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Translation as Elision: Women's Narratives from Twentieth Century Gujarat- Vinodinee Neelkanth's *Dariyav Dil*

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Abstract:
This essay explores through the method and metaphor of translation, discourses of women's narratives in twentieth century Gandhian Gujarat. It concentrates specifically on a short story *Dariyav Dil* by well-known writer Vinodinee Neelkanth (1907-1987) in order to analyse and examine its patriarchal trappings through translational process of elision which render the language of oppression into one of sacrifice, the language of control into one of restraint and respectability.

Keywords**:** *Gujarat, Translation, Elision, Dariyav Dil, Vinodinee Neelkanth*

Scholars in the field of translation studies have made convincing connections between translation and feminism by examining the secondary status accorded to both translation and women vis a vis the structure of patriarchy and the language that is often used to define them. One of the first noteworthy alliances of this kind between translation and feminist practice was the movement of feminist translation associated with Canadian scholars of the 70s and 80s such as Suzanne de Lotbiniere-Harwood, Barbara Godard and others who called for a variety of innovative literary tactics such as over-translating or visible interference, 'hijacking' and 'womanhandling' the text in order to disrupt patriarchal codes and make the feminine visible in language. While these techniques clearly emerged out of a specific historical context and in complicity with the emergence of feminist avant-garde writing, translators became accomplices to writers and translation served not only as a mode of engagement with literature, but as what Sherry Simon has called "a kind of literary activism" where "the entry of gender into translation theory had a lot to do with the renewed prestige of translation as 're-writing' […] just as it shows the importance for all social and human sciences of a critical reframing of gender, identity, and subject-positions within language." (1996: ix) The emerging locational metaphorics of translation has enabled new ways of articulating marginalized existence through a host of meanings.

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495)
JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

While postcolonial writers have used the metaphor of translation to describe a condition of linguistic and cultural dislocation and violence, a feminist translator declared around the same time "I am a translation because I am a woman" (qtd in Simon 1996:1). On the other hand, others have been able to articulate a position of agency through translation by seeing it as a zone of liminality that escapes binaries, definitions and normative subjectivities: 'I am neither a woman nor a man because I'm a translator' (qtd in Maier 1998:100). These positions provide a context to the various travels of translational thought and its conceptual polysemy that resulted in a 'cultural turn' at the turn of the century. They also signal the striking possibilities of theoretical alliances between translation theory and other ideological frameworks.

In a context closer to home, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, from her position as a translator, calls attention to an ethics of translation as 'intimate act of reading', where the translator surrenders herself to the text and pays attention to the various 'textures of language' and the jagged relationship between logic and rhetoricity against the grain of homogeneity where "in the act of wholesale translation into English […] the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan" (182). In attending to the specificity of language and the politics of English translation, she gives the example of a story by Mahasweta Devi called "Stanadayini" translated in two version as "The Wet-Nurse" and "The Breast-Giver" in order to show how the first one reflects a loss of the rhetorical silences from the original, neglecting the suggestion of organ as commodity and does away with the way that the story plays with "Marx and Freud on the occasion of the woman's body." (183) Furthermore, in her discussion of Mahasweta Devi's *Douloti the Bountiful,* Spivak shows how a translator can provide narrative and rhetorical details of a text she translates in ways that could serve to bring translation theory and practice within the range of a host of cultural and political debates. She uses the context of the story that talks about the exploitation of tribal bonded workers to show how Mahasweta Devi creates an alternative space removed from the colonialism-decolonialism, empire-nation discourse to deconstruct a sense of nationalist cohesiveness and hegemony through the woman's exploited body and the concept of subaltern heterogeneity (1990: 108).

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495) JANUARY 2018
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In this essay, I attempt to understand through translation into English, the formulation and representation of literary and cultural discourses around women in Gandhi's Gujarat of the early twentieth century through the context of a well-known short story (also later made into a popular film *Kashino Dikro, 1979*) called *Dariyav Dil* by Gujarati writer Vinodinee Neelkanth (1907-1987). I draw from Spivak's theoretical stance in order to employ translation as a critical mode of reading and also ask what it means for a translator to make sense of a text that is both historically and ideologically distant. How must those texts be rendered which were once seen as progressive but stand exposed today in their patriarchal trappings? Within a normative discourse that posits the journey from silence to speech as a linear, evolutionary trajectory of empowerment, how can translation apprehend and posit women's subjectivities differently across different points in history? In other words, when the text presents an ideological crisis, how must the translator engage with silence when speech is normative? At the same time, the particular instance of translation here, I argue, comes to stand for processes of elision, the silences, the gaps, the displacements, and the cooption that characterize much of the language of women's narratives where often the language of oppression is translated into one of sacrifice, the language of control into one of restraint and respectability, of labour into one of selflessness and generosity. Translation in all its polysemy, as method and as metaphor, can serve to unravel and read the movement of gendered narratives and identarian inscriptions such as wife or mother, often conflictual, jostling for space, often impossibly simultaneous and coexistent that characterize much of the construct of the early twentieth century 'woman' in Gujarat. This burden of impossible simultaneity is effectuated both through physical and discursive violence even as translation metaphorically comes to signify the displacement of such discourses, the standing in of one in the place of another, the passing off of one as another.

