Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
http://www.rjelal.com; Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com

Vol.4.Issue 3. 2016
(July-Sept.)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

REALISTIC AESTHETICS AND ART : A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF SELECT FICTIONAL WRITING OF MAHASWETA DEVI

R. PAVITHRA
Assistant Professor of English, Jansons Institute of Technology, Coimbatore

R. PAVITHRA

ABSTRACT

The postcolonial writers may not achieve international success unless they address certain themes, or more established figures "discover" them, should be considered as well. Mahasweta provides a fruitful example: Mahasweta is an intensive and a social alert writer who showcases the rural realities as well as a broad narrative of the importance of the unprivileged or the people living on the extreme. While Mahasweta originally written in her native Bengali language, most of her works are translated into English and regional Indian languages. The credit for translating her works into English for the first time goes to Gayatri Spivak, who had translated Mahasweta's "Draupadi" in 1981 and "Breast-Giver" (Stanadayini) in 1987. Since then many of her stories have been translated into English by other scholarly translators, and until now about a dozen translators have translated Mahasweta's stories into English, among whom the foremost are Spivak and Bandyopadhyay. Mahasweta claims on translators capturing 'the spirit' of her work, which to her is more important than technical or even artistic perfection and she readily authorizes those translations of her fiction that have been faithful to the spirit of her fiction.

A very important aspect of Mahasweta's text is spontaneity and capturing of sudden surge of thoughts which runs in the mind of the characters. For instance, Spivak has translated the text 'Draupati' thereby compromising with the syntactic structure of English language. Her deeply political novels, short stories and journal posts have cherished generations of readers of Bengali literature. One of the most widely translated authors of contemporary India; Mahasweta has readers the world over.

Mahasweta Devi, as the voice of the disempowered and the conscience-keeper of her times, she compiled content over form, and developed an incredibly powerful literary style. Direct, violent, often mixing bits of tribal dialect with refined urban Bengali, and only at times lapsing into beautiful imagery. Mahasweta's innovations with language and style have been recognized by literary critics and contemporaries as important contributions to Bengali literary convention. Her social agenda seems to relieve her stories of all the frills of a metaphysical or romantic fiction, an outcome achieved by adopting a multilayered plan in the concept and construction of her narrative that avoids all kinds of emotion, imagination and admiration in her literary device, and takes the position of an emotionless truth seeker, almost turning herself into a linguistic bone-collector of reality. Hence Mahasweta has been criticized by literary perfectionists as a mere speaker of social reality.

Key Words: Translation, Postcolonial, Language and Style.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Mahasweta is an intensive and a social alert writer who showcases the rural realities as well as a broad narrative of the importance of the unprivileged or the people living on the extreme. Her deeply political novels, short stories and columns have nurtured generations of readers of Bengali literature. One of the most widely translated authors of contemporary India, she has readers the world over. "Moving even further back to take this forward, mention of a little-known anthology is a must. *Short Stories for Social Work Education,* edited by Manu Manu Desai, was published by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1985.Though carelessly laid out and disrespectful to its many translators whose names have gone missing altogether, the book has 28 stories translated from different Indian languages (the 29th is an original piece in English by an Indian).The editor says: "Unfortunately our educators have hardly used the vast and perennial source of our distinguished literature in Social Work Education…. even after thirty-odd years our educators rely heavily on writing rooted in Western culture. The indigenisation of teaching material in India is essential to enable students to understand the society to which they belong."

In today's postcolonial and global context, translation has attained greater importance than ever before. Translation has turned up as a vital bridge across linguistic, cultural and geopolitical divides, not for literary alone, but for politico-socio-cultural and commercial transactions as well. Translation has always been indispensible for the distribution of oral and written literatures like folklore and the classics among the masses. Indian literature as one Literature is possible only through translations into English, the link language acceptable to all, irrespective of North or South, East or West India. Harish Trivedi, the erudite postcolonial critic in the Indian academy today, has frankly observed:

> The big dream cherished by nearly all writers in the Indian languages whether great or small, is that one day, after they have won the Sahitya Akademi award and the Jnanapith Award and have had art films made out of their works, the ultimate will happen and they will be translated into English and will burst upon the international scene in a blaze of global glory. (52)

Mahasweta, who was granted with the Sahitya Akademi Award, and Jnanapith, even before she was translated into English, had already been translated into Hindi – the national language and into other major Indian languages. The credit for translating her works into English for the first time goes to Gayatri Spivak, who had translated Mahasweta's "Draupadi" in 1981 and "Breast-Giver" (Stanadayini) in 1987. Since then many of her stories have been translated into English by other scholarly translators, and until now about a dozen translators have translated Mahasweta's stories into English, among whom the foremost are Spivak and Bandyopadhyay. Accordingly, Spivak discovered Mahasweta as the author whose works she wanted to translate: "I choose Mahasweta because she is unlike her scene…I remain interested in writers who are against the current, against the mainstream" (*Politics* 189).

