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A Paradigmatic Shift from Language to Culture: A Study of Selected Translations of *Godan*

Sudhir Kumar Sah

Research Scholar,
Department of English, Patna University,
Patna, India.
sudhirkum1011996@gmail.com

Dr. Ramhit Chaupal

Research supervisor & Assistant Professor,
B. N. College, Patna, Patna University,
Patna, India.
Ramhitchaupal46@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper is an attempt to analyze the change from linguistic approaches to cultural approaches in the field of translation studies by taking a comparative study of selected English translations of the Hindi novel *Godan* (1936) by Munshi Premchand. Embedded in a particular cultural, social and religious context, the novel is a poignant depiction of peasant life in pre-independent India and is a formidable task for the translator. This study illustrates the shift in the translation practices from more linguistic fidelity to culturally informed interpretation by examining the two most important English translations, Jai Ratan and P. Lal's *Godan: A Novel of Peasant India* (1957) and Gordon C. Roadarmel's *The Gift of a Cow* (1968). Based on the theoretical assumptions of the "cultural turn" in translation studies as developed by scholars like Mary Snell-Hornby, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere the present paper argues that Roadarmel's translation, although flawed, is a paradigm shift in the understanding of translation as an act of cultural mediation, instead of purely linguistic transfer. The analysis concentrates on the translation of culture-specific concepts, idioms, proverbs and the depiction of social hierarchy, showing how each translator handles the tension between the source and target text. The study concludes that the transition from language to culture as a translation of *Godan* is part of the wider linguistic and cultural changes that took place in the theory and practice of translation, in which the translator becomes not a transparent conduit, but an active cultural interpreter.

Keywords: Translation studies, Cultural turn, Premchand, *Godan*, Hindi literature, Comparative translation, Cultural mediation

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Introduction

Munshi Premchand's *Godan* (1936), widely regarded as the greatest novel in modern Hindi literature, stands as a monumental work that captures the social, economic, and personal conflicts of rural and urban India in the final years of colonial rule. The novel revolves around Hori, a peasant whose aspiration to own a cow—and thereby perform the pious Hindu ritual of godan (cow donation) at death—leads him through a series of trials that ultimately result in his destruction. Beyond its narrative power, *Godan* is a richly layered text that embeds within its pages the complex fabric of Indian village life: caste hierarchies, agrarian economics, colonial exploitation, gender relations, and the intricate web of religious and social obligations that governed rural existence.

The translation of such a culturally dense text into English poses challenges that extend far beyond the purely linguistic. As one scholar observes, the word godan itself is “so culture specific that there is really no English equivalent to it: daan is not just charity, nor donation”. This observation encapsulates the central problematic of translating Premchand's masterpiece: how does one convey not merely the denotative meaning of words but the entire cultural universe they inhabit?

This paper argues that the translation history of *Godan* reflects a broader paradigmatic shift in translation studies—a movement from viewing translation as a primarily linguistic exercise concerned with formal equivalence, toward understanding it as a cultural practice deeply embedded in questions of power, identity, and interpretation. This shift, which came to be known as the “cultural turn” in translation studies, fundamentally reconfigured how translators and scholars approached the task of rendering texts from one language and culture into another.

Through a comparative analysis of the two most significant English translations of *Godan*—the 1957 translation by Jai Ratan and Purushottama Lal, and the 1968 translation by Gordon C. Roadarmel—this study examines how each translator navigated the tension between linguistic fidelity and cultural mediation. The paper contends that while both translations represent serious scholarly efforts, Roadarmel's version, despite its imperfections and the critiques it has attracted, embodies a more culturally informed approach that anticipates the theoretical developments of the subsequent decades.

The Cultural Turn in Translation Studies

The paradigmatic shift from language to culture in translation studies emerged as a dominant force in the 1980s and 1990s, though its intellectual roots can be traced to earlier critiques of linguistic formalism. The “cultural turn,” as it came to be known, was heralded by scholars who argued that translation could not be understood merely as a process of substituting words from one language with equivalent words in another. Rather, translation was increasingly recognized as a form of cultural mediation, a site where cultures encounter, interpret, and sometimes misrecognize one another.

Mary Snell-Hornby's *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach* (1988) was instrumental in challenging the rigid linguistic models that had dominated the field, advocating instead for a more holistic approach that situated translation within its cultural and historical contexts. Similarly, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, in their influential work *Translation, History and Culture* (1990), argued that translation must be studied as “a form of rewriting” that is shaped by—and in turn shapes—the cultural, political, and ideological forces of its time. They famously declared that translation studies had undergone a “cultural turn,” a shift that moved the field beyond the narrow concerns of linguistic equivalence to engage with broader questions of power, identity, and cultural representation.