Vinodinee Neelkanth and Dariyav Dil (The Bounteous Heart)

Vinodinee Neelkanth (1907-1987) came from an illustrious family that saw two generations of social reformers well-known for their progressive views and their literary contributions. Vinodinee's father was the celebrated litterateur Ramanbhai Neelkanth, a writer whom Gandhi called 'The Jewel of Gujarat,' and her mother Vidyagauri Neelkanth and her aunt Sharadaben Mehta were known to be

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495)
JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

the first women graduates of Gujarat. Vinodinee was also the granddaughter of some of Gujarat's earliest social reformers Mahipatram Ruparam from her father's side and Bholanath Sarabhai from her mother's, who founded the Prarthana Samaj in Ahmedabad modelled on the Brahmo Samaj. Furthermore, she was also one of the first women to do a Master's in sociology abroad at the University of Michigan in 1929 when she earned a scholarship. Upon her return, she participated in Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha along with Mridula Sarabhai and gained visibility for her support for the movement by picketing shops selling foreign cloth and liquor. She was also associated with several women's organizations, most notably Jyoti Sangh for women's vocational training and Vikas Gruha a shelter house for abused and orphaned women and children. In 1930, she took up the principalship of the Ahmedabad Municipal Girls' college only to hand in her resignation after her extremely controversial marriage in 1934 to Manubhai Parikh, a Shrimali Jain and a married man with two children (Basu & Parikh 43). The couple came under severe criticism from all quarters of society and were also ostracized. Ironically, one doesn't see much of this radicalism in her writings. As critic Anila Dalal remarks, Vinodinee Neelkanth "was by no means a feminist. But throughout all four genres of her writings, we see a clear focus on feminism. [She] did not advocate radical change; she wanted a more reformed, a more humanistic and a more sensitive understanding of the woman's psyche and a more civilized treatment of her within the existing system." (qtd in Basu & Parikh, 59).

Written in the 1950s, *Dariyav Dil* is centred on the middle-class household of Pitamberdas and his wife Amba. As soon as a newly married Amba comes home, her ailing mother in law gives her the responsibility of her two-year old son Kanti before she dies of tuberculosis. Amba shoulders Kanti's responsibility alone and treats him like her own son and comes to be known throughout the story as Biji Ba or second mother even to her own children. Pitamberdas begins to envy his little brother for claiming his wife's time and attention even though Amba herself develops a strong bond for her brother-in-law. Soon Kanti grows up and gets married to a girl of Amba's choice. Soon after the wedding, he is bitten by a rabid dog and eventually dies. Karuna is widowed and a devastated Amba renounces all the pleasures of family life. Pitambar however, quick to recover from Kanti's death and not inclined to give up the pleasures of the flesh, turns his gaze upon Karuna. One day when Amba is not at home, Pitamber rapes his sister-in-law. Upon her return, Amba realizes that something is

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495)
JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

amiss and begins to suspect what might have happened. When a submissive Karuna finally tells her the truth, Amba blames herself for renouncing familial ties and neglecting her husband. She also absolves her husband by saying that it was Karuna's irresistible beauty that tempted him. When Karuna is pregnant, Amba devises a strategy to save the family from disgrace. She spreads the word that she herself is pregnant and when the baby is born, she claims it as her own. In the end, in front of a handful of neighbours, Amba hands over the baby, tellingly a boy, to Karuna and tells her to take care of him in the same manner that her own mother-in-law had given her the responsibility of Kanti when she came home as a bride.