The fact that postcolonial writers may not achieve international success unless they address certain themes, or more established figures "discover" them, should be considered as well. Mahasweta provides a fruitful example: while Mahasweta originally written in her native Bengali language, most of her works have been translated into English and regional Indian languages. Spivak has turned her into an international icon through her translations, and one can only wonder if Western academia would ever have assigned Mahasweta this relevance without the intervention of a Western-educated Indian critic of Spivak's caliber. Such nuance, in turn, compels one to question the type of postcolonial narratives the West privileges and why (considering that there are possibly millions of stories that the West never reads or cares to read), and the subjective role postcolonial theory plays in overcoming subaltern women's oppression.

It is important that, in attempting to transfer the element of culture to the target language text, the translator has to keep in mind the need to present linguistic equivalence as far as possible, or else, his/her free choice of lexis/syntax may bring in their idiosyncratic features in the target language text rather than the cultural features of the source language text. Indeed there are Anglophone Bengali readers who perceive Spivak's translations of Mahasweta to be rather too idiosyncratic representations of the original (Bose 277). Spivak herself has cited one such charge and has clarified her position:

> Sujit Mukhurjee, the prominent intellectual of the publishing world, particularly concerned with the quality of translations-has also complained – and this is particularly important for U.S. readers who are looking for either local flavor or Indian endorsement – that the English of my translation is not sufficiently accessible to readers in this country (India) … This may indeed be true, but not be enough grounds for complaint. I am aware that the English of my translations belongs more to the rootless American based academic prose than the more sub continental idiom of my youth. (Imaginary xxvi)

Mahasweta insists on translators capturing 'the spirit' of her work, which to her is more important than technical or even artistic perfection and she readily authorizes those translations of her fiction that have been faithful to the spirit of her fiction. Ben Jonson, though an advocate of literal fidelity, believed that "natural genius is needed to give second life to the works of a great writer … verbal equivalence alone was not sufficient for a good translation, but the translator should try to establish equivalence at all levels between the original and the translation" (qtd. Nair 21)

The fact is, as revealed by Mahasweta herself in an interview to Kishore, the publisher; she is interested in words, especially unusual words with a tale behind it. "There are so many more beautiful words. Bengali words. Whenever I come across an interesting word, I write it down" (viii) to be used in her fiction. Despite being a careful and pains-taking translator, Spivak is aware of the in translatability of certain cultural elements in the SL, and cites the South African writer, J.M. Coetzee's explanation for similar difficulties faced by him in translating the Dutch poet Achtenberg into English:

> It is in the nature of literary work to present its translator with problems for which the perfect solution is impossible… there is never enough closeness of fit between languages for formal features of a work to be mapped across from one language to another without shift of value… something must be 'lost', that is, features embodying certain complexes of value must be replaced with features embodying different complexes of values in the target language. At such moments the translator chooses in accordance with his (sic) conception of the whole…there is no way of simply translating the words. These choices are based, literally, on pre conceptions, pre-judgment, prejudice. (Imaginary xxvi)

A very important aspect of Mahasweta's text is spontaneity and capturing of sudden surge of thoughts which runs in the mind of the characters. For instance, Spivak has translated the text 'Draupati' thereby compromising with the syntactic structure of English language. The credit goes to Spivak for creating such instances and who keeps the essence of the original as close as possible.

> 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. (30)

Bengali language has the essence to capture sudden surge of thoughts that imply the pace of the words, written in short sentences or sometimes in fragmented sentences having full expression of meaning together 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. The self-confident translator that she is, Spivak realizes only too well that even in the culture oriented approach the translator has to be governed by the language of the original, and so has taken care to observe linguistic loyalty by seeking authorial and editorial guidance and approval. Spivak too shares Sarmishta Gupta's (another erudite translator of Mahasweta's stories that are collected in Outcast: Four Stories) confession: "Working closely with the author has been a tremendous help in ensuring that there are no misreading. Mahasweta's prose contains many words which are not to be found in standard dictionaries"(viii).

