IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Recovery Or Reinscription? Feminist Translation And The Politics Of Representing Subaltern Women In Mahasweta Devi's Work

Sonali Biswas

Lecturer

Department of English

Women's College, Rayagada, Odisha, India

Abstract: The paper entitled "Recovery or Reinscription? Feminist Translation and the Politics of Representing Subaltern Women in Mahasweta Devi's Work", interrogates the ambivalent role of translation as both a site of recovery and a mechanism of reinscription in the representation of subaltern women, with specific reference to the English translations of Mahasweta Devi. Devi's Bengali writings foreground the lived experiences of tribal and marginalized women, articulating forms of resistance that challenge dominant socio-political structures. Translation has enabled these narratives to reach a wider, global readership, positioning them within transnational feminist discourse. However, this movement across linguistic and cultural boundaries is fraught with tensions.

The study argues that while translation appears to "recover" silenced voices, it may simultaneously reinscribe them within hegemonic frameworks shaped by the target language, readership, and publishing industry. Through close readings of key texts such as "Draupadi" and "Stanadayini (*Breast-Giver*)", the paper examines how culturally specific idioms, subaltern speech patterns, and embodied expressions of resistance are negotiated – or, at times attenuated – in English translation. Particular attention is given to the politics of language, including the loss, transformation, or domestication of caste, gender, and indigenous markers.

Drawing on feminist translation theory and subaltern studies, the paper conceptualises the translator not as a neutral mediator but as an active agent whose interpretative choices shape the contours of subaltern representation. It further explores the ethical implications of translating voices that are already structurally marginalized, questioning whether translation can authentically preserve subaltern agency or inevitably reframes it within dominant epistemologies.

Ultimately, the paper highlights the need for more self-reflexive and politically conscious translation practices. By examining the tension between recovery and reinscription, it contributes to ongoing debates on voice, power, and representation in postcolonial literary and translation studies.

Index Terms – Feminist Translation, subaltern women, translation politics, postcolonial studies, power and language, representation

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation, long regarded as a neutral conduit of intercultural exchange, must be re-theorized within postcolonial discourse as an inherently political act implicated in structures of power, knowledge production, and representation. Particularly in the context of subaltern literatures, translation assumes a paradoxical function: it enables the circulation of marginalized voices while simultaneously subjecting them to processes of mediation and transformation. As scholars of postcolonial translation have emphasized, the movement from a regional or marginalized language into a dominant global language such as English is never ideologically innocent; rather, it is mediated by asymmetrical relations of power that determine what becomes legible, valuable, and authoritative. This tension is especially pronounced in the translation of subaltern women's narratives, where multiple axes of marginality – gender, caste, class, and linguistic hierarchy – intersect. The works of Mahasweta Devi provide a critical site for examining these dynamics.

Writing in Bengali, Devi foregrounds the lived realities of tribal and marginalized women whose experiences are often excluded from dominant historiographies and represented through layers of mediation that shape how their voices are heard. However, their translation into English raises a fundamental question: does translation recover subaltern voices, or does it reinscribe them within hegemonic frameworks of representation? This question lies in the heart of contemporary debates in both postcolonial and feminist translation studies. Devi's stories "*Draupadi*" and "*Stanadayini*" offer powerful critiques of state violence, caste oppression, and the commodification of female body. The translation of these texts into English has enabled them to enter a global literary circuit that is shaped by different cultural expectations, interpretive frameworks, and institutional demands. While such translation undoubtedly expands the reach of Devi's work, it also raises concerns about how subaltern subjectivities are reconfigured in the process.

This article argues that translation must be understood as a site of negotiation where subaltern subjectivities are both enabled and constrained. By analysing Devi's stories "*Draupadi"* and "*Stanadayini*", the paper demonstrates how translation produces a complex interplay between recovery and reinscription simultaneously enabling the visibility of subaltern women while rearticulating their voices within dominant discursive regimes. By bringing feminist translation theory into dialogue with subaltern studies, this study seeks to illuminate the ethical and political stakes involved in translating marginalized narratives, and to foreground the need for a more self-reflexive and critically engaged approach to translation as a practice of representation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of subaltern studies and translation theory has generated significant critical insights into the politics of representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational intervention, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", foregrounds the structural conditions that render subaltern voices inaudible within dominant discourses (Spivak 271). Crucially, Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak outside systems of representation that inevitably mediate and transform their voice.

In her later work on translation "The Politics of Translation," Spivak emphasizes the ethical responsibility of the translator to attend to the linguistic and rhetorical specificity of the source text, cautioning against domestication that erases cultural difference (179). This perspective aligns with feminist translation theory, which challenges the notion of translator neutrality and foregrounds translation as an interventionist practice.

