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Dropping Draupadi: The Crisis of A Woman Translating A Woman

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Abstract: This academic essay seeks to criticize Delhi University's exclusion of Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, from its 'women's writing' course in B.A. English (Honours) curriculum in August 2021. It attempts to establish the text as a crucial example of 'a woman translating a woman'. In doing so, it evokes poststructural feminism as the basis of the shared agenda between the writer and the translator, as the text is transmitted through the process of translation as "literary activism". It seeks to argue how such an act of translation can subvert the existing status quo of the phallogocentric and hypermasculine power relations of the nation-state through the site of a woman's raped body—both as a site of oppression and resistance. It raises crucial questions on the politics that lurk behind the censoring of the text, throwing light upon the growing crisis of feminist translations today. In conclusion, it puts forward an urgent appeal to multiply the translation of a woman, and by a woman, so that such a crisis could be circumvented, if not subverted.

Keywords: Women's Writing, Woman Translating Woman, Post-Structural Feminism, Politics of Translation, Gender in Translation.

"My relationship with [Mahasweta] Devi is easygoing. I am able to say to her: I surrender to you in your writing, not you as intending subject. There, in friendship, is another kind of surrender. Surrendering to the text in this way means, most of the time, being literal. When I have produced a version this way, I revise. I revise not in terms of a possible audience, but by the protocols of the thing in front of me, in a sort of English. And I keep hoping that the student in the classroom will not be able to think that the text is just a purveyor of social realism if it is translated with an eye toward the dynamic staging of language mimed in the revision by the rules of the in-between discourse produced by a literalist surrender."

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *The Politics of Translation* (2000)

The nefarious Covid 19 pandemic had just splashed its second wave, and the human population was merely grappling with the overarching trauma of the lockdown when it was reported that Delhi University had removed three texts from its 'women's writings' course in the syllabus of the fifth semester in B.A. English (Honours) program. These three texts—Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Sangati*, and Sukirtharani's *My Body*—were removed despite considerable dissent from some members of the Delhi University's Academic Council. The news arrived sometime at the end of August 2021. At the time, the media was flooded with statistics of death and life in the middle of

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the coronavirus pandemic. Amid the pool of burgeoning information, this move would have easily drowned itself in the media frenzy, but it did not go unnoticed as some media houses picked it up. There was a huge backlash from civil society, especially against the exclusion of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It is the strategic exclusion of this text—representative of a woman feminist scholar translating another woman writer—that shall be negotiated within this essay.

In the Preface to Sherry Simon's book, *Gender In Translation: Cultural Identity And The Politics of Transmission*, she writes that "it is not the gendered identity of the translator as such which influences the politics of transmission as much as the project which the translator is promoting. Feminism, in its diverse forms, has become the powerful basis of many such projects." Spivak's translation of Devi's *Draupadi* becomes a befitting example of the aforementioned claim. Feminism, in its poststructuralist understanding, is the basis of the "project" entailing the translation of *Draupadi*. When I make such a claim, I must also conclude that the exclusion of such a text from the syllabus of an esteemed university is a direct blow against feminism—it is anti-feminist. Hence, such a move of censoring such a text is only impregnable of a crisis—one which I would like to call 'the crisis of a woman translating a woman'. And to understand this crisis, I shall expound on the above claims.

According to a report published in *The Print*, there were two major grounds on which the translation of Devi's *Draupadi* was found to be "objectionable": one, the "gruesome sexual content" of the text, and two, the aspect that it showed the Indian military in "poor light". Several news reports explicitly said that despite opposition from more than 13 members of the Academic Council, they excluded the text without any expert guidance on the matter. I would like to point out that there was a specific portion that was cited as explicitly sexual and triggering for students. It reads:

Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says 'water' she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?

