

THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATING SUBALTERN TEXTS: AN ANALYSIS OF ARUN PRABHA MUKHERJEE'S TRANSLATION OF *JOOOTHAN*

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ABSTRACT

*Dalit literature is not generally considered amenable to translation since the cultural milieu of the author is supposed to be inextricably interwoven with the text. Because of this, the concept of fidelity to the source text becomes a moot topic in Dalit translations. Since Dalit translations have an innate limitation as regards preserving the indigenous nuances of the source text because of the use of vernacular expressions and slang in the original, it is doubtful to what extent the translation can do justice to the integrity of the original without compromising its anti-elitist and centrifugal propensities. The present paper employs Walter Benjamin's concept of "untranslatability" to examine the residual unassimilability of certain aspects of Dalit literature, especially, the complex expressions of identity centered on the idea of caste differences. The paper looks at Arun Prabha Mukherjee's English translation of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* originally written in Hindi as a means to unravel the intricate relations between knowledge and power as pointed out by Michael Foucault. Knowledge-power relations take the centre stage in the translations of Dalit autobiographies since the author's voice, which records his/her revolt against mainstream society, is immediate and direct. When a sympathetic translator, usually someone not belonging to the Dalit community, undertakes a translation of the autobiography, the vehement voice of protest can be toned down or skewered on account of the implicit "untranslatability" of the text. The paper examines the psychological journey that Arun Prabha Mukherjee had to embark on to assimilate the discontents encoded in the Dalit consciousness. It discusses the aesthetic and political choices he had to make in translating the text and argues that despite the usual objections raised against translating subaltern texts, the translator has been successful in communicating the author's angst and rebelliousness.*

Keywords: Dalit, autobiography, untranslatability, knowledge-power paradigm, subaltern

The voices of Dalit writers rallying for representation and, through it, an end to the countless atrocities and humiliations their kinsfolk have had to suffer at the hands of the upper castes, might have remained cries in the wilderness had it not been for the robust efforts of translators who were eager to recapture the immediacy and poignancy of Dalit experiences in English. The cosmopolitanism of the English language not only made Dalit texts accessible to a sweeping cross-section of readers but also sensitised them to the exploitation and injustice meted out to the Dalits by the same inexorable structures of power that sustain and nourish the upper castes. If Dalit narratives in vernacular languages could create ripples within the country, the translations of Dalit texts extended this effect to the whole world, with even researchers in foreign universities now actively critiquing the ossified caste hierarchies that consign Dalits to the bottom of the social ladder.

The present paper attempts to examine Arun Prabha Mukherjee's translation of Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*, which recounts in stark detail the subhuman existence of the Chuhra community, against the backdrop of Walter Benjamin's notion of "translatability". The paper will delve into the politics of language that renders contexts bound by the specificity of culture pervious to shared understanding, analyse the relationship between knowledge and power as laid out by Michel Foucault, and also try to evaluate the extent to which Mukherjee's translation holds up in the light of Benjamin's theory of translation. It argues that Mukherjee's translation of *Joothan* has not only succeeded in transplanting the author's identity crisis into a totally different language but also accomplished it in a manner that has not compromised the stylistic and aesthetic elements of the source text. The translations of Dalit texts often tend to be lop-sided when it comes to striking a balance between radicalizing the issue at hand and expressing the author's concerns in a language that enshrines the verbal nuances of the original. But in this case, that has hardly been an issue, and Mukherjee's efforts can be seen to lie in the right direction.

