

“To Surrender or Not: Spivak’s Translations of Devi”

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Abstract: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one among many translators of Mahasweta Devi but one who deliberates upon the act of translation both from theoretical as well as practical perspectives. She is also someone who enjoys Devi’s approval and who consciously caters to an international readership. This paper attempts to critically examine the relationship between her theory of translation as predicated on the notion of “surrender to the text” and her practice of translation of Devi’s texts, wherein the translated text is interlaced with dense commentary and is consumed by the English language reader in a heavily mediated form as also to study how effective is this notion of “surrender” to understand the process of translation as such. An attempt has also been made to highlight the politics of translating into English rather than not for a select audience. On the one hand, through her translations, she makes Devi available to an international English language audience, on the other, such attempts at mediation, domestication, institutionalization, appropriation, assimilation and cooptation qualify for a different kind of racism. While acknowledging the necessity yet impossibility of translation, this paper deliberates on some important questions viz can the subaltern speak, who can/should speak for the subaltern, what are the alternatives and what constitutes an ethics of translation.

Keywords: Spivak, subaltern, ethics of translation, surrender, trace of the other, co-writing

First, then, the translator must surrender to the text. She must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner. (Spivak, 1993, p. 183)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one among many translators of Mahasweta Devi but one who deliberates upon the act of translation both from theoretical as well as practical perspectives. She is also someone who enjoys Devi’s approval and who consciously caters to an international readership. This paper attempts to critically examine the relationship between her theory of translation as predicated on the notion of “surrender to the text” and her practice of translation of Devi’s texts, wherein the translated text is interlaced with dense commentary and is consumed by the English reader in a heavily mediated form. This paper thus examines the extent to which Spivak’s poetics of “surrender” gets translated into her praxis and how effective is this notion of “surrender” to understand the process of translation as such.

Surrendering, Spivak explains, means that she must overcome what she was taught in school, resist both Victorian poetic prose as well as plain English. It also involves a sense of intimacy with the language because, she states, it helps if one's relationship with the source language is such that one preferred to speak in it about intimate things: "translation is the most intimate act of reading. Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text" (1993, p. 183).

Examining Spivak's translations of Mahasweta Devi's fiction where chaste and colloquial Bengali jostles with tribal dialect, snatches of song and doggerel, erudite allusion, Hindi phrases, and English terminology, one notices an effort at surrendering. Devi's texts themselves alert us to the translation that takes place in the process of creative writing: translation of lived cultural experiences into the written word. Devi conveys the rhythm of everyday language used by the characters with a sprinkling of English words that seem to have become a natural part of their mother tongue/s. This may be seen in examples like: "gang rape", "lockup", "silhouette", "violently", "obsession", "professional mother", "divide and rule", "lady doctor", "Johnson's baby powder", "frequency", "cancer hospital", "Lifebuoy", "painkiller", "sedative", "antibiotic", "telephone number", "malignant growths", "metastasis", "toxaemia", "semi famine conditions", "cultural awareness", "national issue", "non-issue", "cultural invasion", "pirated cassettes", "anthropologist", "mammal projections", "fantastic", "uniforms", "notorious", "machine-gunned", "architect", "zombie" and so on. To convey the layers of meaning communicated through this kind of a mixed idiom, Spivak italicizes the English terms which appear in the original Bengali and thus highlights the hybrid nature of the language that emerges after the contact with the colonizer. More importantly, this strategy allows Spivak to make visible the trace of the other, creating disturbance/dissonance in the process of linear/coherent reading. What also becomes evident, through and in these translations is the essentially mixed nature of languages, how there is no 'pure' language and how evolution in languages involves a process of sedimentation during their interaction with other languages, cultures and sensibilities.

Another way in which Spivak makes visible the trace of the other is by Indianizing English in the process of translation. In her translations certain English words are wrongly spelt in order to convey the sense of English used by tribal people or semi-literate/ illiterate villagers. For instance, the tribal Draupadi uses the word "kounter" to mean encounter or killed by police in an encounter, or death by police torture. Although she does not know English, she understands what this word signifies. Other similar examples² are: "kerutches", "blood peshur", "injishuns", "elettiri", "photoks", "belouse", "pomoted" and "terain". At times, such an intervention may make the text difficult to read, but this is a reminder to the reader that the

¹ All the examples are from the collection *Breast Stories*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull, 2002.