Perhaps it is important to mention, for those who have not read the story, that Devi's *Draupadi* evokes the image of a tribal woman revolutionary who is brutally gang-raped by the Indian Army officials, in the backdrop of the Naxalite peasant's movement in rural Bengal (not the geographical territory, but the political category including East Pakistan [now Bangladesh] and West Bengal) during the 1970s. Devi's descriptions of the rape are visceral, as is apparent from the above excerpt, turning the readers' focus to the site of the woman's body. In the story, the woman protagonist's body itself is a symbol of resistance against the phallogocentric, oppressive, masculine state machinery.

This intense engagement with the woman's body—both as the site of oppression and resistance—is a key feature of poststructural feminism

wherein the subjective experiences of every woman were brought to the fore, yet the universal category of a 'woman' existed. Hélène Cixous, one of the early thinkers of poststructural feminism, has written in her famous 1976 essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, "When I say 'woman,' I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history...But... there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have in common I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes-any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible." Hence, when Spivak speaks about her shared agenda with Mahasweta Devi while she translates *Draupadi*, it is the shared identity of Cixous' definition of 'woman' that plays a pivotal role in understanding what that agenda entails. While Cixous urges, sometimes almost pleading, women to write, and to write with their bodies, Devi seems to answer her pleas with her narrative in *Draupadi*, in the Third World South Asian context. Devi's narrative in *Draupadi* finds a home in the "new insurgent writing" that Cixous seems to promote. Devi's protagonist, *Draupadi* (or *Dopdi*), seems to stand against all oppression solely and merely with her debilitated and ravaged raped body. Her 'woman' body, caged by constructs of shame and humiliation, then breaks apart the cage, one iron rod at a time, as she puts her raped body on display.

While Cixous only wrote about the act of woman's writing in her essay, there isn't any mention of a woman's act of translating another woman, although she has mentioned the idea of "woman for women" as a crucial aspect of poststructural feminist writing. But if we consider Sherry Simon's idea wherein she says, "The entry of gender into translation theory has a lot to do with the renewed prestige of translation as 're-writing...' we can look at Spivak's translation as an act of 're-writing'". This re-writing by Spivak is rooted in understanding translation "as a mode of engagement with literature, as a kind of literary activism," as Simon proposes. So, what is the "literary activism" that has been achieved in the translation of this text, written by a woman, and translated by another woman, especially in the South Asian context?

The most notable aspect of Spivak's Translator's Foreword to Devi's *Draupadi* is the shared agenda between the two which situates the story in a specific literary as well as an extra-literary context. *Draupadi*, which was originally published in 1978, is situated within the socio-cultural milieu of twentieth-century Bengal and its plot and thematic fabric are hugely contingent upon the contemporaneous political situation—this context is what Spivak explicates in her Translator's Foreword to the English translation of *Draupadi* which appeared as part of an anthology *Breast Stories*, published in 1997.

According to Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory, it is important to analyze an act of translation within the literary and extra-literary

polysystem of both the source language as well as the receptor's culture, and the interrelationships between the two polysystems are always marked by existing power hierarchies within and outside both these cultural systems. Thus, it becomes important to understand: Why a certain text is selected by the translator? And who is the translation for?

The myriad answers to both these questions are explicit in Spivak's Translator's Foreward wherein she is upfront about her intentions behind choosing to translate the text. She begins by stating that the anti-protagonist, Senanayak, was as much enthusing to her as the protagonist, Draupadi Mejhen. She describes Senanayak as the representative of the "First-World scholar in search for the Third World." Thereafter, Spivak refers to her readers as the first-person plural— "we"—thereby placing the receptors of her translation within the polysystem of the modern-day academic scholars who are trying to theoretically understand the classified "subaltern" but are perpetually alienated from their reality in practice—which is analogous to the "doublethink" and "pragmatism" portrayed through Senanayak's character. In much simpler words, Spivak's translation seems to be targeted toward the emergent critical scholars within the milieu of the English graduates at Delhi University, and also all other universities and centers of learning in South Asia, and further in the Third World. She seems to raise such critical academic questions to any scholar who falls into the academic loophole that Senanyak's character represents. Moreover, what becomes extremely important is the translator's position in the act of translation wherein the translator admits to being a participant in such a cultural polysystem. Spivak's targeted readership of her English translation becomes starkly apparent when she declares, "Since the Bengali language script is illegible except to the approximately twenty-five percent literate of the about ninety million speakers of Bengali, a large number of whom live in Bangladesh rather than in West Bengal, her [Mahasweta Devi's] 'Indian' reception is also in translation, in various languages of the subcontinent and in English." Therefore, the reception of Devi's English translation is truly an 'Indian' one and it takes the particularities of a regional cultural polysystem and makes it available to the broader prospect of the nation-state polysystem in a post-colonial socio-cultural context wherein English emerged to be a dominating language within the academic scholars of India.