Omprakash Valmiki is a Dalit writer whose entire life bears testimony to the malady of caste hierarchies. As a child growing up in his village, as a schoolboy, and as an employee, he had to confront the stigma of being a Dalit. In his autobiography *Joothan*, he narrates the life of the Chuhra community existing precariously at the bottom of the caste ladder. It records for the first time in South Asian literary history, the plight of the Chuhra community which is forced, on account of its low-caste status, to sweep roads, cleanse cattle sheds, bury animal carcasses, and perform every other menial job dictated by the upper castes in the village Barla in Muzzafarnagar, Uttar Pradesh. In speaking about the inequities foisted on his community by the elite classes, Valmiki also recounts his unswerving struggle to surmount physical as well as mental exploitation through education as championed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Throughout the book, Valmiki describes with breath-taking authenticity the exclusionary practices resorted to by the upper castes to keep the Dalits confined to the margins of the social order. When he says that “The moment they [the upper castes] find out your caste, everything changes” (154), he communicates the suddenness with which the revelation of one’s low-caste status can consign one to perpetual stigmatization. Valmiki choice of the autobiography as a genre to articulate his voice of protest is deliberate. The autobiographical narration allows him to become the representative of all the other Dalits who have been equally oppressed and denied opportunities. Unlike other autobiographies where the authorial voice takes the centre stage, Dalit autobiography is based on the idea of communal identity. Here the author does not diminish into the role of a narcissistic ‘I’, but acts as a cultural adhesive that brings together the heterogenous voices of the community.

It is for this reason that Arun Prabha Mukherjee begins her introduction to *Joothan* extolling Valmiki’s decision to write an autobiography that will change Dalit literature forever. In the succeeding paragraphs, she lays bare the motivation behind her decision to translate a text that several other caste-conscious translators might have shunned tactfully for fear of the imputations articulated by Valmiki striking too close to home. She states that it was because the autobiography did not mince words in inditing the Brahminical community (of which she herself is a member) for the traumatising of the Dalit psyche that she was able to relate to the text: “It [*Joothan*] brought to surface, as a scalpel penetrating deep into the flesh, the details of my childhood and adolescence in a small town in northern India, where casteism and untouchability were prevalent” (ix). Mukherjee’s upbringing in a conservative town in north India where she encountered Dalits engaged in a plethora of menial jobs had such an impact upon her that when she read Valmiki’s autobiography, it was as though she was listening to the narrativization of a most abject form of cruelty that had conveniently been elided over by mainstream society for so long.

Speaking of the trajectory that her process of translation has followed, Mukherjee says her entry into the translator’s role was occasioned by the disheartening repetitiveness of the colonizer/colonized dialectic schema she encountered in almost every account of postcolonial literature from South Asia. Since becoming aware of Dalit literature and its rallying cry for social justice, Mukherjee was perplexed by the apathy, exclusivity, and brazen indifference with which mainstream writers continued to pander to populist ideologies when they should actually be intervening actively on behalf of marginalized communities. The issue of caste generated only scant response among the intelligentsia, and when it did, it was conveniently hushed in favour of more high-sounding topics. It was quite fortuitously that Mukherjee stumbled upon Valmiki’s text, and even then, it was more out of a sense of moral necessity to alert herself to the injustices suffered by the Dalits than out of any professional ambition that she began translating it. When the dream of a book-length translation took root in her mind, she started discussing the need to place Valmiki’s work in the context of the Other’s global fight for freedom with Sharan Kumar Limbale who gave her the necessary inspiration to take Valmiki’s text to a wider audience.

Mukherjee confesses that her translation attempts to serve a didactic as well as a transformative function. For those who are largely unaware of the systemic violence and oppression faced by the Dalits in India, the book will surely be an initiation into the dark underbelly of caste; and to those who choose to connive at the sufferings of the Dalits while reaping the benefits accruing from being a stakeholder in society, the book will be an eye-opener. However, one must not, when taken into confidence by the self-affirmative tone of the translation, hesitate to ask the most pertinent question here: Can the subaltern speak? In raising Gayatri Spivak's famous question in this context, we are fundamentally trying to probe whether the "translatability" of the text allows of a near one-to-one correspondence between the Dalit author's and the non-Dalit translator's intentionality. In other words, is the translator putting words into the mouth of the author, and thereby, speaking on his behalf, or is she an impartial conduit for the strident protests voiced by the author? If the first proves to be true, then the present translation is nothing more than an addendum to the litany of well-minded but flawed attempts to channel subaltern sentiments; and if the latter is the case, then the translation, instead of committing what Spivak calls "epistemic violence", is one that nudges its textual machinery into the background in favour of the author's true voice.

