

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Week 3 Lecture 3: Gold from the Grave (Part - 3)
Length: 37:43

Professor: Hello and welcome to this session on Gold from the Grave. It is a Marathi short story written by Annabhau Sathe. And today Mrudula and I, we're going to focus primarily on the regional specificities and the implications of this kind of regionalism for cultural uniqueness and other related affairs. So, I hope you are going to enjoy the session.

So, Mrudula, what do you think in your perspective tells you that this story belongs to this particular region from India?

Mrudula: In the short story you can find a lot of references that particularly specifies that it, refers to the region of Maharashtra. The first instance that I can point out is the description of Bhima—the way the writer talks about his outfit, and he specifies that as a Satara outfit and he describes about his outfit in detail.

Satara is actually a district in Maharashtra and when he discuss the outfits, you can see that it is very much indigenous to, first of all you can see this is, this outfit in most of the northern parts of the country. But probably I think we can look into Maharashtra itself, because he is specifying that it is a Satara outfit. And he talks about the outfit in detail, that he says that, it comprises of red turban, a yellow dhoti and a shirt which is thick with coarse cloth. So, that is one.

And then there is this instance where he talks about Bhima's village and he says that, the village is situated on the banks of the river Warna. Warna River, it is the river in Maharashtra again, so we can see there are lot of references that says that the story is set in Maharashtra. And there is also this mention of tola, tola is again a unit of measurement and that also signifies a lot.

Professor: Unit of measurement in the language and so, we kind of anchor it, this story in that particular language, yeah, yeah.

Mrudula: And then there is also this mention of Kurla. Kurla is actually a neighborhood of East Mumbai, and here he, the story where this is reference which says that, Kurla is a place

where Bhima goes to sell the gold and collect cash. So, probably it is a marketplace. So, where people can purchase a lot of things, so, that is also very important. So, from all these instances we can understand that the story is set in Maharashtra.

Professor: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And we have the reference to Mumbai itself, which clearly gives us this big sign saying that the story comes from a particular state, a particular region of India. So, it is on page 107 in my collection, the narrator says that, "Mumbai had everything except work and shelter." And a couple of lines before that, "Bhima's village is long way off on the bank of Warna, however, seeing that even his bull-like strength would not feed his stomach there, he had moved to Mumbai."

So, he is from the outskirts, you know, he is from a village, you know, which is outside of Mumbai, but to find work he moves to Mumbai. So, we are told that he is a migrant and he is migrating to this city of Mumbai to find work, and in that pursuit he fails. So, you can immediately get a set of associated images. Mumbai, you know a village on the side of it and then, you know the references that you pointed out in terms of Satara outfit, which has a particular set of accessories, including the accessories, and then you have the language, you know, coming through, you know, in this English translation, so the word tola, this is the unit for measurement.

So, all these cues, all these cultural and language cues tell us that the story emerges from particular landscape or particular kind of cultural economy. Are there any other references which tell you that the story also belongs to the larger Indian identity, any other set of images, you know scenes, which kind of tell you yes it belongs to the Indian nation, the story?

Mrudula: The story itself gives a very clear, the idea of how unemployment works in a lot of, in various levels. And the story of this Bhima means, somebody who is very poor, who lives in these kinds of places, it also brings up this image of slums.

Professor: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mrudula: So, that can be brought in the larger contextual idea. That is one. But the story tells us, this mention of cemetery and ritual rites that are related to deaths. So, although you cannot say that those ritual rites and things just particular to the region, but you can see that it is very much very much Indian, because again there is this, I can just pick out the instance

where the writer talks, I just quote what the writer says that, “pushing aside shattered pots, battered biers, he jumped from this grave to that.”

So, when you go to a graveyard, especially an Indian graveyard, this is what, is something that you can expect. This image of shattered pots, it evokes a lot of things that are related to death and the rites that are associated with the death.

Professor: Yeah, yeah.

Mrudula: There are lot of ceremonies related to death.

Professor: True, true. Okay. Let me just kind of pick up from what you said you know at the beginning, so we do get scenes of poverty, we get that. We get houses which are run down, right? Dilapidated houses and that is very kind of sharply described by the narrator. The narrator states, the huts were made of old tin sheets, mats, planks and sacks and those houses contains people, cast-off things sheltering cast-off people.

So, this kind of shelter is something that is a sight that we can recognize in many regions in the suburbs, and in the villages. So, that is kind of not unique to the viewer, but it is a common sight, especially in certain pockets not everywhere in certain pockets, so that is one thing.

