



Walter Benjamin, Dalit Literature, and the Politics of Translationⁱ

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Abstract: This paper discusses the need for translating a regional text from the margins to English as well as in other vernacular languages. While it is necessary that a ‘Dalit’ text should be translated into English for international readership, there is also a need for it to be translated into other regional languages for a vernacular readership. The essay problematizes the role of the translator and the possible reader and the national and international market for these translated texts.

Keywords: *translation, vernacular, Brahminism*

Introduction: Translating the Regional into International

When Manohar Mouli Biswas’s autobiography *Amar Bhubone Ami bneche Thaki* came out in 2013, but it hardly received any attention from Savarna readers and critics. It was published by *Choturtho Duniya* (Fourth World), a literary organization with limited economic means committed to the nourishment of Dalit literature in Bengali. No review of it was printed in mainstream establishments, nor was it available for purchase at the popular bookstores of Bengal or on the internet. It was a low budget production that remained invisible to the general mass. The book was circulated only among fellow Dalit writers and was hunted down by academics working on Dalit literature in Bengali. But its English translation—carried out by Dr Jaydeep Sarangi and Angana Dutta and published by Samya in 2015—received both visibility and critical attention. It carried a brief forward by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, included a detailed interview with the author, and came with a formative scholarly introduction. The translation, *Surviving in My World: Growing up a Dalit in Bengal* was inaugurated at an international conference in Europe, it was made available on all leading online bookstores,

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and Anandabazaar Patrika, the highest circulating daily of West Bengal reviewed itⁱⁱ. The review was far from adhering to the Dalit cause—not only did it smirk at the author for his current economically affluent life; it also did not bother to write a word on Dalit consciousness. But the review granted the book the publicity it needed by briefly introducing its plot. What remains paradoxical is that a Bengali daily preferred to review the English translation over the original Bengali text. Furthermore, adding the subtitle, ‘Growing up a Dalit in Bengal’, I suppose, was a stepping ladder to summarize the wharf and woof of the book, performing as an advertising trailer to familiarize the content to a readership not knowing Bengali. One may also recall how the subtitle of Arun Prabha Mukherjee’s English translation of Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* slightly differed in the South Asian and the USA editions. While the former came with *A Dalit’s Life*, the latter was twisted into *An Untouchable’s Life* for the purpose of catering to an American audience unacquainted with the ramifications of the Indian term ‘Dalit’ but aware of the disgraceful Indian legacy of oppressing a specific sect of human beings known as ‘untouchables’.

The reason behind beginning my paper with this exemplary prelude is to demonstrate the dichotomy in which a text in its original vernacular resides in the margins of a literary establishment while its translation grows to become a major fodder for critical engagements of the English educated academia in elite institutions. Unbarred expressions of personal evolution are translated into texts for/of/by the academics; an English rendition enables the Dalit *testimonio* with an international market of universities and libraries, a readership beyond national borders. Keeping this nuanced disposition in mind, my paper aims to look at the politics of translating Dalit writing in vernacular languages into English. I will borrow my theoretical framework from Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay, *The Task of the Translator*.

Testimonios in Translation

Walter Benjamin’s *Task of the Translator* written in 1921 and published in 1923 served as a preface to his own translations of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*. The purpose of this preface therefore becomes twofold. While on the one hand, Benjamin tries to form a

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theoretical justification of his rendition, on the other hand, he sets to lay out a theory of translation that future translators need to keep in mind. In this text, Benjamin not only looks at what and how a translation should be, but he also delves into the nuanced relationships between different languages manifested by the process of translation. Benjamin's theory of translation, for its lack of visible and ideal examples, fails to provide any practical help to a translator. In spite of the fact that a translation gains something in the process of translation, one cannot be oblivious of what it loses or misses out. Therefore, what is missed out varies according to the translatability of the text. Since the translatability of a text varies from one text to another, it is difficult to produce translations of equal merit of all the texts. Furthermore, one needs to be aware of the practical purposes of translation, mostly in its facilitation of signifying a text from one language to another for greater communicability and objectivity. Keeping this mind, I will try to relate the theory he lays down to contextualize the act of translating a Dalit text.

Benjamin begins his article by asking the question whether translations are meant for readers who do not understand the original and answers it by arguing

It 'tells' very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not communication or the imparting of information. Yet any translation that intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but communication. This is the hallmark of bad translations. (Benjamin 2002: 253)

Refuting Benjamin's disposition, translations of Dalit writing are carried out keeping in mind a specific target reader. The inclusion of methodological interviews and critical introductions along with the text make the end-product consumable for scholars. Translation transforms the Dalit text—an unbarred expression of personal catharsis—by attempting to theorize it from outside. It alienates the *testimonio* from its cultural and linguistic roots and places it for discursive analysis in an academic space. Although, the inclusion of Dalit texts is an attempt to decolonize the curriculum from its Brahminical hegemony, one cannot be oblivious of the primary risk these texts have to encounter, — getting appropriated and subverted by

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Brahminism itself. If we are to go by Benjamin's claim about the readers of a translated text, we need to re-examine the very purpose of rendering the Dalit text into English.