In responding to Spivak's question, Mukherjee answers that she has translated *Joothan* as "[her] contribution to making that space" (x) of autonomy available to a Dalit writer to proclaim his identity without the distorting filter of an upper-caste consciousness. She argues that "elite Indian voices, whether in India or in diaspora, continue to represent the Indian voice" and that it is time "that this monopoly [was] ruptured and other voices heard" (x). It can be seen that Mukherjee's translation guides us smoothly and summarily into the exigency of the Dalit voice, with its searing pain, resentment, and reformative zeal all competing against each other in a volatile mix that is saved only by an acute sense of purpose from exploding into a vociferous outburst of rage against casteism and the inhumanity that it condones. The translation also disabuses the reader of any illusion of homogeneity in the problems faced by Dalits all over India and streamlines its critique to the oppression faced by the author himself and the Chuhra community in particular. Whereas the translation could easily have conflated the issues of all Dalits, thus producing a pan-Dalit critique, Mukherjee steers clear of such homogenisation in deference to Valmiki's focus on the uniqueness of individual experience. As such, Mukherjee does not show Valmiki's identity as evolving out of an essentialised matrix of Dalit values but as a result of a dynamic personal confrontation with the dominant modes of a casteist society.

In his remarkable essay, "The Task of the Translator, Walter Benjamin argues that "Beyond the communicable, there remains in all language and its constructions something incommunicable which is, depending on the context in which it is encountered, either symbolizing or symbolized; symbolized however in the development of the languages themselves" (257). What Benjamin means by the inherent incommunicability of a language is aspects of its cultural repertoire that are not fully amenable to translation. Although these aspects become manifest in the source text only in a symbolic manner, their presence is however subtly affirmed. But, in a translation such subtleties are hard to capture. It is this innate "untranslatability" or the extent to which a text resists being recast in another language that serves as the benchmark for the "translatability" of a text. These seemingly contradictory poles of meaning complement each other in establishing a "pure language", that is, a hypothetical plane of meaning where the mutually exclusive differences between two languages can coexist harmoniously in their striving to transcend each other's inadequacies of representation.

Benjamin's argument that translation is not merely about transmitting messages finds its echo in Mukherjee's competent rendering of *Joothan*. Her translation attempts to embody a "pure language" by asserting the a priori kinship of all languages. She conveys the tenor of the original as much as possible in the translation by recourse to a mix of innovative techniques and by adopting hybridization and heterogeneity as her guiding

principles. Speaking of the role played by language in translations, Mukherjee writes in the essay “Translating Minoritized Cultures: Issues of Caste, Class and Gender Language” that “Language is the skin of culture—the surface where inside touches outside and a self encounters an other” (2). In *Joothan*, it can be seen that language becomes the site where cultural interactions take place and where different vectors of power intersect. Mukherjee’s translation, rather than being a mere shadow or copy of the original, reproduces the intentionality of the author. As Benjamin says, it “fashion[s] in its own language a counterpart to the original’s mode of intention, in order to make both of them recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language” (259).

A translator fails in his task, when, according to Benjamin, he/she attempts to shape the translation in blind conformity with the rules and protocols governing the target language. He says that, for a translation to succeed, the translator must broaden his/her understanding to accommodate the intricacies of the source language too. Benjamin argues that this is achievable through the mobilisation of a “pure language” in which the intended object is differentiated from the mode of intention so that the connotative function of language is given precedence over mere denotation.

One of the greatest merits of Mukherjee’s translation is its unwillingness to play down what translators in general might consider the more unpleasant and lurid aspects of the text. As such, she makes no attempt to defuse the threat to elitist morality represented by Valmiki’s depictions of the upper caste women defecating in the open space adjoining Chuhra households, as if it were perfectly natural to do so. For the upper-caste women, and that includes the purdah-wearing Tyagis too, using the land adjoining the Chuhra settlement for excretory purposes, does not present any moral dilemmas since they equate the Dalits to offal, as signified by the unflattering title Valmiki uses for his autobiography. Whereas, such a base act does not constitute a form of indecency for the upper-caste women, Valmiki’s questioning of its legitimacy through his narrative delivers a decisive blow to their presumption that Dalits are supposed to live in a feculent environment. By choosing not to mitigate the horror and revulsion generated by such episodes, Mukherjee can be seen to aid Valmiki in demolishing the bulwarks of upper-caste authority. This fidelity to the source text thus gives the reader a panoramic view of the inequities of the caste system, with no unnecessary embellishments of language mitigating its stark reality.