² These examples are also from the collection *Breast Stories*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull, 2002.

text he/she is reading is not an 'English' text but a translated one. It is a reminder of the difference, the specificity of the context, the evolution of the term, its very history. It shows how a word, when placed in a different context with a slightly different spelling, gets activated with different connotations. This kind of subtlety comes by surrendering, not just to the text but also to the context. This strategy also allows Spivak to deconstruct essentialist notions of India, emphasizing the heterogeneous nature of the subcontinent. Here, translation becomes, "a vehicle for intervention and of decolonization" where what is needed is an "active alignment with marginalized communities to work towards a decolonized translation studies" (Chambers and Demir, 2024, p. 2).

Another example of Spivak's penchant for high standards of translation and attentiveness to the subtle power of words is her translation of the title of Devi's "Stanadayini". The first translation³ of this story neglects the Bengali proverb and context indicated in the title and literally translates it as "The Wet-Nurse". Spivak, instead, titles the story "Breast-Giver"⁴, highlighting the issues of class, caste, gender in the story as also opening up the story to a psychoanalytic interpretation. The new title conveys the extreme commoditization and exploitation of the breast of a lower class, upper caste woman that helps sustain not just her own very big family but also her master's extremely big family and their off springs. When Jashoda receives her "portfolio", she warns Kanganicharan, "Look. I'm going to pull our weight with these. Take good care how you use them" (p. 51). Spivak's translation therefore is also a reading, an interpretation, a critique, an attempt at co-writing.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Spivak attempts to convey the flavor of the tribal's speech in a sustained manner and manages to get Devi's compliment for the same: "Gayatri, what I am really enjoying in your translation is how you've shown that dialect can be dignified."⁵ In fact, Devi is highly appreciative of Spivak's translations of her work: "I think she is the best. As far as I am concerned, as far as my stories are concerned, she's the best . . . all her translations are extremely faithful. . . Gayatri does not distort, not even one word."⁶ So her intimacy with the original and surrendering to the text does seem to help her communicate the specificities, the rhetoricity and the silences of the original in the translation.

Further, she retains the original words so that cultural particularity is not lost. For instance,⁷ words and phrases like - "aman paddy" (winter paddy), "Bhunya" (caste or surname),

³ By Ella Dutta, published in *Truth Tales: Contemporary Stories by Women Writers of India*. New York: Feminist Press, 1990. Pp. 25-62.

⁴ According to Spivak, "Devi has expressed approval for attention to her signature style in the version entitled "Breast-Giver". See Spivak's "The Politics of Translation", p. 182.

⁵ As quoted in "Translator's Foreword", *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull, 2002.

⁶ "Speaking with Mahasweta Devi: Mahasweta Devi interviewed by Gabrielle Collu", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 33, 2 (1998), pp. 143-4.

⁷ These examples have been drawn from two collections: *Breast Stories* and *Old Women*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull, 1999.

“DaimanHarbour” (Diamond Harbour), “dhurrie” (cotton rug), “mashi” (mother’s sister), “Naksali” (Naxalite), “palki” (palanquin), “panchayat”, “phalahari baba”, “pishi” (father’s sister), “puri”, “roti”, “tilak”, “tulsi” and so on are retained. At another place, she leaves two songs, sung by the tribal Draupadi and her husband Dulna untranslated⁸: “Samaray hijulenako mar goekope” and “Hendre rambra keche keche/ Pundi rambra keche keche”. Through these strategies she makes visible those traces of the other that refuse to be assimilated into the homogenizing influence of the target language in the process of translation.

At times Spivak succeeds in manipulating language to convey the rhythm, flavor and feel of the original. When she is unable to do so, she does not hesitate in admitting the same: Mahasweta has followed the Bengali practice of calling each so-called untouchable caste by the name of its menial and unclean task within the rigid structural functionalism of institutionalized Hinduism. I have been unable to reproduce this in my translation.⁹ She also confesses her inability to comprehend “the peculiar Bengali spoken by the tribals. In general we educated Bengalis have the same racist attitude toward it as the late Peter Sellers had toward our English.”¹⁰ By doing so, Spivak prefers not to gloss over the untranslatability of certain features but emphasizes the same as inherent in the very medium of language as well as the texts. This kind of admission involves surrendering to the limitations of language as well as of the process of translation as it is. Translation makes one aware of the complexity of language as a sign system, as a carrier of cultural ethos, history, and tradition. It highlights the fact that language itself is a sort of translation. Just as, in language, difference determines meaning, in translation also, meaning gets constituted by choosing one word over the other. Just as language shows that meaning is infinitely deferred along the chain of signification; translation reveals that transference of meaning cannot be achieved so easily. Language involves substitution and is seen as indeterminate, insufficient and arbitrary. Translation makes the gaps in language visible. In the “Translator’s Preface” to her translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1976), Spivak discusses the very untranslatability of Derrida’s text, but then joins Derrida in regarding this negative not as a flaw but as a fate of language. Words and texts are caught in an infinite web of inter-textuality. Meaning is constituted through differences and is constantly deferred along a chain of signification. In that sense, translation becomes, for both Derrida and Spivak, one of the clues to understand the workings of language. From this point of view, translation is primary, since it brings back into focus the very difference between the signifier and the signified.