However, it must be mentioned that in making Devi's narrative available to such a readership, Spivak remains truthful to Devi's exquisite Bengali and translates all metaphors and imageries as is without altering the immensity and poignance of how Devi portrays violence. An example would be how the expression of "#T# ##### #T####T ### ### ####T## #T##" becomes "The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep" symbolizing an expression of how aesthetic beauty is ruptured through the act of Draupadi's (or Dopdi's) gang-rape. Such faithfulness to the allusions and metaphors of Devi's fiction keeps the spirit of the story intact and bound by a common feminist agenda between the writer and the translator.

Thus, the act of translation, which is also a “re-writing” rooted in “literary activism”, reflects the feminist solidarity that Spivak offers to Devi’s portrayal of state repression and brutality of the law through the symbol of the woman’s raped body.

Further, Spivak writes that her approach to the story has been influenced by “deconstructive practice” but refuses to follow the reductionist path of such a practice which is in tandem with imperialism. Instead, she explains that within the deconstructive framework, she hinges her act of translation as emerging from “the recognition of... provisional and intractable starting points in any investigative effort” and she recognizes her starting point of the critical act of translation from an ideological point of view. Thus, we see that the act of the selection of Devi’s Draupadi is an exercise of projecting the deconstructive structural feminist approach to address the marginal communities in the intersectional points: the social context (the Santal identity of Dopdi or Draupadi), the political context (the Naxalite identity of Dopdi), and finally, the act of penetration which portrays the marginalized social position of a woman’s body amid the lowest rung of the cultural milieu—all rooted in a particular historical context of post-1970’s Bengal.

Thereby, Spivak’s “complicity in the act of translation” is also laden with the intention of making a particular historical context of oppression available to a wider Indian audience. The extraliterary socio-cultural factors are primary for Spivak in her act of translation and the receptor’s polysystem becomes crucial here as she wants to ideologically critique the transgression of law within the nation- state and how marginalized oppression is overlooked by the many educated liberals of 21st-century India.

Subsequently, Spivak also expounds upon the polysystem from which Devi’s text is selected to be translated and highlights a narration of Bengal’s political scenario which informs Devi’s narrative. She emphasizes West Bengal’s Left intellectualism which dominated the ethos of the region post- 1960s, especially after the Naxalbari movement, which was the first peasants’ uprising from within the community, as Dopdi or Draupadi strikes with impeccable accuracy with a scythe and a sickle— the symbol of the radical Left. But soon after, the Naxalbari peasant uprising became merged with intellectualism and after the 1971 War of Liberation in Bangladesh, East Pakistan and West Bengal shared a common alienation with mainstream politics and shared a common interest towards non- electoral guerrilla style politics which becomes the foreground of the short story. In giving such a perspective of the socio-political significance of the thematic framework, Spivak makes her translation accessible to her readers by informing them that the narrative would hold no meaning if one is unaware of the historical and ideological context of its source polysystem.

She writes, “The story is a moment caught between two deconstructive formulas: on the one hand, a law that is fabricated with a view of its own transgression, on the other, the undoing of the binary opposition between the intellectual and the rural struggles. In order to minutiae of

their relationship and involvement, one must enter a historical micrology that no foreword can provide.”

