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The Translation of the Subaltern Discourse to the Dominant Episteme in Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter*

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Rey Chow in her essay *Where Have all the Natives Gone?* (Chow, 1993), reminds us that, for Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern discourse is ultimately not translatable to the dominant episteme, the power-knowledge is unable to hear the actual voice of the subaltern—that is what Spivak's "silent" subaltern means. According to Spivak the subaltern cannot speak because they do not "speak" in a "language" that is already recognized by the dominant culture or power regime. The subaltern who cannot speak is not a dumb creature, but one whose voice, or whose gesture, is not counted as speech in the dominant episteme of power. Subaltern is always condemned to a shallow representation, sometimes becoming the 'object' of representation, and at times the 'subject' being spoken of. Realizing this, Spivak might have been prompted to ask, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* The subaltern is neither dumb nor it is silent. They have their own voices, their own language to foreground their existence. What problematize the situation is the dominant power regime which doesn't consider them. Now, in such a condition when the subaltern can speak, how they will be heard by the dominant episteme, is a worthy question. The appropriate way to hear or more specifically understand the subaltern; their discourses can be approached as informed by the methods of *translation*. By translation, it is not meant that a simple interchange of words, rather "translating" of the everyday culture, life and communication of the subaltern. Translation can 'elevate' the original and the translator's task is to 'echo' the original to help it illuminate its intended meaning. This task of translation rather than representation seems more just, ethical and empathetic. Though while translating the subaltern discourse into the dominant episteme it has to be kept in mind that it is not only a 'movement' between languages but everyday culture, life, art and emotions; which is rather untranslatable.

It is true that for Spivak, who is to a great extent inspired by Mahasweta's writings in her theoretical explorations of subalternity, subaltern discourses contain an untranslatable episteme in them – which is not accessible to the dominant structures of power/knowledge. But, in Mahasweta's own writings we always find a struggle between, on the one hand, the urge to foreground this *untranslatability* of the core of the subaltern discourse and, on the other hand, the committed author's conscience that makes her strive to translate that discourse to the language of the powerful. Without bringing the subaltern discourse into the discursive regime of the systems of power, one cannot empower the subaltern. One needs to bring out the subaltern from the dark cocoon of ignorance. And so, the author has to "represent" the subaltern people through her art, not as a playful creative artist, but as a committed intellectual who fights for social justice and is

aware of her social responsibility. The kind of politically active intellectual enterprise of “representation” Spivak champions in “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” (Spivak, 1988). is symptomatic of the figure of the intellectual which Mahasweta as a cultural translator represents. When Spivak translates into English Mahasweta’s cultural translations of subaltern discourses to the dominant Bengali episteme, we find a chain of translational projects constellating around the figure of the subaltern: one must endlessly try to translate the untranslatable cultural episteme of the subaltern discourse – not to colonize the subaltern voices, but to “represent” them in the domains of power, to empower them without subjugating them to the idioms of the dominant power structure. In other words, it is a project to make “power” listen to the subaltern voices.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahasweta launches this project of translating the subaltern through the figure of the Brahmin poet, Mukundaram, who strives to understand the voices of the Shabar people, and to venerate their goddess, in the process taking up - like Mahasweta, and like Spivak - the responsibility of translation as politico-cultural “representation” of the disempowered. This project is sanctioned by the most ancient Mother, Abhaya Chandi, who, like the Vedic Aranyani, represents plenitude, and yet has to appeal to the committed poet/translator/novelist/theorist to *be represented* as a politico-culturally relevant signifier in the face of the aggressive enterprises of rarefying the subaltern discourses of the forests of India. This translation is the call of the hour as this is a major tool to know the ‘Other’.

