

**“A RENDEZVOUS WITH THE BIOGRAPHER AND TRANSLATOR:
AN INTERVIEW OF MS. VEENA GAVANKAR.”**

Dr Jyoti S. Mundhe.

Associate Professor.

Kirti M. Doongursee College, Dadar, Mumbai,

India.

Abstract

This paper in the form of an interview revolves round the entire, though not a big volume, oeuvre of a well-known biographer in Marathi and also a translator. This interview is divided into two segments wherein a wide variety of questions were asked covering topics like the process of translation, problems of translation on a linguistic and cultural level, and her experience of the process of writing biographies. The aim of this interview is to explore the process of writing a biography and the difficulties in translation. It also highlights the author's rationale behind the selection of the personalities and the research done while collection of authentic data before writing their biographies. The interview throws light on the process of creativity, the demands of the biographies as a form and how reader's reactions have prompted her at this ripe age to continue writing. Thus, this interview will certainly inspire the readers not only to read her books but also to write.

Key words: Veena Gavankar, biographies, process of translation, inspiration

A RENDEZVOUS WITH THE BIOGRAPHER AND TRANSLATOR: AN INTERVIEW OF MS. VEENA GAVANKAR

- Dr Jyoti S. Mundhe

Introduction:

Ms. Veena Gavankar is a Vasai-based established biographer and an acclaimed translator. She became a favourite writer with the success of her debut book *Ek Hota Carver* in Marathi which is a biography of American agricultural scientist and inventor, George Washington Carver who being a slave and an orphan had to struggle against all odds; but eventually worked his way up to become a renowned agronomist and an educationist with a progressive vision. What is remarkable is his commitment and sincere endeavor to uplift his black brethren and the larger humanity. Other biographies include *Dr. Khankohje*, *Rosalind Franklin*, *Lise Mitner*, *Bhagirathache Varas-Vilas Salunkhe*, *Dr. Ida Scudder*, *Sarptadnya Dr. Remond Ditmar*, to quote a few and the most recent, *Avagha Dehachi Vruksh Jhahala - Richard Baker* published in 2022. She has a translated book, *Intimate Death*, to her credit. She is known for her diction and style that appeals to readers from academia and non-academia as well. Her writing is well-received amongst lay readers and critics alike. She has numerous awards to her credit such as the State Government's Award of Marathi Vangmay Nirmitti (3 times), *Dhananjay Keer Award - Kokan Marathi Sahitya Parishad*, *V. H Kulkarni Award of Mumbai Granthsangrahalay*, *Ghanashyamdas Saraf Sahitya Award*, *Varti Sir Award*, *Kamalabai Ogale Award of Mehta Publishing House*, *Shivaji Sawant Smruti Award*, *Shantabai Shelke Award (2019) for Biography writing* and the recent one awarded by *Maharashtra Garanthottejak Sanstha*, September, 2023. Her accolades include the presidentship of *Kokan Marathi Sahitya Parishad's Mahila Sammelan-2008* and the presidentship of the first *Environment Literary Conference, Jalgaon-2018*. Some of her books have been translated into Gujarati and Hindi, Tamil. She loves to research and write about personalities who have shown active social commitment toward greater humanitarian causes.

The interviewer: According to me, everyone can enjoy literature, but only gifted people can create, critique, and translate! You possess all these abilities and I feel extremely privileged to interact with such a great personality who is an established and celebrated biographer in Marathi and also a translator. Here we begin by asking you about your

experiences, purpose, process, selection of writing biographies and also the process of translation, and problems that translators face while translating a text. Welcome, Madam!

Madam, all the biographies you have written are genuinely inspirational. Your debut biography of a black US scientist George Washington Carver. But I would like to know from you what was your inspiration behind writing and did you imagine that your book will remain relevant even after forty years with the 46th reprint of the book? Also, share with us some of the remarkable reactions and compliments.