Another important context and relevance of translating Devi's Draupadi, as put forward by Spivak, is the name Draupadi which becomes Dopdi in tribal dialect. She draws the parallel with the mythological Draupadi of the epic Mahabharata who had multiple husbands and was given off to the enemy as a price of a game. The enemy wanted to strip her naked but Lord Krishna's magnanimity clothes her eternally, upholding a critique against patriarchy. Contrarily, Devi's Draupadi becomes Dopdi in her language because her dialect is not a Sanskritized one, yet she becomes a symbol of twentieth-century oppression against the most marginalized as Devi's Dopdi challenges the patriarchy with her nakedness. This is discussed in great nuance by Spivak who explains that she does not see the story as a refutation of the ancient myth but as a continuation where Dopdi is as heroic as Draupadi, sometimes Dopdi becomes a harbinger of what Draupadi couldn't achieve. Spivak writes that Dopdi Mejhen becomes both a “palimpsest and a contradiction” to the Draupadi of Sanskritized India.

Regarding the language of translation, Spivak puts forward that the words in italics written in English are also English words that are used in the Bengali original version of the story. This is to highlight that nation-state politics is an international intervention and the language of war is an international colonial imposition of culture which makes English the language of law and war—a language that is unavailable and alienated from the tribal community to which Dopdi belongs. Dopdi Mejhen's usage of the word “Kounter” again presents a political repertoire of the specific tribal community of revolutionaries and it means encounter by the law officers. Dopdi, although unfamiliar with the English language of the nation-state is familiar with the particularities of the context of this word which holds relevance to her politico-ideological position in the narrative. According to Spivak, “In her [Dopdi's] use of it [kounter] at the end, it becomes mysteriously close to the ‘proper’ English usage. It is the menacing appeal of the objectified subject to its politico-sexual enemy—the provisionally silenced master of the subject-object dialectic—to encounter—‘kounter’—her. What is it to ‘use’ a language ‘correctly’ without ‘knowing’ it?”

In the end, Spivak points out her own shortcomings in capturing the essence of Dopdi's dialect and the esoteric usage of multiple dialects and specific linguistic patterns of the Santal community, and the other mish-mash of Bengali dialects that Devi's narrative upholds. This is a crucial problem when the target language fails to encompass the micrological nuances of a specific polysystem of the Bengali language and Spivak has to make do with “straight English”—a language that she chooses to honestly depict Devi's narrative without compromising the ideological point of view which drives her act of translation.

In Spivak's detailed Translator's Foreword, it, therefore, becomes clear that she attempts to take the readers on a journey that entails an exercise of self-reflexivity and introspective critique within the frameworks of the

literary and extraliterary polysystems from where the text originates, and then she makes it available to the receptor's polysystem—the bourgeois academic readers and scholars of literature of the Third World. Thereby, upholding Devi's narrative as the "new insurgent writing", inductively makes Spivak's translation an act of new insurgent translating—perhaps, Cixous would have called it that had she been made aware of the translation of this text.

So, what does the coinage of 'new insurgent translating' encapsulate, especially in the South Asian context? Spivak's essay *The Politics of Translation* in 2000 responds to this question as she calls herself a "feminist translator". In the essay, where she describes translation as the "most intimate act of reading", she goes beyond conventional definitions of translation as a mere transformation of language, just like Zohar and Simon. She writes, "Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language." And as Spivak calls herself a "feminist translator", she claims that "the task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency." This gendered agency is what spills throughout the narrative of Devi's *Draupadi*. *Draupadi*, or *Dopdi*, breaks the notions of shame and submissiveness of the woman's body, both thematically and in the language that she chooses to speak in. Spivak now speaks of what remained as subtext in her *Translator's Foreword to Draupadi*. She makes

