

Lingua Franca of the Voiceless: English and the Literature of the Marginalized

P. Rathina

Assistant Professor (Senior Grade), Department of English,
B. S. Abdul Rahman University, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India.

ABSTRACT

The English Language has been proved as a language which gave expression to many colonized and oppressed communities worldwide, like the natives of North America, Australia, New Zealand, etc. The basic premise of this paper is to highlight the seminal role played by the English language in trans-nationalizing the tribulations and mortifications of the marginalized community, which had been hitherto unnoticed and uncared for, in our country. In India, the widespread awakening caused by the iconoclast, Dr Ambedkar, the education promoted by the British Rule and the reservation policy of the government are some of the causative factors which resulted in the evolution of a new literary movement called Dalit Literature. Though many literary attempts have been made by this marginalized community in their vernacular languages since 1970's, the emergence of their English translation is hardly two decades old, starting from 1992, with the publication of Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot's 'An Anthology of Dalit Literature'. This paper endeavours to analyze the impacts of this literature in translation on the marginalized community as well as the 'others'. The English language has widened the scope for realizing the injustice and inequalities existing in the social system and for making inroads into the creation of a new egalitarian society.

KEYWORDS

Lingua franca; English; Marginalised; Dalit Literature.

With the exponential growth in computerization and advent of the Internet revolution, the users of English have multiplied manifold throughout the world. Consequently, there is a phenomenal increase in the creation of words in the English language. According to a recent statistical data, words are being added to English at the rate of some 14.7 words per day and there are some 1.53 billion people now speak English around the globe as a primary, auxiliary, or business language. English has been recognized as an official language by nearly a third of the 190-odd member states of the United

Nations. English has, indeed, become the lingua internacia.

In India, a land of many languages, even inter-regional communication is very difficult or impossible, with the existing linguistic diversities. Only English, "the language of many lands," plays the role of "a second language and the knowledge of it is a function of social class and educational level, rather than national or geographical origin," says Skinner (1998). In our country, English is the chief medium for higher education, media, national and international governance and above all, Information and Communication

technology. The Eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution has listed 22 mainstream languages as national languages. Sahitya Akademi, the National Academy of Letters, went a step ahead and has recognized 24 Indian languages, including Indian English, as languages having major literatures. Sahitya Akademi has instituted annual National Awards and Translation Prizes in each of these languages in order to promote these literatures further. The Akademi aims to build a literary India by encouraging the translation of literature, especially from minor languages. When discussing the minor languages in our country and the role of English, A.J.Thomas affirms that The Akademi strives to accomplish this mission of fostering the Indian languages and literature, by using English as a “conduit language.”

Indian Writing in English and Indian Literature in English translation are the two major phenomena emerging in the contemporary Indian Literary scenario. Indian literature written in vernacular languages is increasingly getting translated in English thereby opening new avenues for worldwide acceptance and acclamation. As rightly observed by Kothari (2008), “What we see around us today are two very successful, post-liberalized avatars of literature – one written in English, and the other translated into English. ...What we need to sadly acknowledge is the way literature written in bhashas wait to enter the public domain through English, the only way to ensure visibility and what Walter Benjamin refers to as “afterlife.”

The English Language has been proved as a language which gave expression to many colonized and oppressed communities worldwide, like the natives of North America, Australia, New Zealand, etc. Similarly in India too, English plays a seminal role in transnationalizing the tribulations and mortifications of the marginalized community,

which had been neglected and ignored for centuries. The widespread awakenings caused by the iconoclast, Dr Ambedkar, the education promoted by the British Rule, the reservation policy of the government, are some of the causative factors which resulted in the evolution of a new literary movement called Dalit Literature. Though many literary attempts have been made by the marginalized community in their vernacular languages since 1970's, the emergence of their English translation is hardly two decades old, starting from 1992, with the publication of Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliott's 'An Anthology of Dalit Literature'.

Dalit literature in English translation came out as an eye-opener for the society which had been fossilized with social discrimination and injustice. The exploitation of the marginalized, their sorrows and struggles, their endurance and resilience, their culture and beliefs which had been hitherto unrevealed in the mainstream literature were exposed to the upper class 'others.' The naked truth behind such writing started to arouse the consciousness of the people in the upper rungs of the social ladder. As Limbale (2004) points out, “since most Dalit writing and discussion of this writing have been in the various regional languages of India, very little of either is accessible in English. This is a major gap given that much of the theorizing in India and abroad about Indian literatures, culture and society, whether from Marxist, Postcolonial or subaltern perspectives, has been in English. Only some of the theorists have drawn on materials from the regional languages, and even they have taken virtually no note of interventions by Dalits.” It is only with the translation of Dalit literature in this global language did emerge the widespread awakening among the oppressed and the oppressive communities. Not only the voices of the voiceless started to be heard by the world but also the Dalits of various regions

and states were able to communicate and share their miseries only through this interlinking language. "English is the only tool that can connect the Dalits of India and being the language of modernity, it can connect people around the globe to the Dalit experience," attests Journalist Chandra Bhan Prasad. (qtd. Das)