So, you can see how the story is also related to the larger, you know, the larger Indian spatiality itself as a big entity. It has regional qualities, such as in the Northeast. And there is also a reference to roti, remember? The wife is patting bhakars into shape. So, that element that particular term referred to roti you know, the big pan cake, in fact pan cake.

So, all these regional elements are there, which kind of tells us that this this story is kind of emerging from the cultural lifestyle from particular people and at the same time, there are other scenes, which tell us that this kind of scenes are also familiar to different parts of the nation, they belong to the larger Indian identity and same time there are unique elements as well. So, that’s something we need to recognize.

And the migrations are also pretty common, people going from one region to the other, so they don’t remain rooted to one particular region all through their lives you know, they move for various reason for education, but in the story they move for making ends meet, they do for survival. For survival, simply they move for their survival , so, this, this element is there.

The other point that you refer to, the ritual rites, yes the ritual rites. Here we need to be a bit you know, specific because at one point of the story, (what's his name?), Bhima tells us that you know the rich buried with gold, you know with the dead, but the poor do not have the luxury of doing that. So, even though certain rituals are, you know, common to the general mass, there are minor variations within those rituals. And those rituals kind of tells us to which class the dead belong to.

And he rants at certain points in the story and says that you know the rich has a right to die and so on and so forth. There is no clear cut rationale to the rant, if you read it pretty closely, he thinks, he says things paradoxically, and he goes back and forth. But all we get to kind of understand or comprehend is that he is immensely resentful and bitter and angry to the society around him.

But to come back to the point about rituals. So, yes there are reference to rituals, which are kind of cued in those items, the biers, the broken pots, which are all part of the ritual, you know, accessories. But there are also minor variations which are interesting, because we also understand that, you know those rituals are valuable, rituals are kind of, you know, modified and changed to suit the needs of individual needs and desires.

So, while there is regional elements, while there is national elements, there is also the individual element, which is kind of structured by wealth, the amount of money which you possess that also defines your lifestyle. So all these internal variations and diversities are there.

Okay, and anything else that you think is unique to the Indian or the regional?

Mrudula: Actually Bhima's wife is very much unhappy about his occupation. Earlier he was working in the quarry and then he left, he had he lost his job, so he had to shift to this location. So, there is this superstition that is related to people going to cemeteries. People are really scared about going to cemetery, there is this lot of the cemeteries are associated with ghosts and other things. So, wife does not like him going to cemetery on the first hand and maybe because she has moral issues because of him doing these things.

Professor: Yeah, you can quote, you can quote those related passages.

Mrudula: “You are going somewhere, aren't you? I do not think what you are doing is right. You should find some other way to make a living. Corpses, corpse’s ashes, gold, this existence is all wrong. People brand...” and she stopped abruptly.

So, one thing is the moral issue, second thing is that she is scared that people will brand him with certain names or like she may be also scared that she will be possessed by ghost maybe...

Professor: Yes.

Mrudula: because that is what we mostly think. Like that is why people are scared of going to cemeteries which is, I don’t know whether that can be seen only in our country, yeah, but still we can also, this is something that we are commonly hear that, people will not go to cemeteries after sunset and things like that, so, he is doing that and his wife is against it.

Professor: Yeah. Yeah. Correct. So, I will pick up on the first point in your discussion, first point was about the quarry work that he did. It is, it is apparent that he did like that work, that honest labor. And, you know, he enjoys working on those hills, breaking rocks, and it is pretty interesting the way that, that you know that idea of breaking things gives him an immense joy and satisfaction.

If you go back to that passage, he says, “as he put all of his bull-like might to work he seemed to almost challenge that hill. He lifted his pickaxe and filled with recoiled, as the sledgehammer rose, the dark rock face would flinch. The contractor was happy with him, Bhima too was contented as he was getting a wage.” So, it is a very very metaphoric passage to look at it closely. He is challenging the hills, the hill becomes a massive personification of a, of a human being and then he likes to challenge, and he likes to win that battle. The hill is recoiling, you know, moving back in fear.

And the contractor was happy because Bhima is such a good worker, he should have he would have broken a lot of rocks. And Bhima was contented too because he was getting a steady wage and he had shelter for his family. And just kind of fighting, this kind of challenge that Bhima throws at it is a point is something that runs through the entire story. And that is what happens later on in the second section of the story when he fights with the jackals and he fights with the corpse to get the piece of gold.

So, you can see his desire to fight, the desire to wrestle, the desire to challenge and extract something back in order to, you know, keep his survival going, in order to keep his dear family, you know, have it is it is kitchen fire going. So, this is a interesting image because that image has reappears in different ways in the previous sections that we see in the story.

