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## Across Languages, Across Struggles: The Disruptive Dynamics of Mahasweta Devi in Translation

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### Abstract

The world's engagement with Mahasweta Devi's (1926-2016) scholarship has, for the most part, been made possible through translation. A vast and varied body of articles, reviews, essays, memoirs, interviews, and critical writings on Devi's works has emerged, enabled by the availability of her texts to readers worldwide through translation. For instance, scholars such as Gabrielle Collu, Jennifer Wenzel, Minoli Salgado, Tabish Khair, Lawrence Buell, and Rob Nixon have developed their critical perspectives on Devi solely through her works translated into English from Bengali. It is imperative, therefore, to delve into the chequered experiences of the translators themselves to get a full view of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak deems as the "usual 'translator's problems'" in her foreword in *Breast Stories*. During Devi's lifetime, and even after her passing, numerous translators have produced versions of her works in both the regional languages of the subcontinent and in English. Whether for the readers' convenience or their safety, they have frequently opted to place useful information in footnotes or endnotes. It is striking that nearly all translators of Devi have remarked on the distinctive linguistic plurality of her writing—a textured collage that blends, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, "literary Bengali, bureaucratic Bengali, tribal Bengali, and the languages of the tribals." There is a natural celerity to Devi's prose, with each dialectal leap and jolt sharpening the sense of relentless momentum. As no standard translation method can reproduce this momentum, Radha Chakravarty terms it the "dynamic disruptiveness" of Devi's writing. This paper investigates how translators—focusing particularly on the translations of Devi's works—navigate these disruptive dynamics and attempt to address Lawrence Venuti's enduring question: "Can a

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translation ever communicate to its readers the understanding of the foreign text that foreign readers have?" (*The Translation Studies Reader* 473).

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi, Translation Studies, Linguistic Plurality, Translator's Challenges

## Introduction:

Literature, for Mahasweta Devi, was never a mere exercise in representation. Across her multifaceted career as storyteller, journalist, novelist, playwright, translator, and above all, activist, she consistently treated fiction as a dynamic arena where competing ideologies collide and converse. The conventional binaries of capitalism and socialism remained central frames of reference for this activist-writer, yet her defining benchmarks were deeply self-interrogative. She foregrounded both her creative impulses and ideological commitments within the crucible of facts, documentation, and spatiotemporal realities. The credo of "art for art's sake" held little appeal for her; nevertheless, her acute awareness of context and its complexities prevented her work from slipping into mere propaganda. If one were to identify the guiding *weltanschauung* of her oeuvre, it would be her radical inclusivity—an unwavering openness to voices, histories, and struggles often silenced or marginalized.

It is this inclusive bent of mind that anchors her literary responses within a heterodynamic ideological framework—rooted in certain convictions yet unafraid to be scathing toward entrenched social orders. For her, ideology is never a dungeon that restricts narrative possibilities; rather, it is a challenge whose boundaries she vows to confront and transcend. While a particular worldview may inform her perspective, vision, or imagination in specific works, it never ossifies into an obsessive credo. Instead, activism animates her writing, making it ever-evolving, engaging, and dynamic. Anita Agnihotri aptly observes: "Her search for the roots of the forgotten and undocumented history of the Adivasi society, and her personal involvement in their lives, had indeed intertwined. From this bonding of the two emerged her essence as a writer and attracted readers to her work" (Chakravarty 227). In this light, translating Mahasweta Devi's Bengali expressions into English is not merely the rendering of a fixed experience into another linguistic register, but the continuation of her relentless "search for the roots."

