

Interrogating the Authenticity of Dalit Texts in Translation

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Abstract: The paper looks at the complexities involved in the translation of Dalit texts. There is an attempt to look at the Dalit texts in translation as “new writing”, “recovery” and “discovery”. The paper attempts to answer the most important question: can the Dalit texts in translation also translate the Dalit consciousness (*chetna*) which is intrinsic to the original version. The paper analyses the English translated version of *Jhoothan*, an autobiographical narrative by Om Prakash Valmiki to nuance the ideas. The relevance of translation as a means to break the linguistic barriers and spread the Dalit voice across cultures is noteworthy; the role of translator becomes more important as he/she bears the moral responsibility to translate the emotions. The paper engages with the process of translation while undertaking a close reading of the text *Jhoothan*. The idea is to critically analyse the question of a “relevant” translation; whether it’s possible or not.

Keywords: autobiography, consciousness, Dalit, Hindi, translation.

The idea of translation as “new writing” has been propounded by Sujit Mukherjee; he claims that a translation is both a “recovery” and “discovery” (*Translation as Discovery*, 2006) of the original. His high esteem of the translation contradicts the traditional hierarchical perception of the original and the translation of a literary work, wherein the original is always the superior/ the absolute/ the source to be revered and the translation is to strive to approximate the greatness of the original. He argues that the translation involves more craft than art (42) and thereby deserves an ‘almost’ equal status. An analysis of the translation of Dalit literature through the lens of Mukherjee’s claims undercuts the recognized socio-political objectives of Dalit literature. Sharankumar Limbale, and other Dalit writers and scholars acknowledge that the literature “which causes the greatest awakening of Dalit consciousness in the reader”(Joothan:2003 xxvii) would be identified as Dalit literature. The Dalit consciousness, according to Limbale, can be aroused only through an authentic depiction of the exploitation of the lower castes in an oppressive brahmanical

social structure. However, as Mukherjee claims, the authenticity is doomed to be compromised in the face of translation as the “new writing”. This paper will analyze the idea of the translation vis-à-vis Dalit literature in general and specifically Dalit autobiography to interrogate the homogenizing tendencies of the Dalit literary discourse. The paper attempts to explore the ideas of Dalit consciousness in an original autobiography and its translation with specific reference to the arbitrary categorization of Dalit and non-Dalit writers, and language politics by examining Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*(1997).

Considering the aforementioned criteria of authenticity, one can decipher the rationale behind choosing the genre of autobiography as the preferred genre among Dalit writers. Gopal Guru further validates the choice of the genre, as the Dalit autobiographies are “politically subversive” and “aesthetically interesting” (Rege 10). In *Joothan*, the writer revisits the past to encounter the past with the present political consciousness that propels him to acknowledge the humiliated past in order to resist the present casteist regressive practices. To Dalit literary discourse, according to Limbale , the ideas of “equality, freedom, justice, and love” are most important than the mainstream aesthetic sensibilities of “pleasure and beauty” (Limbale 119). The “I” in the Dalit narrative, unlike bourgeois individualism, incorporates the collective identity “we”, that registers the shared trauma of the Dalit community at the hands of the caste people. By tracing the history of the self and the community, Valmiki, first, seeks to write a history of his community as they have been marginalized in brahmanical historiography; second, intends to construct a “counter public domain”(Fraser), that facilitates the retrieval of the culture, myths that have been subsumed into the larger Hindu identity (Narayan, Introduction), therefore Valmiki recounts the local gods- goddesses(39), and distinct practices like “gauna” and widow remarriage that are alien to the propagated codes of Hindu religion. The myths and legends are invoked only to turn them on their heads, e.g. the teacher whips narrator in his childhood for interrogating the glorification of Dronacharya (23). Kancha Ilaiah also endorses that the autobiography is “indeed the most authentic way in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history takes place”(xiii).

The credibility of translating a Dalit autobiography seems to be ambiguous in the light of the recurrent emphasis on autobiography’s socio- political motives which thrives on the premise of the authenticity and Dalit consciousness. The points of contest are- whether a non-Dalit translator can interiorize the Dalit consciousness and express it within the translation of a Dalit text? Will the Dalit literary “cannon” approve of a non-Dalit translator? How would the non-Dalit translator reconcile with the “I” of the autobiography. Therefore, some Dalit writers are wary of the loss of the explicitly underlined Dalit objectives against the ulterior commercial motives.