The next thing as a point over the jackals which are attacking him and kind of fights with them and he enjoys that fight, you can see that and he likes to win, he likes to win. And in the same way, the corpse too, he treats the corpse as a living thing and fights with the corpse, he kind of throws curses at the corpse and then he finally emerges victorious. So, there is something unique to Bhima's personality that we see all through the story. The idea of resistance, the idea of resistance and then challenging the other.

The other point that I want to point out and which also ties with the national identity, is that parallel that the narrator brings about the Pandavas. He is compared to Kunti's Bhima, isn't it? So, you can see how this particular man from Maharashtra who has this name Bhima, is this, is kind of associated with the larger Hindu idea which is, which is kind of embedded in that myth, in that scripture, in that ethic and maybe kind of put him in that kind of larger national scale, he becomes a representative of the of the, you know, the struggling Indian man.

So, the regional elements take a back seat then when you kind of associated him with the national, you know, mythology and national religious ethic. So, in that way again, you know the regionals with those nationals and the national identity emerges pretty strongly. So, I am going to come back to that point about the wife that you made.

Again, the gender identity is something which is not unique to this particular story, the idea of you know shushed the wife, it is kind of prevalent everywhere, across the nation, in terms of religion that we treat, I am not saying that, you know, that is the case in practical everyday reality, I am saying that in many instances of the Indian literature, we get these images of oppressed wives, wives who are kind of dominated by the husband and Bhima's wife is one such example.

And you can also connect it with other representations, say from Girish Karnad's Nagamandala. So, this Marathi wife is akin to the Kanada wife. And you can also find parallels with Punjabi, feminine representations, especially in the case of Guleri, who does

not get any responses, when she asks the question. Manak is quiet, silent, so this kind of silent oppression is also another back mention to the female identity.

So, I am not saying that this is the only representation that we get of the female Indian woman, but this is one of the major image that we seem to get. Of course, there are variations and one such variation would be said for example, oh you know, in Summer Vacation we have not read that particular story for this course, for this of course but you get the very powerful nature in summer vacation of the grandmother and, for example in Perumal Murugan's The Man Who Could Not Sleep, the wife is kind of not quite at all, she kind of talks back, on and on and on and the husband is used to that kind of resistance.

So, the predominant, what I am trying to say is that, the predominant gender identity also ties this story with the rest of the regions, the rest of the states of India and that seems to be also part of the national identity, even with respect to the literature that we read, yeah. Is there anything else that you want to add to in this context of different kinds of identities that we get in the story?

Mrudula: Relating to this typical household wife, although there is she is not given a name in the story, and she does not have, actually she does not have any part in the story but passing references and comments which we understand that we have this wife-like character. I think we do not know whether to sympathize with Bhima or like, should we prevent him because he is kind of he is not brute, but he does not give the kind of respect that he should give to his wife?

But at the same time, we tend to sympathize with him because we understand that he is doing all these things because he wants to provide for his wife and for his child. And even after going back to this, even after going to this graveyard and when he comes back with gold coins, all he thinks about is getting a Sari for his wife and a petticoat for his daughter and then and grapes.

Professor: Dates Dates, a sari, a petticoat and blouse for the wife and dates for the child.

Mrudula: Yeah. So, we understand that there is again there is this loving husband and loving, a caring father.

Professor: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, yes, correct. So, again, that gender identity is essential, Bhima's character, the meal, the husband, the father is supposed to kind of look after, provide

for his dependents. Which means wife and children, and he wants to do that job properly and to kind of fulfil his assigned roles in society he does all these things. You can kind of reduce it to gender identity, and does not care about the kind of or the nature of job that falls to him to make sure that he fulfills both husbandly and fatherly duties.

And I want to return to the point that you made earlier, wife's worrying you know about being affected by the nature of the job, what he does. Yes, there are several reservations she has several reservations, once that he might be attacked by ghost and you know, the second is that people might you know look at him as a criminal for grave digging, for robbing graves. And so, there are a multitude of fears on part of the wife, and this fear is not very particular only in the Indian wife. We, you can see, you know, if you read other literature when we have scenes such as these, you know, the female has these set of you know responses to this kind of material graveyards.

The main point here is that, again, the gender identity which kind of matches with gender roles assigned to men, which you can see in other literature from other you know literature from other regions as well. So, if you look at you know Amrita Pritam's, *The Stench of Kerosene*, we have like the farmer. Even though Guleri is doing all the household work just as this wife of Bhima, is doing all the you know preparation and all the household chores, each have their own kind of assigned duties which they are expected to fulfil.