As the central character is a tribal, in "Draupati" 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 'counter'. 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." (18)

In Mahasweta's novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Spivak dares and succeeds in maintaining equivalence even at the level of the difficult Mundari dialect that Mahasweta had invented, by inventing in English a dialect for the Munda's speech as exemplified in this piece of advice by Chotti:

> No don' mek that mistake. If yer name comes up Lala will grab't.
> What s'll I say to ye! We've got out jest a bit from under Lala, got
> jobs in t' forest, wit Chadha. Done nothin' wrong, still I walk
> caref'lly. We are in Lala's bite; I've moved his teeth a bit. He's
> mad angry. And now ye talk outta line... me land! So Sana, ye're
> bonded wit' yer debt load . . . nothin' can be yer own. So ye put in
> Jita's name. And ye've told this to lotta folks? If Lala hears this
> He'll show ye t' capital city me boy. (187-188)

In her earlier translations of Mahasweta, Spivak had been inhibited or not so daring as revealed in her translator's foreword to "Breast Stories":

> 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 towards 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. (18)

But as is typical of her mental habit, constantly revising and reworking on her own earlier practices and theories, Spivak overcomes this embarrassment in her translation of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, and is rewarded by the author's delighted approval.

For a postcolonial translator it is not enough if she/he merely speaks his/her native language, but must be strictly bilingual, for the task of the translator involves surrendering her/himself to the linguistic art of using the language of the original text and "the minimal consequence of ignoring this task will be the loss of the literarity and textuality and sensuality of the writing" (*Politics* 189) as evidenced by Ella Dutt's *The Wet Nurse.*(*The Wet Nurse.* Ella Dutt's translation of Mahasweta's Stanadhayini, was first translated for Women's Press Anthology - Truth Tales: Indian Women's Writing and published by Kali for Women (1990).

In the translator's foreword to *Chotti Munda*, Spivak at the very outset clarifies:

> It has been my practice to underline the words in English in the original. I do this because I prepare a scholarly translation, in the hope that the teacher/scholar will get a

> sense of the English lexicalized into Bengali on various levels as a mark of the very history that is one of the animators of the text. (vii).

On the issue of the translator's need to attend to the specificity of the language she/he translates from and to, Spivak says: 'There is a way in which the rhetorical nature of every language disrupts its logical systematicity. If we emphasize the logical at the expense of these rhetorical interferences we remain safe . . . from the risks or violence to the translating medium' (*Politics* 179).

Spivak translates from within the post-structural notion of language as three tiered - rhetoric, logic, silence 'as an actor interprets a script or as one directs a play, making the agent (translator) go further than taking the translation to be a matter of synonyms, syntax and local color'(180). This makes Spivak's attempt to translate Mahasweta's stylistic experiments produce a text quite different from the translation of the same text by others. For example, Mahasweta's short story — "Stanadayini" is available in two versions – "The Wet Nurse" by Ella Dutt, and "Breast-Giver" by Spivak. Mahasweta has expressed approval for the attention to her signature style in the version entitled "Breast-Giver"(literal translation of Stanadayini). The alternative translation gives the title "The Wet Nurse" and thus neutralizes the author's irony in coining a mysterious word. The story is about a woman, who becomes a professional wet nurse to support her family, and in the end dies of painful cancer of the breast, betrayed alike by the breasts that for years became her chief identity and the dozens of 'sons' she suckled. So the translation "The Wet Nurse" is enough to make the sense, but not enough to shock, as does "Breast-Giver" (Politics183).

According to Spivak, the theme of treating the breast as organ of labour-power-as-commodity and the breast as metonymic part-object standing in for other/woman-as-object and the way in which the story engages with Marx and Freud's theories on the subject of the woman's body, is lost even before one enters the story. In the text, Mahasweta uses proverbs that are astonishing even in the Bengali. The translator of "The Wet Nurse" leaves them out. In fact, Spivak argues that, 'if the two translations are read side by side, the loss of the rhetorical silences of the original can be felt from one to the other' (182-183). Indeed, unlike Dutt's, Spivak's praxis, according to Salgado, observes the dictum that translation should "maintain the strangeness of a text" (140).

Mahasweta's stories are potent and disturbing, and would not be good beach reading, so one assumes that only moderately serious readers would attempt them. The translator's comments, however, are couched in the jargon of the postcolonial arena which is impenetrable to anyone outside that field. They stand in stark contrast to the simple language used by Mahasweta herself.

A paragraph from Mahasweta's *Draupadi*:

Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards the forest, and ululates with the force of her entire being. Once, twice, three times. At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake and flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far.

A typical paragraph from the accompanying analysis:

Of course, this voice of male authority also fades. Once Dopdi enters, in the final section of the story, the postscript area of lunar flux and sexual difference, she is in a place where she will finally act *for* herself in *not* 'acting', in challenging the man to (en)counter her as unrecorded or misrecorded objective historical monument. The army officer is shown as unable to ask the authoritative ontological question, What is this?

