

**Linguistic Displacement and Cultural Marginality:
Translating Tribal Experiences in Mahasweta Devi and
Gopinath Mohanty**

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Abstract:

This paper intends to critically examine the representation of tribal communities in the fictional writings of Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty, interrogating the political and ideological challenges that their linguistic strategies pose for translators. Both authors deploy language as an instrument of resistance against dominant social, administrative and historical discourses and this paper situates that deployment within the broader framework of language movements in postcolonial India, the authors' own socio-political locations and the institutional conditions governing their translation into English. Drawing on Ranajit Guha's concept of the small voice of history, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theorisation of linguistic decolonisation and postcolonial translation theory, the paper argues that the movement of these texts into English is not a neutral act of cultural mediation but a site of multiple, historically determined power negotiations. The politics of representation operative in these translation projects is analysed in terms of both agency and historicity, with attention to the publishing market, literary reception and the specific translatorial decisions of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Bikram Das and Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, among others.

KeyWords: *postcolonial translation, subaltern representation, tribal literature, small voice of history, language movements, politics of representation, decolonisation*

Introduction:

Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty occupy singular positions in the literary histories of their respective languages. Devi belongs to a generation of Bengali writers who came to maturity in the aftermath of Partition and found themselves at once heirs to the rich tradition of the Bengal Renaissance and confronted with the challenge of writing honestly about an independent India that had failed its most vulnerable citizens. Her literary career was shaped not by the drawing rooms and little magazines of Calcutta's cultural establishment but by firsthand acquaintance with bonded labour in Bihar, the Lodha and Kheria communities of West Bengal and the tribal uprisings that official history had silenced. As Bodh Prakash argues in his essay "Mahasweta Devi and the Tribal", her writings over more than three decades on the lives and tribulations of the Mundas, the Oraons, the Shabars, the Lodhas and other "denotified tribes" have been acclaimed for their passionate commitment to the cause of the oppressed, drawing the attention of social scientists, literary theorists, anthropologists and numerous translators (Prakash 280). Her prose style registers this commitment directly. It refuses the aesthetic finish that the bhadrakalok literary tradition prized, reaching instead for a language that is, in her own formulation, driven by "an anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people from these inhuman constraints" (Devi, quoted in Prakash 280). Mohanty, writing in Odia, belongs to an equally significant but differently positioned literary tradition. The Odia literary renaissance of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had produced writers, concerned

above all, with the consolidation of regional cultural identity. Mohanty inherited this tradition while radically extending its social scope. His novels about the tribal communities of Koraput and Kalahandi brought the Odia novel into territory that the mainstream tradition had largely ignored. Where earlier Odia writers had celebrated regional culture, Mohanty documented its most painful contradictions, rendering the slow dispossession of tribal communities through a lyrical prose that drew its rhythms and imagery from the oral world it was describing.

Both writers are significant not simply as authors of tribal literature but as figures who transformed the literary possibilities of their respective languages by insisting that those languages attend to the lives of communities they had systematically overlooked. This insistence is itself a political act. Prakash captures the specific nature of Devi's achievement when he argues that what distinguishes her from radical activists, anthropologists and social scientists is her "aesthetic stance" which allows her to "enter the tribal world, become a part of it and yet paradoxically also stand outside it, an observer whose vision can capture the entire experience in its totality" (Prakash 281). This double position, as immersed participant and critical observer simultaneously, is precisely what makes her work difficult to translate. It is not an ethnographic report to be rendered in equivalent prose but a formal enactment of a relationship between two worlds and any translation, that reduces it to one or the other, loses the tension that gives it its meaning. Understanding this insistence requires situating both writers within this broader context of language movements, socio-political histories and institutional literary conditions that shaped their work, as well as understanding what happens to this insistence when these texts are translated into English, a language that carries the full weight of colonial history.

