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Translating Folktales of Tripura into English: Towards an ‘Emergent’ Modernity

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Abstract:

The hills of India’s North-East are an immense storehouse of orally circulated folktales belonging to multiple ethnic groups. In Tripura, they range from the Tripuris, the Reangs, the Jamatias, the Noatias, the Murasinghs, the Uchais, the Rupinis, the Kolois, the Darlongs, the different clans of the Halams, the Mraimas (Mogs) and the Chakmas. Besides, there are the Lushais, the Garos and the Manipuris. The first eight ethnic groups speak Kokborok, and the rest have their own languages. Folktales of Tripura have circulated through centuries, purely by word of mouth, through the mouths of grandmothers and elderly members of the families of the ethnic population. However, mouths have yielded place to other global mediums of transmission today, mediums of ‘modernity’ as it were. Of late, with the advent of globalism and the emergence of technologies, across the globe there has been a rise of the “glocal” consciousness that champions the presence of the “local” within the “global”. As has been pointed out earlier, borderlands have already eroded in digital spaces, logged on to, from our very homes. It is at this point that the act of translation intervenes: translation from languages belonging to the fringes, and often endangered such as Bongcher, to languages that are ‘modern’ as it were, ‘modern’ European or ‘modern’ Indian. This paper proposes to explore what constitutes the ‘modern’ as far as language and culture are concerned and how translation intervenes as a vehicle to transport the antique elements of a culture from an antique oral language to a ‘modern’, ‘literate’ culture and language.

Keywords: Premodern, Orature, Scatological, Liminality, Carnivaleque, Modernity.

Any study of the emergence of modernity in the Indian body politic and its cultures necessarily entails a knowledge of the “pre-modern” in culture or society, which is the potential raw material out of which modernity is forged. Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, “If modernity is to be a definable, delimited concept, we must identify some people or practices or concepts as *nonmodern*” (xix; emphasis original). Chakrabarty further explains that both in the West as well as in India, in the nineteenth and then the twentieth century, political philosophers such as J.S. Mill and L. T. Hobhouse were the ones who defined modernity in terms of Western Enlightenment.

Following the tenets of the European Enlightenment, many Western intellectuals thought of modernity as the rule of institutions that delivered us from the thrall of all that was unreasonable and irrational. Those who fell outside its ambit could be described as *premodern*. Western powers in their imperial mode saw modernity as coeval with the idea of progress. (Chakrabarty xix; emphasis original)

Additionally a postcolonial thinker like Partha Chatterjee, in his book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (1986) has marked that the emergence of modernity coincides with the arrival of print capitalism, a technology of communications in print to resist erasure of human linguistic diversities, and endangered languages and literatures in particular. Both the above notions of the 'premodern' and 'modern' ought to be taken into consideration in any study of translation of oratures.

Translating oral literature from a tribal language into a global link language poses special problems. The dilemma of faithfully translating folk tales from the tribal languages of Tripura – Kokborok, Bongcher, Mraima or Chakma – into English is compounded further by the Bengali transcription/transcription of the tales. Linguists such as the late Kumudkundu Chowdhuri, and then later, Mrs Minakshi Sen Bandopadhyay under the patronage of Sahitya Akademi North East Centre for Oral Literatures, went out of their way painstakingly preparing hand-written manuscripts of the tales, trotting from village to village in the far-flung hilly heartland of the state. In the context of Tripura, the metropolitan-bred translator, having to negotiate with such manuscripts, often comes to be uncomfortably positioned, embarrassingly aware of a plethora of limitations, first one's ignorance of Kokborok and the other languages in which orality thrived in the region, and then one's position as an outsider. Folktales of Tripura, when transcribed through Bangla enter the English mainstream, traverse a long journey through cultures, from antiquity to modernity. The usual problems and familiar roadblocks involved in the process are as follows: the gap between the nature of these indigenous languages; their different stock of ideas, the problem of equivalence, the contending pulls of information transfer, of artistry etc. Such inter-cultural differences and unfamiliarities between cultures and languages affect all inter-cultural translations and are not just limited to translations from the oral. But translators of oral literatures (including myself) have often ended up imitating the 'antique', 'primitive' and 'pre-modern' content of these stories through adopting plain, unpolished or crude linguistic styles. As has been observed in an earlier essay penned by the present author:

Sometimes the translator, in an attempt to convey romanticized evocations of the mystical and archaic, in an attempt to represent the unfamiliar linguistic structure of a tribal language, ends up choosing an un-English, word-for-word equivalence. (Gupta 22)