Scholars such as Sherry Simon conceptualize translation as a site where gender and power intersect, arguing that translation can either reinforce or disrupt dominant structures (12). Similarly, Luise von Flotow identifies strategies through which translation actively reshapes meaning, highlighting its role in ideological rewriting (14). This article brings these frameworks into dialogue to conceptualize translation as a mode of representation that both recovers and reinscribes subaltern women's voices.

III. TRANSLATION, SUBALTERNITY, AND THE PROBLEM OF VOICE

At the heart of this inquiry lies a complex and contested question of voice, particularly in relation to subaltern women who occupy the intersections of gender, caste, class, and often, colonial marginalization. Such subjects are not merely excluded from dominant discourses but are produced as *silent* within them. As Gayatri Spivak famously argues, the subaltern cannot simply "speak" in any unmediated sense, since her voice is always already inscribed within structures of representation that determine intelligibility (271). For subaltern women, this condition is further intensified by what Spivak identifies as a "double effacement," whereby both colonial authority and indigenous patriarchy collaborate – sometimes unintentionally – in rendering their agency inaudible. Consequently, the issue is not one of recovering a lost or authentic voice, but of interrogating the conditions under which that voice is produced, mediated, and interpreted. Translation intervenes decisively in this already fraught terrain. By transferring texts from regional or marginalized languages into globally dominant ones such as English, translation appears to offer a form of recovery – bringing subaltern narratives into wider circulation and recognition. However, this apparent recovery is inseparable from a process of transformation. Translation does not simply carry meaning across linguistic boundaries; rather, it articulates that meaning within epistemological and cultural frameworks of the target language. As Tejaswini Niranjana argues, translation is deeply implicated in colonial and postcolonial power structures, functioning historically as a tool through which knowledge about the colonized is produced, organized, and disseminated (2). In this sense, translation participates in a larger economy of representation that shapes how subaltern subjects are understood and positioned within global discourse.

Moreover, the process of translation often necessitates forms of linguistic standardization that can obscure the very markers of subalternity embedded in the source text. Dialect, oral rhythms, and culturally specific idioms – key elements through which subaltern identity is articulated – are frequently smoothed out in translation to ensure readability and coherence for a wider audience. As a result, the translated text may become more accessible, yet less reflective of linguistic and cultural specificity that constitutes subaltern experience. This tension between accessibility and fidelity underscores the fundamentally paradoxical nature of translation: it both enables and constrains the articulation of subaltern voice.

Furthermore, translation is shaped by the expectation and interpretive frameworks of its readership. When subaltern narratives are translated into English, they often enter a global literary marketplace that privileges certain modes of representation, such as narratives of suffering, resistance, or empowerment. These frameworks can inadvertently reconfigure the subaltern subject, aligning her voice with dominant discourses that may fully capture the complexities of her lived reality. Thus, translation must be understood not as a transparent or neutral medium but as a transformative process that actively reconstitutes subaltern subjectivity. It is within this space of mediation and rearticulation that the politics of translation – and the problem of voice – must be critically examined.

IV. EMBODIED RESISTANCE AND TRANSLATIONAL MEDIATION IN "*DRAUPADI*"

In "*Draupadi*," Mahasweta Devi constructs Dopdi Majhen as a paradigmatic subaltern figure whose body becomes a charged site of political inscription and resistance. From a subaltern theoretical standpoint, the subaltern subject's voice is never fully autonomous but is mediated through institutional and discursive structures of power (Spivak 271). Dopdi's speech is therefore framed within the coercive apparatus of state authority, which seeks to regulate and silence her. However, the climactic moment of her refusal to clothe herself following custodial violence marks a radical shift from speech to embodiment, where the body itself becomes a mode of resistance. This act exceeds linguistic articulation and destabilises the authority that attempts to define and contain her. When translated into English, this embodied resistance must be rearticulated within a different linguistic and cultural framework. Feminist translation theory is particularly useful here, as it foregrounds the translator's active role in negotiating meaning rather than merely transferring it (Simon 12). The English translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak demonstrates a conscious effort to retain the rhetorical density and cultural specificity of the original text, even while making it accessible to wider readership (Spivak 197). Nevertheless, certain transformations are inevitable. The mythic resonance of the name "Draupadi," embedded in the cultural memory of the *Mahabharata,* may not fully translate for readers unfamiliar with its intertextual significance. Similarly, the oral and dialectal

textures that signal Dopdi's marginality in Bengali are often rendered into more standardized English, thereby reducing the linguistic markers of subaltern identity. While such standardization enhances readability, it risks reinscribing the subaltern voice with dominant linguistic norms. At the same time, Spivak's strategy of resisting complete domestication – through selective retention of vernacular elements – functions as a feminist intervention that seeks to preserve textual alterity. Yet, the translated narrative inevitably participates in global feminist discourses that may interpret Dopdi's resistance primarily through the lens of gendered violence, potentially overshadowing its specific grounding in tribal insurgency and state repression. Translation thus emerges as a paradoxical practice that simultaneously enables the recovery of Dopdi's narrative while reconstituting it within frameworks that shape and delimit its meaning.

