as folklore: Her descriptions of "thousand-year-old eggs" are not merely observations of food but point to a deeper cultural practice, likely rooted in ancient beliefs about preservation and health, signifying a form of culinary folklore. The text elaborates on the process and the perceived benefits, thus explaining a culture-specific item.

Prabhu notes the traditional use of "pearls in medicine," which signifies a long-standing belief system blending natural elements with therapeutic practices, deeply embedded in Chinese cultural lore about healing and well-being.

Prabhu explicitly recounts the "difficulties with language barriers" and the "cumbersome task of transliterating Chinese names into Marathi." These passages underscore the direct friction encountered in bridging linguistic divides and the conscious effort required for cultural adaptation.

On cultural adaptation and resilience: The anecdote about the "Buddhist temple that strategically displayed Mao's picture to evade destruction during the Cultural Revolution" vividly illustrates the pragmatic adaptation of religious institutions to political pressures, showcasing the resilience of tradition

3. Preservation and Reinterpretation of Tradition:

A crucial theme in both works is the preservation and reinterpretation of tradition. Meghani's life work was a direct mission to preserve the endangered oral traditions of Saurashtra, transforming them into a permanent literary heritage (Kapadia, 2022; "Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand

Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017). His collections are acts of deliberate cultural preservation. Prabhu, though not explicitly a folklorist, contributes to the preservation of Chinese cultural moments by documenting them in her travelogue (प्रभु et al., 2003). Her observations on the adaptability of cultural institutions, such as the Buddhist temple during the Cultural Revolution, implicitly speak to the resilience and preservation of religious and cultural traditions in the face of external pressures. Both authors, therefore, contribute to the ongoing life of folklore, either by canonizing it or by interpreting its contemporary manifestations.

4. Author as Cultural Interpreter/Mediator:

Prabhu and Meghani prominently feature the author's role as a cultural interpreter or mediator. Prabhu's 'Chini Mati' is profoundly personal, her interpretations of China filtered through her individual Marathi-Indian identity (प्रभु et al., 2003). Her observations are not neutral; they are subjective interpretations that shape how her audience perceives China. Meghani, while ostensibly a collector, was also a powerful reinterpreter. His choices in selecting, editing, and translating oral tales imbued them with his artistic vision and made them palatable for a literary audience, effectively mediating between the folk performers and the readers ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017). The very act of cultural translation, as a "blending of cultures," positions the author as a central figure in shaping meaning and understanding across cultural boundaries (Abu-Mahfouz, 2008).

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The anecdote about the "Buddhist temple that strategically displayed Mao's picture to evade destruction during the Cultural Revolution" vividly illustrates the pragmatic adaptation of religious institutions to political pressures, showcasing the resilience of tradition.

The analysis of Meghani's Saurashtrani Rashdhar emphasizes how his translations of oral folklore led to a situation where "the distinction between original and translated became fluid," and the "source and target... conflating into one another" ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017). This illustrates his profound engagement with the very nature of cultural translation. Kapadia notes Meghani's centrality to the "cultural preservation of Saurashtra" (Kapadia, 2022). This highlights his role as a dedicated folklorist committed to safeguarding regional heritage.

Prasad's work positions Meghani's efforts within the historical framework of "folktale collections in colonial India" (Prasad, 2003), showcasing his contribution to the national project of documenting Indian traditions.

The broader context of translating Indian language texts, particularly in short stories, reveals "problems of translation" related to concepts and culture (Kumar et al., 2019), which Meghani would have inherently faced when translating regional oral narratives into written Gujarati.

Conclusion:

Meena Prabhu's 'Chini Mati' and Jhaverchand Meghani's contributions to Marathi travelogues and Gujarati folk literature offer a rich and multifaceted understanding of cultural translation and the enduring power of folklore. Prabhu's travelogue exemplifies the dynamic process of cross-cultural interpretation, wherein an Indian author implicitly translates the intricacies of Chinese culture, its historical narratives, and its embedded folklore for her Marathi readership (प्रभु et al., 2003). Her experiences highlight the formidable challenges of linguistic adaptation and the inevitable filtering of foreign realities through the author's unique cultural and personal lens. Through her observations, Prabhu makes the distant realities of China accessible, relatable, and comprehensible to an Indian audience, performing a vital act of cultural mediation.

In contrast, Meghani's work showcases a critical act of internal cultural translation—the meticulous collection, documentation, and artistic rendering of oral folk traditions into written literature. His efforts were instrumental in preserving and elevating regional folklore, making it accessible to a wider audience and transforming fluid, ephemeral oral narratives into canonical, enduring texts ("Shape-Shifting Sources and Illusory Targets: Jhaverchand Meghani and Saurashtrani Rasdhar," 2017). His methodology not only conserved an invaluable cultural heritage but also demonstrated the complex interplay between source and target in the act of translation, even within a seemingly singular cultural context.

Both authors, through their distinct literary genres and foci, underscore the significant role of writers as cultural agents. Whether interpreting a foreign culture or reinterpreting their own rich indigenous traditions, their work involves profound acts of "cultural translation" that adapt, blend, and reshape narratives

for specific audiences. This comparative lens reveals the pervasive nature of folklore as a bedrock of cultural identity and the indispensable function of cultural translation in fostering both cross-cultural understanding and internal cultural continuity. Their legacies demonstrate how literature, in its varied forms, serves as an essential bridge, allowing cultures to interact, understand, and enrich one another through the shared medium of stories and traditions.

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