This theoretical development has profound implications for the translation of literary works from non-Western traditions into English. When a text like *Godan*—deeply embedded in the specificities of North Indian rural life, Hindu religious practice, and the social hierarchies of caste—is translated for an

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English-speaking audience, the translator faces choices that are as much cultural as they are linguistic. Should the translator prioritize accessibility for the target reader, perhaps by domesticating unfamiliar concepts? Or should the translator prioritize fidelity to the source culture, even at the cost of making the text more difficult for the uninitiated reader? These questions, which lie at the heart of the cultural turn, are central to understanding the different translation strategies employed by the translators of Godan.

Premchand's Godan: Context and Significance

Godan occupies a unique position in Indian literary history. Published in 1936, the year of Premchand's death, it represents the culmination of his literary career and his most ambitious attempt to portray the condition of the Indian peasantry. The novel weaves together two narrative strands: the story of Hori and his family in the village of Belari, and the parallel story of the urban characters—the educated but disillusioned intellectuals, the corrupt officials, and the emerging middle class—whose lives intersect with the village in various ways.

Premchand's literary project was explicitly social and moral. In his presidential address to the first conference of the Progressive Writers' Association in 1936, he declared that literature is "the criticism of life" and that language itself "is a means, not an end". This perspective has important implications for translation: if language is merely a means to convey a vision of life, then the translator's task is not merely to reproduce words but to convey that vision in its fullness, which requires an understanding of the cultural and social realities that the words signify.

The novel's title itself presents the first and most fundamental translation challenge. Godan (from Sanskrit go, cow, and dana, gift) refers to the traditional Hindu ritual of donating a cow to a Brahmin, an act believed to ensure the donor's passage to heaven. This ritual is central to the novel's plot and theme: Hori's desperate desire to perform this act, and his ultimate failure to do so, encapsulates the novel's critique of a society that promises spiritual salvation while perpetuating material exploitation. Yet the title *The Gift of a Cow*, used by both translations, cannot fully convey the religious and cultural weight of the original term. As one commentator notes, "daan is not just charity, nor donation"; it is a sacred obligation, a religious act with profound spiritual significance.

The Translations: An Overview

Jai Ratan and P. Lal's Translation (1957)

The first English translation of Godan was published in 1957 by Jai Ratan and Purushottama Lal, titled *Godan: A Novel of Peasant India*. This translation, published by Jaico Publishing House in Bombay, represents an early attempt to make Premchand's masterpiece accessible to an English-reading audience. The translators, both accomplished scholars of Indian literature, approached the task with a clear sense of the challenges involved.

Jai Ratan and Lal's translation strategy tends toward the domesticating: unfamiliar cultural concepts are often rendered in relatively accessible English terms, sometimes at the cost of losing some of the cultural specificity of the original. The translation reads smoothly and is generally accessible to readers without specialized knowledge of Indian culture. However, this accessibility comes at a price: the rich texture of village life, the nuanced social relationships, and the specific religious and cultural practices that give the novel its distinctive character are sometimes flattened in the process of translation.

Gordon C. Roadarmel's Translation (1968)

Gordon C. Roadarmel's translation, published in 1968 as *The Gift of a Cow* by Indiana University Press, was commissioned by UNESCO as part of its Collection of Representative Works. Roadarmel, a

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scholar of Hindi and Urdu at the University of California, Berkeley, brought to the task a deep linguistic competence and a serious engagement with the cultural context of the novel.

Roadarmel's translation has been widely praised and is now considered "a classic in itself". However, it has also attracted significant criticism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the influential postcolonial theorist and translator, famously described Roadarmel's translation as "boringly literal," arguing that it lacks a sense of the original as a whole. Ludo Rocher, another scholar, pointed out inconsistencies in how Roadarmel rendered certain words throughout the text. Robert O. Swan, while appreciating Roadarmel's provision of a glossary, noted instances where the translation produced unidiomatic English.

Despite these critiques, Roadarmel's translation represents a significant advance in the translation of Indian literature into English. His approach is more foreignizing than that of Jai Ratan and Lal: he retains many Hindi terms, provides a glossary for reference, and attempts to convey the cultural specificity of the original even when this makes the English text somewhat less immediately accessible. In this sense, Roadarmel's translation embodies the cultural turn before the term was theorized, recognizing that translation is not merely about finding English equivalents for Hindi words but about mediating between two cultural worlds.

Comparative Analysis: Language and Culture in Translation

Culture-Specific Concepts

The translation of culture-specific concepts provides the clearest illustration of the different approaches taken by the two translations. Consider the rendering of terms related to caste, religion, and social hierarchy. Premchand's Hindi uses a rich vocabulary of caste and kinship terms that encode precise social relationships and obligations. The translators face a choice: retain the Hindi terms (perhaps with explanation), or replace them with approximate English equivalents.

