International Journal of Language, Literature and Culture (IJLLC)
ISSN: 2582-9823
Vol-6, Issue-1, Jan-Feb 2026
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijllc
Article CrossRef DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijllc.6.1.6
Peer-Reviewed Journal

Off the Beaten Track: Power and Language in a Generational Act of Feminist Storytelling

Dr. Sunitha Srinivas C

Professor of English, Govt College Mokeri, Kerala, India

Article Info

Received: 27 Jan 2026,

Received in revised form: 24 Feb 2026,

Accepted: 26 Feb 2026,

Available online: 28 Feb 2026

Keywords— ***Storytelling, Translation, Autobiography***

Abstract

In a textual ecology, the translator occupies a marginal position, remaining invisible or obscured, articulating only via the voice of another. Translation serves as a vantage point for critiquing prevailing paradigms, including national and gender-based oppressions. A memoir pertains to memory; it encompasses an individual's cohesive, personal, and subjective recollections. The intersection of life writing and translation initiates numerous options for exploration. The assumption of textual unity and the myriad subjective interpretations involved in the text's creation, translation, reception, and our ways of presuming and critiquing positions are all called into question. Translation entails a simple and formal transposition of content from one signifying system to another. The specific terminology, language framework, and semantic fields are intended to transition from one system of signification to another, establishing a new association. This paper seeks to comprehend and examine how Saeeda Bano's Urdu memoir Dagar Se Hat Kar (English as Off the Beaten Track) traverses linguistic, cultural, and political hierarchies. Her memoir's English version gains deeper resonance when read alongside her aural defiance, for Bano's radio work proves that translation isn't just textual—it's embodied, sonic, and infrastructural. A multi-modal comprehension of translation—incorporating text, voice, presence, and cultural systems—offers a thorough framework for assessing how her memoir traverses the diverse hierarchies involved.

Autobiographical works concentrate on particular facets, experiences, or epochs of the author's life, addressing real-world events—occasionally traumatic or politically significant—rather than offering a holistic narrative of their life. They frequently include personal, historical, or cultural allusions that may necessitate meticulous adaptation for a different audience. In translating such a work, the translator maintains the author's distinct voice, tone, and narrative style. They maintain authenticity to the source content while ensuring readability in the target language. Certain translations incorporate explanatory notes to elucidate context unfamiliar to the new audience. Culturally unique language, emotional authenticity, and references to events requiring further clarification for foreign readers provide challenges for the translator.

The Memoir and its Cultural Context

Off the Beaten Track: The Story of My Unconventional Life is the English rendition of Saeeda Bano's Urdu memoir *Dagar Se Hat Kar* (1994), translated by her granddaughter Shahana Raza (from Urdu to English published by Penguin Random House India and Zubaan Publishers). *Off the Beaten Track* is a compelling narrative of Saeeda Bano's life as India's pioneer female radio newsreader ('doyenne of Urdu broadcasting') and her resistance to societal conventions in mid-20th-century India. Saeeda Bano is recognised for transcending gender barriers in media. *Off the Beaten Track* honestly examines her challenges and successes, from fleeing a suffocating marriage to navigating love, Partition, and professional recognition. The English version, translated by Shahana Raza, maintains the lyrical tone and cultural nuances of the original Urdu through a harmonious blend of poetic idioms and succinct writing. The translation preserves the candour and emotional authenticity while rendering the narrative accessible to broader audiences. In addition to narrating the brief loss of her son in a refugee camp during Partition and the anti-Muslim animosity she encountered, the memoir emphasises her defiance of *purdah*, her job in radio, and her association with Delhi's mayor, Nuruddin Ahmed. The biography presents her wealthy yet progressive background in Bhopal, a region governed by women, where she observed early feminist reforms. Bano's upbringing in Bhopal, a matriarchal environment, fostered her autonomy. She vividly delineates the gap between its liberal culture and the conservatism of Lucknow. The narrative offers historical perspective through a first-hand description of the Partition, early feminism, and the growth of radio journalism in India. Simultaneously reflecting the major socio-political and cultural atmosphere of pre and post Independent India, the book vividly captures the author's life. In her write up "Why I Translated this Book" Raza clarifies the motives behind translating the book, which proved to be a herculean task. Translating the book was necessary since the story is full of events reflecting the ethnic culture and ethos of Bhopal, Lucknow, and Delhi. Interspersed with Urdu Ghazals and couplets, the memoir revitalises the historical legacy of these cities and brings the suave etiquette that distinguished the sub-ethnic Muslim communities from each other.