Official historiography, as Ranajit Guha argues in *The Small Voice of History* (1996), is structured by a systematic suppression of subaltern voices which persist only as traces, interruptions and residues within the archive of power. Both Devi and Mohanty write about communities whose primary mode of cultural transmission is oral. Moreover, their languages are marginalised within the hierarchy of Indian linguistic culture and their histories have been consistently erased from national narratives. Their literary projects can therefore be understood as sustained attempts to recover and amplify precisely such suppressed voices, to restore to the historical record the experiential reality of communities that official discourse has rendered invisible. Prakash makes this point directly when he argues that given the orality of tribal society, Devi's works function as "an archive of tribal history, an archive which does not consist of documented papers but a living archive of memories, songs and events long gone by" (Prakash 282). When their texts are translated into English, a language in which Guha's colonial archive was largely constructed, the question of what survives this journey and what gets silenced anew acquires urgent theoretical significance. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument that the choice of language is never politically innocent brings out a further dimension of this problem. For Ngũgĩ, the imposition of colonial languages on subjugated peoples was not merely a practical administrative measure but "the most important area of domination," since it operated at the level of the mind itself, producing a dissociation between the colonised person's culture and the language in which they were compelled to articulate it (wa Thiong'o 16). The hierarchy of languages in India with English at the apex, then Hindi, then the regional literary languages and somewhere far below them the tribal tongues, replicates in miniature the colonial structure Ngũgĩ

describes. When Devi deliberately roughens literary Bengali with tribal idiom or when Mohanty embeds the oral rhythms of Koraput's communities in Odia prose, they perform acts of linguistic defamiliarisation that carry the charge Ngũgĩ attributes to writing in an oppressed language. They insist on the validity of a linguistic world that dominant culture has refused to recognise.

Both writers, however, occupy positions of structural privilege relative to the communities they depict and their socio-political locations are themselves significant analytical categories. Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in Dhaka into a politically and literarily distinguished family. She was the daughter of poet Manish Ghatak, niece of filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak. Her uncle Sachin Chaudhury was the founder editor of *Economic and Political Weekly* and her husband Bijon Bhattacharya was a cofounder of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The Bengal famine, the Partition, the Tebhaga movement and the Naxalite movement of the 1970a were all formative and in 1984 she renounced her teaching post for complete commitment to social activism, editing the journal *Bortika* as a platform through which marginal people could publish their experiences unmediated. She claimed no separation between writing and activism saying, "the sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies" (Devi. Trans. Chanda ix). Gopinath Mohanty's engagement with tribal communities was mediated by a different structure of power altogether. As an IAS officer posted in the tribal regions of Koraput and Kalahandi, his proximity to the communities he wrote about was an administrative proximity, sympathetic in sensibility but institutionally privileged in structure. His novel *Paraja* emerged from this encounter and the Jnanpith Award it received in 1974 marked its canonisation within the national

literary establishment, raising questions this paper will address about what such recognition does to a politically radical text.

That both writers work in regional languages about communities whose cultural world is primarily oral already implicates their writing in a prior act of translation – from the spoken to the written, from tribal register to literary standard. When these texts are subsequently translated into English, a second layer of mediation compounds the ideological stakes. Tejaswini Niranjana argues that in a postcolonial context “the problematic of translation becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power and historicity”, since the very act of translating produces and reproduces “asymmetry and inequality of relations between peoples, races, languages” (Niranjana 01). The linguistic interventions of Devi and Mohanty cannot be separated from the language movements that give them their political charge. The formation of Odisha as a linguistic state in 1936 established the Odia language as a site of political assertion long before Mohanty began writing and his deployment of tribal dialects within Odia disrupts the internal hierarchies of a language that had itself fought for recognition. Devi’s deliberate roughening of literary Bengali was a comparable challenge to the *bhadralok* aesthetic which she made explicit when she said that “for a long time now, Bengali literature has indulged in a denial of the reality and has been plagued by an atrophy of conscience” (Devi. Trans. Bandyopadhyay xviii). The tribal communities whose struggles Devi documented were simultaneously organising to secure constitutional recognition for their own languages. The Santali language was admitted to the Eighth Schedule only in 2003. The linguistic politics of their texts are therefore inseparable from these larger histories of language rights. As G. J. V. Prasad argues, India is “a major translation

area, a political, civilizational and cultural area that has formed and reformed in terms of traffic between languages" (Prasad 12) and this multilingual reality renders the choice of English as a target language politically weighted. It prioritises the readership with access to the filter language over the communities within India for whom translations into contiguous vernaculars would carry greater cultural proximity.