The Book of the Hunter was first published in Bengali as *Byadhkhanda* in 1994 and translated into English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta, tracing the roots of the Lodha Shabars community who are closely bonded with nature; Mahasweta Devi gives a voice to this Subaltern tribal community. The novel is set in sixteenth-century medieval Bengal, drawing the life of Mukundaram Chakrabarti, whose epic poem *Abhayamangal* contains three sections: ‘Devkhanda’, ‘Byadhkhanda/ Akhyatickhanda’ and ‘Banikkhanda’. It is in ‘Byadhkhanda’- ‘Book of the Hunter’ section of the epic where Mukundaram describes the lives of hunter tribes- the Shabars, who lived in the forests. (This section of the epic poem is mentioned in sections on page numbers 138, 141, 325, 333 in Ancient Pali History book). Mahasweta Devi referring ‘Byadhkhanda’ as a source fabricates the fictional world of *The Book of the Hunter*. The Shabar origin myth and the glory of Abhaya Chandi is narrated to Mukundaram by Tejota, the Shabar Community head, who possess the secret knowledge of the tribe, that has been passed to her by her father Danko Shabar. She narrates him how in Abhaya’s forest, the Mother kept all her wild creatures, trees and forest children- the Shabars, safe and protected. Gradually, they come to know that a town has sprung up and a king has established his capital there. The king desired to construct a temple to Abhayachandi. A young Brahmin, the priest’s son in his thirst for seven *kahans* of gold, steals the stone slab which had the image of the goddess. The consequence of this sin fell on the Brahmins priest’s family which got perished. The Shabars got scattered in all directions and the king now possessed the slab, but without the image of the goddess on it. Later, the Mother observing the misery of the Shabars blew life into the clay models of a man and woman- whom she named Kalketu and Phullora. She blessed them as future King and Queen,

Kalketu as Meghbahan and Phullora as Meghabati. In his hunting expedition, Kalketu came across a Golden monitor lizard, which was indeed Abhayachandi in disguise, blessing him as the future King of the Shabars and gifting him with seven pots of riches. Tejota's narrative is symbolic, because she has been equipped with a "voice", being able to "speak" about herself and her community serves the purpose of empowering the Subaltern. Through Tejota's narration of the myth, we come to know about the past of the Shabars, how they were blessed with seven pots of everlasting riches by their goddess "Abhaya Bonodebi" the Vedic Aranyani- the one who has the wholesome right to the 'Aranya'/forests. She empowered them as the rulers of the forests. But these children of the Nature are cheated by the civilized people and are thus forced to live in poverty until their glory is restored when a Shabar succeeds in killing a golden monitor lizard.

In the novel Mahashweta Devi voicing the Shabar tribe, represent them as people who live beyond the town of Ararha at the edge of a jungle called Chandir Bon. They are poor hunters and gatherers, not very keen about money. They never realize that they are poor but are always content with whatever they receive from Mother Nature. Tejota narrating the glory of the Mother states: "She gives us fruits, flowers, tubers, leaves, wood, honey, resin, medicine herbs, barks, leaves and roots, even animals to hunt. She gives us everything, keeps us alive- doesn't that make her our mother?" (73). The Shabars sustain on these gifts of nature and never exploit them. Danko Shabar, the head of the community, would never allow Abhaya's creatures killed recklessly but conserve them and allow only limited hunting. But they are always threatened by the receding forest and coming up of cities. Their way of life suffers slow erosion as more and more forests land is cleared to make way for settlements. The novel reflects the effects that the city life cast on the Shabar life. Phuli, Kalia's wife fascinated by the town life would describe Mukunda's household as: "They've got oil in their hair, and wear fresh spotless clothes. And the words they speak are as sweet as the ripe *kul* growing by the pond" (110). But this was not the way a Shabar could live. They knew no ornaments than twigs and cowries, dressed dirty as the result of hunting or rigorous toil of gathering and selling, nor were they allowed to possess mud house apart from that of huts made of grasses. The intrusion of the town invoked in them the desire of saving money, constructing clean mud houses, wear brass ornaments, and check upon clean fresh clothes etc. which were restricted for the community. The old members of the Shabar community saw the upcoming cities and towns as a threat to their community. The young Shabars faced a challenge of preserving the rules of the forest when they were lured by the sophistication of the city life. The city on which they depend for selling their gatherings starts affecting their lives and they could only helplessly let the changes prevail or leave in search for a new forest.

