

RELOCATED IN MEANING-A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SPIVAK'S TRANSLATION OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S 'DRAUPADI'

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Abstract: Modern academia has seen major changes in contemporary approaches. Interdisciplinarity seems to be the call for the day as disciplinary boundaries are rapidly dissolving. Comparative literature or comparative analysis thrives on the very idea of interdisciplinarity and provides modern academia a dynamic approach. Translation studies is one such discipline which paves the way for comparative analysis of texts. But the question that have bothered critics and academicians is that whether translation is a mere recreation of the original text or does it lead the germination of a completely novel work. The familiarity with the host and target language on part of the readers also leads to the question of retention of the originality of essence and meaning in the translated text. Readership, language, locale and setting of the original text play a significant role in the assessment of the translated narrative. This paper attempts to look into these questions by attempting a comparative analysis of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's translation of Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi'.

Keywords: translation, comparison, language, tribal, meaning, dialect

"Comparative literature is an academic field dealing with the study of literature and cultural expression across linguistic, national, geographic, and disciplinary boundaries. It traces the transformations and travels of literary genres and texts across time and space. The discipline explores the connections of literature with history, philosophy, politics, and literary theory." ("Why Study Comparative Literature")

As an academic discipline Comparative Literature delves into the intersections of literature with other cultural forms such as film, drama, the visual arts, music, and new media. In the development of comparative literature as an academic discipline, translation of texts, translation theories and their subsequent readings and analysis has played an important role. Translation studies much like the discipline of comparative literature forays into transcending linguistic barriers and allows for texts to reach wider readership. They attempt to bring peripheral texts to the center and vice versa. But the question that arises and one that have troubled academicians is that whether a translated work is able to successfully replicate the original, its essence and flavour or a new narrative emerges out of the translated text. This paper aims to make a comparative study between Mahasweta Devi's Bengali short story Draupadi and its accepted English translation by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in an attempt to find an answer to the earlier mentioned dilemma.

"More than just a linguistic activity, translation is one of the main ways in which intercultural relationships are formed and transformed. The study of translation should thus involve far more than merely defining and testing linguistic equivalents." (Pym, 2010). The above quoted statement clearly suggests that translation is not only limited to the transference of a text or a narrative from a host to a recipient language- in most hetero-normative approaches translation is viewed as the process to transfer a local text to a global academic arena. However, translation theorists are clearly against such a simplified categorization. Crossing linguistic limitations, geographical and cultural restrictions, translated texts often form an identity of its own which can be read in its own singularity and independence. This very birth of a new text out of the process of translation allows for a comparative and critical analysis of the two narratives- the host and the translated one (Warwal, 2014). Language and its intricacies are a very important component in comparative analysis of texts and in the discipline of comparative literature. And linguistic nuances play a very important part in a

story like Draupadi which is situated in the remotest of areas in rural Bengal, 'rarbhum' (parts of Bengal within the districts of Purulia, Bankura and a certain part of Jharkhand as well) to be exact- a land of tribals, of languages and dialects as old as the Indian heartland itself. Mahasweta Devi's renowned work has been set in a locale which has an indigenous culture, a linguistic fervor which is distinctive in its existence. It's a land comprising mainly of tribals (Santhals to be precise), but at the same time has inhabitants in the form of people belonging to the lower castes and class of Bengal, the middle-class and the bureaucrats. This has given rise to a unique milieu, which is not all cosmopolitan, yet one which is distinct and different from socio-political-economic and linguistic aspects. The reader has to keep in mind the fact that Spivak essentially translates a text steeped in this earthy ruggedness and tries to transform it for a cosmopolitan and sophisticated readership. Mahasweta Devi had worked for the tribals in that particular area for several years and hence was aware and acquainted with the dialects and their norms which is reflected in the original text. Not only that, but the writer also creates a unique linguistic blend in the story where the language of the metropolitan, language of the administration and the language of the rural Bengal, the tribals co-exist together. Spivak in her forward to the translation says, "Here Mahasweta begins putting together a prose that is a collage of literary Bengali, street Bengali, bureaucratic Bengali, tribal Bengali, and the languages of the tribals." (Spivak,1981). What the original author creates, and the translator acknowledges is the differences within a single language- in this case pertaining particularly to Bengali- an observation which is astute to critically comparing two narratives, the very essence of comparing literature.