Benjamin goes on to argue that translations belong to the afterlife of a piece of art and occurs at its moment of fame. (2002: 254) Contrarily, in the case of Dalit narratives, translations transport the piece of art to its moment of fame. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, in an afterword to his translation of *Joothan*, recalls how he first chanced upon the original Hindi text on a hot summer afternoon in June 1998 at the office of *Hans*, a Hindi monthly. He was introduced to the book by Rajendra Yadav, the editor of that monthly, who previously claimed to have no idea about Dalit writing in Hindi. (2014: 135) But the subsequent translation not only acquainted the text to a larger audience, it evolved *Joothan* to become a must-read for any scholar of Dalit studies. But tallying Benjamin's argument with the growth and international recognition of the Dalit movement might yield another possible interpretation. The gradual spread of anti-caste movements and literary endeavours across India in the second half of the twentieth century, followed by the Mandal Commission report that violently polarized the general masses created a momentum for the Dalit cause. The Durban conference at the turn of the millennium along with the subsequent inclusion of Dalit texts in academic curriculums in universities around the globe made the moment ripe for Dalit texts to be translated. It became a historical necessity for Dalit narratives to be accessible in a more familiar language—English, for its colonial history and contemporary socio-political ramifications in the Indian subcontinent. If rampant translations of major Dalit texts had not been carried out in the last two decades or so, the intra/international discourse Dalit Studies has currently engaged with would not have been possible.

Benjamin maintains that “translation ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages.” He turns back to what he calls “the traditional theory of translation.” (2002: 255) Since there is no means of determining the accuracy of faithfully representing the form and content of the original in its translated counterpart, it is necessary to endorse translation more as a mode of recreating the original rather than imitating it. Dalit

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literature in English translation operates to unite Dalit consciousness in the form of a cohesive whole. It offers the opportunity of exploring the relationship between several local cultures at different historical junctures by bringing them on the same linguistic plane. As it would be unjust to demand the translation to share likeness with its original, it would be more beneficial to observe how a translation of a Dalit text manifests the original by allowing its vernacular content to negotiate with English in its canonical juxtapositions. English is important in a multi-lingual country like India for being an impartial outsider. At the same time, it is the language of power that dismantles the vernacular lineage of India. Therefore, connecting the Dalit cause, (for it being continually repressed by the Brahminical hegemony over vernaculars in India) with English, empowers the Dalit writer and his/her translator by reversing the rules of the game laid out by Brahminism.

Translations of Dalit texts have occurred by enhancing the linguistic contours of English. In case of *Joothan*, retaining the original title in Hindi, without replacing it with an English equivalent has succeeded to not only expand the possibilities of ‘joothan’ beyond its Indian origin, but also in appropriating and expanding the possibilities of English to accommodate a foreign word. Furthermore, keeping a bulk of vernacular words un-translated (but explained in a glossary or in footnotes) preserves the original cultural connotations inherent in them. This, on the one hand, enriches the target language, and, on the other hand, adopts it to drive these ‘fragments’ come closer to what Benjamin defines as a ‘greater language’. This becomes a makeshift solution for dealing with the untranslatability of a text. As Benjamin observes, the purpose of translation is not merely to ‘transmit messages’ from one language to another, but a provisional way to come to terms with the foreignness of a language. The untranslatable is left un-translated but separately explained, thus paving a mutually symbiotic interaction between the two cultures.

Walter Benjamin sums up the ‘task of the translator’ to be the feat of “finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original.” (2002: 258). Although Benjamin’s beliefs were about translating poetry, they can

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be seen in the light of rendering other genres as well. If Dalit literature is written for the purpose of propagating ‘Dalit consciousness’ (Limbale 2004: 19), then the primary aim of translating Dalit texts, in my opinion, is to expand the possibilities of Dalit consciousness by spreading it across linguistic and national borders. Translation can contribute to this cause by not just blindly reproducing the meaning of each word used in the texts but by organically incorporating the context and culture with all their nuances as much as possible in another language. Such a strategy, in Benjamin’s words, would make both the original text and its translated version recognizable as fragments of a ‘greater language’ which in this case would be the Dalit consciousness.

Of Markets and Outsiders: Towards a Conclusion

Kalyani Thakur Chharal, a woman Dalit writer in Bengali, regretted in a talk that Dalit literature fetches only two kinds of audience—Dalits who are literate and can afford reading, and academics working on Dalit literature. She went on to assert that Dalit writers in vernacular languages look for translators more keenly than publishers these daysⁱⁱⁱ. In this context, it can be argued by borrowing from Benjamin again, that there is an enormous deal of ‘translatability’ in Dalit texts. Translation can thus be read as a crucial apparatus for the Dalit writers to combat the marginalization and ignorance they face from the Savarna establishment in their own language as it endows them with a scope to communicate to a more serious and academic audience in English. But, at the same time, initiatives should be taken for Dalit writers to reclaim their space also in their mother tongues; translations need to be carried out not just into English but into other vernacular languages as well. The bulk of Babasaheb Ambedkar’s canonical writings are essentially in English. Ambedkar used writing not just to theorize caste but also to wage a battle of words against the caste Hindu nationalists and British colonizers. Writing in English enabled him to engage directly with the English-speaking academia across borders in subsequent generations. But ironically, the lack of plausible translations into Indian vernaculars, especially Bengali, restricts his access to the substantial population residing outside the realms of English education in his own country. I

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will now try to look at some of the practical problems that Dalit writing in translation face at the onset of renewed capitalism and globalization.