Mukherjee’s translation of *Joothan* in a manner consistent with the tone of the original is no mean feat considering the incompatibility between Hindi and English. Since most of the technoscientific and cultural developments of the preceding century have taken place in the West and since material changes are reflected in language too, English has progressed quickly through a pre-Capitalist to a consumerist phase, with a protean vocabulary suited to representing the multifariousness of this change. On the other hand, Hindi, being an Indian language, still retains a culture-specific vocabulary, most of which is not easily translatable into a fluxive language like English. What this means is that while there are no proper English equivalents for certain Hindi words corresponding to indigenous cultural practices/artefacts, several English words for which there are no native equivalents have also been assimilated as such into Hindi for lack of a better alternative. The task of the translator as such becomes intensely complicated. It becomes a balancing act in which the translator has to resist the lure of convenience that dictates the use of set expressions and also of extreme fidelity, in which case the translation is hamstrung by the redundancy of indigenous expressions.

Mukherjee seems to have surmounted such linguistic difficulties by resorting to a form of translation that does not detract from the authenticity of the original even as it embraces the stylistic integrity of English. The title of the translation itself is a case in point. Instead of using “Leftovers”, Mukherjee decided to stick with “Joothan” since the word is deeply rooted in the Dalit psyche as a marker of all the pain and humiliation that they have had to undergo on account of being ostracised. While “Leftovers” might have signified the

exclusionary ideology of the upper castes, it might in no way have communicated the trauma it engendered. In translations targeted at an international audience, it is not unheard of for editors to change the book title in line with the sensibilities of a Western readership. Though Mukherjee was apprehensive that the title might be changed to “Untouchable” since that is a word that has already struck a chord with European and American scholars, the editorial decision to keep “Joothan” as the title was not changed. To elucidate the importance Mukherjee attaches to the title “Joothan”, a passage from the autobiography can be reproduced here:

During weddings, when the guests and the baratis, those who had accompanied the bridegroom as members of his party, were eating their meals, the Chuhras would sit outside with huge baskets. After the bridegroom’s party had eaten, the dirty pattals, or leaf plates, were put in the Chuhra’s baskets, which they took home to save the joothan that was sticking to them. The little remnants of pooris, puffed bread; bits of sweetmeats; and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. They ate the *joothan* with a lot of relish. (10)

“Joothan” is not just “leftover”; it is what remains after the upper castes have had their fill. The little morsels of food that the Chuhra community salvages after the elite classes have satisfied their hunger serve as a metaphor for the rights of Dalits being downgraded into the status of “residues” left over from the Brahminical classes enjoying their privileges.

Another point that must be discussed here to sort out ambiguities that might arise later in the course of this analysis is the conspicuous disparities between the edition of *Joothan* released by Columbia Press and the one released by Stree-Samya Books. Although both the translations were done by Mukherjee herself, the Columbia Press edition bears the imprint of certain extraneous editorial decisions that have rendered the text more academic and therefore a bit stilted. While the Stree-Samya edition speaks of the episode where the upper-caste women are sitting around in a circle defecating thus: “All the quarrels of the village would be discussed in the shape of a Round Table Conference at this same spot” (1), the Columbia edition garbles this reference by means of unnecessary “ennobling”: “At this same spot they would have a conference at a round table to discuss all the quarrels of the village” (1). Though the difference seems to be only cosmetic, it runs much deeper. Valmiki’s original intention was to compare the original Round Table Conferences which failed to acknowledge the Dalits in their own right as mere excretory episodes of the ruling classes. It is evident that in the Columbia edition the literalization of the analogy has produced quite the opposite result. What was originally a derisive reference has been defanged to sound like a bland statement. What this goes to prove is that even in the translation of a text like *Joothan*, the politics of translation can undermine the tone and substance of the original, foregrounding an orientalist perspective of how the Dalit struggle should be rather than mediate the truth.