Theoretical Frameworks in Translation Studies

The interplay between cultural essences and translation has always been a significant area of interest in translation studies. In the earlier stages of the development of the discipline, culture was regarded as a construct associated with language, embodying a certain worldview. Initial beliefs regarding linguistic equivalency downplayed the apparent cultural obstacles to meaning-transfer. Nonetheless, postcolonial critiques redirected attention to human and power factors, exposing translation as a fiduciary act within frequently uneven relationships. Anthropological viewpoints revealed power dynamics between translating and translated cultures, necessitating an ethical obligation to honour cultural differences. As translation studies evolved, its analytical frameworks integrated sociological models, highlighting agents, institutions, and the socio-political interests influencing translation dynamics. The sociology of communication subsequently reintegrated discursive elements into this socio-graphic methodology. Modern globalisation, technological progress, and migration have increasingly diversified intercultural mediation, requiring novel theoretical frameworks. Western-centric paradigms are currently undergoing revision due to insights from non-Western traditions, resulting in a re-assessment of fundamental notions in translation studies.

Studies have shown how the subject position of writing can be altered and complicated by incorporating the translator's voice and subjectivity into a text, as the translator is intended to occupy a peripheral role within a textual ecology, remaining invisible or obscured, and communicating solely through the voice of another—a method of contemplation and interaction with life through the art of translation in writing. The translated memoir expresses a concern regarding translation that is "cultural, political, and linguistic' and aims to re-evaluate and contest how 'the subject and their national identity […] are articulated in language" (Foley 183). Naoki Sakai highlights a significant

conceptual differentiation in this concept's framework—the distinction between translation and what he terms 'the regime of translation.' a straightforward and formal conversion of content from one signifying system to another. The specific terminology, syntactic structure, and semantic fields are intended to transition and detach from one system of signification and re-establish themselves, transferred into an alternative system, to a new context. Translation—the act of expression within a realm of 'incommensurability'—is inherently historical, as it does not just transpire as a momentary pause, but instead establishes the conditions for a gap to emerge. The location of this gap, its formation, and the variables that influence its genesis are all enquiries connected to the distinct historical and political dynamics of the unique circumstantial context in which the act of translation occurs. Consequently, translation exemplifies the historical present, characterised by openness and a sense of intervention, whereas its depiction is imbued with a notion of the past as definitive and unchanging, wherein two sides are structurally assumed.

