

Revisiting the Shifting Paradigms through the Translations of Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi's writings have been immensely translated in Indian languages like Assamese, Gujarati, Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Telegu and tribal languages like Ho and Santhali along with foreign languages like English, Italian, Japanese and French. The range of her translations is reflective of her wide popularity both within and outside the nation. Compared to other languages translating into English from her original stories in Bangla has always remained fraught with the complexities of colonial history. In the Indian context translation into English always corroborates the hegemonic power equations more than translation into any other language especially in the postcolonial context. For Devi's texts translation into English is wrought with hegemonic complexities that are not equally traceable in the translations of her stories in other vernaculars. The objective of this article is to critically look into the various dynamics of the author/translator interface that forms the crux of the 'politics' interplaying at different levels of the translation process of her stories.

KEYWORDS

Politicisation; subjective intervention; hegemonic complexities; cultural resistance; counter-narrative.

"For me it is much more important that my writings are being translated and published in Indian languages. I have to reach India first" (Devi, Interview)

Mahasweta Devi can be truly called a writer with a firm social purpose and one of those few writers who have equally treaded the fictional and non-fictional terrains throughout her life without prioritizing one over the other. Even though she has a considerable amount of non-fictional writing in English to her name, the fictional works are mostly written in Bangla. She preferred

documenting her observations about the deprivation, distress and degeneration of a major part of Indian society in Bangla. At the same time, she intended to reach out to the maximum number of Indian readers with her conscientious social crusade for the deep impact that she expected from as many educated Indian readers as possible. With the implicit yearning to prick the conscience of her readers through the chastising spirit wrought in her stories, it was important for her that her stories were made available to the maximum number of other language readers in India. However,

with the insight that most of the educated Indians prefer to read any translation in English more than in other Indian languages, as pointed out by Sujit Mukherjee, the English translations of her stories also come within the purview of her aim. Indisputably, thus, the English translations of her short stories have played a pivotal role in accomplishing her objective of introducing her to the national readers along with acquiring international readership.

Irrespective of the fact that she has also written some of her non-fictional works in English the availability of her fictional writings to the English reader seems inadequate. In an interview to Nandini Sen, she has clarified that for her writing in English “was associated with a very important phase of activism” (Nandini Sen 63). The necessity to write in English was outcome of her desire to reach out with her deepest concern about the Denotified Tribes to the national readership who were unable to access her writings in Bangla. Interestingly, the national and international honours bestowed upon her are both for her writings as well as the recognition of her contribution as an activist devoted towards the cause of the downtrodden people of the society. She has spent her entire life as the prolocutor of the underprivileged and marginalized sections of India who are carrying across the scars of injustice, oppression and dehumanization. The twenty-five million tribal population of India living across the different sections of the country have found a reliable representation and a champion of their cause through her writings. She has always positioned the welfare of these approximately 150 different tribes over her personal life and her writings as only the extension of her role as an activist. She has pioneered as the iconoclastic writer to voice forth against the subjugation and suppression of these marginalized citizens of India in the name

of caste and class. Her trenchant pen has contributed to her social crusade against all sorts of injustice and for the proliferation of the disenfranchised people whose voices have always been silenced by powerful authorities.

The lethal combination of activism and writing for the sake of substantiating a cause has wielded into the inculcation of the zealous authorial intervention into the narrative through which she interacts with the readers. This actually is reflective of the agony of the writer to reach beyond the façade of fictional representation of the poor disenfranchised characters. “Shanichari” is one such example where the author perforates the complacency of the reader when she directly addresses them:

You are also likely to think that this author is obsessed with issues like police-struggle – violence-ādivasi-rakshamorcha and so on. That nothing else interests her.

But look, there’s basically just one question. *Kaise bache?* How does one survive? Well, this writer chose her path long ago—that of writing such stories. Asking herself what to write about, she trudged mile after mile down innumerable roads which all led to one destination. At the end she always stood face to face with battles, blood, sweat, tears. That’s why I decided to tell you Shanichari Linda’s story (Devi, *Outcast* 44).

Such direct authorial address bursts out the agony of the writer to transfuse the inner conflict amongst her readers and also carry the risk of culminating into propagandist literature. Mahasweta Devi has treaded through the fine line differentiating literature from propaganda so often that the critics sometimes considered her merely as a chronicler of some specific social concerns. However, Maitreya Ghatak discards this as

unjustified as she “transcends the boundaries of material concerns and highlights the value of universal consciousness of exploitation and the strength to protest against it” (Devi, *Dust on the Road* xi-xii). With the thematic orientation of condemning the hegemonic forces perpetrating the marginalization of the subalterns and unabashedly protesting against it she has augmented a paradigmatic shift in the literary canon of India. Hence, her stories pose the translator with the challenge of not only sustaining the sharp tonality predominant in the stories but also of adapting some unique strategic devices to retain the discursive preoccupations.