Further, her self-awareness of such an attitude as racist is significant. In the Translator’s Foreword to “Draupadi,” Spivak compares the villain, Senanayak, to “the First-World scholar in search of the Third World” (p. 179). As a pluralist aesthete of the First World, she

⁸ This example has been taken from “Draupadi” in the collection *Breast Stories*.

⁹ From “Draupadi: translator’s foreword”, *Breast Stories*, p. 13.

¹⁰ From “Draupadi: translator’s foreword”, *Breast Stories*, p. 16.

argues, he participates in the production of an exploitative society. Interestingly, Spivak does not find the whole sale translation into English from Bengali and other vernacular languages problematic. Harish Trivedi and Susan Bassnett are particularly critical of this trend that promotes monolingualism and monoculturalism that desires to homogenize, to render in its own image, all kinds of others. But the question that arises in the case of Spivak is: is she also simply interested in promoting translation into the hegemonic language or is she self-consciously engaged in what Homi K. Bhabha identifies as mimicry, “the process of splitting as the condition of subjection; a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is avowed is not repressed, but repeated as something different – a mutation, a hybrid” (1994, p. 97), wherein the translator, in an attempt to articulate the voices of the marginal, the subaltern, or the dispossessed becomes, in Brinda Bose’s opinion, “an agent for subaltern resistance, instead of an extension of the long arm of the oppressor” (2002, p. 259). Bose identifies Spivak’s self-reflexivity, evident through her nuanced theoretical engagement with the issues of translation praxis, her seminal contribution as a postcolonial, subalternist feminist as the source of her formidable intellectualism and yet is critical of her as one engaged in “a different kind of ‘racism’” (2002, p. 278). Spivak’s translations of *Devi* contribute to the phenomena of what Bassnett and Trivedi identify as the existence of several *Mahasweta Devis* – one writing about her native ground in her native language, “the other the author of a few selected short stories which through English translation have been borne across and coopted within the post-colonial agenda set by the Western academy” (1999, p. 11) and many “in each of the Indian languages whose writings engage with a whole range of post-colonial issues but who are yet untranslated into English and therefore unknown to post-colonial discourse” (1999, p. 11).

At one level, Spivak does seem to surrender to the text and allow the trace of the other to exist when she italicizes English words, Indianizes English words, retains original source language words, admits untranslatability of certain others; at another level, her surrender seems conditional, conditioned by her politics, consciously overpowering the text with her excessive critical commentary that envelops the text, coloured by a certain kind of self-conscious racism. In the case of an exclusively English language reader, the translated text is consumed through the filter imposed in the form of critical commentary preceding, accompanying, following the main text, as voluminous as the text itself. Is this not, then, a case of surrendering to make it one’s own, giving in to take over completely?

Spivak’s politics conditions her “surrender” in multiple ways. Feminist concerns are central to her politics of translation. In fact, she begins her essay, which is based in part on her experience of translating eighteenth century poetry and the contemporary fiction of *Mahasweta Devi* from Bengali into English by stating that, “The task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the working of gendered agency. The writer is written by her language, of course. But the writing of the writer writes agency . . .” (1993, p. 179). In other words, language determines a gendered identity and in turn is determined by the same. For Spivak, the

relationship between language and the gendered agency is the prime locus of attention. As such, translating from one language into another, reveals more about the politics of exchange between languages, cultures, countries, race and gender.