One can also notice a contrast between Mukundaram's and Kalia's household. Mahashweta Devi uses their lives, the Brahman Mukundaram and his wife, and the young Shabars, Phuli and Kaliya, to capture the contrasting socio cultural norms of rural society of the time. This contrast also brings forth the hardships and struggles, these sylvan children undertake to sustain in the womb of nature. Mukundaram being a Brahman priest lives decent life with his

family; his granary is filled with paddy, has cows in the shed to provide milk, have a fine house and wore fresh spotless clothes. Kaliya and Phuli and other Shabars lived a life of hardship; they lived in huts made of vines and leaves, they survive on hunting and gathering and possess dirty clothes due to their poverty and hunting expeditions. While Mukundaram's wife had the privilege to wear *garad* silk sari and a pair of gold bracelets, Phuli could only do away with "a coarse sari, tied up short. Her hair was combed back over the center part. In her earlobes hung earrings made of tender young palm-frond and there were thick wooden bangles on her arms" (53). Mukundaram's wife receives an elaborate *shadh* arranged by the queen herself but Shabar women like Phuli can only console themselves by saying that "We don't have a queen to do it for us, you know!" (85). Phuli has to think of selling meat and skin in the market, to buy some rice, salt, oil and pepper to quench Kalia and her hunger. Voicing the condition of the Shabars, Phuli puts it to her 'Bamun-didi' (Mukundaram's wife): "Whatever Abhaya wants us to have. She has allotted you rice daily, and so you've got a stock of it at home. We Shabars, despite being her children, are not destined to have it that way. She hasn't allotted rice to everyone!" (87).

In his theory of differend, Jean-François Lyotard clarifies that, a case of differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom. This case of differend arises in the novel when the voices of the subaltern shabar go unnoticed by the civilized people. Mahashweta Devi, through the novel throws light on various challenges faced by them due to the intrusion of the civilized culture in their way of life. The impact of the urban culture and the depletion of the natural resources rob the Shabars of their environment. The advancement in the town of Ararha poses a threat over the Shabars, whose life depends upon the natural resources provided by the forests. Their endangered existence is aptly reflected in the novel, "there was no stopping the times from changing! A Shabar understood that the more others encroached, the more his existence would be threatened. Then, that was it. He'd pick up camp, sticks and all, and calling 'Ma, Ma! go off into the shelter of some virgin forest'" (106). In the light of urbanization and modernization the dominant forces exploit the forest and its resources, which are the dwelling place of these native tribes and also the source of their livelihood. In the novel Kalya repeatedly expresses that the Shabars are not allowed to cultivate but live as hunters and gatherers in the forest. "Whatever comes out of the jungle, they will eat it scalded or roasted. They won't work on any schedule, they won't farm, and they'll retort, why plough when there's forest" (76). It is the command of Abhayachandi to live on her resources and not to practice cultivation. But when the dominant civilized forces deplete the forests and influence their culture they are left with no other option than of leaving their forest in search of another Abhaya's jungle or merge with the civilized, sacrificing their culture and identity. Suffering atrocious cruelties and being uprooted several times they have even lost their oral traditions.

The untranslatability of the native's experience and suffering into the dominant episteme becomes problematic because, in order for their experience to become translatable, the 'native' should not only 'speak' but should also be provided with the justice for their speech, a justice that has been long denied to them. The native/shabars victimized have no access to justification, thus left with no alternative than opting for silence. Their silence indicates displacement, their displacement from the center to the margin, displacement from their ancient forest home to a new unknown forest. In such a silence the Shabars move out of Ararha for a new shelter in some other forest, being aware that their plight and pain will never be translated into the knowledge of the dominant power. Mahashweta's novel provides a voice to these 'silenced' voices, voices which are silenced since ages. First, we hear Tejota's voice narrating their myth, then we hear Mukundaram's voice penning down the Shabar's life, again Mahashweta brings out this section of Shabar plight from Mukundaram's divine epic and later the translation of Mahashweta's novel *Byadhkhanda (The Book of the Hunter)* from Bengali to English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta. A constellation of narration thus surrounds the Subaltern native, which is encouraging, and in its own way advocates the denied justice to this section of peoples. Thus it can be asserted that by bringing out the subaltern Shabar tribe from their cocoon, introducing their identity to the mainstream people, voicing their troubles and humiliations; Mahashweta Devi champions in her job of social transformation. Only by providing justice/justification to these natives, the translatability of their experience becomes possible. But since, justice is destroyed in the form of differend to the subaltern; the process of translation of their discourse becomes never-ending.

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