Language as Small Voice: Domination, Resistance and the Limits of Writing

Guha's concept of small voice offers a productive framework for reading the linguistic strategies of both Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty. The small voice is not simply the voice of the marginalised. It is the voice that dominant discourse structurally cannot hear, intelligible only within its own community's registers and rhythms. Both the authors are engaged in the formally demanding project of rendering such voices audible within the medium of literary prose, a medium that is itself shaped by the conventions of dominant culture. The tension between what the text is trying to say and what the medium allows it to say produces the specific formal distortions like the fragmentation, the dialect mixture, the refusal of standard syntax that characterise their work. Prakash describes this tension precisely when he argues that Devi "does not merely narrate" but "recreates the experience even as it is in the process of being created," fictionalising a history that "creates a resonance of experiential authenticity" unavailable to anthropological or historical accounts (Prakash 282).

Devi's story "Little Ones" stages this tension directly. The Agaria tribals the story depicts have been so thoroughly impoverished by the state failure that their adult bodies appear

to the Relief Officer as those of children. Their malnourishment has made them illegible to the very administrative gaze that is supposed to protect them. In the climactic scene, the tribals confront the officer with their bodies as testimony, refusing his designation of them as children by displaying the genitalia that prove them adult. The corporeal resistance mirrors the textual resistance Devi performs as both are acts of forcing a recognition that the dominant system has refused. Devi had articulated the historical frame explicitly when she pointed out that for “the last five decades, one India has remained basically feudal, while the other has remained a victim of class and caste oppression” (Devi. Trans. Spivak ii). Her critique of the “Government of India” for having ‘pauperized’ the tribal communities is not merely deceptive. It is the foundational claim from which her entire literary method such as the refusal of the aesthetic distance, the language that is “brutal, lethal at times” derives its necessity (Devi. Trans. Chanda x). The small voice in Devi’s prose materialises formally through the multiplicity of sociolinguistic registers that Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav describes in as “deliberately not integrated into a seamless whole according to any conventionally organic idea of narrative organisation” (Sen and Yadav 22). In “Shanichari”, the exploitative logic of the brick kiln is rendered through the bureaucratic vocabulary of the labour hierarchy:

‘After working here nine months you’ll realize you were better off with the BMP.’

‘Ai baba!’

‘Hah! The *rejas* will carry the bricks, the *patariyas* will place them, the labourers will dig the ground and the *rubbishmen* will handle the kiln. Got it?’

'Huzoor'

'You'll carry unbaked bricks in piles of ten. Each time, my *munshi* will give you a *tikli*....After you've got 44 *tiklis* for 440 bricks, you'll make a rupee. Now go. Eat your *roti-sabji* and go to sleep' (Devi, trans. Dutta Gupta, 49-50).

The terms such as *rejas*, *patariyas*, *tikli* and *munshi* are not translated. They are rather retained as the administrative vocabulary of a system that operates on the bodies of the poor through the very language it uses to organise them. In the worker's response the deferential address to a superior, *huzoor*, encodes the asymmetry of power as a linguistic reflex. Devi does not aestheticize this vocabulary. She reproduces its bureaucratic flatness, its indifference to the bodies it catalogues. The language of domination is allowed to convict itself. This is not illustration but formal argument proving that the structure of the sentence is the structure of the exploitation.