Bassnett and Trivedi in the introduction to their anthology *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (2002) attempt to destabilize the authority of the original/authentic by quoting Octavio Paz who claims that “no text can be completely original because language itself in its very essence, is already a translation” (3). The claim

to the authenticity is further questioned on account of the author's right to narrate only selected memories; Valmiki in the preface to his autobiography claims that "a lot is still unsaid for lack of power". The writer's life experiences also get refined through the framework of linguistic structures and narrator's perspective on his/her past experiences. Therefore, the autobiography is redeemed out of the essential construction as the original, and detached of its authority to be the source to the translated work.

The Dalit writers and scholars question the validity of non-Dalit translators because they do not have authentic experience to evoke Dalit consciousness. Their suspicions are rooted in the false assumptions that create polarities between Dalit and non-Dalit writers; first and foremost, they arbitrarily trust that all Dalits have undergone similar oppressive experiences and therefore, possess Dalit consciousness which qualify them to be a part of the Dalit literary cannon; contrary to this, all non-Dalit writers are not sensitive or aware enough to remain true to the cause of Dalit emancipation in their writings. However, one cannot completely discard their apprehensions against the caste writers and translators as baseless, Sharmila Rege cautions them against homogenizing practices of prohibiting and containing creative expressions as this can be counter-productive (2). Their rigidity is as problematic as the mainstream critique of Dalit literature as non-literary, for how can Dalit literary discourses seek to counter the brahmanical cultural hegemony by creating an another one.

Ganesh Devy in his essay quotes Roman Jakobson to articulate the three types of translation-(a) from one verbal order to another within the same language system, (b) those from one language system to another, (c) those from one verbal order to another system of sign(184). Taking the example of *Joothan*, the translation is from one language system to another, which involves the transference of narrator's experiences from one cultural context to another. Thus, translation is not a pure aesthetic practice but represents the intersection of cultural and political ideologies.

Most of the post-colonial countries exhibit a one way process of translation that is from vernacular languages to English. *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki is also translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. The credibility of English as the language of translations is grounded in its status as the major "link language" (as Sujit Mukherjee identifies in *Translation as Discovery*) in the postcolonial cultural context that abridges the linguistic gaps and reinforces the formation of Dalit link literature. Tapan Basu in his essay quotes Sharmila Rege and P. Sivakami to acknowledge English as the language of "democratization" (21) in its capacity to bring diverse Dalit literary works in multiple languages across the nation on the same page and also forging the bond of solidarity among different subaltern groups at global level. Thus, English no longer serves as the colonial tool to subjugate. Rather, it emerges as the connecting link to create an ideological space to promote dialogue across different cultures.

A linguistic system incorporates the specific cultural peculiarities. Sujit Mukherjee (2006) admits the approximation to the original as the only yardstick to measure a translation (5). Therefore, a complete semantic transference from one language system to another is not possible. Walter Benjamin in the essay “The Task of the Translator” focuses on the dilemma that whether content/substance/sense held a greater claim over the aesthetic component/poetic sensibility in the translation or vice versa (69-71). However, the proclaimed motive to translate Dalit literature is not to cater readers’ aesthetic sensibilities but to disseminate the plight of Dalits. Therefore, the practice of translating the original Dalit literature carries political import and upholds Dalit consciousness, aroused and expressed in the literary work, as the primary concern in the translation.