And to come back to your earlier point about should we sympathize with Bhima or not? The answer is, you know, the story is set up in such a way that the narrator kind of tells you how to react to him. And at the end of the novel at the end of the story you have Bhima crying over what he has done. He has lost a couple of fingers, but very next day he realizes that there's work to be had. And because over those over the loss of those hill breaker effect fingers, and the narrator kind of summarizes the story in a greater moralistic way and tells us to see, this is the result of excessive greed. If you're extremely greedy, this is what you will get. And perhaps we can also, you know, see it in this way, you know, Bhima suffers this because he has meddled with things he should not have meddled. And so, in some sense, you get, you kind of realized that perhaps the wife was right, you know, if you if you kind of meddle with cemeteries, with with cremation grounds, with corpses and bodies, you will have to pay for it in one way or the other, because (())(24:51) to settle the family or on the cause he was doing (())(24:55) Bhima himself.

And Bhima himself kind of realizes that. He thinks that, is the dead man attacking him for what he has done to the dead man. At one point of the story, page 111 in my collection, he says, the narrator says, “he felt the corpses teeth cut into his fingers. He froze thinking, this is a real ghost, today it will catch me and hand me over to the people who will kill me because I am desecrating his body.” So, what he is doing is desecration, so, it is taboo, you are not supposed to meddle with the dead. And he thinks that the corpse itself is trying to catch him and hand him over to the people who will kind of punish him.

So, you can one thing you realize that the narrator knows what Bhima is thinking in his mind, he said he is a, you know, very omniscient narrator, who knows about everything, even the internal thought processes of Bhima. The other thing is that, Bhima thinks that you know his payday has come. So he realizes deep down that what he is doing is wrong, morally wrong, but he has to do it, so that his family survives, so that he could give a decent you know lifestyle to his family, clothes to the wife, food for the child.

So, he is kind of justifying the submersion of certain rules in society, because he has to fulfil his gender roles. So, you can, you can now realize that these are at you know, these are contradicting one another, isn't it? The societal rules and the expectations of masculine, they seem to be kind of in opposition to one another, isn't it? So, he has, he has to choose one over the other, either obey the rules of society and give up on his family or you know protect the family at any cost and give up the rules and regulations of the society.

So, we do get a similar scenario in Premchand's Shroud as well, you know, similar kind of setups where the men choose to do one things against the other and the repercussions fall. So, a good companion read for the story would be Premchand's story. Anything else you want to pick up on in in this discussion?

Mrudula: I would like to point out what you have talked about earlier, about the comparison that can be made with this character and that of the mythological character.

Professor: Yes, yes.

Mrudula: There is this, right from the start, the author has made a conscious effort to bring that comparison outwardly, like when he says that he looked like a proper wrestler.

Professor: Yes, yes, yes.

Mrudula: Then again when he talks about his strength, he says, he has his bull like strength which is again when we talk about the strength of the Bhima again he would he had really we say that he had the strength of a 1000 elephant. That reference again

Professor: yeah yeah specified.

Mrudula: specified towards the end of the story.

Professor: elephant like Bhima, yeah yeah.

Mrudula: So, and again, you know, you can even extend this idea of him using his crowbar and that of the ()28:29.

Professor: Yes very good, very good.

Mrudula: So, I do not know why the author has, why author wanted us to think him, think this character in relation to the mythological Bhima. Maybe the two characters have this similar dilemma. They have to do something which they did not want to do, maybe, because in Mahabharata also he had to, he had to kill his own kith and kin.

Professor: Fantastic, yes, yes.

Mrudula: He was doing something which was against his conscience but he had to do it.

Professor: Yeah for that one, yeah.

Mrudula: So, so, that is similarity can be drawn.

Professor: Yeah. So, it is an interesting it is an interesting way to put it. Yes, that parallel between, you know, the Bhima from the Mahabharata is very consciously sketched in this Bhima from Maharashtra, from a village on the outskirts of Mumbai. It's very very very consciously sketched. Especially, the physical strength and his some, you know insistence of challenging people, society you know this kind of this battle-hardiness which comes through whatever he does, you know, making the hill flinch that immediately, you know, evokes in more images of Mahabharata's Bhima.

So, that is that is there and you might also have a point when you state that perhaps Bhima, he is he is forced to that kind of things which he would not do given the right circumstances. So, just you know gravely, robbing a cemeteries and attacking corpses is not something that he would do if he was reasonably comfortable, you know.