This formal strategy has a direct bearing on Ngũgĩ's argument about language and domination. One of the ways in which colonial language exercises its power, Ngũgĩ argues, is by providing the colonised with the vocabulary of their own subjugation, so that they reproduce the structures of their oppression in the very act of speaking. The brick kiln passage in "Shanichari" demonstrates precisely this dynamic in a postcolonial context where the labourer receives the system's terms for her own exploitation and acknowledges them with *huzoor*. Here Devi does not need to comment additionally since the formal reproduction of the exchange is itself the critique. The translator who understands this can begin to ask what formal strategies in English might preserve the same effect of the bureaucratic flatness. Thus the translator

preferred to retain the same untranslated terms carrying their charge of embedded domination rather than reaching for the safer option of explanation and domestication.

Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* develops a parallel argument about the relationship between written language and power. Sukru Jani's encounter with the colonial administrative legal system is one of the novel's defining scenes:

Sukru Jani stood like a criminal in the dock and when he saw the officials writing, he felt as if the point of a knife was being dragged across his heart; for he had the tribesman's instinctive dread of writings made on paper. He also heard them speak to each other in some dialect which no tribesman could understand, and this added to his terror. Presently they nodded their heads in agreement. (Mohanty. Trans. Bikram Das, 36-37)

The scene enacts Guha's analysis of the archive precisely. The written record determines Sukru's fate but is not accessible to him. The 'nodding in agreement' that seals his fate is an act of consensus from which he is structurally excluded. Mohanty's point is not simply that Sukru is illiterate. It is rather that the entire apparatus of bureaucratic writing incorporating the legal procedure, the administrative record and the temporal reckoning of courts constitutes a world built in a language the tribal person is not meant to inhabit. When Sukru later confuses 'the sixth Tuesday' with 'the sixth day of the month', he is dismissed as 'mad'. The incomprehension that the state's own opacity has produced becomes evidence against him. This movement is precisely what Ngũgĩ diagnoses as the deeper violence of linguistic imperialism. This is not the erosion of a vocabulary but of an entire way of relating to the world, of reckoning time and authority and justice. Unlike Devi's confrontational prose, Mohanty's lyrical style which is

rooted in the oral rhythms of Koraput's communities registers this violence through accumulation and understatement, creating a tension between the beauty of its surface and the structural horror it describes. The formal challenge this poses to translation is considerable, since Mohanty's novel makes its argument through the texture of its prose rather than through direct critique and any domestication of that texture into the conventions of English realist fiction removes the very medium through which political argument is being made.

Translation as a Site of Power: Historicity, Agency and the Politics of the Market

The formal strategies through which both Devi and Mohanty make the small voice audible within mainstream literary prose are inseparable from the specific socio-political and historical contexts in which they write. A translation that fails to carry those contexts into the target text does not merely lose nuance but also reverses the direction of the original argument, domesticating the voice it was written to disturb. Tejaswini Niranjana's insistence on historicity as a dimension of the translation problem is directly relevant here. She argues that translation in a postcolonial context operates within "contesting and contested stories" shaped by the asymmetry and inequality of colonial history and that the translator's choices are always already positioned within that history. The moment in which a text is translated is not neutral. Spivak's translations of Devi, published from 1987 onwards, were produced in a specific institutional context. They were premised upon the rise of postcolonial studies as an academic field in North American universities and the concurrent appetite of western literary culture for texts that could be read as documents of Third World experience. Spivak herself was candid about this. In her "Translator's Preface" to *Imaginary Maps*, she declared her intention to prevent Devi from being commodified as a "national cultural artefact, only accessible to Indians" (Spivak xvii), a formulation that reveals the

extent to which her translation project was oriented toward a First World academic readership. The consequence was that *Imaginary Maps* was marketed internationally primarily under Spiavk's name, a market positioning that tells its own story about whose authority structures the reception of a Third World writer in global literary culture.