The first and foremost impact of literature in translation is the widening of readership. It helps break down the linguistic boundaries and disintegrate cultural borders. It helps in nationalizing and internationalizing the continuing oppression of Dalits across India. Ganguli (2005) also says: "Another instance of rapid trans-nationalization of Dalit issues is the widespread commissioning of translation of Dalit literary and political writing by some of the major publishing houses, such as Oxford University Press, Penguin India, Orient Longman and Macmillan." Consequently, the translated texts awaken the humaneness of the individuals which in turn may affect social transformation. Mukherjee (2004), the translator of the Dalit autobiography Joothan says: "I wanted to translate it the moment I finished reading it. I wanted to share this text with a wider readership in the hope that they too, will feel its transformative power. Here in Joothan readers of English language texts will find another answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question: 'Can the subaltern speak?' ... Very little of Dalit literature is available in translation. High class and upper-class Indian voices, whether in India or in the Diaspora, continue to stand in for the Indian voice. It is time that this hegemony be ruptured and other voices heard. It is time now that they be read in other parts of the world besides India. I hope that the English translation of Joothan will enlarge Valmiki's readership manifold."

As a result of a wide readership, Dalit voices are given due attention by the outsiders

who were responsible, either directly or indirectly, for the social acrimony. The subhuman condition of the marginalized and their excruciatingly painful life are exposed to the vast majority. Guru (2008) firmly believes: "I hope this translation will help in expanding the social base of readers, activists and commentators and will be further translated into several vernacular languages. It is in this sense that the English translation becomes important for the transmission of life worlds both within the country and outside it." As the centuries-long oppression has been given expression in a global language, many world communities become aware of the injustice and inhuman practices, which would provide opportunities for fair and open discussion of the subject. Further, this has also enhanced the chances of introducing new studies in academia like 'Literature of Protest', 'Subaltern Studies' and so on, worldwide. Eventually, these may expedite the process of liberation and formation of alternative hegemonies. Precisely, English serves as a language of empowerment for the socially disadvantaged communities.

When the experiential narratives of Dalits get translated into the Universal language English, it demands more introspection among the human beings. As Guru (2008) explicates: "What is the role of translation? Translations help in bridging the gap between two minds existing in two different spaces and times, viz. the sociological space in terms of the caste location, and the intellectual space it allows the Dalit concerns to occupy. It also connects two minds existing in two different spatial contexts. The story of the self, translated in a communicative language also reveals the foreignness of other's mind. First order translation seeks to communicate the life experience at the horizontal terrain of language transition.... Second order translation makes the Dalit experience available to a larger public through

its reproduction in connecting it to a language like English, then possibly to several vernacular languages.... Translation plays an important role in terms of creating a moral impact upon the recalcitrant self, usually from the upper caste. It can open the ethical/moral corridor within the hardened self." As a result, social solidarity and harmony can become a reality.

Literature plays a predominant role in human culture and civilization. The literature of the marginalized in English translation will certainly explode the caste-based inequalities

in the society and strengthen the struggle for creating an egalitarian society. In Joothan, Valmiki (2003) writes:

We need an ongoing struggle, and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change.

This revolutionary change can be affected by the transformative power of the English language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anand, S (2003). *Touchable Tales: Publishing and reading Dalit Literature*. Pondicherry: Navayana Publications Ltd.
- Das, Anupreeta (2005). "Dalit Writing Makes its Mark". Retrieved August 15, 2005, from <http://www.csmonitor.com>
- Ganguly, D (2005). *Caste and Dalit Life-Worlds: Post-colonial Perspectives*. New Delhi: Orient Longman India.
- Guru, Gopal (2008). Afterword to "The Prisons We Broke". Chennai: Orient Longman Ltd. India. Samya Publications Ltd.
- Kothari, Rita (2008). "Translation Today: Divided by Translation" Literary Review, *The Hindu*, India.
- Limbale, Sharankumar (2004). *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited India.
- Mukherjee, Arun Prabha (2004). A Note by the Translator. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Kolkata: Samya Publications Ltd India.
- Skinner, John (1998). *The Stepmother Tongue: An Introduction to New Anglophone Fiction*. New York: Macmillan Press Ltd. U.S.A.
- A. J. Thomas (2008). "In the Margins: The Story of Languages outside the Majority Gaze". Literary Review, *The Hindu*, India.
- Valmiki, Omprakash (2003). "Joothan" Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Kolkata: Samya Publications Ltd. India.