her agenda as a "feminist translator" loud and clear when she says that the texts she chooses to translate in English are texts which have to be accessed by the maximum possible number of feminists in the Third World, which includes South Asia. In a way, then the task of a "feminist translator" is to make certain texts accessible to the English-educated feminists of the Third World in order to generate feminist solidarity against the plethora of oppressive constructs that chain the woman's body. She writes, "In my view, the [feminist] translator from a Third World language should be sufficiently in touch with what is going on in literary production in that language to be capable of distinguishing between good and bad writing by women, resistant and conformist writing by women." She adds that a "literalist surrender" is a necessity for a translator if one might want to uphold the feminist ideology in the act of a woman translating a woman, however, such a surrender should also establish a critical relationship between a writer and a translator for the pivotal role in recognizing the texts that one needs to translate. Thus, such feminist translations like Spivak's translation of Devi's *Draupadi*, wherein women's bodies are brought to the fore, with an intention to make it accessible to the other feminists of the Third World, serve as a subversive politics of translation that break apart all law (including its transgressions), thus emerging to be the 'new insurgent translating' that is much needed for the future of scholarly studies on the relationship between gender and translation.

Thus, when according to a news report, a member of the Delhi University's Academic Council which took the decision to exclude this text comments, "We have no qualms with Dalit literature and wish to teach our student stories that are empowering and speak of how Dalit women broke the shackles to overcome caste discrimination. The scenes of rape have been described in gruesome detail which can make grown adults uncomfortable, I don't know how professors are teaching the text," one is left with a flurry of questions and comments:

First, the category of 'Dalit' is irrelevant in the context of Devi's Draupadi, because Draupadi (or Dopdi) was an Adivasi, not a Dalit. What happens when one leaves the decision of inclusion or exclusion of texts in the syllabus of a university's reputed course in the hands of a member who cannot differentiate between crucial identity markers of 'Dalit' and 'Adivasi'? Then, are claims by some members that the exclusion, or censoring, of Devi's Draupadi, was done without considerable expert opinion on the matter hold true?

Second, how does one "empower" any marginal community by censoring fictionalized experiences of their past oppression? What is the relationship between history and fiction? Does censoring fiction entail a censoring of history in itself?

Third, according to the 2021 annual report of the National Crime Records Bureau, there are 86 rapes, on average, happening daily in India. If, in our society, adults (sometimes, non-adults too) have been extensively reported (sometimes, unreported) to have been raped or being rapists, or both of these, then how is it that adults would be "uncomfortable" by reading descriptions of a symbolic resistance of rape in Devi's Draupadi?

Fourth, where does the "literary activism" in translation stand in the context of India and its multilingual, multicultural reality? What must be the politics of such activism?

Fifth, how will the practices of self-reflexivity, critical thinking, and negotiating with poststructural (and other forms of) feminism be achieved among the educated literary scholars of Delhi University?

Sixth, when an act of translation of a woman, by a woman, is censored on grounds that have already been refuted in this essay, will it gradually spread its poison to the other universities of the Indian subcontinent? If so, then what is the future of the literary scholars of the Indian subcontinent?

Lastly, what is most astonishing is that the text has been removed from the 'women's writing' course. So, how does the exclusion of such a text blur the readers' (in this case, the students') insights into the poststructuralist feminist writings of intersectional marginal identities within the South Asian context, which focus on the site of a woman's body as a symbol of both oppression and resistance?

The answers to these questions aren't deterministic. Each of them demands a separate essay, focusing just on them. But these are the crises that plague the arena of translation, especially feminist translation. However, one must subvert, circumvent, and build a literary dissent

against the censoring of such texts of a woman, translated by a woman. Why?—Because such censoring is anti-feminist (as is explained in the essay), also anti-humanist, and poses serious harm to the future of academic and scholarly debates on the relationship between gender and translation.

But how must one subvert it?—In my opinion, the only way to resist such censoring is to vehemently translate more texts of a woman, by a woman, albeit with the ideas of ‘shared agenda’ and ‘literary activism’ along the lines of feminism (its myriad forms), bearing in mind the intersectionality of identities within such an act of feminist translation. It is in the multiplication of translated texts—of a woman and by a woman—that the crisis can hope to find a resolution.

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