Bikram Das's 1987 translation of *Paraja* for Oxford University Press India operated in a different institutional frame. OUP India's decision to translate a novel about tribal dispossession in Odisha was itself an act of national canon formation. Anjana Desai has argued, when texts are labelled 'masterpieces' or 'classics' of a particular region, the effect is "a surreptitious endorsement of the hegemonic establishmentarian process of centralising and marginalising cultural expression" (Singh 57). The Jnanpith Award that brought *Paraja* to national attention performed a similar canonising function, absorbing a politically radical text into the prestige economy of national literary culture. The absence of an internationally prominent theorist to mediate its reception meant that *Paraja* circulated in the Indian English language market primarily as an ethnographic document, risking what Diptiranjan Pattanaik, in his essay "The Power Translation", identifies as the sanitisation of the 'ethnic dimension' of the text, the stripping away of its linguistic specificity in the interests of making it legible to readers unfamiliar with Odia culture. Pattanaik's anecdote about one of his own stories being dismissed in Odia but celebrated in English translation, with friends suggesting that the translator had improved it, captures the hierarchy of linguistic prestige that distorts the reception of all regional language texts in postcolonial India.

The selection of texts for translation is itself a political act whose consequences for an author's reputation are structural. Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*, winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979 and translated into Malayalam, Assamese, Konkani and Santali, has never been translated

into English. Its male protagonist Birsā Munda, the leader of the tribal uprising against British colonial rule, does not fit the feminist subaltern profile that Spivak's theoretical project and the market logic that followed it, installed as the frame for Devi's work. Seagull Books, the publisher of most of Devi's English translations, consistently framed her texts as "rich sites of feminist discourses" raising "vital contemporary questions of politics, gender and class" (Devi. Trans. Spivak 298). This framing is reductive and its reductiveness is the product of a publishing logic that requires Third World women's writing to be legible within a pre-existing critical category. As Sherry Simon argues in *Changing the Terms*, translations in postcolonial contexts are "solicited and exchanged according to rules of trade and ownership which are both commercial and ideological" (Simon and St. Pierre 13). Bodh Prakash highlights this point when he argues that Devi's works transcend the typologies created by "communalists, radical activists, feminists, environmentalists and other" since "there is no one standard TRIBAL response to exploitation" and any reductive framing falsifies the complexity she renders (Prakash 289). Devi's own rejection of the feminist label was explicit as she told Nandini Sen, "I write for people who have been marginalised. Men, women and children are all equally abused when they belong to the weaker section of the society. My stories are not about women alone. I write for all oppressed people" (Sen 64). The distance between this authorial self-understanding and the market framing of her translated work is itself a measure of the power that translation and publishing exercise over representation.

This dynamic of market driven misrepresentation extends further than the selection of individual texts. It shapes the entire apparatus through which a writer becomes legible to an international readership especially the blurb, the cover image, the series in which a book is placed, the critical introduction that precedes the text itself. When Spivak

positions her translations of Devi as case studies within her won theoretical project, placing them in the section titled 'Entering the Third World' in her collection *In Other Worlds* alongside her essays on subaltern historiography and Third World women's writing, she does not merely translate a text but also assigns it a predetermined interpretive location. The reader who encounters "Draupadi" or "Breast Giver" in this context is directed toward a reading shaped by the priorities of First World academic feminism rather than by the specific political concerns that animated Devi's writing. The consequence, as Brinda Bose has argued, is a kind of 'first worlding' of Devi's Third World narratives, in which the translator's authoritative presence dangerously affects the reception of the writer and may produce a monolithic portrait of a richly varied oeuvre. Devi herself was aware of this. Thus, when informed that *Imaginary Maps* was marketed in North America primarily under Spivak's name, her response was characteristically direct. The literary market, she understood, operates according to its own logic of celebrity and authority and that logic is indifferent to the specificities of the tribal realities she had spent her life documenting. The politics of representation inherent in these translation projects cannot be understood only in terms of the translator's individual agency. It must also be understood in terms of the historical moment of translation and the institutional structures within which translators work. James Clifford's insistence in *Routes* that cross cultural translation is inevitably "enmeshed in relations of power" is a useful corrective to any account that treats the translator's choices as merely personal. Sukanta Chaudhuri's argument that any translation "must be plotted against the play of cultural politics" and "subtly modifies" the balance of the relationship between two languages is equally important (Chaudhuri 13). Therefore, translation does not simply reflect existing power relations but actively reshapes them.