In a 'normative' translation the terms of linguistic negotiation are deliberately hidden to allow easier inclusion into the receptor culture and ready reception by the target readership, while in an 'abusive' translation the terms of linguistic negotiations are fore grounded or unfamiliar. Thus, terms that Dutt's work tames for a British readership, Spivak chooses to differ for the American scholar, as can be distinguished from the samples below:

> A passage from "The Wet-Nurse":
>
> Seeing such a woman every Tom, Dick and Harry knows that the ancient Indian traditions are alive and kicking. Old sayings,

> celebrating the fortitude of women, were made to describe such females. (12)

The same passage in "Breast-Giver":

> The creeps of the world understand by seeing such women that the
> old Indian tradition is still flowing free- they understand that it is
> with such women in mind that the following aphorisms have been
> composed 'a female's life hangs on like a turtles', her heart
> breaks but no word is uttered' 'The women will burn, her ashes
> will fly/Only then will we sing her praise on high'. (47)

In the above passage from "Breast-Giver", "the creeps of the world" are certainly a case of domestication for an American readership. But Spivak's foregrounding of the traditional song- 'Is a mother so cheaply made? Not just by dropping a babe!' (52) – constitutes a strategy in her overall project to bring out the varieties of accent and social nuance in spoken speech, to cause a bizarre of the target language. Further as Salgado points out, in Spivak's translation,

> . . . the dynamics of dialogue evident structurally in the interjections of the oral narrator, and internally in slang, doggerel, and colloquial simile, are heavily played out, making it truly dialogic and celebrating the very plurivocity of which translation is
> a part. Indeed what appears as mild abuses in Dutt's translation, in Spivak's version appears to be the crudest of obscenities. (140)

For example, 'the other fuckups of the time', 'You bastard ball-less crook!', 'You fucking jackal of a nard' (138, 145, 32), etc., are assimilative presentations that domesticate the easy obscenities used by Mahasweta in the original. In fact, in "Politics of Translation", Spivak asserts: "To decide whether you are prepared enough to start translating, then, it might help if you have graduated into speaking… of intimate matters in the language of the original."(187).

Spivak in her conversation with Mahasweta makes it clear that she does not translate for the Indian reader who does not read any Indian languages, but that she translates for the readership in the rest of the world (Telling xix).In her translator's preface to Imaginary Maps, speaking of the constraints on her praxis, she picks on the transreader as the first and the major constraint:

> This book is going to be published in both India and the U.S. As such it faces in two directions, encounters two readerships with a strong exchange in various enclaves. As a translator and a commentator I must imagine them as I write. Indeed, much of what I write will be produced by those two-faced imaginings even as it will no doubt produce the difference. (xvii)

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.' (113). Thus by translating and transcreating Spivak does her best to make Mahasweta accessible to the non Bengali readership.

Mahasweta's innovations with language and style have been recognized by literary critics and contemporaries as important contributions to Bengali literary convention. Her social agenda seems to relieve her stories of all the frills of a metaphysical or romantic fiction, an outcome achieved by adopting a multilayered plan in the concept and construction of her narrative that avoids all kinds of emotion, imagination and admiration in her literary device, and takes the position of an emotionless truth seeker, almost turning herself into a linguistic bone-collector of reality. Hence Mahasweta has been criticized by literary perfectionists as a mere chronicler of social reality.

WORK CITED

Devi, Mahasweta. *Breast Stories.* Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Critical Inquiry*. Web.

________. *Imaginary Maps.* Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Thema, 2001. Print.

________.*Chotti Munda and His Arrow.* Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. Print.

________. "Interview: Telling History." *Chotti Munda and His Arrow.* Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. ix –xxviii. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Translator's Preface." *Of Grammatology.* By Jacques

Derrida. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976. Web.

________. "The Politics of Translation." *Outside in the Teaching Machine.* New York: Routledge, 1993. 179 – 200. Web.

________. "Translator's Preface." *Imaginary Maps.* By Mahasweta Devi. Calcutta: Thema, 2001. xvii – xxvi. Print.

________. "Draupadi: Translator's Foreword," *Breast Stories.* By Mahasweta Devi. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002. 1 – 18. Print.

Trivedi, Harish. "The Politics of Post-Colonial Translation." *Translation: Its Theory and Practice.* Ed. Avadesh Kumar Singh. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1996. 46 – 54. Print.

Salgado, Minoli. "Tribal Stories, Scribal Worlds: Mahasweta Devi and the Unreliable Translator." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature 35* (2000): 131-145. Print.

Gupta, Sarmishta Dutta. "Translator's Note." *Outcast: Four Stories*. By Mahasweta. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002. vi – viii. Print.

Kishore, Naveen. Personal Interview. 30 March 2009. Web.

Nair, Sreedevi K. *Aspects of Translation.* New Delhi: Creative Books, 1996. Web.