V. COMMODIFICATION AND RECONTEXTUALIZATION IN *"STANADAYINI"*

In "*Stanadayini* (Breast-Giver)," Mahasweta Devi presents Jashoda as a subaltern woman whose body is subsumed within the intersecting economies of caste, gender, and labour. Her identity is defined by her role as a wet nurse, reducing her subjectivity to the productive capacity of her body. From the perspective of subaltern studies, such a figure exemplifies the structural marginalization of women who are both economically exploited and discursively silenced (Spivak 287). Unlike the overt defiance embodied by Dopdi, Jashoda's condition reflects a normalized form of exploitation, where commodification of her body is sustained through social and cultural institutions. Her voice is not articulated through direct resistance but emerges through the narrative's ironic tone, which exposes the systemic nature of her subjugation. When this narrative is translated into English, feminist translation theory highlights the challenges of conveying specific forms of embodied labour across linguistic boundaries. Jashoda's role is deeply embedded within caste hierarchies and ritual practices that do not have direct equivalents in English. As Luise von Flotow suggests, translation inevitably involves process of supplementation and reinterpretation that reshape the ideological contours of the text (14). The term "breast-giver," while effective in evoking the central metaphor, cannot fully capture the socio-cultural complexity of the original, where maternal labour in intertwined with economic coercion and symbolic value. This process of recontextualization illustrates how translation produces meaning rather than simply transmitting it. Furthermore, the tonal nuances of Devi's narrative – particularly its critical engagement with the romanticising of motherhood – may shift in translation toward a more affective register that emphasizes suffering and sympathy. Such a shift risks transforming a structurally grounded critique into a more individualized narrative of victimhood. As Sherry Simon observes, translation is always embedded within cultural hierarchies that influence how marginalized subjects are represented (27). The translator must therefore navigate the tension between accessibility and fidelity, a process that is both interpretive and ethical. In this context, the translation of "*Stanadayini*" exemplifies the dual movement of recovery and reinscription: it brings Jashoda's narrative into global visibility while simultaneously reframing it within interpretive frameworks that may attenuate its critique of caste-based and gendered exploitation. Through this lens, translation emerges not as a transparent medium but as a site where subaltern subjectivity is continually negotiated and reconstituted.

VI. CONCLUSION:

The translator occupies a central position in the process of mediation. Far from being an invisible intermediary, the translator actively shapes the text through interpretive choices, linguistic strategies, and paratextual framing. This raises critical ethical questions: How can translation remain attentive to subaltern difference without rendering the text inaccessible? To what extent can the translator intervene without appropriating the subaltern voice? Following Spivak, this article suggests that ethical translation requires a rigorous engagement with the linguistic and cultural specificity of the source text and translator's positionality. Contemporary translation studies, therefore, emphasize the need for more self-reflexive and ethically aware translation practices.

This article has argued that translation operates within a dynamic tension between recovery and reinscription. In the case of Mahasweta Devi, translation enables the global circulation of subaltern women's narratives while simultaneously reshaping them within dominant frameworks of representation. Rather than viewing translation as either emancipatory or oppressive, it is more productive to conceptualize it as a site of negotiation where meanings are continually contested and reconfigured. The analyses of "*Draupadi*" and "*Stanadayini*" reveal that subaltern subjectivity, far from being transparently transmitted, is actively

reconstituted through translation. By foregrounding the interplay between feminist translation theory and subaltern studies, this paper highlights the risks involved in representing marginalized women across languages. Recognizing this complexity is crucial for developing translation practices that are critically self-aware and resistant to epistemic erasure. Ultimately, rather than seeking to resolve the tension between recovery and reinscription, it is more productive to engage with it as an ongoing dynamic that underscores the limits and possibilities of representing subaltern voices in a globalized literary sphere.

REFERENCES

[1] Devi, M. 1977. Breast Stories. Translated by Gayatri Spivak, Seagull Books.

[2] Niranjana, T. 1992. Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context. University of California Press.

[3] Simon, S. 1996. Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and Politics of Transmission. Routledge.

[4] Spivak, G. C. 1988. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, pp. 271-313.

[5] Spivak, G. C. 1993. 'The Politics of Translation', Outside in the Teaching Machine, Routledge, pp. 179-200.

[6] von Flotow, L.1997. Translation and Gender: Translating in the "Era of Feminism". St. Jerome Publishing.