These differences however find a leveled platform, the discordant rhythm being diminished somehow, and a polished cadence taking its place when the text gets translated into English. Spivak's efforts are sincere, her observations acute and that is perhaps the reason her translations of Mahasweta Devi are considered to be the most authentic, yet the highlighted differences of the original, the rustic musicality are never totally appropriated. A comparative analysis of a section of the texts illustrates the point. In a description of the modus operandi of the tribals against the system, Mahasweta Devi writes, "Saotalir naam Dopdi, kyan? Ami je naamer listi loiya aschi tate to emun naam nai? Listite nai emun naam keu thuite pare?" (Devi,1978) The same portion in the translation of Spivak emerges as "What's this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it! How can anyone have an unlisted name?" (Spivak,1981) The original text incorporates a Bengali dialect which is essentially a conglomeration of rural Bengali and a dialectical form from present Bangladesh. To cite example one can, focus on the words 'emun' and 'thuite'. 'Emun' is essentially a disfigurement of the Bengali word 'emon' which is once again derived from the polished and nuanced and typically metropolitan Bengali word 'erokom' meaning 'like something'. Thus, a singular word undergoes a dual modification to emerge as it is seen in the original text. The translator's limitation and her need to provide a text steeped in distinctive features of colloquiality a global linguistic pedestal give an already morphed word a common translated platform. Similarly, the word 'thuite' in general means 'to keep'. But the common Bengali word for the purpose is 'rakha'. 'Thuite', which is a word generally spoken by natives belonging to modern day Bangladesh finds usage in the original narrative by Devi when one of the liveries at the very beginning of the text. Readers familiar with the language can immediately draw an inference about the social class, origin and position of the person speaking. Spivak's translation is never able to capture the essence. She replaces the word Santhal with tribal- a generalised term instead of the specific one. A sophisticated tone substitutes the local parlance which makes the speaker sound like any other government servant which robs the text off a certain linguistic flavour that accompanies the original. A critical and comparative analysis of the two texts only can lead to such astute observations. Hence, translation not only crosses the linguistic barrier, but also emerges as an important contrivance in the discipline of comparative literature.

Similarly, the word 'khochor' from the original text which generally means a police-informant (usually from the ruffian class or from within the criminals themselves) does not find an equivalent in Spivak's translation and is omitted, perhaps intentionally. The word is of common usage among law-keepers. The word carries a particular connotation, finding a cosmopolitan equivalent which seems rather difficult, but in its omission a certain meaning or nuance is lost from the text, howsoever insignificant it might be. Such examples are abounding. The word 'khonjijal' which is derived from the 'khonj' which means to search (so 'khonjijal' can roughly be translated to 'searcher') is changed to 'informant' in the translated version to maintain a certain cadence. And throughout the entirety of the translated version, the peculiarity of dialect, the particular accent in which the tribals speak has been appropriated. Spivak herself admits this fact in the introduction: "It follows that I have had the usual "translator's problems" only with the peculiar Bengali spoken by the tribals. In general, we educated Bengalis have the same racist attitude toward it as the late Peter Sellers had toward our English. It would have been embarrassing to have used some version of the language of D. H. Lawrence's "common people" or Faulkner's blacks. Again, the specificity is micrological. I have used "straight English," whatever that may be." (Spivak,1981).

What is interesting to note is that the cultural and linguistic exchange does not take place only through the translation of the text. The original text in itself has curious instances where a lingual interchange is at place. The tribal and rural people use words like ‘pulus’ and ‘biddibabu’ which are broken formats of the words ‘police’ and ‘BDO’. Words like ‘listi’ are morphed, broken formats of the original English word itself (the word being ‘list’ in this case.) Similarly, ‘train’ becomes ‘tain’ in the local language. The most interesting transfiguration is that of the word ‘encounter’. For the Santhal rebels it becomes ‘counter’ (this is how Spivak uses the word in her translation. The original text records it as ‘couter’ with a slight nasal tone incorporated in the pronunciation of the same). The uninitiated appropriates a technical term which adheres to state-oppression to state their fate. What is curious they seem to outgrow the fear of the term. Draupadi says, “Dhorle ba ki korbe bol? Couter kore dibe,dik” (Devi,1978)- translated “What will they do if they catch me? They will counter me. Let them.” (Spivak,1981) the appropriation of this particular word seems to be symbolically related to Draupadi’s bravado, her fearlessness against the administrative regimen which ultimately manifests in the dramatic, haunting and cruelly impactful ending of the text where an undraped Draupadi confronts the Senanayak, asking him to ‘counter’ her. The language constructs the character. A global, sophisticated, and elite linguistic phenomenon undergoes an informal, vernacular transformation. The rustics transfigures them according to their own usage. Language, thus, does not remain constrained inside a hegemonic space. Mahasweta Devi frees the narrative of its linguistic and culture curtailments. The most unique feature of the original text is the co-existence of so many linguo-cultural spaces, so many distinctive voices that comes together to create a socio-political narrative that traverses the length of the society- from the elites to yokels. Spivak, in all her brilliance, captures the essence, provides the text a wider readership, yet the linguistic nuances which is the hallmark of the parent text seems to fall short.