Dariyav Dil (The Bounteous Heart) is a story written clearly before the dawn of a language of women's rights. Its Perso-Arabic title is both ironic and telling. Dariyav Dil, which literally means 'a heart that is like the ocean,' shows how the metaphor of the ocean for a woman's heart reinforces the role of the nurturer who is abundantly generous like the earth or the sky and the ocean while also reinforcing such generosity in a woman as the natural order of things. Such a discourse of nature was salient not only in fossilizing gender roles but also, as this story shows, of normalizing men to be errant by nature. On the other hand, the intertextual echoes in the story of Gandhi's views on women through ideals of non-violence, silent suffering, motherhood and the 'stout heart' are hard to miss:

> Woman is the incarnation of ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and delivers joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labour? But she forgets them in the joy of creation. […] let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget she ever was or can be the object of man's lust and she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader. It is given to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar. She can become the leader in satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith. (316)

This 'stout heart' can be seen to form the preoccupations in many of Neelkanth's early stories and essays that centre on women's issues as many of the titles would reveal: 'Strinu Hriday' (A Woman's heart), 'Nari Hriday' (A Woman's Heart), 'Savki Ma' (One's Own Mother), 'Matanu Hriday' (A

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495) JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

Mother's Heart) and show a constant engagement with the idea of motherhood as the defining feature of feminine psyche. Her well-known essay 'Parakashta' (The Ultimate) was written about her experience of motherhood.

> When I held my tender, golden-haired baby in my lap-[…]I understood that it is pointless to wander the world looking for the ultimate feeling of the heart. The ultimate experience of infinite and priceless happiness has been made so easy by Nature! (Basu & Parikh, 238).

Dariyav Dil is significant in the way that it portrays the shifting and interwoven narratives of oppression and agency, sometimes passing one off as another, sometimes engaging in a game of disguises, displacement and that involves a range of discursive and ideological subterfuges. In this space where roles coalesce and merge, brothers-in-law become sons and sisters-in-law become daughters, the roles of mothers are extended to 'Biji Ba' (Second Mother), women become self-regulating workers of a system of patriarchy that they not only uphold and sustain at the cost of their surrendered freedom but are conditioned to valorise their oppression as sacrifice and selflessness. The story reveals the fault lines and the contradictions of a patriarchal set up of familial relationships and bonds that, on one hand, valorize motherhood as the noblest construct of femininity and struggle to reconcile it with feminine sexuality on the other. The extended motherhood that Amba receives as her responsibility from her mother-in-law on her deathbed comes without her choosing. Yet her embracement, her preoccupation and her absorption of that social role that leads her to raise Kanti, educate him, choose a bride and eventually blame herself for not being able to anticipate his death shows that motherhood is enough for Amba. Unlike, her jealous, unhappy husband Amba does not feel the need for a companionate marital life outside the wifely duties of efficiently running the household and looking after her husband's needs. Nor does she ever feel resentful or angry at her additional responsibilities of raising a child that is not hers. Nor does she even ever confront her husband of the rape or feel anger or disgust. Like Karuna's silence, Amba's lack of anger is replaced by her resourcefulness as a clever housewife who saves the family, a metonymic abstraction for Pitamber himself, from disgrace. The criminality of rape, which is never recognized as such or even confronted as violence or rape in the first place, is translated into Amba's silence as nobility. In such a schematic where women are entirely defined by their social roles (in fact, Amba is always introduced in the story with a familial qualifier

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495)
JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

such as 'eldest daughter-in-law of the house', wife of Pitambar, or mother, Pitamber on the other is merely Pitamber) and are conditioned to privilege everything and everyone above their own body, mind and individuality, the 'heart' or 'dil' becomes the only glorified organ and gendered epithet that allows a woman to claim personhood conditionally.

Translation as Motif

A recurring motif in the story is the transfiguration or the translation of multiple identities mixing and merging into one another. Amba, the supreme mother, is mother to her brother-in-law Kanti who becomes her son, she is mother to her sister-in-law who becomes her daughter and she is a 'second mother' even to her own children (and to Karuna) who emulate Kanti in addressing her in that manner. Kanti himself is not 'uncle' but *mota bhai* or elder brother to Amba's own children. In this dizzying shapeshifting of identities, the role of motherhood looms largest and as the all bountiful trope of a woman's large heartedness and her quality to suffer silently. On the other hand, throughout the story Pitamber appears doggedly and consistently as the unhappy, jealous husband who is never seen as anything else but a husband. He never takes on other identities either of father, brother or brother-in-law pointing to the burden of impossible simultaneity that is expected and eventually characterizes the fluid identities of women in their familial/social roles. The tussle between Amba as a mother and Amba as a wife, to an unhappy Pitamber reaches a climax with Amba's decision to withdraw from her marital life after the death of Kanti. Pitamber is unable to deal with her renunciation and cannot accept the asexuality of her motherhood along with his own persistent desires. Sexuality becomes the embattled site upon which patriarchal conscriptions of wife and mother collapse. This crucial contradiction ends with rape as Pitamber turns his attention to the recently widowed Karuna, his sister-in-law. Amba blames herself for the rape as a result of her neglect and this only underscores her 'sexual' duties even as she is conditioned to take the blame for every ill event from Kanti's death, to Karuna's widowhood and her rape. Consider the following paragraph that illustrates Amba's conflict after Kanti's death. Her own desire is to renounce familial ties but the red dot of her bindi brings her back to the fold of traditional marital duty that is supposed to confer good fortune to her that her husband is still alive.