Moreover, problems multiply during attempts at translating certain folk motifs which have been relegated to the restricted domain of taboos in bourgeois culture. Among common folk motifs such as the use of animism, the beast fable, magic, charms and metamorphosis, an

integral aspect of the oral tradition of storytelling is its use of the ‘gross’ and the ‘grotesque’, both in style as well as in content, with its recurrent use of exaggeration and scatological excess, particularly the extensive references to the lower stratum of the body, genital organs and excreta. This aspect distinguishes folktales from modern narrative fiction dictated by the standardized norms of urban bourgeois world-view with its polished set of value systems and insistence on ‘culture’ as opposed to ‘nature’. Any attempt to dilute those norms in translations into so called modern languages including English, intrudes upon the purity of the folk narrative. Nevertheless, such dilution is inevitable, as certain words, tabooed in ‘literate’ culture, translate themselves only through the mask of bourgeois culture. A detailed reading of select tales may assail the sensibility of the modern reader used to the received and accepted discourse of ‘narrative’ in fiction. Stories replete with references to strange and grotesque transformations, copulation, defecation, urination, dismembered body parts and genitals, not only assail ‘civilized’ sensibilities, they also in a way attempt to establish counter discourses of modern narrative culture. An instance may be cited from another of my earlier studies on the Bongcher oral tradition of Tripura, in which I had elaborated upon the carnivalesque elements in ‘premodern’ literatures. (Gupta, *Writing Orality, Telling Histories* 119). The Rabelaisian grotesque erupts in the following lines in English translation from a popular narrative of the Bongcher oral tradition, “The Story of Chemchhawrmanpa,”:

One day a man called Chemchhawrmanpa was busy honing his *da* on the edges of a huge rock beside a stream. He was seated in a squatted position with his scrotum dangling between his thighs above the water. A big lobster while wading through the water spotted the dangling object, and assuming it to be some delicious grub, pinched it hard. The man jumped up, screaming in agony. Blinded by excruciating pain, he plunged his *da* into the bark of a bamboo bush that had tilted onto the rock upon which Chemchhawrmanpa squatted. The remaining portion of the bamboo pole under the impact of the *da*, rebounded and stood upright, banging straight into a squirrel, and that too in his scrotum, of all places. Losing his cool, the squirrel bit into a *khawum* tendril, tearing it apart. The shoot fell into the nest of a poisonous ant, decimating it altogether. (115; emphases original)

As the chain narrative unfolds, a chain of destruction is unleashed. The ant vents its fury on the belly of a wild boar. The boar uproots a tree on the branches of which a bat was at repose. Confused, it invades into an elephant’s ear lobe, making enough fuss to disturb the animal’s tranquility, enraging it beyond control. The elephant madly charges into the hut of an old woman. The story then goes thus: “Horrorified, she began to run from pillar to post for shelter. At that very moment she felt a gurgle in her stomach. It was nature’s call. Unable to resist the call, she excreted having reached the top bend of a stream” (115). Likewise, in another Bongcher folktale titled “Zongkhak Tepu” or “The Tale of the Chimpanzee”, when the chimpanzee’s human wife leaves him, Zongkhak, as he is called, is so agitated at her betrayal that he kills the barking dog in the neighbourhood and makes a “champrong with its intestines” (85), “champrong” being a one-stringed ethnic musical instrument of Tripura. In www.the-criterion.com

“A Tale of a Hen’s Egg”, the egg and excreta of the hen are personified as searching for the dead mother-hen, killed by the fox. “Lalrawnga Retep” or “The Tale of Lalrawnga” revolves round the magical powers of the son of a renowned magician, having the power to speak from within his mother’s womb. He is born finally with a big tongue, so big that he begins to talk too much, much to the irritation of his parents. His garrulity invites the wrath of his parents who decide to slice out a piece of his tongue. They preserve the slice which eventually is discovered by the boy later. The story proceeds through grotesque metamorphoses which juxtapose the world of humans and the world of beasts. Translating the contents of the folktale into English from the Bangla transcription has not been devoid of a distinct discomfiture, particularly when it came to dealing with ‘tabooed’ words denoting genital organs and excreta. The discomfiture index involved in such translation may be overcome in the light of Bakhtin’s observations on the scatological liberties in European folklore as he finds in Rabelais’ description of the ancient ritual of the feast of fools:

We know that defecation played a considerable role in the ritual of the “feast of fools.” During the solemn service sung by the Bishop-elect, excrement was used instead of incense. After the service the clergy rode in carts loaded with dung; they drove through the streets tossing it at the crowd. (147)

Bakhtin’s theorizing of the carnivalesque tendencies of ancient folk literatures may serve as an appropriate model for the understanding of the major motifs of folk literatures in India. However, the modern translator of folk may be compelled to shun the purity of the scatological stock of ideas on account of the constraints of culture and the canon. Erasure and hence amnesia are inevitable. But translation, as an act too, is inevitable and may be justified as resisting amnesia through the project of retrieving a lost or a fast fading culture. Anxieties are inevitable in such postcolonial projects of retrieval that may lead the archiver towards a limbo of sorts, caught between erasure and recovery. Also, it must not be forgotten that Sahitya Akademi’s patronage of the retrieval of oral literatures of the diverse linguistic and ethnic communities of the North-East through the method of collection, selection, transcriptions and then translations, particularly into English, is first and foremost a political act. Further, such projects are part of a state establishment’s attempt to canonize literatures of the North-East and to create a new map in literary cartography. Thus, the hegemonic implications are palpable in the act of translation. So, despite the recurrence of scatological motifs in the original tales, as it spills over in the Bangla transcriptions, the English translator has no choice but to further prune words, phrases, expressions and figures of speech for the sake of the canon. Therefore, although the sincere objective of Saitya Akademi is retrieval and museumization through anthologies, the unstated cultural codifications of written literature dumps the translator into a vortex, caught in between retrieval and erasure.

