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Carrying Across the Coast: Cultural Translation and Untranslatability in Sara Aboobacker's Breaking Ties

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Abstract

Sara Aboobacker's Kannada novel Chandragiriya Teeradalli (1981), rendered into English by Vanamala Viswanatha as Breaking Ties (2001), reaches its anglophone readers only after passing through at least two acts of cultural translation: the novel's own original work of making the specific social world of the Beary Muslim community of the Dakshina Kannada-Kasaragod coast legible within Kannada literary culture, and the subsequent work of Viswanatha's English translation in carrying that already-particular world across a further linguistic threshold. This essay argues that the translator's visible choices — what is retained in its source-language form, what is glossed, and what is smoothed into more generic English phrasing, beginning with the title change itself from a place-name to an abstract thematic phrase — are not incidental to the novel's feminist critique of triple talaq and patriarchal authority but constitute a form of cultural argument in their own right, determining how much of the Beary community's regional specificity survives translation versus how readily the novel is absorbed into a generic, homogenizing narrative of "Muslim women's oppression." Reading Breaking Ties against Susan Bassnett's and Lawrence Venuti's translation theory, and against the documented case of the novel's contested Malayalam translation, this essay traces the risks and responsibilities of English as the primary route through which regional-language Indian feminist fiction reaches a wider readership.

Keywords: cultural translation, Sara Aboobacker, Breaking Ties, domestication and foreignization, Beary Muslim community, regional feminist fiction, translation studies

Introduction

The English title under which most readers now encounter Sara Aboobacker's first novel, *Breaking Ties*, names an abstraction: a severed relationship, a woman's rupture from family or husband. The Kannada original, *Chandragiriya Teeradalli*, names a place: the banks of the Chandragiri, the river that marks the boundary of the Kasaragod region where the Beary Muslim community — a community distinct in language, custom, and history from the North Indian Muslim communities more familiar to readers of English-language Indian fiction — has lived for generations. That the novel's very title changes register, in its passage from Kannada to English, from a geography to a theme is the first and most visible sign of the translation choices this essay sets out to examine. [INSERT: if your edition's translator's note explains this title change explicitly in Viswanatha's own words, quote the relevant phrase here, under fifteen words, with page citation.]

Aboobacker, who died in 2023 at the age of eighty-six, was among the first women of her Beary Muslim community in the Kasaragod-Dakshina Kannada coastal belt to receive a matriculation education, and she turned that hard-won literacy toward a body of fiction that returned, novel after novel, to the specific customs, religious authority structures, and gendered constraints of the community she knew from the inside. *Chandragiriya Teeradalli*, first serialized in the Kannada literary magazine *Lankesh Patrike* in 1981, tells the story of Nadira, a young Beary woman whose life is shaped first by an autocratic father and then by a husband from whom she is separated by a pronouncement of *talaq*; the second half of the published text pairs this fictional narrative with an autobiographical account, in Aboobacker's own voice, of what it required for a Muslim girl of her generation and community simply to attend school. Vanamala Viswanatha, a translator and translation-studies scholar who has worked extensively across Kannada and English and who later served as Honorary Director of the Centre for Translation at the Sahitya Akademi in Bengaluru, translated and introduced the novel as *Breaking Ties*, published by Macmillan India in 2001.

This essay argues that reading *Breaking Ties* as a translated text is not incidental to its feminist critique of triple *talaq* and patriarchal control but constitutes an additional, entangled layer of that critique's own transmission. The translator's choices about what to retain in its original linguistic form, what to gloss, and what to render into more generalized English phrasing determine how much of the Beary community's specific social world survives the crossing into English, and how much is smoothed into a more generically legible narrative of "Indian Muslim women's oppression" that risks flattening the very regional particularity on which Aboobacker's original critique depends. This argument matters beyond the specific case of one novel because *Breaking Ties* belongs to a much larger and still growing body of regional-language Indian fiction whose primary route to a national and international readership runs through a single English translation, frequently undertaken by a single translator working with limited institutional support and no guarantee that a second, competing translation will ever appear to test or correct the first. In such a landscape, the translator's individual choices about specificity and legibility carry a weight that translation of a more widely retranslated canonical text, available in multiple competing English versions, would not place on any single translator's shoulders alone. The discussion that follows situates this argument within translation studies' theorization of cultural translation, considers the novel's own prior work of translating Beary specificity into wider Kannada literary culture, offers close readings of what the English translation preserves and what it smooths, and concludes with a comparison to the novel's own contested Malayalam translation history as direct, documented evidence of how differently a single regional text can travel across different linguistic destinations.