The primal linguistic mutation of the narrative is centered upon the eponymous heroine. Suresh Ranjan Basak writes, “Draupadi, the classical heroine of the Mahabharata, in an unavoidable way, forms the praxis of reference, comparison, and contrast with Mahasweta Devi’s tribal heroine Draupadi. As part of the collective mytho-cultural memory, the ancient lady invokes a process of analogy, and “deconstruction” (Spivak, 1981) as does Mahasweta Devi’s Santal Draupadi against the backdrop of the West Bengal government’s anti-Naxalite campaigns and military operations in the late 1960s and early 1970s.” (Basak, 2020) The name of the protagonist herself undergoes a colloquial transfiguration. The tribal inhabitants of the area, devoid of the elite mythic counterpart and linguistic aristocracy, re-christens her as ‘Dopdi’- giving her an identity of her own. The class-based colloquialism co-exists with metropolitan chauvinism in the name itself- Draupadi Mejhen. Class differences seems to be obliterated in the original manuscript- “Most wanted meyechele” (Devi, 1978) which is a given one-liner description of Draupadi. ‘Meyechele’ is a derogatory coinage in urban dialectical Bengali for a woman of dubious characteristics. In Spivak’s translation the same line emerges as, “Most notorious female.” (Spivak,1981) The English substitute ‘female’ does not carry the same weightage and disparaging connotation as ‘meyechele.’ A single word is laden with the patriarchal outlook, the hatred of administration towards the outlaw and is pregnant with a plethora of underlying metaphors which initiates the readers to the context of the narrative. Similarly, words like ‘dom’ and ‘charal’ which denotes two different marginalised classes within the Bengali Community, finds a singular equivalent in the word ‘untouchables’ in Spivak’s translation. The instances obviously raise questions towards the purity of the translated text- how much does it retain the spirit and essence of the original host text. Academic inquisitiveness leads to the obvious question- whether translated works are mere reproductions of the originals, or independent works of their own accord.

The translation meant for a metropolitan readership and its comparative study with the text, accomplishes two substantial objectives. Firstly, the texts (considering the translation as an independent text) which are set during the Naxalite movement, a major peasant and intellectual uprising in contemporary Bengal, introduces the socio-political scenarios of the time to the readers. The translated version opens up avenues for a larger readership to look into and compare the setting with similar socio-political movements across the nation and the world. Secondly, the title of the story ‘Draupadi’ initiates readers to an important character from an Indian epic, her significance (both mythological and metaphorical), and how she gets recreated in the eponymous heroine of Mahasweta Devi’s story. Myth gets recreated in reality; class boundaries are transcended as a princess is redrawn in the character arch of a tribal woman. The story in itself is a study in comparisons, the translation gives it a global platform. Thus, a unique narrative is formed where a critically comparative analysis of a text is found both within itself and its translated form.

Susan Bassnett (2007) defines Comparative Literature and Translation Studies as self-independent ways of analysing narratives that are mutually beneficial for each other. Citing Ezra Pound's Cathay Poems in translation as examples, Bassnett comes up with the view that the disciplinary boundaries between translation studies and comparative literature be resolved and translation studies should foray into the practice of comparative analysis so that present day academia finds a more open and dynamic approach. Present scenario of academic research and modern critics agree on the fact that both these disciplines are rather interdependent. Translation, its theories, and its analysis are important methodologies in comparative analysis of texts. As many translation theorists agree that more often than not translation leads to the birth of a new text (for readers not initiated to the host-language, the translated text is an independent work in itself), it always keeps open an avenue for the comparative analysis between the two. The case in study in the given paper corroborates with the notion that theorists and practitioners of the discipline of Comparative Literature propagates. Mahasweta Devi's original text of 'Draupadi' is a linguistic marvel where language finds a dimension of its own. It's a text where language is fluid- the elite and the sub-altern dialogues exist together, the colloquial, the dialectical and the metropolitan linguistic space converges to create a cross-cultural and multi-lingual interface which perhaps strengthens the narrative outcome. Spivak's translation provides it a much-needed global platform. However, some of the obvious and subtle gradations do not find appropriate equivalences which perhaps robs the text of some of its texture. The translation, read in its individualistic existence, emerges as an equally strong narrative. A critical and comparative analysis of the two, however, reinstates the focal argument of modern comparative studies that translation studies are an important aspect of comparative literature and contemporary academia thrives on the mutual coalition between both the disciplines.

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