## The Anxiety that therefore Translation Is

The act of translation—wherever it begins and whatever it seeks—can never be entirely uncontentious, nor is it expected to be. It unfolds across a mosaic of translinguistic, transcultural, and even transdisciplinary terrains, demanding an organic spirit of collaboration. Collaboration itself may pose challenges, yet what unsettles most is the inevitability of compromise—whether deliberate or inadvertent. A translator, however, must never yield to pressures that erode the values essential to making a rendering trustworthy and enduring. The fear of eroding values, erasing subtleties, and overlooking seemingly minor yet profoundly important commas is a central concern in any approximation that translation, in its special sense, inevitably entails. A premeditated or standardized approach can ultimately lead to the dilution or suppression of the "heterogeneity and hybridity" (Venuti 469) inherent in the culture

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being approximated. Lawrence Venuti, in “Translation, Community, Utopia,” aptly notes that translators discern the defects in translation and endeavour to address them through corrective strategies:

. . . the translator seeks to build a community with foreign cultures, to share an understanding with and of them and to collaborate on projects founded on that understanding, going so far as to allow it to revise and develop domestic values and institutions. The very impulse to seek a community abroad suggests that the translator wishes to extend or complete a particular domestic situation, to compensate for a defect in the translating language and literature, in the translating culture. (469)

The “impulse to seek a community” is inseparable from the question of trust. A reader approaching a translated text relies entirely on the translator’s competence, comprehension, and—above all—sincerity. A single misreading or misinterpretation can distort meaning, and even celebrated translations are not immune to omissions: a crucial detail, a sentence, or sometimes an entire passage may simply vanish. Familiar sayings may carry unexpected nuances in a different cultural context; a casual remark may acquire ironic undertones; the lines of a song may be steeped in rituals from a distant locality. To capture these subtleties, a translator must grasp not only the literal sense but also the origins of words, music, and traditions. Every phrase, proverb, and festivity carries within it a flow of history that demands recognition. Understanding the cultural and historical surroundings of language is essential, for they embody the traditions, values, and long-cherished dreams of a people.

It is now pertinent to turn to the experiences of the translators themselves. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the first to render select works of Mahasweta Devi into English—and notably, under Devi’s direct tutelage—offers valuable insight into the process. She reflects on what she terms the “usual translator’s problems,” thereby foregrounding the challenges and negotiations inherent in carrying Devi’s voice across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

It follows that I have had the usual ‘translator’s problems’ only with the peculiar Bengali spoken by the tribals. In general we educated Bengalis have the same racist attitude towards it as the late Peter Sellers had towards our English. It would have been embarrassing to have used some version of the language of D. H. Lawrence’s ‘common people’ or Faulkner’s Blacks. Again the specificity is micrological. I have used ‘straight English’, whatever that may be. (Devi, *Breast Stories* 18)

One surely wonders to what extent and with what justification one can equate and identify an age-old, classical practice like translation with “usual problems”. Do we ever describe our everyday acts of breathing as problems? Do we call our walking, sitting, or eating problematic? If not, then why should translation be treated as something unusual or burdensome? In truth, translation permeates every moment of our lives. Whatever strikes the mind—whether small or big, dull or exciting, naïve or puzzling—undergoes an automatic process of translation so that it becomes intelligible to us in our own terms. The capacity to translate is innate; it is the very mechanism through which the external world becomes perceptible. Every stir of a leaf, buzz of a bee, or sway of a flower is nothing less than a source language (SL), which we render

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into a target language (TL) according to our competence, sensitivity, and understanding. The contexts, conditions, and perspectives may vary, but the fundamental pattern remains the same: translation is not an occasional act, but the very rhythm of comprehension itself.

Following the arguments of Maite Taboada and William C. Mann in “Rhetorical Structure Theory: Looking Back and Moving Ahead”, one might feel like asking two crucial questions— (1) what influence does the translator’s beliefs and ideology have on the proposed execution of the concept, and (2) whether or not the benchmarks selected can actually measure the concept the translator wishes to measure? Primarily, the source text difficulty acts as a concept, and the way the concept influences the translator might impact the translation process. It has been found that the source text difficulty has been espoused and dealt with by translators in numerous ways: some translators have used native speakers as evaluators to grapple with the intricacy of subjectivity, some “traditional readability indices” (Taboada and Mann 6) and some “rhetorical structure theory” (6). However, in all acts of translation, the translators have agreed that translation is itself a subject worthy of study. Not only is it undoubtedly the most sophisticated form of transcreation in the epistemic world, but it defines who sentient beings are. Researching about translation equates to researching about sentient beings, and researching about how transcreation developed equates to researching about how the sentient beings developed. The most difficult constituent of translation is, however, its dual coordinates— like language, it is both a “biological capacity” and a “cultural phenomenon”. Since these two coordinates are not directly correlated, the difficulties of translation are not very far to seek. The “quest for a comprehensive model” is, therefore, natural in the realm of translation. The concern of a contemporary Switzerland-based author Joanna Dornbierer-Stuart does ring out loud and clear, of course:

Language is unique precisely because it is both a biological capacity and a cultural phenomenon, but the relationship between the two is not a direct one and therefore open to much debate. Nevertheless, what is clear to all evolutionary linguists is that, as in any serious scientific enterprise, theories need to be backed up with observable, objective data. The quest for a comprehensive model embracing all aspects of the origins of human language continues. (viii)

## Translating Devi in the Indian Context

Translation inevitably demands sensitivity to contexts, conditions, and perspectives. In the case of Mahasweta Devi’s works, it becomes essential to engage with what may be termed the “Indian situations” (Sen and Yadav 149), where translation from source language (SL) to target language (TL) must navigate a polyphonic, multilingual, and multivalent cultural landscape. India’s linguistic terrain stretches across borders and hierarchies, with languages constantly hovering around porous, interpenetrating boundaries. This dynamic interplay keeps our relationship with language fluid—always shuffling, shifting, and evolving. Within Devi’s texts, three major languages—Bengali, Hindi (with its variants), and English—coexist, often in seemingly incongruous juxtaposition. Yet these very incongruities gradually carve out the distinctive context of her writerly world. Each language arrives with its dialectal

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variations, case-specific distortions, and unexpected inversions, contributing to the text's unique rhythm. Devi's writing possesses an accelerating energy of its own, where dialectal leaps and jolts catalyze its momentum. Her effortless movement—escalating into standard Bengali or retreating into colloquial dialects—occurs in the blink of an eye, while the aesthetic appeal remains intact.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her long “Introduction” to *Breast Stories*, underscores this challenge of translation: “It is a pity that translation cannot keep track of Devi's movement from standard Bengali to varieties of local dialects . . .” (xvi). This observation highlights the translator's struggle to capture the full vitality of Devi's linguistic shifts, which are central to the texture and power of her narratives.

In “Draupadi: Translator's Foreword”, Spivak has both rued and justified the absence of a “pure language”, which can best translate a text as palimpsestic as Devi's: “English is standing in here for that nameless and heterogeneous world language. The peculiarities of usage belong to being obliged to cope with English under political and social pressure for a few centuries. Where, indeed, is there a ‘pure’ language?” (16). Admittedly, there is no “pure language” and there can be none.

Keeping in mind the target audience, a translator may introduce dialectal variations into Indian English, much like Samik Bandyopadhyay does when transcribing mythic-folkloristic names—rendering *Behula* as “Beulo” and *Indra* as “Ind.” Such innovations merit commentary in the endnotes, particularly for an international readership less familiar with these cultural nuances. The phrase “*Tamak pata o chun*”, if retained in its original form, conveys the everyday flavour of a household item traditionally offered to casual visitors. Beyond its social function, it is also consumed as a mild intoxicant believed by labouring communities to provide refreshment. In Devi's narrative, however, it assumes a medicinal role as a potential cure for scorpion bites. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translates the phrase as “Tobacco leaves and limestone powder” (31), yet some translators, in keeping with the spirit of the context, might prefer to preserve the original Bengali expression. In *Bashai Tudu*, Bandyopadhyay generally renders dialect into standard, accessible English, though he occasionally retains exceptions—such as “pulooc” for “police” and the Bengali *jotedar*. Similarly, he translates the colloquial *mag-bhatar* as “lovey-dovey,” while deliberately leaving certain key or contentious words untranslated, thereby preserving their cultural resonance: “*Hyan he Laban majhi. Goldar re hojmot dibu, pulus asbe nai. Pulus e- jotedar e mag-bhatar janu nai? Hyan*” (Devi, *Mahasweta Devi Omnibus* 243). Bandyopadhyay's rendering of these colloquies is as follows: “Yes, Laban Majhi. If you strike Goldar down, the pulooc is bound to be after you. Don't you know that the pulooc and the jotedar are lovey-doveys? Yes, of course.” (Devi, *Bashai Tudu* 79).