Theorizing Cultural Translation

Translation studies since at least the 1980s has insisted that translation is never a purely linguistic operation, a matter of finding equivalent words across two otherwise stable systems, but is always also a cultural operation, carrying with it decisions about which aspects of a source culture's social world will be rendered legible to a target-language readership and which will be lost, simplified, or exoticized in the process. Susan Bassnett's foundational account of this "cultural turn" in translation studies insists that a translator works not simply between languages but between two entire systems of reference, in which a term's meaning depends on a web of social practice that rarely maps neatly onto the target culture's own vocabulary.

Lawrence Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignization gives this general insight a more precise analytical vocabulary. A domesticating translation smooths the source text into the target language's own familiar stylistic and cultural norms, minimizing the reader's encounter with linguistic or cultural difference and producing a text that reads as though it might have been written originally in the target language; a foreignizing translation, by contrast, deliberately retains visible traces of the source text's linguistic and cultural otherness — untranslated terms, unfamiliar syntax, culturally specific references left unglossed or lightly glossed — at some cost to the ease with which the target-language reader can consume the text. Venuti's own preference, developed partly as a corrective to what he identifies as English-language publishing's long-standing tendency toward domestication, favours foreignizing strategies precisely because they preserve the reader's awareness that a translation is a translation, carrying an other culture's difference across rather than erasing it into invisibility.

Postcolonial translation theory adds a further, more explicitly political caution to this framework: translation from a regional or "minor" language into English, the dominant global literary language, is never a neutral technical transfer between equals. It inevitably involves decisions, made by a translator working within English-language publishing's own market expectations, about which aspects of a minority culture will be rendered legible and consumable for a metropolitan or global readership and which will be lost, softened, or converted into an exoticized marker of cultural authenticity rather than a genuinely understood social practice. Because English functions, in the contemporary Indian literary field, as the language through which regional-language writing most often reaches a national and international audience, the translator's choices in precisely this direction — regional language into English — carry unusually high stakes for how an entire community's specific social world will be received.

Breaking Ties is a particularly instructive test case for this framework because it is already, in its original Kannada, a text about a specific, doubly minoritized community: Muslim within a Hindu-majority Karnataka, and Beary — with its own distinct dialect, migration history, and coastal customs — within the broader category of South Asian Muslim communities more commonly represented in English-language Indian fiction through North Indian, Urdu-inflected settings. A translation of this text into English is therefore not simply carrying "an Indian Muslim woman's story" across a linguistic threshold; it is carrying a specific regional and communal configuration of that story, one whose particularity is precisely what Aboobacker's original Kannada readers would have recognized as distinct from the North Indian Muslim milieu more familiar to them from other literary sources. The translator's choices about specificity versus legibility are consequently unusually consequential here: to smooth Beary specificity into a more generic "Muslim woman's oppression" narrative would risk erasing exactly the regional particularity that gave Aboobacker's original social critique its force and its accuracy.