Translation Strategies: The Limits of Foreignisation and the Problem of the Archive

The formal strategies through which Devi and Mohanty make the small voice audible in prose create specific and intractable problems for translators. These problems are structural, arising from the fact that the political content of the texts is embedded in their linguistic form. Therefore, any formal choice the translator makes such as to foreignise, to domesticate, to gloss and to silently normalise is also a political choice with consequences for what the text can say in its new language. The dominant debate around the English translations of Devi has centred on Spivak's strategy of italicising the English words that appear in the original Bengali, words that have entered the common parlance of Indian vernaculars through colonial contact. Sujit Mukherjee has argued that this constitutes a "rhetorically confusing device" because it marks as foreign words that are in fact thoroughly domesticated in Bengali speech, failing to communicate the historical reality of how a colonised language absorbs and transforms the coloniser's tongue. His alternative suggestion to use single quotes, leaving it to readers to determine "which thus distinguished word is mere officialise, which meant ironically and which is a convenience available only to a once colonised people" is more attentive to the sociolinguistic history than the original registers (Sen and Yadav 232). The stakes of this debate become clear in "Draupadi" where the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen uses the word 'kounter', a distortion of the English 'encounter' as shorthand for extrajudicial killing by police without knowing the original word but with perfect contextual accuracy. Spivak's extensive commentary on this moment focuses on its politico sexual significance but by doing so she overlooks what is arguably more important. This is thus an evidence of how colonised

speech communities develop their own creative relationship with the coloniser's language, a process that Ngũgĩ identifies as one of the defining features of linguistic decolonisation in practice.

In "Douloti the Bountiful", Spivak confronts a different kind of difficulty with the semantic layering of bonded labour nomenclature. Devi's original uses three terms – *kamiya*, *seokia*, *beth-begar* – that are not quite synonymous but describe related and historically distinct forms of unfree labour. Spivak's solution is to retain the original terms and supply English glosses in brackets:

I am his bondslave [*kamiya*].

You are his *kamiya*?

I am his bonded labourer [*seokia*].

His *seokia*?

I am his bonded worker [*beth-begar*].

Hey, what are you? *Kamiya*, *seokia* or *beth-begar*? (Devi, Trans. Spivak 20)

The strategy preserves the opacity of the original but at the cost of a different kind of domestication. By supplying English synonyms, Spivak implies that the terms are essentially equivalent to their glosses when, in fact, the irony of Devi's passage depends on the untranslability of the distinctions between them. The interlocutor's "hey, what are you?" is not a question about vocabulary. It is a question about the system itself and the system's refusal to stabilise its own categories of unfree labour is precisely what Devi is exposing. The concluding description of Douloti's dying body as her corpse "putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs", spread across "the

entire Indian peninsula from the ocean to the Himalayas", leaving no room on Independence Day "for planting the standard of the Independence flag" is Devi's most powerful formal enactment of what translation must try to carry (Devi, Trans. Spivak 94). The body of the subaltern as the ground on which the nation's founding narrative is built and unmade and the relationship between the grand narrative of national liberation and the small voice of those for whom liberation remained unrealised.

The translation challenges posed by *Paraja* are structurally different and in some respects more intractable. Bikram Das, the translator, acknowledges in his "Introduction" that "No translation can hope to capture the varied riches of Gopinath Mohanty's Oriya prose, vigorously colloquial and forthright at one moment and sublimely effervescent and lyrical at the next" (Das viii). What he concedes in this admission is more significant than it might appear. The political argument of *Paraja* is not carried by lexical disruption, as in Devi's texts, but is inseparable from this double quality of the prose, its capacity to hold together the lyrical beauty of tribal life and the structural violence that destroys it within a single narrative voice. Any translation that resolves this tension, choosing one register over the other or smoothing both into a uniform literary English, loses not just texture but the novel's central claim. The folk verse chanted by Dhepu Chalan after Sukru Jani's confrontation with the Forest Guard illustrates in miniature what is at stake throughout the novel. Described in the text as "a piece of doggerel which was often quoted by the hill folk" (Mohanty, Trans. Das 38), the verse reads:

The Forest Guard's the rider,
The tribesman is the horse,
And always it's the rider who
Decides upon their course. (Mohanty. Trans.
Bikram Das, 38)

The doggerel functions in the novel as a fragment of collective memory circulating among the hill folk, condensing their lived experience of colonial and bureaucratic domination into a rhythmic, ironic metaphor. Its status as shared communal property, something "often quoted by the hill folk", is precisely what gives it its political force. It is not an individual observation but a collective encoding of experience, passed orally through the community as a way of making the structure of power recognisable and nameable. Rendered in English rhyming verse, it communicates the allegorical content of the power relation but loses what Ngũgĩ identifies as central to oral literature. The translation is legible but no longer small in Guha's sense. It has been amplified into a form intelligible to a global readership at the cost of the communal specificity that gave it its force as tribal speech rather than literary metaphor.

This loss is compounded throughout the novel's most politically charged sequences, in which the tribal encounter with bureaucratic writing and legal procedure is staged as an encounter between two entirely incommensurable ways of ordering reality. When Sukru Jani stands before the officials measuring the felled trees, the text registers his terror not as ignorance but as a culturally specific form of knowledge:

...he had the tribesman's instinctive dread of writings made on paper. He also heard them speak to each other in some dialect which no tribesman could understand

and this added to his terror. Presently they nodded their heads in agreement (Mohanty, Trans. Das 36).

What is being named here is the way that bureaucratic consensus, the nodding agreement, is produced entirely outside the tribal person's participation, yet determines his fate entirely. The nodding is not the end of a conversation. It is the end of a process from which Sukru was never included in the first place. The translator who renders both Sukru's response and the officials' procedure in the same normalised English register performs, at the level of form, the very erasure that the scene is written to expose.

This structural exclusion reaches its culmination in the scene where Sukru loses his land case because the magistrate's instruction to attend "on the sixth day of this month" was translated by the Writer and the Pujari as "the sixth Tuesday from today". When the case is dismissed for non-attendance, Sukru pleads, "Great lord, I shall die! That date is today. I was asked to come on this Tuesday" (Mohanty, Trans. Das 365). The Writer and Pujari dismiss his appeal outright. The scene is not simply about misunderstanding. It is about the way the administrative system transforms its own opacity into evidence of the tribal person's incapacity and recruits even the other tribespeople present to affirm it. Hence, the system's failure to communicate becomes Sukru's failure to comprehend and this inversion is reproduced without comment in the English translation. A formally alert translator would recognise that the scene demands a rendering that keeps the two temporal systems – the tribal reckoning of time by harvests, moons and Tuesday markets and the bureaucratic reckoning of numbered dates – audible as distinct, incommensurable registers rather than flattening both into a single neutral English.

The debt bond that finally reduces Sukru and his son Tikra to gotis i.e. bonded servants, enacts the same dynamic in written form. The deed, read aloud by the Sahukar but signed only by thumb-prints from the illiterate Sukru and Tikra, is a document of total legal precision and total communicative exclusion:

...the members of the Second Party do hereby bind themselves jointly and severally to serve the First Party as his gotis during the tenure of the loan and thereby to be the whole-time servants and labourers of the First Party for the purpose of doing all jobs for him as he may direct, at all hours of the night and the day (Mohanty, Trans. Das 51).