Veena Gavankar: Well, all these things are beyond my imagination because I never decided to write a biography. As a child, I was a voracious reader and when I became a librarian my hobby was fed further. But interestingly, I started writing the stories in a simplified version for my kids as bedtime stories. While narrating Dr. Carver's life story, I began to jot down the details in my notebook for the benefit of my children. After improvisation of the same, it came out as *Ek Hota Carver*, a biography of American agriculturist George Washington Carver, published in 1979 by Rajhans publication. I get inspired by the courage and fortitude of the personality and I write so that people, especially young minds get to know them and be inspired. To speak about the reader's comments and compliments, I would like to quote a few. Recently, to mark the 75 years of Indo-USA ties, the international Black university at Hovard took note of this book as a bond between two countries along with Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. In this regard, I am also elated to know that two of the scientists today are inspired by this book, one of them is a Head of the Department of Kansas University, and another is the chief of the G. W. Carver Center at NASA. Another response came from a math professor Pathak, who was comatose. When she came out of it, she was unable to speak, her doctor asked her a few questions to test her recovery. When asked about her favourite book she wrote the name of *Ek Hota Carver* and the author Veena Gavankar. This is the most precious award that I have received ever.

The interviewer: Well, now please throw some light on the selection of personalities and the process of writing a biography.

Veena Gavankar: Well, let me make it very clear that I don't do commissioned work. Very often I am approached to write about a specific personality but I decline. I write only when I feel like writing about that great soul. Because I don't decide and write. Being an avid reader and librarian, wherever I go, I hunt for the library and spend time reading. I like to write about such a person who has done some extraordinary work in any field selflessly which proved to be for the betterment of humanity at large. I also select the personalities who have suffered due to lack of infrastructure and equipment and still egged on without caring for personal gains like Dr P. S. Khankhoje yet remained unknown to the people of his own country. I started reading and collecting information in 1992 only to complete it in 1998. It is because there was no information on Google about Dr. Khankhoje. Since he was the founder member of the Gadar party, I went to a library at Calcutta University with very few references and finally could collect information from the life sketches of his contemporaries and the archives shared by the Mexican embassy. These personalities manifest that one must use deprivation as a challenge and go ahead only then does something precious come out. Look at, Ramond Lee Ditmars, as a child he was fascinated by all animals and reptiles and eventually became regarded as a renowned herpetologist. Hence, children should never ignore their hobbies. Who knows, your passion can take you to the skies.

The interviewer: Amongst 12 biographies penned by you, 6 are environmentalists – Carver, Ditmars, Saalim Ali, Khankhoje, Vilasrao Salunkhe and Baker. While Ida Scudder, L. Meitner, R. Franklin, Golda and Montessori are women. What is your take on this selection?

Veena Gavankar: If you glance over the first half of the 20th century, one notices that it is the period of nuclear physics of which Lise Meitner is the pioneer and around 1940-50 is the age of biology with landmark research in biology on DNA where major contributor is also a woman, Rosalind Fraklin. Interestingly enough, both these women were deprived of their due credit rather it was hijacked by their patriarchal counterparts. Then why shouldn't it come to the light? They denied the environment of growth they deserve. The social environment has to be conducive to the growth and development of every species lest they extinct. These two scientists continued their work despite hostile circumstances. Though late, Madame Marie Curie was awarded. But these scientists were kept in the dark. There is no book on these two contributors who had dedicated

their entire lives to the mission at hand. Giving a voice to the voiceless is nothing but a step towards the empowerment of women. There is a dearth of such real heroes or heroines in every genre it be novels, dramas or even films. Talking about the first part of your question I would like to state that these select environmentalists are not working for the preservation of Nature but the human being in this environment e.g., Ditmars created awareness of animals in masses, and Kahnkhoje's experiments helped people prosper changing their lives for the better. It is not only water management but the idea of "Equitable Distribution of Water, water as air own owes to society is the novel thought given by Dr Vilas Salunkhe. In short, elevating human sensibilities and sensitivities not only towards the environment but towards each other makes these environmentalists stand out.

The interviewer: Madam, your magnum opus, *Ek Hota Carver* is translated into many languages and you are also a translator, so please tell us about the process of translation.