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495)
JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

> The happiness of family life no longer interested her [Amba]. After Kanti's death, Amba began to grow extremely careless about her appearance and attire. She combed her hair without looking into the mirror. It was only to put the red *chandlo* on her forehead signifying that her husband was alive, that she briefly saw in the mirror. The dot had to be put so she used to put it. She felt embarrassed to see Karuna's shapely forehead bare while her own had the bright red *chandlo* of a married woman.

Ironically, it is only through the rape that Karuna is able to don the attire of a married woman for the predicament of giving birth in her widowhood.

> She [Amba] dressed Karuna in the complete attire of a married woman, a *soubhagyavati*. When the time came, Karuna gave birth to a son at the hospital. "This is my Kanti himself!" said Amba pressing the child to her bosom as soon as she saw him. Amba took the child. In a few days, they returned home with the baby.

Furthermore, although Amba had chosen renunciation, she is forced to tell the neighbours that it is *she* who is pregnant, and that sexual indulgence is as much a woman's weakness as a man's. Presenting her own renunciation as indulgence to save her husband and Karuna from disgrace comes at the cost of her own truth, a violence that is in its turn valorized as large-heartedness. In all its labyrinthine twistedness, the ideal of womanhood that Neelkanth proposes is not only one where motherhood is paramount, but the language of selflessness, of untiring sacrifice, of a hundred untruths for the sake of familial honour show how a woman must always sacrifice herself at the altar of-her family. Her own self begins and ends with her social roles, her responsibilities, her duties which she must tirelessly devote herself to and execute without complaint or criticism in an attitude of all-encompassing-love. These characters are evidently idealistic and hardly partake from real women; but the need to uphold ideal constructs and to write about models to be aspired to, was part of the prescriptive and instructive role that Neelkanth was probably seeing herself play as a writer of wide appeal and as a long-time columnist of women's issues.

The story employs different metaphors of sexuality. While reproductive ability is differentiated from sexuality, the metaphors remain more or less the same. It is in the 'twilight of her fertility' that Amba's mother-in-law gives birth to Kanti. Her waning reproductive years are akin to darkness while the birth of a child, a boy, is named light or Kanti. Even though she is a *soubhagyavati*, Amba sees

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495)
JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

her marital status and her sexual identity that comes from it as something embarrassing as the passage below highlights. Contrarily, in order to claim the child from the rape as her own, she also tells the neighbours:

> "Alas ben! No matter how much we try, we are slaves to the pleasures of the flesh! At home, my young derani still in her prime, has to suffer the lot of a widow. Kashi is the mother of two. Tomorrow Dashrath will have his own children and yet our family continues to grow. How can one blame the man alone for this?"

The elision of the act of rape under the excuse of 'indulgence' completely absolves Pitamber even as Amba takes everything on herself. Although, it is Amba's lie that confers legitimacy to Karuna's child, Pitamber is absolved of the rape that now becomes a legitimate act of procreation for society as Amba feigns pregnancy. However, it is Pitamber again whose paternal authority accounts for the child's legitimacy as the neighbours remark "Your son looks exactly like Pitamberdas" and Amba replies, "Is that so? Well, a son will look like his father. There is nothing odd about that."
The gravity of the rape appears mitigated when widowed Karuna has a baby that is seen as something she can look forward to in her widow's life. Her husband Kanti's loss is replaced by the child born of rape. In some sense the story comes full circle from the beginning when the new bride Amba and later Karuna are given the responsibility of a child they have not voluntarily had or wished for. Kanti's birth and later the child born of rape, also a son, see the baton of patriarchy passed on from one woman to another over generations. In the end, not only is the rape elided in the discourse of 'large-heartedness' but without being the heinous act of crime that it is, becomes a way to bestow the 'gift' of motherhood on Karuna. "Your mind too will be engaged in something" Amba tells her as she gives her the responsibility of her own child.