So, all these things there, but what my sense in in reading this parallel is this: the author is trying to kind of compare or make this Bhima and every man and every Indian man who's hardy, who is strong, who wants to work, who is eager for hard labor and who is very, you know very meticulous about providing for his family and all that.

So, all these attributes of every man, you know, is there in in Bhima from the Mahabharata and Bhima from this particular story from Maharashtra to represent the ordinary citizen who wants to do the right thing by his family. So, that is that is something perhaps the author wants to communicate, so he is he is taking this man from this particular region and turns him into an Indian figure in the story, who represents any man who wants to care for his family and that kind of ideas is brought to this kind of parallel epic, this scripture, yeah.

So, that is perhaps the reason as well, I think, for heavy metaphorical treatment given to that that battle scene with the jackal.

Mrudula: Yes.

Professor: Yes, yes, yes, yes, absolutely, absolutely. So, that it becomes a kind of a battlefield, the war front, where this man single-handedly is kind of fighting with the jackals with the ultimate goal of providing for his family. And it is very interesting that reference to dates comes up twice in the story, that is all he has in his mind, when he goes home he wants to, you know, get back dates for the child. And this you know, the fatherly concern for the child is something which is very moving and touching and profound as well, because we do get some real images in other stories as well for example, we're not doing that story for this course, but Tagore's Kabuliwala, where Mini gets dates from the Kabuliwala regularly because the father kind of ask him to come in and serve this.

And so, the dates becomes a symbol for affection itself, for love, warmth, you know, nurture and all these associated ideas. And unpack ideas again, you know, mentioned in this particular story, we can see the connections from this Maratha story to the Bengali story and to other stories I am sure where we can see a very moving image of the father providing for his offspring.

Yeah, so we are moving into the national scale, correct. So, we got to remember this, this story this course is titled Modern Indian Writing in Translations, so, while there are regional specificities, spatial, you know, peculiarities, culture peculiarities, we do get a larger Indian

identity, a larger Indian self in the making in all these stories, yeah. So, the commonality is something that we should recognize as well.

While I have jotted down in terms of that big scene, the extended scene between, the battle scene between the jackals and Bhima, is heavily metaphorical drawing or the primitive fight between the animals and the humans for food and survival. So, it is a very primitive idea as well, fight for survival, the fight for food and and that is something which we need to acknowledge

And there is this clash over gold and corpse, again that is a kind of universal fight, it is a fight for survival there.

Mrudula: Yes.

Professor: And there is another image, the image of the lanterns. Lanterns, people approaching with lanterns. When they hear the sound of the jackals, you know, which wake up the dogs and the dogs barking and the villagers getting up and come towards the cemetery with lanterns. And I was reminded of the other story The Blue Light, where we have that Lantern, the hurricane lamp.

So, again, all these recurring images of darkness with the contrasting image of light. And again that that kind of very evocative image is a signifier for the rural lives, the rural life with minimum comfort such as electricity and the (35:00) , yeah, so, that, that is a very interesting image.

There are all such references to the green scenario, the landscapes. At the beginning of the story we have references to green trees, a massive tamarind trees. So, we do get a you know, natural cover you know the green landscape is reference but we get so taken up with this kind of very gory, wild you know, scenes between Bhima and rough terrain and wild beast that we tend to forget all these you know spatial cues. I think we need to remember that this is also taking place in the “jungle”, quote unquote, it is metaphorically a jungle as well, physically there are a lot of greens, you know spaces, woods. So, it is jungle in double sense, because there is a battle for survival between the beasts and the human, for food, for money, for survival and at same time, it is literally a jungle with all these you know animals fighting with Bhima. And he also brings up the reference to moneylenders, moneylenders coming up, you know, once again telling us that money was hard to get, and people have to kind of borrow money from all these figures and we have an associate set of ideas about money lenders,

They're very hard, cruel, and stingy with money and these poor people are in reach for such moneylenders.

So, we know what kind of character moneylender is and when Bhima is trying to draw moneylender's corpse or the daughter of the moneylender, we was that there is a kind of big divide in terms of wealth and it is kind of you know it is quite apparent that (())(37:01)classes of people.

As I pointed out the moral of the story is also kind of highlighted through the way the narrator describes you know. So it becomes the story of greed, it becomes a story of excessive greed at the end of the day from the narrator's point of view. So, if Bhima had been in a (())(37:24), if Bhima had not desecrated the cemetery, things would have been different. So, that kind of message is kind of projected from the narrator's point of view.

Alright, thank you for your thoughts, and I hope you had a very productive time listening to the discussion.