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Recasting aesthetics, violence, and oppression in translation politics

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Abstract
By looking at the translated works of Ajay Navaria, the paper looks at the politics and challenges of translating modern Hindi Dalit literature by using Benjamin and Sujit Mukherji's theoretical premise to look into not just the loss and gain in translation. The paper argues ways in which the act of (mis)translating registers and gestures of a Dalit as a modern subject misses an intrinsic part of Dalit politics embedded in promises contained in the English language. Secondly, it looks at how translations can both amplify Dalit voices to a wider audience and simultaneously risk transforming or diluting their political and aesthetic intent. By analysing the linguistic techniques, differing dialects and narrative strategies used in the original texts and their loss in English translations, the paper explores the limitations of conventional translation practices in expressing Dalit consciousness, social assertion, and the aesthetics of the writings.

Keywords: Caste, translation, aesthetics, politics, dalit consciousness

Introduction

Drawing from G N Devy, the modern literary critics in India are informed mainly by the 'colonially constructed hierarchal structure' of the Western literary traditions, which gives them a sense of inferiority of their own traditions (Devy 2009) [3]. This 'amnesia', which still exists, can be extended to the modern Hindi literary critics who, according to Laura Brueck, have led to a content-based understanding of Hindi literary writings. Extending this argument to Dalit writings, Brueck goes on to state that the lack of literary criticism has also led to a restriction of the Dalit writings to a 'mouthpiece for a rhetoric of politics of the broader Dalit movement'. (Brueck 2014) [2] In Dalit literature, language functions not merely as a site for contesting the entrenched linguistic hierarchies of the Hindi literary canon but also as a tool that articulates a distinctive aesthetic sensibility. Even though the modern Dalit writings in translation have become popular in academic institution enabling Dalit literature to gain a wider audience, both in and outside India, what we do not have is a distinct theory of translation. To put it in Sujit Mukherjee's words, we are translating so long that we forgot to stop and give a theory for it" (Mukherjee 2009) [11].

With the advent of translations of Dalit writings, one is also continuously confronted with the question whether translated works can 'translate' the whole histories of oppression and sufferings which the Dalits have undergone. How do we translate the 'language' which, according to Sharankumar Limbale, has been an area that offers a challenge to the mainstream Hindi writings that dominate the literary sphere? Is the rejection of the "cultivated gestures of grammer", which is the most important aspect of Dalit aesthetics as Limbale puts in reflected in the translation? Can a non-Dalit translator translate the feelings that are 'untranslatable', to speak in terms of Benjamin? Do we need a theory of translation for Dalit texts as a social necessity? These are some of the questions that the essay will attempt to answer.

It is interesting to note that translation can simultaneously enable Dalit voices to reach a broader audience both within and beyond India, while also posing the risk of significant loss or betrayal of the original text. For Sujit Mukherjee, it is 'both drama and prose fiction [which] pose problems to the translator, especially when the transference is from an Indian language to English' (Mukherjee 1981). What counts as a standard of good fiction is the use of poetic language in it. There is a strong rejection by the Dalit writers who, in the use of non-colloquial language, present a sense of aesthetics (Brueck 2014) [2]. For Sharankumar Limbale, the 'Dalit writers have rejected the class of this standard language' as they find it arrogant. (Limable 2004) Since the language becomes an essential tool in marking the aesthetics, the translation must be done in the most careful manner. Not only will the translator have to make a distinction between speeches of different characters, but he must 'maintain the consistency of each character's speech' (Mukherjee 1981). For Benjamin, a translation must not be restricted to communication or imparting information (Benjamin 1923). The translator must find the particular 'intention' of the author in their translation. Thus, we see Benjamin advocating that a translation that solely focuses on finding the exact meaning of the words that are to be translated does injustice to the work. However, the task becomes more nuanced when one is dealing with a Dalit text, as one continuously confronts the entire history of oppression and suffering. For Sharmila Rege, the 'intention' in a Dalit testimony is not of the literariness but that of retelling the pain, oppression, imprisonment and struggle of one group. Thus, the translation of a Dalit text is not only about finding the 'intention' but is also about tracing the entire histories of oppression and struggle for emancipation that it unravels before the world.