Raymond Williams, in his classic Marxist study of literature titled *Marxism and Literature* classifies ‘culture’ into three components: the dominant, residual and the emergent. He argues how certain “determinate dominant features” dictate a cultural process. But in its act of domination, culture allows the inclusion of certain available elements of its past, which Williams calls the “residual.” The “residual” as Williams sees the term, must be

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differentiated from the “archaic”. The archaic is a closed chapter of the past, “which may be opened on occasion in a deliberately specializing way.” But the “residual” component of culture is slightly different, as Williams observes:

Certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. (122)

Raymond Williams also observes that this aspect of the “residual” may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to dominant culture. He further observes:

At certain points the dominant culture cannot allow too much residual experience and practice outside itself, at least without risk. It is in the incorporation of the actively residual – by reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion – that the work of the selective tradition is especially evident. This is very notable in the case of versions of the ‘literary tradition’, passing through selective versions of the character of literature to connecting and incorporated definitions of what literature now is and should be. (123)

The extensive use of the scatological in the orally circulated folktales of Tripura and the North East thus comes to be pruned in translation to cater to the dominant hegemonic project of the literary canon, to cater to what Raymond Williams describes as “incorporated definitions of what literature now is and should be” (123). Moreover, the immense vitality of the so called ‘grotesque/gross’ elements in the folk literature of the North-East has seriously challenged bookish notions of civilization and culture that have engendered concepts such as modernity and the nation. Hence, the serious translator with the objective of retrieval may use his/her own discretion to retain those elements which challenge hegemonic notions of civilization and culture in order to generate an alternative modernity. The postmodern position of the contemporary translator may initiate thus a creation of a new “emergent” modernity through retaining the purity of the original, as far as practicable, picking bits and pieces of the ‘residual’ in culture. Esther Syiem in her essay “Social Identity and the Liminal Character of the Folk: A Study in the Khasi Context” observes:

Although the folk may seem to have been sidetracked from its original position of centrality, it can never be recanted, never erased. If at all, it has now assumed a position of potent ‘invisibility’, a hidden strata of creativity mirroring the compulsions of a community. This (invisibility) is a term that has been borrowed from the protagonist of *The Invisible Man* (of Ralph Ellison), which signifies a hidden area of darkness, heady with energy; distinctively its own. (131)

According to Esther Syiem, this hidden area of darkness in folk narratives exerts pressure upon mainstream society as it waits to be disseminated. Its liminality, in a sense becomes its strength in order to stand up to and confront the challenges of globalism. Hence the folk's recurrent use of the 'grotesque' is a marker of that liminality that has been accorded to it by the global norms of urban culture. It now becomes an interesting exercise to examine how such liminality of the folk tales of Tripura, challenges the 'norms' of the modern narrative.

Bakhtin in his analysis of the grotesque in European folk literature in *Rabelais and His World*, studies how medieval writers such as Rabelais had used folk elements in resistance to the official prohibition of certain kinds of writing. Such folk elements were specially designed to provoke laughter and ridicule at institutions such as the church and monarchy during and after the Reformation. He assesses certain aspects of folk culture that defy the prohibitions and dominance of standard norms of the state and culture with carnivalesque elements pertaining to the body. In the process folk literature often relies upon the vulgar and the bawdy as its essential components. He observes moreover, how the body and its acts have been silently sidelined in official speech and writing. Investigating into the reasons behind the exclusion of these acts from the discourse of polite conversation and writing, he observes:

In the modern image of the individual body, sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific, torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole. In this connotation they can no longer carry on their former philosophical functions. (Bakhtin 321)

It is in folk literature of the oral traditions that power/status is granted upon the body and its functions that challenge the post-Renaissance and Post-Enlightenment image of 'humanitas' and the individual body. The oral folk of several communities of Tripura, (for example Bongcher community), standing on the brink of linguistic and cultural extinction, challenges notions of modernity, nationhood and identity that have all through attempted to examine, analyse, and even 'write' endangered communities under Western eyes. The body-politic of modernity thus comes to be challenged by the body in folk. The carnivalesque tendency in the Bongcher folklore is not just a feature of one endangered community. Almost all the tribes of India's North-East may boast of a rich repertoire of folk tales which challenge norms of literate culture.

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