Michel Foucault’s *pouvoir/savoir* (power/knowledge) paradigm can be invoked here to understand the consequences of editorial decisions that wear down the authenticity of the translation. Foucault contends that the interpenetration of the *pouvoir/savoir* paradigm establishes regimes of truth that discipline the social body in ways deemed correct by the dominant orders. The Columbia edition naturalizes the vestiges of Valmiki’s “coarseness” surviving in Mukherjee’s translation to create a polished text along the lines of a Western sensibility. But by exercising such controls, the editors lose the larger point of the translation, which is to allow the original intention of the author to be heard.

Alongside these editorial interventions, we also need to consider the socio-cultural milieu from which Mukherjee has undertaken the translation. For one thing, she has had to deal with her own complicity as an educated high-caste Hindu inhabiting the very social order that Valmiki wants Dalit writing to subvert and reject. The question then becomes how effectively has Mukherjee been able to reject the pressures of her casteist upbringing and translate faithfully without allowing her feelings and prejudices to interfere with the author’s

original intention. As Foucault argues in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, “Knowledge does not slowly detach itself from its empirical roots” (65). It always remains wedded to the circumstances that engendered one’s initial worldviews, structuring new experiences in accordance with entrenched patterns of belief, unless one makes a radical attempt to undo layer upon accreted layer of social conditioning. Generating discourses of subservience and moral inferiority about people you wish to control has always been the choicest strategy of the elite classes. By labelling Dalits as “unclean”, “low-born”, and “polluted”, the upper castes have legitimized their oppression of the Dalits. In all such forms of violence, the relationship between knowledge and power as outlined by Foucault is quite evident. It is this unholy nexus that Mukherjee tries to sunder through the articulation of a new radical discourse characterized by uncompromising non-conformity, rebellion, and dynamism. Working within such a discursive framework, Mukherjee feels her own privileged position implicated by the deconstructive forces of the translation. As such, Mukherjee’s journey as a translator is marked not just by the realization that societal stakeholders have to give up their position of political and cultural privilege but also that, as a translator, she must develop a certain humility in relation to the cultural specificities of the text. For her, being a good translator means as much remaining true to Valmiki’s intention as trying to resist the subconscious urge to normalize and appropriate the Dalit idiom.

One of the best examples of Mukherjee’s competence as a translator is the effortlessness with which she renders the village scene the autobiography opens with. Quite contrary to conventional Hindi novels that guide the reader through idyllic spectacles, running the gamut from rippling streams, verdant fields with peasants working harmoniously under their feudal masters, bustling markets, and trundling bullock carts, *Joothan* plunges the readers right into the thick of gross biological functions to disabuse their sensibilities of any hints of romanticism. By portraying the entire womenfolk of the village as defecating on the banks of the pond, Valmiki disrupts the traditional association between ponds and the rural charm they suggest. Valmiki’s radical reinterpretation of village life, with its glaring injustices and mortifications, is brilliantly captured by Mukherjee’s translation that opts for a coarse phrase like “take a shit” (1) instead of “defecate.” Although the phrase used by Valmiki “टट्टी-फरागत के लिए” is more toned down compared with the visceral implication of “taking a shit”, it can be said that Mukherjee improves upon the original by her daring inventiveness. Another example is the care with which Mukherjee has sought to preserve words showing familial relations as in the original. She uses words like “bua”, masi”, “bahu”, “chacha”, chachi”, and “mausa” instead of coming up with make-shift English equivalents. This policy is followed whenever Mukherjee encounters a word in the original that can be translated only with some detriment to its semantic core. As such, the translation is characterised by the preponderance of words like “chandala”, “goonda”, “savarna”, etc. over their English equivalents which sometimes sound more sophisticated, and therefore, inadequate.

However, there are other instances where Valmiki’s prose remains several notches above the translation. Valmiki’s diction, though very simple and direct, has an undertow of satire and resentment. While this seeps out naturally in the original, in the English translation, the same effect is very difficult to produce. Through the innovative use of diction and syntax, Valmiki unleashes his diatribe against his teachers, village heads, and even other self-righteous Hindi writers for vilifying Dalits. Valmiki uses simple words to communicate profound sentiments and never once does his prose lean in favour of syntactic virtuosity when he can find a more direct expression. This strategy of communicating searing experiences using simple sentences makes the writing feel at once raw and intimate. It is as though the writer is making a confession to the reader, but without any entreaties for indulgence. But it remains questionable to what extent Valmiki’s intention of turning simplicity of structure into a potent weapon of self-assertion has been reproduced by Mukherjee in English. Although this is by no

means a personal failing, since English is not completely adapted to dealing with the cultural universe of Hindi, the effect is often jarring.