In his preface to an anthology of Neelkanth's work, Gujarati writer and critic Raghuvir Chaudhary notes that many of Vinodinee Neelkanth's well-known stories have been selected for inclusion as textbooks (5). Surprisingly, *Dariyav Dil* is one such story pointing to the need to institute through educational and instructive contexts particular norms and models of femininity and familial relationships. Furthermore, even after twenty years of its publication, this short story captured public attention and found its way out of literary and educational domains into the field of popular culture and

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495) JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

celluloid when it was made into a full-length Gujarati feature film called *Kashino Dikro* (1979). There is not scope here to provide a discussion of the film, but it is important to note that ironically, this was the same year that saw country-wide mobilization around the Mathura rape case, an important milestone in the Indian women's movement and the first event to trigger a large-scale discussion of custodial rape in the public domain.

The Translator's Unease: The Quandary of Engagement

What is more important for our context, however, is the question of translating such a story in which almost everything stands for something else, almost everything is made out to be what it isn't, almost every ideal that is held up as virtue is built on a fundamental violence that is constantly passed off as an occasion for nobility. The silence of Amba and Karuna is deafening even as it conjures the text and its ideological stance as a hugely problematic translational encounter.

The experience of confronting an ideological 'other,' not the foreign, or the cultural other, but the other even within the subjectivity of gender, provokes in the translator as a woman translating a woman, a silence of a different order. The translator's unease is a quandary of engagement the initial response to which is to read 'silence' with antagonistic aphasia. However, the loci of enunciation that make speech and a measure of feminist belligerence a normative index of agency appear to be largely historically conditioned. Yet it is also a recognition of the different textures of silence and a critical understanding that destabilizes the normative hierarchy of silence and speech where speech is better placed. This is not to justify in any way translation as elision or elision as translation but to see that antagonism calls attention to a new ethics of translation where to translate is to engage, to listen with the possibility of deferring consent; to acknowledge that every idealistic construct of femininity through values such as generosity, suffering and kindness needs to be sabotaged not for the values themselves but for conscripted processes of gendering; to reconfigure a relationship of opposition and confrontation into one of dehierarchization where speech is not the only normative response to subjection, violation and oppression and silence, not always an acknowledgement of defeat and weakness; that silence can be just as subversive as the normative expectation of speech is violent. More

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495) JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

importantly, such a dehierarchization, recognizes the possibilities of simultaneity, a recognition that speech and silence are not oppositional or mutually exclusive but translatable. Furthermore, 'silence' calls for a particularly attentive mode of reading because just as speech can be of various kinds, silence too is polyphonic in ways that complicate a facile binary of the oppressed and the empowered. To conclude, recast, the metaphor of the ocean comes to stand as much for silence and tranquility as for tempest and turmoil. As a metaphor of speech, it becomes a symbol of narrative verbosity, a conglomeration of stories that tell, re-tell and recast. *Dariyav Dil* then becomes as much about speech as it is about silence. As Ambai says: "I feel that stories are not about revealing; they are about hiding. Stories hide elements and emotions in a way that they reveal things in a totally different manner than what the translator can conceive. Everything about a story cannot be made bare like everything about a culture cannot be given exact meanings to be understood. Some mysteries must remain." (67)

Notes

1. Indeed the development of Translation Studies through the 1970s closely parallels the development of feminist theory in the West. While feminist preoccupations such as Helene Cixous' *Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) aimed at going beyond binaries of male and female to explore an in-between notion of the Feminine, the emergent discipline of translation studies at this time was discussing ways of moving beyond notions of equivalence in translation (Bassnett 1992:64).

2. Hijacking, a way of excessive interference in the text through strategies such as neologisms, feminization of words, glossing etc. is justified by Lotbiniere-Harwood in the following way: "My translation practice is a political activity aimed at making language speak for women […] Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world" (qtd in Flotow, 1991: 79).

3. Supplementing was a strategy to justify 'over-translating' or visible interference on the part of the feminist translator, who as the "writer's accomplice," supplemented "the original text by making its critique of language apply to English." (Flotow 1991: 75).

4. Vidyagauri Neelkanth founded the Ahmedabad branch of the All-India Women's Conference and also founded Lalshanker Umia Shanker Mahila Pathshala, which was later affiliated to the Karve University.

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CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495) JANUARY 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

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(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

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