Venuti's broader argument about the "translator's invisibility" supplies a further, complementary lens for this essay's approach. Venuti observes that English-language publishing has historically preferred translations that read fluently, as though no act of translation had occurred at all, a preference that tends to reward domesticating strategies and to erase the translator's own interpretive presence from the reader's experience of the text. A translator who is visible — through an included introduction, a signed translator's

note, explicit discussion of specific translation choices — works against this tendency, inviting the reader to register translation itself as an interpretive act rather than a transparent conduit. Viswanatha's own visibility in the published edition of *Breaking Ties*, as a named translator who also authored the volume's introduction, is therefore significant in its own right: it signals, at the level of the book's basic paratextual structure, an intention to resist the fully domesticating, self-effacing model of translation Venuti critiques, even before one examines the specific content of her introduction or her lexical choices within the narrative itself.

Aboobacker, the Beary Community, and the Novel's Own Prior Act of Translation

Before any question of English translation arises, Chandragiriya Teeradalli was already performing a form of cultural translation within Kannada itself. Aboobacker wrote from and about a community whose customs, religious authority structures, and even domestic vocabulary would not have been transparently familiar to the broader Kannada-reading public beyond the Dakshina Kannada-Kasaragod coastal belt; her fiction's realist, unembellished style, which she herself described as prioritizing the expression of social concern over stylistic ornament, functioned in part as a vehicle for making this specific community's constraints on women — its particular application of talaq, its particular structures of paternal and marital authority — visible and legible to Kannada readers who might otherwise have encountered Muslim women's lives only through more generalized or North Indian-inflected representations.

This means that the novel arriving in Viswanatha's hands for English translation was not a text expressing some generic, pre-existing "Indian" or "Muslim" social reality in transparent form; it was already a specific act of cultural mediation, one community's internal critique rendered legible to a wider but still regionally specific Kannada readership. The English translation therefore performs what this essay calls a double translation: it translates not a raw, unmediated cultural reality but an already-mediated literary rendering of that reality, carrying across not only the Beary community's customs but also Aboobacker's own particular choices about which of those customs to foreground, dramatize, or explain for a readership already one step removed from the community itself. Any account of what *Breaking Ties* preserves or loses in English must therefore reckon with this prior layer of mediation: some of what looks, from an English-language vantage point, like the "raw" specificity of Beary custom is already the product of Aboobacker's own authorial selection and explanatory framing for a Kannada audience, and the translator inherits, and must make further decisions about, an object that was never simply transparent ethnographic reality in the first place.

Aboobacker's own stated preference for a direct, unornamented realist style, prioritizing the clear expression of social concern over stylistic embellishment, is itself relevant to how this prior act of translation was originally accomplished and to what the English translation subsequently had available to work with. A more stylistically elaborate or symbolically dense original text might have embedded its cultural specificity in ways resistant to straightforward carrying-across, requiring an English translator to make extensive compensatory interpretive choices; Aboobacker's realist clarity, by contrast, tends to state the mechanisms of patriarchal and religious authority directly, in scenes of dialogue and direct social consequence rather than through dense symbolic mediation, which arguably makes the novel's central social critique more portable across the second, English-language threshold than a more heavily stylized regional text might have been. This is not to suggest that realist clarity makes translation simple or its choices any less consequential — the analysis that follows will show precisely how much interpretive weight still falls on specific lexical choices even within a plainly stated realist narrative — but it does suggest that the novel's original stylistic choices were themselves already shaped, in part, by Aboobacker's own evident concern that her critique reach and be understood by readers outside her immediate community, a concern the English translation inherits and extends one step further.

The novel's own internal doubling — its pairing of Nadira's fictional narrative with Aboobacker's autobiographical account of her own path to literacy — is itself a further instance of this prior translation work. By placing a fictional case study of patriarchal constraint alongside a first-person testimonial account of the same community's restrictions on female education, Aboobacker builds into the original text its own internal argument that Nadira's story is representative rather than exceptional, a rhetorical strategy that itself performs a kind of internal cultural translation, instructing the Kannada reader on how to receive the fictional material as social documentary rather than as an isolated, atypical case. [INSERT: if your edition preserves this dual structure with distinguishable narrative voices or formatting, note here how the transition between the fictional and autobiographical sections is handled — is it marked by a formal shift in style, address, or paratextual heading? — since this handling itself becomes a further translation decision for the English text to reproduce or flatten.]

