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Loss of the Reader: Analysis of Spivak's Translation of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

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Mahasweta Devi (1926-) is a prolific Bengali writer and a very active social activist. Her works for the upliftment of the tribal people is extra ordinary. Along with the tribal people, she has also dedicated her struggles for all the subalterns, who are the victims of the system and class. Her works like *Bashai Tudu*, *Chhota Munda and His Arrow*, *Rudali*, *Mother of 1084*, "Douloti", "Draupadi", "Breast-giver", etc. gives a realistic picture of the society where protagonists are oppressed and suppressed by the different tools of the system. Major portions of her writings are journalistic in nature and are directed against the mainstream. According to her mainstream people are the mute spectators and are very much part of the exploitations inflicted upon the subalterns. Though all her stories are written in Bengali, most of the works of Devi has been now translated into English and other languages for wider readership.

While talking about Devi's influence on the world literature, it will be unfair if we don't mention Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1942-) name along with hers. Spivak played an important role in Devi's career by making her familiar to the western readers through her translations and critical writings on Devi's works. Many of Devi's works has been translated by Spivak which are famous with wide array of readers.

A translation is basically meant for readers who do not understand the original text, and the aim of a translator is to provide a semantic equivalence between the Source Text and the Target Text. But the problem arises with the term 'equivalence', as to what should be expected and accepted from the translated text. I call it a problem because the exact equivalence is almost impossible, i.e. to say, no translator could provide a translation that is a perfect parallel to the source text, in respect to rhythm, sound, symbolism, puns, and cultural allusions. The success of a translation depends on the purpose for which it is made, which in turn reflects the needs of the reader for whom it is being made, but in any case there is always some loss of information on the part of the reader. The present paper is thus an analysis of the loss of information in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" which has been translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

There is no doubt about the credibility in Spivak's translation of "Draupadi" from Bengali to English, but an English reader has to keep in mind a number of things before proceeding to read the translated text, and that may be one of the reasons which made Spivak to write a detailed Translator's Foreword to the said text. Mahasweta Devi has also complimented Spivak for the beautiful translation. But as a Bengali reader, I feel the absence of a lot of things which are actually available in the original text.

As far as the story is concerned, it describes the tale of a tribal woman Dopdi/Draupadi. She is a 'Wanted' by the police for her alleged involvement with the Naxalite Movement as well as for killing Surja Sahu, the landlord of the area. Dopdi and her husband Dulna, kill Surja Sahu for denying water to the people. A special officer Senanayak is sent to capture Dopdi and soon he succeeds in hunting her down. Dopdi is dragged to an army camp. In the camp she is stripped and gang-raped. Later when she is summoned for interrogation she refuses to be clothed. She

comes out naked in the broad daylight in front of Senanayak, thereby suggesting a protest against male dominance.

Every translation of Spivak includes a critical insight/foreward for the reader, which actually reshapes the reader's approach to the text. Though in some cases it makes a better reading of the text but in most of the cases the actual interpretation of the text by the reader is compromised, i.e. the readers approach becomes premeditated. Thus the story "Draupadi" is no exception. Spivak's beginning remarks in the Translator's Foreward to "Draupadi", thus becomes important. She writes

I translated this Bengali short story into English as much for the sake of its villain, Senanayak, as for its title character, Draupadi (or Dopdi). Because in Senanayak I find the closest approximation to the First- World scholar in search of the Third World, I shall speak of him first.

On the level of the plot, Senanayak is the army officer who captures and degrades Draupadi. I will not go so far as to suggest that, in practice, the instruments of First-World life and investigation are complicit with such captures and such a degradation.¹ The approximation I notice relates to the author's careful presentation of Senanayak as a pluralist aesthete. In theory, Senanayak can identify with the enemy. But pluralist aesthetes of the First World are, willy-nilly, participants in the production of an exploitative society. Hence in practice, Senanayak must destroy the enemy, the menacing other. He follows the necessities and contingencies of what he sees as his historical moment. (1988: 179)

So the importance of the central character becomes diluted for the non-Bengali readers, who read the Translator's Foreward first. Quite naturally Devi's motif of showing tribal and gender oppression also gets compromised in some extent. While commenting upon Spivak's Translator's Foreward, Brinda Bose writes

Even before looking at the concerns of Mahasweta Devi's "Drauadi," the non-Bengali – perhaps primarily Western –reader of this translation must contend with a number of Spivakian anxieties buried in her Foreward. There is of course, as mentioned earlier, a politics inherent in all acts of translation. In Spivak's acts of translation, the struggle exteriorizes a peculiar –all encompassing –self-reflexivity, so much so that the issues raised within the original story often end up only simmering on the backburner. The capture, and degradation, of Dopdi is not Spivak's sole focus..... But as Spivak, proclaims in her opening lines, she has chosen this story as much for the sake of its villain, Senanayak –and because she finds in him "the closest approximation to the First-World scholar in search of the Third World," she will speak of him first. (2008: 73)

The setting of the story "Draupadi" is very important. The peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari area of the northern part of West Bengal which was later termed as Naxalbari movement started in 1967, there was increasing numbers of Naxalites lead by the middle-class of Calcutta. The rebellion was against the oppression of the tenant and itinerant farmers by the landlords. In 1970 the armed struggle began between East and West Pakistan. In 1971 the Indian government intervened and West Pakistan was defeated thereby forming a new country Bangladesh. The Indian Prime Minister then taking advantage of the situation turned towards cracking down the Naxalites with extreme severity. This is the time when the story begins. It is to be noted that the English readers will find it very much difficult to associate with the

Naxalbari movement, as in Bengal; this movement changed the whole scenario of the state. It is marked as one of the darkest phase in the history of modern West Bengal. This suppression of Naxalites leads to downfall of the Congress govt. and marks the rise of Communism in West Bengal, and till now Congress is in their revival stage. The political importance of the story also gets diminished for the non-Bengali readers.