What we see in a Dalit translation is that language can become both an area of denial and also a space of enfranchisement for the Dalit writers. (Basu 2013) Also, translation can be a major hurdle that can limit the assertion acquired by the Dalit movement. One cannot deny the fact that although a translation helped the Dalit writings, in Sujit Mukherjee's terms, in getting 'recovered' from anonymity, it also transforms the Dalit experiences, something that is consumed by the broader academia both in and outside India. Christi Merill's analysis of different subtitles of Om

Prakash Valmiki's Joothan helps us understand this. While the Kolkata-based Samya Press titles it Joothan- A Dalit's Life, the New York-based Columbia University Press titles it as Joothan- An Untouchable's Life to garner more readership. (Basu 2013) The difference in the titles not only proves that 'English as a global language can never be uniform and neutral' but also shows how it limits the Dalits' assertion for self-identity. Translation, thus in its nuance, becomes something that enables Dalit Literature to gain a greater audience across linguistic boundaries, but also as something that transforms the Dalit experiences into items of consumption. For Arun Prabha Mukhejee, both 'joothan' and 'Dalit' are not translatable in English. Also, "the shift in self-identity from the pejorative and humiliating, externally imposed word, 'untouchable,' to a self-chosen identity cannot be captured by a literal translation." (Mukherjee 2006) [10]

Let me now come to Delhi-based Dalit writer Ajay Navaria, who writes short stories in Hindi and look at the aesthetic techniques used by him in his works. Ajay Navaria, in an interview with Alessandra Consolaro in 2015 [6], says how "literature is also influenced by the realities of societies and the concept of time and space and transcends these realities too and try to change it slowly and gradually. During this process, the new aesthetics of literature is developed and emerged. Aesthetics is not a static term but it continuously alter itself" (Navaria 2015) [6]. Navaria believes that the artistic value of Dalit literature will gradually gain recognition.

In his short stories, he employs different dialects as a literary tool, which differentiates between the upper caste characters who use non-standard speech to address the lower caste. The lower caste characters use the same dialect, but is often marked by helplessness. The language lacks the vocabulary of assertion. However, later, when the Dalit characters undergo a change in time and space, there is a change in speech which does not gets reproduced to the same effect in the translation. In the short story Upmahadvip (Subcontinent), Navaria uses a similar literary technique when the Dalit characters change language once they achieve Dalit Chetna (consciousness). The upper caste of the villagers uses rough and abusive language to the narrator's mother. The word Gaanv (village) is said Gaam, which is a regional dialect when speaking to the narrator's mother by the caste villagers who are torturing her. Later on, the narrator's son uses the correct Hindi word Gaanv when speaking about the village. Both words in the translated work are said as village. However, in the former case, the word is a signifier of the upper caste's hate of the lower caste, which gets manifested through coarse language. Navaria also employs the selective use of English words in his stories as a literary tool to show his characters' (and readers') imagination moving from rural to urban life. When the protagonist of the story (Upmahadvip), Subcontinent Siddharth Nirmal's wife, asks him about his plans of going to the village to attend a marriage ceremony, his memory oscillates between the past life of the village and the present city life. He thinks:

"… S mein Shirish Sonkar, D M screen par naam aur phone number ubhra. Shirish mera junior tha, university mein. Dausa mein hi posted hai… 'hello' udhar seaahat hote hi maine kaha. Par yeh to computer ka stree swar hai, 'the number you had dialed does not exists please check the number again' maine check kiya. Number sahi tha. Shayad unse sim card badal dia hoga" (Navaria 46).

"…Deputy Magistrate Shirish Sonkar's name and phone number appeared under 'S' on the screen. He was my junior at university. He is posted in Dausa, Rajasthan… 'Hello, I said as soon as I heard from the other end. But I could only hear computer generated female voice saying, "The number you have dialled does not exist, please check the number you have dialled." I checked. The number was correct. He must have changed his Sim card" (Navaria 102).