What the Translation Keeps: Retained Terms and Foreignizing Choices

The clearest and most consequential foreignizing choice in Viswanatha's translation is one that occurs before the reader reaches a single sentence of the narrative proper: the retention, within the novel's plot if not its title, of the specific vocabulary of Islamic marital law governing Nadira's fate. Terms such as talaq and the practice of nikah halala — by which a woman divorced by triple talaq must, under one interpretation of religious law the novel explicitly critiques, marry and be divorced by a second husband before she may lawfully remarry her first — are retained in their source-language form rather than converted into approximate English equivalents such as "divorce" or "remarriage requirement." This is a significant foreignizing choice in Venuti's sense: an English equivalent would smooth the term into the target language's own familiar legal vocabulary, implying a rough parity between, say, "divorce" in a Western secular legal sense and talaq's specific religious-legal procedure and consequence, whereas retaining the source term insists that the reader confront a specific religious-legal mechanism that has no precise English equivalent and must be understood, if at all, on something closer to its own terms.

This retention places real interpretive labour on the English-language reader, and it is worth asking directly what that labour accomplishes. On one reading, consistent with Venuti's own preference for foreignization, the retained terms signal respect for the specificity of the practice being critiqued: by refusing to translate talaq or nikah halala into softer, more familiar English approximations, the translation insists that readers reckon with the actual religious-legal mechanism Aboobacker's novel is protesting, rather than allowing the more comfortable English vocabulary of "divorce" to obscure the particular cruelty of a woman being required to marry a stranger and be divorced by him before she may return to the husband she wishes to remarry. On a more skeptical reading, however, such retained terms risk a different effect when they arrive without sufficient contextual scaffolding: a reader unfamiliar with Islamic marital jurisprudence may register talaq and nikah halala primarily as markers of cultural and religious difference, evidence that this is a story about an exotic or unfamiliar legal world, without fully grasping the specific mechanics of the injustice at stake. Which of these two effects predominates in a given reading depends heavily on how much explanatory scaffolding the translation supplies elsewhere — through introduction, footnote, glossary, or contextualizing narrative exposition — and this is precisely where Viswanatha's own paratextual apparatus becomes the essay's most important primary evidence.

A further foreignizing choice worth close attention is the title itself, considered now not simply as an isolated marketing decision but as a substantive interpretive act. Chandragiriya Teeradalli names a specific river and a specific stretch of coastline; *Breaking Ties* names a universal condition of rupture that could describe innumerable stories set in innumerable places. In one sense, this title change performs the opposite of foreignization: rather than retaining the place-specific original title and asking the English reader to learn what the Chandragiri river signifies, the translation replaces geographic specificity with thematic universality, a domesticating move that trades a distinctive marker of place for an abstraction more immediately legible to an English-language audience unfamiliar with the Kasaragod coast. That this single most prominent paratextual choice in the entire English text domesticates precisely where the body of the translation elsewhere foreignizes — retaining *talaq* and *nikah halala* while abandoning Chandragiri — suggests that Viswanatha's translation does not pursue a single, consistent strategy of either domestication or foreignization throughout, but calibrates its choices differently depending on whether the material at stake is religious-legal vocabulary, which the translation treats as requiring preservation, or geographic and communal specificity, which the title's own translation history suggests was judged less essential to protect at the threshold where a prospective English-language reader first encounters the book.

What the Translation Smooths: Domestication and the Risk of Generic Legibility

If the retained legal vocabulary of *talaq* and *nikah halala* constitutes the translation's clearest foreignizing gesture, the title's shift from river-place to abstract theme is not an isolated instance of domestication but a signal of a broader risk running throughout the text's English-language circulation: that *Breaking Ties*, once in English, becomes available to be read as a representative account of "Muslim women's oppression" in a generalized, homogenizing sense, rather than as Aboobacker's specific, community-internal critique of Beary custom and its particular interpretation of religious authority. This risk does not depend solely, or even primarily, on identifiable domesticating choices at the sentence level; it depends on the wider circulation context into which an English translation necessarily enters, a context in which an anglophone readership, and particularly a readership encountering South Asian Muslim women's lives primarily through a handful of English-language texts, may have few other reference points against which to register Nadira's story as specifically Beary and coastal Karnatakan rather than as a stand-in for South Asian Muslim womanhood in general.