The legal English of the deed is rendered with formal accuracy in Bikram Das's translation but, in doing so, it inadvertently domesticates the violence of the original. The impersonal bureaucratic register becomes simply the register of legal documents, familiar and legible to an English-language reader in a way it could never be to Sukru Jani. What is lost is the gap between the precision of the deed's language and the absolute incomprehension of the man whose life it determines. Diptiranjan Pattanaik has identified precisely this as the central risk in the translation of *Paraja*. The sanitisation of the "ethnic dimension" of the text, the stripping away of the linguistic specificity that marks the distance between the world of the document and the world of the man whose thumb-print it records.

Sarmistha Dutta Gupta's approach to the translation of Devi's "Shanichari" demonstrates, by contrast, what a formally alert strategy can achieve. She found "punctuation to be one of the most effective tools" for managing the "at least half a dozen registers" in the story, used by "Shanichari,

her grandmother, the Adivasi Raksha Morcha, the Bihar military police, the press, the politicians and the brick kiln owners" (Devi, Trans. Dutta Gupta vii). What Dutta Gupta describes is not a stylistic problem but a sociological one. Devi's text maps the power structure of a society through its linguistic heterogeneity and the translator's task is to preserve that mapping. Each register is not merely a different way of speaking. It is the speech of a different position in the social hierarchy. The absence of an equivalent strategy in the translation of *Paraja* where the competing registers of tribal oral culture, administrative bureaucracy and colonial legal procedure are rendered in a broadly similar English is a measure of how much harder the problem is when the author's political argument works through lyrical accumulation and tonal contrast rather than lexical disruption. Lawrence Venuti's concept of the translator's invisibility is useful here as the translator who normalises Devi's prose becomes invisible at the cost of its political argument. In Mohanty's case, the very coherence of the English translation risks concealing the incommensurability it was written to reveal.

Conclusion

The translation of Devi's and Mohanty's texts into English is not a single event but a layered historical process, shaped at every stage by asymmetrical power relations between languages, cultures and institutions. The challenge takes a different form in each author's work. In Devi, the political argument is carried by lexical disruptions like the violent intrusion of dialect, bureaucratic jargon and tribal speech into the fabric of literary Bengali and the translator's task is to find formal equivalents that preserve the disruptive charge of each register. In Mohanty, the argument is carried by the incommensurability of two worlds held within a single prose and the translator's task is correspondingly

harder. What must be preserved is not a disruptive word but a structural gap, the distance between the legal deed that binds Sukru Jani as a goti and the world of tribal oral culture in which such a document has no intelligible place. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument that language is "the most important area of domination" clarifies what is at stake when this fails (wa Thiong'o' 11). If the political force of both writers' linguistic strategies derives from their insistence on the validity of linguistic worlds that dominant culture has refused to recognise, then a translation that domesticates those strategies into the conventions of standard English performs, at the level of form, the same erasure that the texts are written to resist. Guha's framework suggests the answer is not straightforwardly negative. The small voice does not disappear but it persists as a trace, a disturbance and a refusal of full intelligibility. The comparative analysis demonstrates that structural equivalence is achievable when the translator reads a word's full cultural range. The analysis of *Paraja* suggests it becomes considerably harder when the political argument inheres in tonal contrast and structural gap rather than in a single charged term and that Bikram Das's own candid admission marks not a failure of craft but a structural limit that any honest account of translation must acknowledge.

Both Devi and Mohanty occupied the paradoxical position of non-tribal writers who devoted their careers to the representation of tribal experience. As Prakash argues, Devi is "a bridge" who makes the tribal world accessible not by creating a typology but by "becoming a part of the tribal world, its myths, songs, fears, sorrows, happiness" while simultaneously standing outside it to give it creative form (Prakash 281). Mohanty's administrative proximity to tribal Odisha created a comparable double position that of lyrical

intimacy coexisting with institutional distance. The translator inherits both these paradoxes and must answer them anew. As Tharu and Lalita argue in *Women Writing in India*, translation from any Indian regional language into English represents a regional culture for a more powerful national and still more powerful international culture and the power struggle that generates out of this representation often results in the flattening of discrete multiplicities within the text. These texts ask to be heard, not merely to be read and that demand extends to the translator who carries them across.

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