The growth of Dalit Studies as a necessary development of Cultural Studies in the English academia at universities all over the world has created a demand for the translation and availability of Dalit texts. Academics and translators are on a hunt to discover for diverse, obscure, and lost Dalit texts to make them readily available in the lingua franca. This has also paved the way for a series of avant-garde publication houses like Navayana and Samya to come up along with garnering renewed interest from established enterprises like Oxford or Routledge. However, while on the one hand, the importance of widely translating Dalit literature from several vernacular languages cannot be undermined, doubts regarding the scope and motive of these publishers have inevitably come up. How much can these publishers evade the forces of a consumerist market and prevent the narratives from turning into commodities designed for the consumption of an otherwise Brahminical audience? What are the ramifications of a Dalit text being translated by a member coming from privileged elite class? How is the Dalit cause appropriated in such a process? An idea of this conflict is visible in the debates centering around the Navayana publication of the *Annihilation of Caste* in which Arundhati Roy's introduction to the text drew rigorous contempt from Dalit intellectuals to such an extent that culminated in the publication of *Hatred in the Belly*. In most cases, publishers give the writer a specific page limit, not following which would jeopardize their cost estimates. This is a major challenge to the publication and dissemination of Dalit writing.

Most of the Dalit writers, in the Gramscian sense, are organic intellectuals who articulate and theorize their lived experiences. They gain their unique idiom by consciously separating their style, diction, and content from the Caste Hindu writers. Translations catered for the pedagogic purpose of universities bring these organic intellectuals in the framework of the traditional intellectual. Translations occur not only from one language into another but also with a major diabolic shift in audience, readership, and reception. Furthermore, choosing a

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relatively more acclaimed and organized publisher secures the text from getting lost. Most low budget publication units, as I have observed, do not maintain careful archives of the titles they bring out. Translation, in a way, preserves the penumbra of a text in its afterlife.

Professor Sharmila Rege, in her seminal work, *Writing Gender, Writing Caste* (2006), has extensively looked into nuanced debates revolving around the reception of Dalit narratives. By assembling the argumentative voices of Gopal Guru, Uma Chakravarti, Smith and Watson, and others, she goes on to conclude,

The role of critical translations for foregrounding the social and political content of the testimonies cannot be undermined. Reading dalit ‘autobiographies’ minus the political ideology and practices of the dalit movement does stand the risk of making a spectacle of dalit suffering and pain for non-dalit readers.

...

When the purpose of reading is one of democratisation of knowledge-s rather than colonisation, locating the narratives historically and relationally becomes crucial.”

(Rege 2006: 15)

Agreeing with Professor Rege, one needs to be aware of the historical necessity of encouraging the translation of Dalit literatures along with being sensitive of the risks it posits. I would like to conclude this article by bringing in Bakhtin to highlight another prospect of translating Dalit texts in a world brought together by digital connectivity.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his *Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff*, observes, “In the realm of culture, outsidership is a powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself and profoundly.” (Bakhtin 1986: 06) From Bakhtin’s disposition, it can be asserted that translation facilitates Dalit literature and culture to open itself up and reach out to other historically and socially oppressed cultures of the world, in turn, allowing it to communicate, exchange, and enrich itself. It is only possible through translation for the Dalit milieu in India to transcend linguistic boundaries and interact with the Black American culture in America or the Apartheid of South Africa through a relatively more acquainted language. Without translation

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and participation from serious enthusiasts irrespective of their race, class, creed, and caste, Dalit literature, an emblematic outcome of the Dalit movement, would have to suffer the unfortunate fate of being ghettoized to an insular realm robbed off the possibilities a globalized future might have in store for it.

Notes

ⁱ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a conference on “Archiving Marginalities: Documenting Narratives of the Oppressed”, organized by the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India on 16-17 March, 2016

ⁱⁱ See Bandopadhyay, Anirban. "Tritiyo Jiboner Kotha Jante Icche Kore." *Anandabazar Patrika*. Abhik Sarkar, 28 Nov. 2015. Web. 08 Jan. 2016.

<<http://www.anandabazar.com/supplementary/pustokporichoi/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Charal, Kalyani Thakur. "Gender Dalit Literature in Bengal: Questions of Marginalization, Hegemony, Appropriation." *Publishing and Disseminating Dalit Literature*. Department of English University of Delhi, New Delhi. 18 Dec. 2015. Lecture.

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