Roadarmel tends to retain more Hindi terms, providing a glossary at the end of the translation. This strategy acknowledges that certain concepts resist straightforward translation and that the English reader must be introduced to the cultural vocabulary of the source text. Jai Ratan and Lal, by contrast, more frequently substitute English equivalents, making the text more immediately accessible but sometimes losing the cultural specificity of the original.

This difference is not merely a matter of translation technique; it reflects different assumptions about the nature and purpose of translation. For Jai Ratan and Lal, translation is primarily a means of making the text accessible to a new readership. For Roadarmel, translation is also a means of introducing that readership to a different cultural world, which requires retaining some of the strangeness of the original.

Idioms and Proverbs

Premchand's *Godan* is rich in idioms and proverbs drawn from the oral traditions of North Indian village life. These expressions are not merely decorative; they encode a worldview, a set of values and assumptions about how the world works. The translation of such expressions presents a formidable challenge: a literal translation may produce nonsense in English, while a free translation may lose the cultural resonance of the original.

Consider, for example, the translation of proverbs that appear throughout the novel. A literal translation may be comprehensible but may not carry the weight of folk wisdom that the original proverb conveys. Conversely, substituting an English proverb with similar meaning may convey the general sense but lose the specific cultural flavor. Both translations struggle with this challenge, but they struggle in different ways.

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Roadarmel's translation tends toward greater literalness, preserving the image of the original proverb even when this produces somewhat unusual English. This approach has been criticized as producing prose that is "boringly literal", but it can also be defended as an attempt to convey the cultural texture of the original. Jai Ratan and Lal, by contrast, more frequently substitute familiar English expressions, producing smoother prose but losing some of the distinctive voice of the original.

Narrative Voice and Register

One of the most subtle challenges in translating Godan is the representation of different registers of speech. Premchand's novel moves between the colloquial speech of the villagers, the more formal language of the educated characters, and the narrative voice of the omniscient narrator. These different registers are not merely stylistic choices; they encode social relationships and class distinctions.

The translation of dialogue presents particular challenges. The villagers in Godan speak in a dialect that is distinctly different from the standard Hindi of the narrator or the educated characters. How should this be rendered in English? Should the translator attempt to represent dialect through non-standard English? Or should the translator normalize the speech, sacrificing the linguistic marker of social difference for readability?

Both translations struggle with this challenge. Roadarmel tends to preserve more of the distinctiveness of the villagers' speech, even at the cost of producing English that can seem awkward. Jai Ratan and Lal tend to normalize the speech, producing dialogue that reads more smoothly but loses some of the social texture of the original. Once again, we see a tension between linguistic fidelity and cultural mediation, between accessibility and authenticity.

The Representation of Social Hierarchies

Caste is central to the social world of Godan, and the translation of caste terminology presents particularly acute challenges. The Hindi vocabulary of caste—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, and the countless sub-castes and jatis—carries a weight of social meaning that has no equivalent in English. The translators must decide how to render these terms: retain the Sanskrit/Hindi terms with explanation, translate them approximately (e.g., "priest" for Brahmin), or find some middle ground.

Roadarmel's decision to retain many Hindi terms and provide a glossary represents a recognition that caste is not merely a set of categories but a whole system of social relations that cannot be adequately conveyed through approximate English equivalents. Jai Ratan and Lal's more liberal use of English equivalents, while making the text more accessible, risks reducing the complex reality of caste to simplified categories that may mislead the English reader.

This difference is not merely academic. The representation of caste in translation has political implications: how caste is rendered in English shapes how English-speaking readers understand Indian society. A translation that flattens or domesticates caste terminology may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or misconceptions. A translation that retains the specificity of caste terminology, even at the cost of accessibility, may offer a more accurate—if more demanding—representation of Indian social reality.

Theoretical Implications: From Language to Culture

The comparison of these two translations of Godan illuminates the paradigmatic shift from linguistic to cultural approaches in translation studies. Jai Ratan and Lal's translation, produced in 1957, reflects an approach to translation that is primarily concerned with linguistic equivalence: finding English words that correspond to Hindi words, English syntax that corresponds to Hindi syntax, and so on. The cultural dimensions of translation are acknowledged but are secondary to the linguistic task.

Roadarmel's translation, produced a decade later, reflects a more culturally informed approach. While still concerned with linguistic accuracy, Roadarmel is more attentive to the cultural

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embeddedness of the source text and more willing to retain elements of the source culture even when this makes the translation more challenging for the target reader. His provision of a glossary, his retention of Hindi terms, and his attempts to preserve the distinctiveness of different registers of speech all reflect a recognition that translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a form of cultural mediation.