From this point onward, the narrative develops through an extended dialogue between two characters, rendered in local dialects understood chiefly by a small clan or community. Translating these colloquies into the target language posed an obvious challenge for Bandyopadhyay. Yet, in contrast, when the narrative shifts to Bengali in its relatively standard

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form, the translator handles it with remarkable ease, without any trace of strain: “*Charsa ekti swalpotoya shrotoswini. Iha Damodorer utsa hoite udvuto. Doirghey ekanobboi mile lomba. Ihar nodigorbho oproshoshto, porjonko balukamoy. Banari o Kodomkhyuna grmaer sonnikote nodi kinchidhodik gobhir. Sadar grmaer nikar ihar gobhirota sorbadhik. Ihar boishisto hoilo bigoto trish botsore noditi dui bar dhara poriborton koriyache. Grishmer uttape nodir jolodhara shukaiya jay ebong borshay noditir rupantar hoy. Ei noditi dui parsostho dui shotadhik gramer jolobhander. Sechkhal thakileo . . .*” (Devi, *Mahasweta Devi Omnibus* 242). The English version, as crafted, resonates with the glory, height, and grandeur inherent in the original Bengali expressions:

The Charsha is a small river, sharing a common source with the river Damodar. Ninety-one miles in length, it has a shallow basin and a sandy bed. It is relatively deep near the villages of Banari and Kadamkhunya. It is deepest near the village Sadar. The river has changed course twice in the last thirty years. In summer it dries up and is in flood during the monsoon. It is the chief source of water for more than two hundred villages on its banks. Though there is an irrigation canal. (Devi, *Bashai Tudu* 75-76)

The dual shades of rendering by the same SL-to-TL-turning mind reveal how swiftly perspectives shift in Devi’s text, demanding that the translator resist reliance on any fixed or premeditated plan. Attuned to the rapidly yet organically evolving context, the translator must continually negotiate methodology, strategy, and innovation, embracing even the necessity of novelty. To borrow Radha Chakravarty’s words, one might argue that the translator must cultivate the same “dynamic disruptiveness” that Devi’s own linguistic practice embodies:

In Mahasweta’s fiction, chaste and colloquial Bengali jostle with tribal dialect, snatches of song and doggerel, erudite allusion, Hindi phrases and English terminology. Instead of a seamless texture, her writing acquires a dynamic disruptiveness that reinforces the thematics of separation and struggle. Dissonance represents the irreducibility of difference. An extraordinary feature of her writing, Mahasweta’s linguistic virtuosity poses a problem for the translator. The stylistic and tonal variations tend to become flattened in English translations, diluting the nuances of the original. Nevertheless, English translations of Mahasweta’s stories serve a political purpose, invoking national and global frameworks that expand their range of reference (Devi, *In the Name of the Mother* xiv).

## Conclusion

The translation methods employed by Devi’s translators inevitably call to mind Michel Foucault’s reflections on the act of translation:

It is quite necessary to admit that two kinds of translations exist; they do not have the same function or the same nature. In one, something (meaning, aesthetic value) must remain identical, and it is given passage into another language; these translations are good when they go “from like to same” [...] And then there are translations that hurl one language against another [...] taking the original text for a projectile and treating the translating language like a target. Their task is not to lead a meaning back to itself

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or anywhere else; but to use the translated language to derail the translating language.  
(30)

The distinction reflects the major divide within the field of translation, setting apart “literary” works (in the broad sense) from “non-literary” ones such as technical, scientific, or advertising texts. Devi’s works accommodate both literary and non-literary paradigms, and her translation methodology has thus far remained evolving—precious in its nuance yet disruptively dynamic in its execution.

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