The novel's own internal doubling — Nadira's fiction paired with Aboobacker's autobiography — is especially vulnerable to this generalizing risk in translation, because the very rhetorical move that, within the original Kannada context, situated Nadira's story as representative of one specific community's constraints can, once the text circulates in English divorced from that specific Kannada literary and regional context, be reread as representative of Muslim women's constraints tout court, the Beary specificity quietly dropping out of a foreign reader's frame of reference even where the translation itself has not altered a single word of the relevant passages. This is, in other words, a risk that operates partly independently of the translator's own choices, a function of the asymmetry between a source culture in which a text's regional specificity is legible by default and a target culture in which that same specificity requires active, sustained contextual work — through introduction, footnote, or surrounding critical apparatus — to remain visible at all.

This tension mirrors a broader and long-running debate in postcolonial literary reception: the concern that English-language circulation of a specific, regional social critique risks being absorbed into external, often reductive narratives about "Muslim women" as a monolithic category requiring external rescue or reform, narratives that a text like Aboobacker's, read correctly in its own specific terms, is actually working to complicate rather than confirm. Aboobacker's critique, after all, is explicitly an internal one — a woman writing from within the Beary community about a particular, contested interpretation of that community's own religious authority, arguing for reform from within rather than supplying ammunition for an external, generalized indictment of Islam or of Muslim communities as such. The risk of domesticating circulation is precisely that this internal, reformist specificity can be lost on readers who encounter the English text as evidence for a broader, externally authored narrative the novel itself was never trying to tell.

A Documented Comparative Case: The Novel's Contested Malayalam Translation

Unusually for a case study in translation risk, *Breaking Ties*'s own translation history supplies direct documentary evidence of how differently the same source text can be handled across different target languages, evidence considerably more concrete than the comparative theoretical framing this kind of argument often has to rely on. Reporting published around the time of Aboobacker's death in 2023 revealed a long-standing controversy surrounding an earlier Malayalam translation of the novel: family members and literary figures close to the case have alleged that the plot of the Malayalam version was altered, likely by an editorial board rather than by the credited translator himself, in ways that softened or changed the novel's original protest against particular interpretations of Islamic authority. By contrast, the same reporting explicitly credits Viswanatha's English translation with having "stayed true to the original work," a judgment offered by a literary figure with direct knowledge of the dispute over the Malayalam edition.

This documented contrast supplies a genuinely rare piece of concrete evidence for a claim that translation theory more often has to argue in the abstract: that the choice of translator, and the institutional and editorial context surrounding a given translation, can produce meaningfully different versions of the same source text's political and cultural argument, independent of the two languages' own inherent capacities for equivalence or distortion. Where this essay's earlier sections have argued that even a careful, professionally credentialed translation such as Viswanatha's involves inevitable, structurally embedded trade-offs between foreignization and domestication, the Malayalam case shows a starker possibility still: that editorial intervention in a translation's production can alter a text's substantive political content altogether, not merely its degree of cultural specificity.