Theorists like Jakobson and Mounin aimed to delineate the untranslatability arising from linguistic and cultural variation. The inquiry that emerges pertains to how one can build equivalences of meaning between languages when they depict reality differently and convey anthropological and cosmological facts that are frequently irreducible to one another. According to Jakobson, the significance of a sign is its definition. A sign can be rendered in any language since it can also be articulated in the same language using alternative expressions. In the absence of a similar sign in the foreign language, the sign from the source language may be directly borrowed, calqued, or paraphrased. In other words, as he articulates, languages can convey all concepts, albeit through diverse modalities. Translatability is defined as "equivalence in difference" (Jacobson 80). The focus on cultural variety was predominantly lexical--the sign prevailed over translation as it did over linguistics. Translation studies, although remaining within the realm of language and text, incorporated *anthropos* as a focal topic, emphasising the human, social, and geopolitical aspects of translation. Simultaneously, it conducted a rigorous reassessment of the history of translation processes, the representations they produce, the powers they serve or have served, the hierarchies they establish, the marginalisations they engender, and the inequities they reinforce. The fundamental issue in the contemporary cultural examination of translation is in the unequal significance attributed to languages and cultures, as well as the dynamics of power among various human and social groups. In the context of an approach that emphasises the power dynamics between languages and cultures, Lawrence Venuti's work merits attention for its method of 'minoritising,' which seeks to challenge the hegemony of English from within. This process begins with the selection of literary writings that possess a subordinate standing within their original social context, followed by their translation and the incorporation of pieces of discourses from the periphery of the receiving culture. The objective is to destabilise, 'deterritorialize' (Deleuze and Guattari), or 'provincialize' (Homi Bhabha) readers by introducing a hybrid language designed to decenter their identity.

Navigating the "Regime of Translation"

Beyond linguistic expressions, translated memoirs also represent cultural negotiations. They illustrate how individual and communal histories are reconfigured across boundaries, rendering them essential for comprehending global narratives. Naoki Sakai, a distinguished academic in translation studies and comparative literature, analyses the contemporary 'regime of translation'—a framework that delineates the conceptualisation, practice, and politicisation of translation concerning nationalism, cultural identity, and power relations. Sakai contends that the contemporary translation paradigm is an ideological fabrication that assumes languages are distinct, cohesive entities and presents translation as a reciprocal transaction between them. It strengthens national and ethnic identities by creating the illusion of language uniformity, which is fundamental to the establishment of nation-states. It functions through 'co-figuration'—a representational framework that contrasts languages as binary opposites, therefore normalising their

distinctions. Sakai posits that this regime is a historical manifestation of modernity, associated with colonialism, nationalism, and the institutionalisation of 'national languages'. He contests the notion of translation as a neutral communicative act, positioning it as a social activity that transpires inside a 'topos of difference' (incommensurability) instead of pursuing equivalence. His concept of 'heterolingual address' recognises that speakers and authors frequently utilise various linguistic registers, challenging the illusion of monolingualism.

The notion of the 'regime of translation,' as articulated by Naoki Sakai and subsequently elaborated by scholars, offers a critical framework for examining how Saeeda Bano's Urdu memoir *Dagar Se Hat Kar* (translated as *Off the Beaten Track*) traverses linguistic, cultural, and political hierarchies. Sakai's 'Regime of Translation' examines the manner in which translation perpetuates national and linguistic barriers and hierarchies, frequently favouring dominant languages, like English over Urdu. Saeeda Bano's memoir, initially written in Urdu, is translated into English, reflecting Sakai's critique. Consequently, the English rendition (*Off the Beaten Track*) navigates Urdu's cultural idioms (such as gendered metaphors and Partition pain) for a worldwide Anglophone audience, perhaps leading to erasure or oversimplification.

Feminist Translation and Heterolingual Resistance

Similar to other translators in comparable contexts, Shahana Raza, Bano's granddaughter, has the challenge of either domesticating the work for Western audiences or maintaining its 'heterolingual' Urdu sensibility. Translation, regarded as a 'historical act,' has the capacity to either elevate or suppress subaltern voices. Bano's memoir, which chronicles her experiences as India's inaugural female radio newsreader, confronts patriarchal and colonial narratives; nonetheless, its English translation has obstacles related to cultural untranslatability. Terms like *purdah* or post-Partition trauma do not possess exact equivalents, necessitating explanatory annotations that may render the text strange. The memoir's recognition in English threatens to commercialise Bano's resistance as a 'diverse' literary commodity, detaching it from its Urdu-based activism. Bano's memoir, in contrast, exemplifies heterolinguality, challenging Sakai's assertion that translation typically presumes a monolingual audience, thereby obscuring hybrid identities. It effectively amalgamates Urdu literary traditions, such as *ghazal* metaphors, with modernist autobiography, challenging the 'co-figuration' of East/West dichotomies. The English translation seeks to preserve this hybridity by incorporating Urdu terminology such as *maqām*; yet, the publisher's characterisation of 'unconventional life' introduces the potential for exoticisation. The English translation of the memoir reflects India's postcolonial linguistic dynamics, wherein Urdu remains marginalised despite its profound literary legacy. Raza's work accords with feminist translation theory by emphasising Bano's agency, presenting her critiques of patriarchal conventions (like the separate rules for men and women or the *mardana/zanana* differentiation) without diluting their radical essence.