For Laura Brueck, in the "various linguistic registers within such tightly constructed short story narratives… issues such as traditionalism, modernity, and the like are revealed" (Brueck 2014) [2]. What we see here is that the English translation does not tell us at all about the use of English registers that trap the urban life, completely missed in the translation. The inability to reproduce the different speeches of educated and non-educated dalits limits the aesthetic sense used by the Dalit writers. (Brueck 2014) [2] Also, one sees Laura Brueck's analysis of the use of heteroglossic dialogues in the narratives of the Dalit characters, we see that the author continuously differentiates, through these dialogues, between those who have achieved Dalit Chetna (consciousness) and those who haven't undergone that. The use of such dialogues enables us to understand different social identities whose marker is language. Most contemporary Dalit writers use this kind of language to differentiate between the characters. The use of English registers is more clearly seen in his story *Yes Sir* where he uses a mix of Hindi and modern English words in order to bring to the fore the condescending image of the Dalit character Narottam. Even in the Hindi original, while speaking to his peon, Narottam uses 'R.O System, Aquaguard, Tootpaste, Colgate, detergent, water purifier, dreamgirl etc' While in the English translation, one does not know whether the words used in the translation were the same in the original text. The use of the english terms by the Dalit character is not just a status signalling but also a very political choice that implcitly challenge social hierarchy. The use of English words, also becomes an aesthetic strategy through which the writer enables the characters to exercise agency and interrogate a language that has traditionally served as an instrument of domination.

Thus, we see how the translation limits the sense of assertion and empowerment that the Dalit characters have assumed by getting employment through the reservation system. He shows his knowledge of the modern equipment to non Dalit person, which is a sign of transformation of status. The linguistic hierarchy serves as a tool to represent the Dalit self-consciousness and also shows the creative use of language employed by the Dalit writers.

Also, in Om Prakash Valmiki's Joothan, we see a continuous engagement with language by the author. Here, language is not justa tool that is employed in order to manifest the literariness but is also something that is necessary in the struggle to achieve self-respect. He recalls in the story how Baburam Tyagi helped him to have a grasp of the Hindi language (Valmiki 32). He also remembers how he met Dr Hanuman Naidu, who was the head of the Hindi department at Nagpur University and who was the one who polished his language (140). This affirms what Laura Brueck also states, that language helps us to understand the social and emotional distance between various Dalit psyches. The characters who have attained the

hegemonically defined 'Dalit Consciousness' are more likely to speak register of Hindi which is standard Hindi register. (Brueck 2014: 121) [2]

Thus, we see how the translation of a Dalit text in English is wrought with contradictions. On one hand, it makes a text get 'discovered' to the global market, while on the other hand, it can also become the language of denial. In case of Hindi fiction or English novels written in India, we see that works that resemble the Euro-American literature are considered to be of great artistic value. In words of Ajay Navaria, "what is considered good Hindi Fiction, strongly resembles Euro-American writing, albeit topped with a deshi sauce of sloppy Sanskrit-derived and other wishy-washy literary circus tricks that obfuscate the hard-core realities of Indian society but instead ruminate Euro-American phantasies of India, presented in a way that obscure the essence of Indian culture, society and civilization" (Navaria 2015) [6]. The translation often does the same thing. It attempts to make a Eurocentric approach towards understanding the caste system. But since the Dalit writers reject the mainstream theory and attempt to build their own aesthetic theory based on their own political and ideological premise, it becomes pertinent to have a serious study of translation theory or develop a new theory of translation towards an understanding of Dalit prose and poetry, which would help their literary styles and aesthetics get saved from being ignored. Thus, to end with G N Devy's lines, "the translation problem is not just a linguistic problem. It is an aesthetic and ideological problem which has a significant bearing on the question of literary history." (Devy 2009) [3].

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