The title of the story is essential as Draupadi is the name of the central character. It is essential as it has mythical reference to Mahabharata. Draupadi in the epic is one of the most celebrated heroines. In the epic Draupadi was married to five husbands. When Draupadi is lost out by her eldest husband in a game of dice, the enemy chief tries to publicly strip her by pulling out her sari. But Draupadi was infinitely clothed by one of the miracles of Krishna. It is demonstrated as the male glory. But here in this context

Mahasweta's story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi—in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representative of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine....the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops. (2010:12)

Thus the non Indian English readers or those who are alien to this mythical reference will certainly be clueless with this kind of allusions.

Draupadi is introduced to the readers between two versions of her name; Dopdi and Draupadi. This is because 'as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the tribalized form, Dopdi, is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi.' (10:1997) The name Draupadi was given to her by the landlady where she worked out of affections. It is actually an unusual name to be associated with a tribal woman. Mahasweta has special reasons to name her Draupadi. She says

Remember, Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* is a black woman. She must have been a tribal. In the state of Himachal Pradesh we still find the sort of fraternal polyandry that Draupadi was supposed to have practised in the *Mahabharata*. The polyandrous tribal women of Himachal Pradesh are said to belong to the Draupadi Gotra or clan. (i:1993)

As the central character is a tribal, in many cases the original text has been written in tribalized Bengali. So when this tribalized Bengali is translated, much of the essence of the originality is lost. Dopdi in the story uses the word 'kounter' in place of encounter. According to Mahasweta, "it is an abbreviation for 'killed by police in an encounter'". Spivak too when translated used the same word 'kounter'. A Bengali reader understands the way how a tribal people speak but for English reader it will be hard to associate with the word 'kounter' and its significance. Spivak confesses

It follows that I have had the usual 'translator's problems' only with the peculiar Bengali spoken by the tribals. (2010:18)

Name of the characters are very important in Mahasweta Devi's texts. Senanayak, who hunts down Dopdi, means 'army chief', is really the chief of his camp. Arijit in the story is the leader of the comrades. It means victorious over enemies. 'A Bengali reader would pick them out by name among the characters'. (2010:13) Names are important because certain names talk a lot about their characters. Even in Bengali sometimes names reflect the class of the characters too, as certain name is purely attached with particular class of society. Names like Chandu, Bholu,

Kanai, Poltu etc. are the Bengali names usually associated with the lower class people, whereas Abhijeet, Arindom, Satyajit, Indranil, etc. are the names associated with the upper class people. The inherent class struggle in the story is reflected through their names even without mentioning the class of certain characters like Arijit and Senanayak who belong to the bourgeois class. The whole story can be seen in the light of class struggle. But the target reader may perceive it but not necessarily in the way a native reader understands. For example, the name Mir Jafar, for Indians now stands for 'betrayal', because he betrayed Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula in the battle of Palassey. Till date he is held responsible for the colonization of India. But in truth Mir means 'prince' and Jafar means 'stream'. So the English readers will find it very difficult to understand the importance of names which are used in regards to this context.

A very important aspect of Mahasweta Devi's text is spontaneity and capturing of sudden surge of thoughts which runs in the mind of the characters. Bengali language has the essence to capture those sudden surge of thoughts that imply the pace of the words, written in short sentences or sometimes in fragmentative sentences having full expression of meaning intact with rhythm and beauty of language; but when the same is translated in English the essence diminishes. Indeed Spivak has tried to capture it in her own way. Let me quote such an instance from the English text

Surja Sahu. Then a telegraphic message from Shiuri. Special train. Army. The jeep didn't come up to Bakuli. March-march-march. The crunch-crunch-crunch of gravel under hobnailed boots. Cordon up. Commands on the mike. Jugal Mandal, Satish Mandal, Rana alias Prabir alias Dipak, Dulna Majhi-Dopdi Mejhen surrender surrender surrender. No surrender surrender. Mow-mow-mow down the village. Putt-putt-putt---cordite in the air--putt-putt---round the clock---putt-putt .Flame thrower. Bakuli is burning. More men and women, children...fire...fire. Close canal approach, Over-over-over by nightfall. (2010:30)

Here in this instance Spivak has translated the text thereby compromising with the syntactic structure of English language. Though credit goes to Spivak for creating such instances and keeps the essence of the original as close as possible.

Another striking feature of Mahasweta Devi's writings is the element of shock for the readers, as in this case when Dopdi comes out naked in broad daylight, we the readers are made to feel guilty and responsible for her plight. The text is highly charged politically. Devi makes no mistake in accusing the bourgeois readers while narrating the plight of the protagonist. According to her, the readers are equally responsible for her plight as they belong to the mainstream. The mainstream society looks upon the tribals as 'other'. Whereas in the translated text, the intensity of shock is lesser to the target reader because of their lack of knowledge about the political and mythical backdrop in which the source text is embedded.

The terms like 'bidi' (a kind of smoke) is not translated as there are no close proximate terms of 'bidi' in English. It is important in the sense because smoking of 'bidi' generally suggests that a person belongs to proletariat class. English readers will hardly perceive the fact as they have no nonlinguistic acquaintance with 'bidi'. As according to Bertrand Russel, "no one can understand the word 'cheese' unless he has a nonlinguistic acquaintance with cheese." (2000:113).

To conclude we can say that whatever measures a translator may take but there will be always loss of information. The best a translator can do is to minimize the loss. Bengal with its rich culture, traditions and religious values it becomes all the more tough for the translators to avoid the dilution of those values.

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