One of the best examples of the inability of the translation to reproduce the emotional load of the original is conveyed by Mukherjee's embrace of the phrase "of a Chuhra" to stand in for "Chuhra ka." Though on a superficial level, the translation is spotless, at a deeper level, it fails to convey the derogatory sense of the original to the fullest. Whereas "of a Chuhra" sounds bland, "Chuhra ka" has an added layer of ethnic slur that makes it doubly poignant for the one subjected to this demeaning insult. By transliterating the phrase "Vhuhra ka" into "of a Chuhra", Mukherjee fails to highlight the pejorative implications of the original. Another example is Mukherjee's use of the word "progeny" as a replacement for "jatak" in the original. The problem with translating "jatak" as "progeny" is that it completely soft-pedals the denigratory impact of "being a spawn" or "jatak". When Valmiki refers to the self-righteousness with which the upper castes call the Dalit children "jatak", he is also unearthing the convoluted history of casteism that posits the Dalits in an animal relation to the divine Brahmins. But "progeny" is a neutral term; it hardly conveys the viciousness embedded in "jatak" nor does it help orient the disruptive core of the novel towards a mounting hatred for the high-handed practices of the upper castes. But before anyone attempts to find fault with Mukherjee's translation for such lapses, another example can be produced in mitigation of the previous flaw. In an instance where the headmaster tells Valmiki, "तेरा तो यो खानदानी काम है" (4), Mukherjee deftly translates it into "It is, after all, your family occupation" (5). Although there is no proper equivalent for "तेरा तो" in English, Mukherjee salvages the racial slur from losing its savage thrust by adding "after all" into the mix. Now, "after all" in some ways carries the snideness implied by "तेरा तो". In this manner, Mukherjee can be seen to colloquialise English and adapt it to the satirical import of the novel.

Dialogue is perhaps the trickiest part that Mukherjee has had to grapple with in the course of her translation. Valmiki has structured the dialogues in such a manner that the registers employed by different castes become manifest through the difference in the choice of words and other phonetic nuances. But when the same is rendered in English, all one can hope to do is point up the dissimilarity between upper-caste and low-caste registers by bifurcating dialogue at length into formal and informal utterances. Though such a technique suffers from certain drawbacks, it is also perhaps the best alternative to hearing characters speak with robotic regularity. It can be said that, within given limitations, Mukherjee's translation succeeds in approximating the rhythms and cadences of Hindi. Mukherjee's expertise shines through in instances where she integrates Hindi expressions with otherwise-formal dialogue patterns as in "Abey, what is your name?" (5). If Mukherjee had translated "Abey" into "Hey you", it would not only have marred the beauty of the translation but also failed to communicate the particular cadence of that slur in Hindi. So, it can be said that, by peppering the translation with Hindi expressions as in the original, Mukherjee hybridizes the translation and endows it with a stunning polyphony that works centripetally against unilateral ideologies.

In conclusion, it can be said that Mukherjee's translation, even while falling short of the original in places, especially in maintaining the distinction between different kinds of register and reproducing slang expressions in English, lives up to the original in terms of authenticity of emotion. She even outdoes Valmiki when it comes to ratcheting up the intensity of the language and not shying away from what is traditionally labelled as profanities. Considering the chasmal divide between English and Hindi, she has done a commendable job, one that does not leave a lot to be desired. The most redeeming aspect of the translation is the use of expressions borrowed from Hindi like "Abey", "Chuhra ka", and so on to create a visceral effect. Finally, the translation attests to what Mukherjee herself says about the role of a translator of Dalit texts in an interview:

“If a Dalit writer is an activist, I would say that the translator is also an activist. My journey to the point of becoming a translator of Joothan is the journey of coming into consciousness about the unjust social order and my place in it” (7).

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