The problem occurs when the discursive preoccupations drive the translators as their guiding forces while taking important decisions like the selection of stories for translation. More often than not, the translators of Mahasweta Devi’s stories have been wielded by the evocative strains predominating within the narrative. Since translation has been delineated as a process involving asymmetrical power relations, the selection of the stories can be perceived through the power dynamics. Though *Jhansir Rani* received wide critical acclaim and popularity, it was with the appreciation through the Sahitya Akademi award in 1979 for *Aranyer Adhikar* that her position in the Bangla literary canon began to be championed. Naturally, with the growing popularity her works went through a translation explosion in various Indian languages. The first English translator of her stories, Kalpana Bardhan has selected her stories along with Rabindranath Thakur, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, and Hasan Azizul Haque primarily because their stories have moved her deeply. This selection can be discerned as apolitical act since they all have managed to evoke the categories of the title like ‘women’, ‘outcastes’, and

‘rebels’. She also considered the social significance of the stories along with the fact that most of them were not translated earlier. So, one can directly elucidate the interpretative straitjacketing of the stories through their contextualization within a categorically designed framework which can influence the understanding of the readers. Given this fact it is easily understood that Mahasweta Devi has not been very satisfied with Bardhan’s translation which she has indisputably expressed (Sen and Yadav 222).

Kalpana Bardhan has unequivocally admitted the difficulty in translating particularly Mahasweta Devi’s stories while saying:

Drawing her first-hand observation, Mahasweta writes these stories in a mixture of tribal or folk dialects and urbane Bengali, whose marvelous effect in the original cannot fully come across in translation; the stories remain powerful, however, in their themes and portrayals (Bardhan 25).

While accepting this difficulty, the same selection strategy has been followed by some other translators like Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, Ipsita Chanda, and Sumanta Banerjee. These translators with every decision that they have taken in selecting the stories for translation have consciously or unconsciously emphasized upon one aspect of the stories over others. Evidently, the translator is not always aware or concerned about the impact that these choices may have on the reception of the individual stories. The texts selected by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta are premised upon the interpretation of the central characters as suffering women “each subtly forcing her community to rethink societal norms” (Devi, *Outcast* vi). For Ipsita Chanda the stories selected by her strongly evoke the author’s critique of the perpetual discrimination, deprivation and victimization of the tribal people. Sumanta Banerjee on the other hand has restricted

himself with the stories located in the urban settings with urban subalterns as protagonists. Each story selected by these translators may have alternative interpretative dimensions to be explored since every translation is primarily an interpretation.

The discussion takes a unique turn as the translations of Mahasweta Devi's works are embedded directly within some eminent theoretical presuppositions of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She is the most prominent English translator of Mahasweta Devi and has been much appreciated by the author for disseminating her stories properly. She has conveyed her firm belief on the translator who has managed to translate a challenging story like "Breast Giver" retaining all its nuances. From the position of a postcolonial poststructuralist translator/critic Spivak has preferred to cite the stories that she has translated as examples to substantiate her theoretical presuppositions. She has been severally criticized for interweaving her translations within the trajectory of her critical pursuit of feminism, postcolonialism, deconstruction, and subaltern studies. In fact, her formulations of translation theories have been crossing borders with these critical presuppositions. While the extensive elaboration of her position as a translator and the strategies evolving out of her experience of the translation process have been severely questioned, they have also opened new avenues for further discussion. Because of her critical renderings of these translations, they have consistently drawn critical attention of the western intellectuals till date which actually furthers Mahasweta Devi's intention of reaching out to the maximum number of readers to affect some real changes in the lives of the marginal people of India.

"The Politics of Translation" forms a very cogent part of the discussion regarding the facets of translation where

Spivak emphasizes on the necessity of having a profound knowledge about the cultural milieu depicted in the text and eventually surrendering to it. However, as a translator she had the privilege of participating very closely with the author in her activism and having first-hand knowledge about the people depicted in the stories. Since the stories are premised upon some strong cultural tropes interwoven through the local myths, and folklores, especially the tribal saga Spivak's direct association with these milieus has definitely enhanced her capabilities as a translator. As a consequence of her earnest surrender to the text as the translator Spivak has been accused of taking over the text entirely for the promotion of her own critical arguments. Mostly the criticisms revolve around her presumed stance as a First World feminist translator for the rendering of the texts by a Third World woman writer about the voiceless subalterns.