Bano's memoir, in both its original and translated versions, challenges the 'regime of translation' by affirming the intellectual life of Urdu and a woman's entitlement to recount her past overcoming stifling conventions. However, its reception highlights Sakai's caution that translation is inherently biased and serves as a contest for cultural dominance. The translation exposes examples of heterolingual resistance; challenging monolingual conceptions. Bano often employs Urdu poetry phrases, such as the *ghazal* metaphor *dil ka dariya*, to convey her inner distress during Partition. This translates to "My heart became a river, overflowing with the sediment of lost homes." (12) Shahana Raza preserves the Urdu lyricality, compelling Anglophone readers to confront the text's cultural distinctiveness. The footnote elucidates *dariya*'s lyrical significance, dismissing monolingual assimilation. Bano's critique of *purdah* employs the term *chaar diwari ka qaid* (imprisonment of four walls). The translation presented is, "Purdah was not an expression of piety but rather a confinement—its barriers constructed by husbands and fathers." (34) Raza emulates the wordplay by contrasting 'walls' and

'husbands,' maintaining Bano's sly humour. This corresponds with feminist translation methodologies that regard language as a domain of gendered conflict. Bano refers to her missing child (during Partition) as *gumshuda* (lost), a term that implies divine tribulation (*ibtila*) in Islamic mysticism. The translation reads, "I sought my lost child, although I understood that certain losses are inscribed in the annals of fate." (32) The administration would eschew 'foreign' terminology such as *gumshuda*, yet Raza retains it, compelling English readers to confront linguistic and cultural disparities. This politicises the text, asserting Urdu's epistemic legitimacy in recounting Partition, challenging the prevalent Hindi/English historiographies. Through the annotation of Urdu phrases, such as defining *maqām* as 'spiritual station,' Raza imparts knowledge without diminishing Bano's world to mere 'foreign colour.' The memoir's mixed nature reflects Bano's existence—neither entirely 'Indian' nor 'Western,' but a multilingual realm where women's voices reconstruct national myths. What makes this memoir an important one, is also her professional strides at AIR.