The centrality of gender politics and subaltern concerns to Spivak's poetics of translation is also evident from her choice of Mahasweta Devi (herself a spokesperson for the rights of the tribals) for translation. In fact, another interest that binds Devi and Spivak is their concern for the tribal as subaltern. Although Spivak's and Devi's work for/about the subaltern needs no introduction, yet it would be pertinent to mention that Devi was awarded the Padmashree in 1986 for her social activism and her work amongst dispossessed tribal communities. Spivak, on the other hand, is also a social activist, was a member of the Subaltern Studies Group and has authored one of the seminal essays in postcolonial discourse, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Further, her choice of texts to be translated from the corpus of Devi's works is also evidence of her dual concern with the subaltern tribal women. Her collection *Imaginary Maps* consists of three stories: "The Hunt"; "Douloti the Bountiful"; "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha". The first two are about women. All are about the tribal people. Her collection *Breast Stories* consists of three stories: "Draupadi", "Breast-Giver", "Behind the Bodice: Choli Ke Pichhe". All are about women, two of them being tribal women. Another collection titled *Old Women* consists of two stories: "Statue" and "The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur". As the name of the collection suggests, both the stories are about the trials and tribulations of two old women. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is a novel about the tribals. Even in a text like *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, which is primarily about the tribal's experience, their continuous struggle to resist cultural/ economic/ political invasions, Spivak is particularly interested in the woman's question. In the interview with Mahasweta Devi titled, "Telling History", published with the text of this novel, she insists: "I want you, one of these days- . . . To write about the women warriors. . . I'm not being a literary critic here or a translator; it is just a reader's request" (2002, p. 18).

A clear sense of a target audience also conditions her "surrender". Spivak seems absolutely clear about her target audience: the international reader. In an interview with Devi, she states: "I don't translate for the Indian reader who doesn't read any Indian languages. I translate for the readership in the rest of the world."¹¹ Therefore, in her notes, she gives basic details about the history of India, which an Indian reader might be expected to know but a foreign reader might not know. For instance, consider this:

During the period 1971-77, when Mrs. Indira Gandhi (1917-84) was Prime Minister of India, the country faced food shortage and rising prices (1973-74) leading to political grievances, popular demonstrations and movements . . . In a final bid to decisively end all opposition to her

¹¹ See "Telling History: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Interviews Mahasweta Devi", *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, p.19.

continuance in office and to keep the discontent among her political opponents at bay, Emergency was declared by the President of India on 26 June 1975 . . .¹²

At other places, in her notes in the collection *Breast Stories* (2002), she gives information about Krishna (p. 37), panchayat (p. 37), sari (p. 38), sati-savitri-sita (p. 75), Ajanta and Ellora (p. 159), Shiva (p. 160) and so on. Now details like the above mentioned would not be required for an Indian reader but might be indispensable if one is aiming at an international readership. Spivak very consciously writes for the same and uses notes as the space to elaborate on culture specific words/concepts.

In fact, three out of four of the above-mentioned collections of Mahasweta Devi's translations are accompanied by extensive commentary in the form of an introduction, translator's foreword/note/preface, an interview with Devi, essays, translator's afterword and a glossary (different combinations of these in different collections). On the one hand, this multi-tiered commentary makes the text rich, helps explain certain issues, reflects Spivak's attempt to contextualize the varied voices and layers of perspectives that are embedded in the translated text. On the other hand, it could also be seen as an attempt to influence the reading of the text, to make the text one's own since the text produced as such is as much Spivak's as Devi's. What she creates is not simply a translated text where signifiers from source language are converted/transferred to the target language but a process in which the consciousness of the translator determines the final product as it is co-recreated, co-written, co-transformed. In that case, a paradox between Spivak's theoretical stance of "surrender" to the text and her praxis involving intensive and extensive commentary surrounding the translated text through which the only English-language reader is allowed access to the text, can be noticed.

Besides focusing on gender politics, Spivak's translations are also heavily inclined towards translations into English rather than not. She argues that woman's text in Arabic or Vietnamese "must be made to speak English" (1993, p. 182) even though, "[I]n the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest" (1993, p. 182). She states that differences are important and need to be foregrounded because "Without a sense of the rhetoricity of language, a species of neo-colonialist construction of the non-Western scene is afoot" (1993, p. 181) and therefore translation must involve "miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self" (1993, p. 179) wherein "[T]he task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, [attend to] the rhetoricity of the original" (1993, p. 181).

In a more recent essay, "Translating into English" (2005), Spivak directly deals with her location and responsibility as a translator into English, the growing power of English as a global lingua franca, the growing market for quick translations from non-European languages into

¹² This is Note 2 in "Telling History: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Interviews Mahasweta Devi", *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, p. 24.