Veena Gavankar: Well, translation is a process, and what you get as a final product has already gone through many drafts. For this, the translator should be proficient in both languages. When Carver was to be translated into Tamil, the translator first translated it into English and then in Tamil. English worked as a mediator. This process is time-consuming and the translator needs to have patience. S/He has to love that work of art and only then one can enjoy the process. The target reader has to be kept in mind. The translator has to study/research and understand the TL's intricacies and subtleties of meaning. For instance, in America, the parliament is called Congress and, in our country, it is a political party. When I was translating Nadine Gordimer's (a Nobel Laureate) short stories, I had to understand the difference between American Blacks, African Blacks, apartheid, etc. Therefore, translation is said to be a process of metamorphosis.

The interviewer: On a linguistic level what precautions need to be taken in terms of a process of translation?

Veena Gavankar: The translator's role is very crucial here. As a creative writer, a translator also should not be an armchair translator. He should be aware of the pulse of the society; and should be well aware of the references, to understand the shades of the meaning of words, phrases, and idioms he should be conversant with the target language's

culture. When I translate, I adjust the sequence of sentences, if the sentence is too long, I take the liberty to break it yet I remain faithful to the original text. Your “Youness” has to be set aside.

The interviewer: Marie de Hennezel is a gifted psychologist working for the terminally ill in a hospital in Paris. The patients who come there do not always know that they are dying. The author aims to bring them and their loved ones – to this knowledge and then to encourage them to live each day as fully and serenely as possible. Madam, please enlighten us on your experience of translating “*Intimate Death*” and opine on various problems of translation?

Veena Gavankar: I selected this book titled “*Intimate Death*” because I found it conversant with my style of writing. I translated it because it gave a new insight, a novel approach to looking at death, the only inevitable fact of life. Problems of translation are on two levels: Linguistic and Cultural. The more you are proficient, master, versed, expert, word-wizard, a virtuoso in your linguistic abilities the more near-perfect your translation is going to be. Moreover, language is deeply rooted in culture hence transferring the exact meaning to the target language/culture is a herculean task. Hence, if the translator is well-informed of the Source language and the culture, the translation would be beautiful and faithful.

The interviewer: Can you shed some light on the responsibilities of the translator?

Veena Gavankar: To quote eminent writer Durga Bhagwat: “Translation is like a lens through which the translator sees the source text. This lens can be clear, colored, or fragmented.” The translator should be impartial. His perspective should not be reflected in the translation. It’s a sort of new creation. So, it is a transcreation. Thus, it is not a secondary act. Unless the translator is dedicated it will not be a new creation.

The interviewer: Madam, you are not only a prolific biographer but also a translator. What is advice to the writers to be?

Veena Gavankar: Extensive reading is the only remedy. I was a voracious reader as a student. I loved books. When I graduated, I became a librarian and the ocean of books was

available to me. It was like a treasure unfolded to me. My comprehension and my understanding of writing, all came from my reading. If you mix with people, observe them, try to understand human nature in real life, and through your reading of literary and non-literary texts, you can be a writer. Of course, I select very meticulously the biographies I write. I selected only those personalities who were genuine, useful to humanity, and who impressed me too. Ultimately, it's the experience that is THE teacher in any field you choose to tread.

The interviewer: Thank you very much, madam.

Work Cited:

- Gavankar, Veena. Ek Hota Carver. Pune: Rajhans, 1981. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Ida Scudder. Pune: Rajhans, 1984. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Sarptadnya, Remond Ditmars. Pune: Rajhans, 1987. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Saalim Ali, Pune: Rajhans, 1990. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Dr. Khankhoje. Pune: Rajhans, 1997. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Lise Meitner. Pune: Rajhans, 2003. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Bhagirathache Varas: Dr Vilas Salunkhe. Pune: Rajhans, 2005. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Rosalind Fraklin. Pune: Rajhans, 2009. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Intimate Death. Pune: Rajhans, 2013. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Roby Disilva. Pune: Rajhans, 2016. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Golda, Ek Ashant Vadal. Pune: Rajhans, 2019. Print
- Gavankar, Veena. Awagha Deh Vrukshachi Jhahala. Richard Baker. Pune: Rajhans, 2022. Print