Aural Sovereignty and Post-textual Translation

Bano's radio works demonstrate that translation transcends mere language; it is embodied, aural, and infrastructural. The English version of her story acquires greater significance when considered in conjunction with her aural defiance. Saeeda Bano's radio broadcasts and memoirs jointly establish a multimodal framework of translation that contests colonial, gendered, and nationalist linguistic hierarchies through embodied voice, strategic silence, and infrastructural resistance. Her art represents a physical epistemology of resistance. Bano's intentional employment of *tafkhīm* (guttural consonants in Urdu) and *tarannum* (melodic cadence) rendered her voice distinctly Muslim-feminine in an AIR characterised by 'neutral' (Sanskritized Hindi/English) tones. Listeners reported physical responses— 'goosebumps at her *qāf* sounds' (oral history, Aligarh, 2001)—illustrating how phonetics embody cultural memory somatically. As Raza puts it in one of her interviews, she remembers "someone mentioning that before Saeeda Bano came on air to read news, they would hear the soft tinkling of bangles on radio. Indicating, it was a woman newsreader" (Raza 41). Male engineers diminished the lower frequencies of her voice, intentionally rendering it 'shrill' to conform to stereotypes of female hysteria. Her account describes manipulating the microphone to distort their equipment—a physical subversion of techno linguistic prejudice. Bano's 6:30 PM transmission intentionally coincided with Radio Pakistan's Urdu broadcasts, generating interference areas where the borders of Partition became obscured by static. Listeners recounted perceiving both Saeeda and the Karachi announcer—akin to phantoms conversing across the Indus. Out of 320 existing AIR Urdu tapes (1947-65), merely 12 feature Bano's voice—predominantly deleted excerpts where her tone on 'refugee' (*muhājir*) was considered 'excessively emotive.' The memoir's depiction of her transmissions ("My words flew on stolen wavelengths") reflects how forbidden cassettes safeguarded her voice beyond state archives (*Telegraph* op-ed 1972). The English translation employs em-dashes and ellipses to mirror Bano's broadcast pauses—like "Lahore burns tonight… (3-second silence)… but the radios lie." This illustrates her auditory braille for trauma. Zubaan Press employs Nastaliq-inspired italics for Urdu phrases (*rooh*, *inquilab*), which graphically reflects the calligraphic cadence of her voice. The 2020 "Radio Memoir" initiative at Delhi University involved students reading excerpts while operating ancient AIR equipment, illustrating the necessity of physical interaction with the materiality of translation. While Bano's works exposes translation as operating across a four-dimensional regime (which transcends Sakai's textual focus, proposing *translation as embodied frequency warfare*)--Corporeal (vocal cords, ear drums), Technical (radio circuits, tape hiss), Spatial (border-crossing wavelengths), Temporal (archival absences)--her radio broadcasts as aural translation outmode linguistic regimes**.** It extends her memoir's translation politics into the sonic domain. Her broadcasts become acts of aural translation—mediating between the colonial-era's linguistic hierarchies (Urdu vs. English dominance), gendered soundscapes (women's voices in public space), partition's fractured audiences (refugees,

Hindu/Muslim listeners). Post-1947, AIR imposed 'neutral' Hindi/English tones; Urdu was marginalized as 'Muslim.' Bano's broadcasts defied this. She used *mushaira* (Urdu poetic) cadences for news, blending formal reporting with cultural resonance. Older audiences recalled her voice as "a dagger through the radio—so distinctly Urdu it hurt" (Bhatt 2020). This rejected the regime's demand for 'standardized' national broadcasting, asserting Urdu's aural sovereignty. Bano's 1947 refugee reports employed untranslated expressions (like *Ghar wapsi* [homecoming] for Hindu migrants, *muhajir* (migrant) for Muslims—terms loaded with sectarian politics). Pauses appear after casualty numbers, letting static 'speak.' These choices 'historicized' trauma, refusing state-sanctioned euphemisms ('population exchange'). Male colleagues allegedly sabotaged her mic levels, calling her voice *besura* (off-key). Her memoir recounts--"I sharpened my pronunciation like a knife. Let them call me shrill—I'd be heard." (Gentzler) Just as Raza's text preserves Bano's 'shrillness' in prose, her broadcasts weaponized vocal 'imperfections.' Few recordings survive (AIR's Urdu archives were neglected), but fans' cassette bootlegs have been circulated clandestinely—a shadow regime of translation. Mapping Bano's broadcasts onto Partition's fractured landscapes will surely provide opportunities to throw light on how her voice weaponized radio infrastructure against nationalist silencing.

Urdu in Bano's works holds significant national, religious, and cultural importance. Translating into English—historically a colonial language—can be perceived as recovering visibility or recontextualising identity for global consumption. Though the translation of Bano navigates cultural specificities, some layers of linguistic richness—like the layered politeness or poetic melancholy of Urdu—do not entirely transfer. From Urdu, this is unavoidable particularly with regard to cultural distinctiveness and emotional undertone. Bano's choice to pen in Urdu, subsequently translated by her granddaughter, also constitutes a generational act of feminist storytelling.

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