The theoretical inclination of the translator can be deciphered from the assumption of a feminist approach to interpret and translate the texts that culminates in the overemphasis on the woman-oriented concerns over others. The translator's strategic stance determines the reception of the text by the English language readers. While Sarmistha Dutta Gupta prioritized the woman-centric concerns for the adaptation of the texts for translation, for Spivak this remained her fundamental mechanism in *Breast Stories* and *Old Women*. In *Imaginary Maps* though the plight of the subaltern tribes has been primarily accentuated, the double jeopardy of the subaltern woman's suffering has not been neglected either. Though the stories selected by Sumanta Banerjee delineate the characters of the Bengali underworld, it is discernible that he has attempted to reproduce their socio-political ethos. His inference is that in

her [Devi's] fiction, gender exploitation cuts across class barriers

embracing girls from poorer classes who are victims of a male predatory socio-economic order, as well as housewives of middle class homes who are harassed by a patriarchal domestic order (Devi, *Four Stories* xxi).

For him, the stories have dealt with the problems of class struggle over that of caste or gender which sets a different paradigm for the interpretation of the stories. Therefore, the tendency to present selective stories within certain theoretical presumptions is very common among the English translators of Mahasweta Devi. This inclination of the translators has augmented some specific critical interpretations while simultaneously the critical illustrations have guided the translators in their selection of the stories. In both ways the nuances of the stories get compromised and sometimes restricts the alternative interpretations by readers. Therefore, stories like "Draupadi" or "Breast Giver" are often discussed as sagas of women suffering because of their gender inequalities, undermining the nuances like class and caste struggle. Moreover, the revolting spirit of Mary Oraon cannot be considered as the representative voice of the subaltern tribes even though the story delineates the essence of the struggle of tribal communities. The politics, thus, initially lies in the approach of the translator towards a particular story that can definitely affect its reception amongst the other language readers.

Furthermore, the *udbeg* or *asthirata* ('anxiety' or 'impatience') that always worked within her, forced Devi to write in a lethal language that would disturb her readers, challenging the borders of their knowledge and their expectations from the fictional genres. Such subject matters in her stories which in themselves are political enough required a language surcharged with the political overtones for the dispassionate and unexceptionable narration of her knowledge. Hence, the

translators have to inescapably indulge in a politics of their own while taking decisions regarding their respective approaches and strategies to translate the schematic intent of Mahasweta Devi's language. Sumanta Banerjee consciously restricts himself in evocating the ethos of the cultural milieu of the characters through the authenticity of their respective dialects without any overt emphasis on the politicization of the language. Moreover, he has elaborated that,

Mahasweta Devi has developed a unique style that combines stinging wit with a note of pathos. When she touches this note in her stories, it never degenerates into the melodrama....Instead, it gains force from the contrast with the tone of unemotional cynicism with which she narrates the events or describes the characters (Devi, *Four Stories* xxii).

Evidently, he has carefully endeavoured to retain the author's experimental "use of the lexicon of the Bengali underworld and its nomenclature" (Devi, *Four Stories* xvi). However, the different translations of stories like - "Standayini" (translated as "The Wet Nurse" or "Breast Giver") or "Shishu" (translated as "Children", "Strange Children", and "Little Ones") - are enough to prove that the most crucial aspect of translating Mahasweta Devi's stories is the politicization of the language. Here, the translation indomitably demands the clear understanding and reproduction of this politics of language with which the author prefers to affect the germination of certain emotions in the readers.

The postcolonial approach only broadens the premises of the latent politics imbibed by the translations of Mahasweta Devi's stories. To designate her as a postcolonial writer and to entitle her stories as works by a Third world woman author caters to the broader politics of representing them to the First World readers. Unlike the pre-colonial or colonial

era when translations from the East used to administer West's dearth of knowledge about the East, in the postcolonial period a counter paradigm has come to exist. With the postcolonial discourse a reverse strategy to scathingly disparage the hegemonic colonial and nationalistic discourses has been initiated by critical thinkers. The onus taken by them rests upon interpreting and unravelling the literary works for the western readers. Benita Parry in her essay "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse", seriously questions the appropriation that takes place in this process. She critiques Spivak's illustrations that, for her, have undertaken the responsibility of unravelling the nuances of Mahasweta Devi's stories but in the process prepares a strategy for reading (Parry 37). Mahasweta Devi's stories thus have always remained at the centre of critical discussion and have been perceived through the critical scanner appropriated by Spivak.