English related to the rise of the so-called international civil society and therefore the need to operate with great caution and humility. She discusses her attempts to capture nuances by playing with language and also of unavoidable failure in the process of translation: “I have failed in this detail. Translation is as much a problem as a solution” (p. 95). She acknowledges the necessity yet impossibility of translation and articulates the relationship between the source and the target text through the dialectic of the self and the other wherein the trace of the other in the self is inevitable:

The impossibility of translation is what puts its necessity in a double bind. It is an active site of conflict, not an irreducible guarantee. If we are thinking definitions, I should suggest the thinking of trace rather than of achieved translation: trace of the other, trace of history, even cultural traces – although heaven knows, culture continues to be a screen for ignoring discussions of class. If translation is a necessary impossibility, the thought of a trace looks like the possibility of an anterior presence, without guarantees (p. 105).

Commenting on the neoliberal project of producing knowledge about the Third World and branding the product of such endeavours as comparative literature, world literature, Spivak, in her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003), proposes the idea of “planetarity” as a way of ‘doing’ comparison. Characterized by unending openness to the other, by an “irreducible curvature” (p. 29), she argues is a “more risky political activity” (p. 30). She argues that this “new comparative literature” must be based on planetarity, a system of differences that exceeds and spills over the totalizing fantasy of globalization. So she conceptualizes the relationship between the source text and the translated text via Lévinasian, Derridean ethics.

Spivak understands the relationship between the translated text and the source text in terms of the self and the other wherein the self/the English translation must assume infinite love and responsibility towards the other/the original. Now this Lévinasian, even Derridean notion of unconditional love for the other is basically flawed as it is contaminated by a combination of pity, fear, guilt, fascination, narcissism and aggression towards the other. Love for the other is only to the extent that it is not really an other, in so far as the other is deprived of its otherness. Spivak admits: “(Absolute alterity or otherness is thus differed-deferred into an other self who resembles us, however minimally, and with whom we can communicate.) . . . The experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu is uncanny” (1993, p. 181). The other is acceptable only if it is a good other, the same as the self, or at least willing to be converted into a mirror image of the self. Hegemonic presence of English language and its users determine what kinds of others are fit to be translated into its own image.

Second, the very existence of the politically correct translation is predicated on the existence of its other, on keeping the problem of translation alive, on continuing to critique the hegemony exercised by the English language, and on not thinking about alternatives to promote literatures in other languages. So, translation industry feeds on the existence of the other and prepares the ground for the possible hegemony of English language. Third, far from

really helping the other, it ensures that they remain the other, wherein it is okay to help the helpless, but in no way are other literatures to be allowed actually to cast off this otherness by asserting themselves as sovereign and self-reliant bodies of knowledge with no need for such benevolence, active forces capable of propagating themselves. Fourth, her argument is predicated on the idea that the self should be ethical and not on how the other can be political. She contends that, “We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical” (1993, p. 183). So, she does not talk about how the other can resist or protest or empower itself but about how the self, that is, English language and literatures continue to enjoy a sense of ethical superiority vis-à-vis other languages and literatures while pretending to promote the latter but actually cementing its own hegemonic power. Surrender, in this sense, is exactly what she is not practicing.

To conclude one could say that “surrender” is a useful concept to understand and engage in the process of translation. In fact, it is one of the important ways to practice what one can call ethical translation. But unlike Spivak’s idea of what constitutes the ethical, I think an ethical attitude should first and foremost deconstruct the binary between the self/the English translation and the other/the original. In fact, the terminology of the self versus the other is not just inadequate but also deeply problematic to understand the relation between the texts involved in the process of translation. Moving beyond this kind of a difference that automatically privileges the English text over the original and addressing the very inadequacy of language as such is what constitutes ethical vis-à-vis translation. Spivak, on the one hand, seems to be making somewhat of an effort at what she calls “surrender” in the process of translation but the very opposite before and after as she presents her finished product to a select audience. On the one hand, through her translations, she makes Devi available to an international English language audience, on the other, such attempts at mediation, domestication, institutionalization, appropriation, assimilation and cooptation qualify for a different kind of racism. A study of Spivak’s theory and practice of translation therefore helps keep alive the debates around some important questions viz can the subaltern speak, who can/should speak for the subaltern, what are the alternatives and what constitutes an ethics of translation.

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