This shift from language to culture in translating Godan parallels broader developments in translation theory. The “cultural turn” in translation studies, which gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, argued that translation must be understood as a cultural practice shaped by—and shaping—relations of power, identity, and representation. Translators are not neutral conduits but active interpreters who make choices that have cultural and political implications.

The translation of Godan into English is not merely a linguistic transaction but a cultural encounter: between Hindi and English, between Indian and Western literary traditions, between the world of the Indian village and the world of the English-speaking reader. How this encounter is negotiated—whether through domestication or foreignization, through smoothing over differences or foregrounding them—has profound implications for how Indian culture is represented to the world.

Critical Reception and the Question of “Wholeness”

The critical reception of Roadarmel’s translation has been mixed, reflecting the tensions inherent in the cultural turn. Scholars such as Ludo Rocher and Robert O. Swan have offered varying perspectives on its linguistic fidelity and readability. Rocher pointed out inconsistencies in how Roadarmel rendered certain words throughout the text, while Swan noted instances where the translation produced unidiomatic English.

The most influential critique, however, comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who described Roadarmel’s translation as “boringly literal” and argued that it lacks a sense of the original as a whole. Spivak’s critique is significant because it comes from a translator and theorist who has herself grappled with the challenges of translating non-Western texts into English. Her criticism suggests that literalness, even when motivated by a desire for fidelity, can paradoxically betray the source text by failing to convey its wholeness—the way its various elements cohere into a meaningful whole.

Nitya Pawar, in a recent analysis, engages with Spivak’s critique and argues that a close reading of Roadarmel’s translation, “rather than adherence to a singular translation approach, contributes to the wholeness of the translated work”. This perspective suggests that the question of whether a translation succeeds cannot be answered by reference to a single criterion—whether linguistic fidelity, readability, or cultural authenticity—but requires a more nuanced assessment of how the translation functions as a whole.

The debate over Roadarmel’s translation reflects the broader theoretical questions raised by the cultural turn. If translation is understood as cultural mediation rather than mere linguistic transfer, then the criteria for evaluating translation must also shift. A translation that is “boringly literal” may be criticized for failing to convey the spirit of the original, but a translation that is too free may be criticized for imposing the values of the target culture on the source text. There is no easy resolution to this tension; it is inherent in the task of translation itself.

Conclusion

The translation history of Premchand’s Godan illuminates a paradigmatic shift in translation studies from language to culture. The two major English translations of the novel—Jai Ratan and P. Lal’s 1957 version and Gordon C. Roadarmel’s 1968 version—represent different approaches to the challenge of rendering a culturally dense text for an English-speaking audience. Jai Ratan and Lal’s translation, with its tendency toward domestication and its prioritization of accessibility, reflects an

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approach to translation that is primarily concerned with linguistic transfer. Roadarmel's translation, with its retention of Hindi terms, its provision of a glossary, and its attempts to preserve cultural specificity, reflects a more culturally informed approach that anticipates the theoretical developments of the cultural turn.

This is not to suggest that Roadarmel's translation is without flaws. As critics have pointed out, it can be literal to the point of awkwardness, and it does not always succeed in conveying the wholeness of the original. Yet Roadarmel's translation represents a significant advance in the translation of Indian literature into English, precisely because it recognizes that translation is not merely a matter of finding equivalents but of mediating between cultures.

The shift from language to culture in translation studies has profound implications for how we understand the task of the translator. The translator is not a transparent conduit but an active interpreter, making choices that shape how the source text is received in the target culture. These choices are not merely linguistic but cultural and political: they determine what aspects of the source culture are foregrounded or backgrounded, what is made accessible or kept strange, what is represented faithfully or distorted.

In the case of *Godan*, the stakes of these choices are particularly high. Premchand's novel is not merely a literary text but a social document, a critique of the conditions that shaped Indian rural life in the colonial period. How this critique is rendered in translation—whether its force is preserved or blunted, whether its cultural specificity is retained or lost—has implications for how English-speaking readers understand Indian society, both past and present.

The paradigmatic shift from language to culture in translation studies, as exemplified in the translation history of *Godan*, ultimately affirms that translation is never a neutral act. It is always a form of cultural mediation, shaped by—and shaping—relations of power, identity, and representation. The task of the translator, and of the translation scholar, is to recognize this, to make visible the choices that translation entails, and to strive for translations that do justice to the cultural richness of the source text while remaining accessible to the target reader. This is a demanding task, and neither Jai Ratan and Lal nor Roadarmel fully succeeded in it. But their efforts, and the debates they have generated, have advanced our understanding of what translation can and should be.

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