It is worth being precise about what the Malayalam case does and does not demonstrate for this essay's argument. It does not show that Malayalam as a language is somehow less capable than English of rendering Aboobacker's critique; the reported alteration is attributed not to any inherent linguistic limitation but to editorial intervention within the specific magazine context in which the Malayalam version was serialized, a context evidently subject to pressures — whether commercial, communal, or political — that led an editorial board to soften or alter the plot's confrontation with particular interpretations of religious authority. What the case does demonstrate, with a clarity theoretical argument alone cannot supply, is that the abstract risks this essay has attributed to translation in general — the risk of domestication, the risk of a text's political specificity being smoothed for a given readership's presumed comfort — are not merely hypothetical dangers inherent to the act of translation as such, but concrete outcomes that have, in this novel's own documented history, actually occurred in one of its translated versions while apparently having been successfully resisted in another. This gives the essay's broader theoretical claims about Viswanatha's English translation a comparative anchor: her translation's fidelity

to Aboobacker's original critique is not simply this essay's own inference from close reading, but a judgment independently corroborated by literary figures with direct knowledge of how differently the same novel's translation history could have unfolded.

Read alongside Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's own extensively documented reflections on the ethics and politics of translating Mahasweta Devi's Bengali fiction into English — reflections in which Spivak insists that translation of a politically engaged regional text demands the translator's deep, situated knowledge of the source language's rhetorical and political texture rather than mere linguistic competence — Viswanatha's own credentials as a translation-studies scholar working specifically across Kannada and English, rather than as a general-purpose literary translator, appear as a significant, if not sufficient, safeguard against the kind of substantive distortion the Malayalam case documents. Spivak's own practice as a translator who has written as extensively about her translation choices as about the source texts themselves offers a model of exactly the visible, self-reflexive translatorial presence this essay has argued Viswanatha's introduction and paratextual apparatus also supply, even if in a less extensively theorized form than Spivak's own published reflections. The comparison suggests that translator visibility and translator expertise, rather than any inherent property of the English language itself, are what most reliably protect a regional feminist text's specific political argument as it crosses into wider circulation — a conclusion the Malayalam case's documented failure of exactly this protection makes considerably harder to dismiss as merely theoretical.

Conclusion

Breaking Ties reaches its English-language readers only after two acts of cultural translation: Aboobacker's own original mediation of Beary Muslim custom for a wider Kannada readership, and Viswanatha's subsequent English rendering of that already-mediated text for an anglophone audience with even less immediate access to the specific social world the novel describes. This essay has argued that the visible choices made at this second threshold — the retention of talaq and nikah halala in their source-language form against the domestication of the novel's own place-specific title, the risk that the text's internal argument for representativeness collapses into an external, generalizing narrative of Muslim women's oppression once removed from its original Kannada context — are not incidental to the novel's feminist critique but constitute an additional, consequential layer of that critique's transmission.

The documented contrast between the novel's English and Malayalam translation histories confirms, with unusual concreteness, that this transmission is neither automatic nor guaranteed: the same source text can arrive at strikingly different destinations depending on who translates it, under what institutional conditions, and with what degree of situated commitment to the source community's own specific terms. This should give pause to any reading practice, scholarly or otherwise, that treats an English translation as simply transparent access to a regional-language original, as though the specific translator's identity, training, and institutional position were incidental details rather than substantive factors shaping what the reader ultimately receives. A responsible criticism of translated regional feminist fiction, this essay suggests, must therefore treat the translator as a fourth, largely invisible character in the text's cast — one whose choices about foreignization and domestication are as available for interpretive scrutiny as any other author's stylistic decisions, and whose absence from most readers' critical attention is itself a symptom of exactly the domesticating tendency Venuti identifies as English-language publishing's long-standing preference.

What Breaking Ties ultimately suggests, for the wider study of regional-language Indian feminist fiction in English translation, is that the responsibility for preserving a text's specific, communal argument against the flattening pressures of generic legibility falls substantially on the translator's own visible choices, choices that deserve the same close critical attention this essay has tried to model rather than the

invisibility that translation, in Venuti's own memorable phrase, so often aspires to and so rarely deserves. Future work might extend this reading through direct comparison of the English and Malayalam texts side by side, or through further research into Viswanatha's own stated translation philosophy across her wider body of work translating Kannada social-realist fiction into English, including her subsequent translations of Lankesh's short fiction and Gulvadi Venkata Rao's foundational Kannada social novel, both of which raise closely related questions about carrying a specific regional social critique across the threshold into English.

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