The translator bears the challenge and responsibility to do justice to the social and political intention of Dalit literary productions. Sharankumar Limbale in “Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature” argues that the distinct language in terms of the “uncouth, impolite language” of the Dalit literature is borne out of the different experiential reality of Dalits. The enormous task of the translator of the Dalit text is to communicate the originally felt emotions along with the cultural, social, and regional peculiarities of the original. A.P.Mukherjee in *Joothan* retains the original Hindi title along with many local spatial phrases like “basti”, “gher”, references to extended family relations, e.g. chacha, tauji, mama, and derogatory casteist references like, “Oe Chuhre”, “Abey Chuhre” “Sohra” in order to preserve the regional, cultural characteristics of the original. Also, the title signifies a sense of pain and humiliation which cannot be invoked in the English translated counterpart of the title. The translation fails to register the language of urgency driven by the emotional tumult, for instance, in the preface to the English version fails to keep the pace of the emotionally charged short sentences. One can also notice the unsuccessful rendering of the nuances of the local language in the translated version of original *Joothan* (1997). For instance, the differences in the tone, accent, vocabulary between the father and the narrator, and narrator and his caste school mate, do not get materialized in the translation. The disparities are the consequences of the linguistic limitations owing to the differences in the two language systems involved, rather than incapability on the part of the translator. Derrida in “What is a Relevant Translation?”, emphasizes that the translation characterizes the ever present lack as the original work never yields to a complete semantic transference. Bakhtin deals with this linguistic limitation and argues that the co-existence of multiple languages within a socio- cultural context can never get completely transmitted/ reflected in the translation (99). He further underscores that this “lack” lays bare the totalitarian tendencies of the translation (99). However, Arun Prabha Mukherjee resists the totalitarian potential of the translation by employing literary strategies like selecting some portion of the narrative to retain, and editing and replacing some Hindi expressions with English counterparts.

The English translation of Valmiki’s autobiography is relatively in sync with the identified motives of the Dalit literary discourse. But, one cannot negate that the success of the outcome relies heavily on the prudence of the translator. A thorough analysis of both the

Hindi and the English versions of *Joothan* brings to fore the question of the eligibility of the translator. Sujit Mukherjee in “An Essay in Definition” (2006), attempts to delineate the criteria to estimate the eligibility of the translator. He outlines that a translator must have specialization in the languages along with the sense of familiarity with their respective cultures (39). Arun Prabha Mukherjee exemplifies the aforementioned characteristics owing to her identities as a post-colonial scholar and literary critic, and as a professor in York University. She also asserts in “A Note by the Translator”, in the translated work, that her interest in the text sparked because the narrative is about “my[her] corner of India, in my[her] first language, Hindi” (x). Thus, the cultural and social proximities with an academic specialization has enabled Mukherjee to come to terms with the distinct language systems.

When Sujit Mukherjee claims that “there being more craft than art to translation” (42), he is implicitly ascertaining that the translator needs to accommodate the intention of the writer and the themes of the work, and cater to the expectations of both the writer and the readers. Conventionally, where a work of art is conceived of as an outcome of spontaneous overflow of feelings of the poet/writer, a translator who is as much inspired by the inner urge (Mukherjee 42) has to curb his creative spontaneity to address the demands of the translation. Therefore, the translation is aptly described as the “new writing” (Mukherjee, 2006) and “creative translation” (Devy 184).

When a translator creatively engages with the original work of literature, he takes certain liberties in terms of editing, remodeling the original in order to achieve an apparent spontaneous shift from one language system to another. Arun Prabha Mukherjee employs this freedom in order to retain the cultural, regional peculiarities of the original. In contrary, an imprudent translator can render the writer’s Dalit consciousness into the narration of the pathetic experiences of the narrator in the name of creative liberties. The fundamental question is how much freedom a translator can claim? Sujit Mukherjee in *Translation as Recovery* (2009) , claims that Indian translators have the drawback to interfere, edit the original to an irreparable extent (41). When Mukherjee entitles his critical anthologies as *Translation as Recovery* (2009), and *Translation as Discovery*(2006), he recognizes the capacity of the translator to discover the text in terms of his/her interpretation and recover the original work for a large number of readerships.

As “new writing”, “creative writing”, and “discovery”, literary translation claims certain creative freedom. The extreme apprehensions of the Dalit literary discourse about the failure of Dalit cultural movement at the altar of commercialized mainstream literary translation could end up delimiting its cultural expression. The introduction by Harish Trivedi and Susan Bassnett to *Post- colonial Translation* (2002) suggests a reconciliatory position by drawing upon the idea of “inbetween space” by Homi K. Bhabha. One can conclude that on the one hand, the translator’s creative autonomy cannot be curtailed, on the other; the translator needs to be sensitive to the cultural, and ideological demands of the original by not succumbing to the rigorous demands of the alien linguistic, and cultural

structures. The reconciliation between the two becomes more important in the context of Dalit literature which originated out of the dire political and social needs to assert Dalit's identity.

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