Spivak's questioning the possibility of representation of those living at the periphery has been cited as one of the viable reasons of her appropriation of the political subjectivity through the translations. Her theorization of this silence on the basis of western epistemological construct deduces the native as devoid of any agency to speak or to be heard. The implication is that the stories provide them with the opportunity of primary representation within the nation to counter the way they have been historically muted. The lack of their representation thus supplanted through the stories and her translations where the educated intellectual communicates with the world on their behalf. From her position of the First World intellectual the translations can be regarded as the representation of the Third World subaltern who finally gets mediation through the translator. Spivak has been thoroughly questioned for presenting herself as a voice of mediation between the

subalterns and the western readers. This idea has been refuted with the proposition that it is the incapability of the historiographers to listen to the voice of the subalterns that has always existed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty also warns against the mixing up of the feminist discourses on Third World women, who form a substantial part of the subalterns, with the material reality (Parry 37). Therefore, the politics of the translator/critic becomes evident through Spivak's extensive theorization if not through the translations.

These various dynamics of the author/translator interface form the crux of the politics interplaying at different levels of the translation process. However, the politics of the translator or publishers involved in the translation process becomes an empowering tool if not considered only as a means of mediation between two different cultures. Critics like Micheala Wolf and Maria Tymoczko have preferred to revisit the perception towards translation tracing "the ways translation can effect cultural change and the relation of translation to dominance, cultural assertion, cultural resistance, and activism" (Tymoczko 44). Within the multicultural encounter of the present world translation can affect not only the interpretation of any text but also appropriate the desired meaning production. In the post-globalisation world the production of meaning empowers the translator more because of the advancements in migrancy, exile and diaspora that have increased the experience of fragmented identity or 'hybrid' identities.

In the present scenario, the polarity between self/other, us/them, East/West, First/Third World, colonizer/colonized is quickly getting blurred and extending into what has been called a 'Third Space' (Bhabha 36), a 'space-in-between' two cultures. Bhabha considers this 'Third Space' as the space for the germination of

postcolonial translation strategies where translation is a “ground of intervention” (Bhabha 36). Therefore, translation is not anymore the means of intercultural interaction but becomes a strategy of intervention. In this context the criticism against the English translations of Mahasweta Devi’s stories can be refuted giving the fact that they can also aspire to resist categorization and renaturalization (Simon and St.-Pierre 21). A comparative study of all the texts mentioned earlier turns Bhabha’s concept of the ‘Third Space’ problematic as the identity of the translators leaves open the space for looking at the cultural conglomeration because all the translators have deep-rooted links with the source language and the culture to which it belongs. Moving through the texts gives one the scope to question the probability of re-creating the ethnographic details and the linguistic violence that Devi has so wonderfully, purposefully and successfully accomplished.

Moreover, there remains the possibility of the target text indulging in a dialectical interaction with the different cultural milieu delineated in the ‘original’ text through hybridization retaining the characteristics of the original through a process of cultural conglomeration (Simon and St.-Pierre 131). Without much pondering over the western epistemological construct about the interventionist capacities empowering the translators, the translations of Mahasweta Devi’s short stories can be considered as ‘production’ of new/alternative interpretations. Keeping in mind that translation “is not simply a mode of linguistic traffic but a translingual practice, a writing across languages” (Simon and St.-Pierre 28) these translations of Devi’s

stories can be esteemed to have a new life of their own. In the Indian cultural framework, the status enjoyed by translations previously can be set as the critical framework to illustrate these translations, without restricting the purpose of their existence as secondary reproduction of the Bangla originals.

Tutun Mukherjee denies to put overt importance of the author’s ‘intention’ in the translations as she believes, “whatever be the special predilections of the ‘author’, they are neither imposed upon the retellings nor circumscribe them in any way” (Nandini Sen 219). For her the diverse renditions of the stories by the different ‘auteurs’ in no ways intervene with the social representation driven by their “respective performative orientation and critical edge” (Nandini Sen 219). It is important here to focus on the fact that there is a fine line differentiating propaganda from entertaining fiction that the translators of Mahasweta Devi’s fiction have to always balance. The challenge is furthered by the social agenda of the author ingrained in the stories. However, the other edge of this balancing act involves the interpenetration of the translator’s critical orientation that runs the risk of presenting the readers with a double-hegemony or a counter-narrative in the postcolonial cultural interface. Since translation is presently attributed with the power of subversion or appropriation, the overt critical interference of the translators can also lead to the propagation of the translator’s hegemonization. If the translations of Mahasweta Devi’s short stories are projected as the rendition of a new paradigm, then with the application of new critical perspectives they can also be regarded as new productions opening newer vistas for their treatment.

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