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Remembrance as Resistance: Reflections on *Adivasi* Literature in Translation

La memoria como resistencia: reflexiones sobre la literatura adivasi *traducida*

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ABSTRACT: Since texts are neither born nor read in isolation, especially those carrying voices of resistance, they negotiate a contributory space in (re)shaping collective memory of a community. Indigenous voices in academic knowledge domains have long been absent. Contemporary indigenous writings challenge this invisibility by documenting their suffering and distress resulting from systematic territorial displacement and cultural dislocation. Translations of these narratives not only suggest critical departures from unidimensional reading of indigenous persons/crises but also serve as memory triggers. Within the *adivasi* (a term referring to tribals in India) context, translation of these narratives in English demystifies their identity as well as promotes survival of narratives of resistance. Keeping the idea of «afterlife» as suggested by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida broadly in background, this paper proposes to critically look at the politics of remembrance, both as a signifier and a device of translation, in *adivasi* writings from India in English.

KEYWORDS: remembrance; memory; *adivasi*; translation; resistance.

RESUMEN: Dado que los textos no nacen ni se leen en aislamiento, especialmente aquellos con voces de resistencia, negocian un espacio contributivo en (re)configurar la memoria colectiva de una comunidad. Las voces indígenas en los dominios académicos han estado ausentes durante mucho tiempo. Los escritos indígenas contemporáneos desafían esta invisibilidad documentando su sufrimiento y angustia por el desplazamiento territorial y la dislocación cultural. Las traducciones de estas narrativas no solo sugieren desviaciones

críticas de una lectura unidimensional de las personas/crisis indígenas, sino que también actúan como detonantes de la memoria. En el contexto *adivasi* (un término que se refiere a los tribales en India), la traducción de estas narrativas al inglés desmitifica su identidad y promueve la supervivencia de narrativas de resistencia. Con la idea de «supervivencia» de Walter Benjamin y Jacques Derrida en el trasfondo, este artículo propone analizar críticamente la política del recuerdo, como significante y dispositivo de traducción, en los escritos *adivasi* de la India en inglés.

PALABRAS CLAVE: recuerdo; memoria; *adivasi*; traducción; resistencia.

1. INTRODUCTION

> To be seen as equal human beings with souls is still at the root of the continuing need for resistance. We resist being treated disrespectfully… Perhaps most of all, we are resisting being imagined out of existence. It is a terribly dynamic moment for though we have changed, we are standing there still. (Harjo and Winder 2011, 126).

Efforts made to remember one's existential past are closely aligned with those made to reclaim one's social and communal memory. The short quoted piece that the paper begins with, by Joy Harjo, an internationally acclaimed thinker and poet-activist of the Mvskoke (Creek) Nation from Oklahoma, U.S.A., highlights the significance of an indigenous person taking recourse to his or her social history as memory becomes the fundamental key towards uncovering indigenous social and cultural histories which were systematically stifled by colonial enterprises. The very act of re-memorialization, particularly within the context of international indigenous movements, grows into a political imperative to retrieve lost space(s), in terms of territoriality, culture, literature, aesthetics, history and epistemology. By choosing to narrate their own stories in their own terms, indigenous voices resist elimination of their bodies and knowledge, assert themselves in the discourse of existing ethnocultural historiography, and compels a revaluation and restructuring of established indigenous identities. Crafting memories of their families and their specific psychological experiences enables indigenous writers to confront their enduring absence in systems of knowledge production and dissemination. From this perspective, textualizing individual memories of the «self» serves as means of refashioning the indigenous «self» politically and culturally.

Located within the complex dialectic of remembering and forgetting their past, indigenous narratives become active agents of meaning negotiation. They work towards resisting an imposed state of tabula rasa, a gradual erosion of agency and access to the community's history, on which narratives of the settler-colonizer have been inscribed. The act of remembering then becomes a political act of resisting deterritorialization of the communal psyche, a forced clean slate, that is suggestive of silencing indigenous belief systems. G. N. Devy identifies this obtruding silencing of *adivasi* languages, in the postcolonial Indian context, as a form of «imposed aphasia» (Devy 2009, 11-2). Attempts to confront this violent subduing necessitate a continual engagement with established images of a past that bear desires, interests and intent of earlier actors. In this context,

remembrance can be deemed as a collective act not only because the intended content centres on a collective-level identity but also because the act is a cooperative endeavour requiring engagement with a history of social influence manifested in cultural tools (Mukherjee et al. 2017, 563).

The dominant tradition in memory scholarship, from psychological research to modern cognitive neuroscience, appears to take memory and the act of remembrance in a more positive light, while associating negative connotations to forgetting (Brockmeier 2002, 16). In its broadest sense, forgetting is often interpreted as a loss, emptiness, a void and/or a failure to preserve a meaningful content for understanding and relating to human existence in present. The essence of remembering transcended cognitive and intellectual domains, evolving into a moral and cultural ideal since the significance lay not only in the ability to store and retrieve relevant information but also in the nature of knowledge and experiences recalled, along with the impact it had on an individual's actions and character (Gross 2000, 25; Brockmeier 2002, 16). It resonates with a sense of continuity and correspondence within a shared space of lived experiences. This space becomes a reference point of kinship, knowledge, beliefs and worldviews. Simultaneously, it also develops into a threshold point of transference where memories, experiences and narratives of the community travel through one generation to the next. Literary texts, therefore, serve as linguistic mediums of literary and cultural remembrance, encapsulating and disseminating a collective understanding of history which surpasses individual encounters and permeates public discourse (Jünke 2023, 1284). From this perspective, indigenous literary traditions serve as gateways routing individuals back to their historical roots. By choosing not to forget but remember their past and foster a spiritual connection with the collective voice of history, works of contemporary indigenous thinkers surpass conventional notions of literature and transform into active memory sites. They serve as custodians of a communal voice and a shared sensibility, providing foundation for individuals during times of crises.

2. *ADIVASIS:* THE «LIVING DOCUMENTS»

Within the Indian context, although the relation between indigenous communities and the larger non-indigenous Indian society has been somewhat different from those in settler-colonial states, such as, Canada, the United States, Australia and South Africa, questions of agency and representation of the indigenous *adivasi* subject within the existing ethnocultural historiography of the state have been equally inadequate and fragmentary. One of the limitations of drawing up a field of dedicated research on «Adivasi Studies» in India is the stark absence of *adivasis* in the modern state archives as subject of textual exegesis (Banerjee 2016, 1). The word *adivasi* translates to «original inhabitants». Contemporary *adivasi* writings made accessible by translations set up a space committed to address the lacuna in chronicling lived experiences of *adivasi* communities and proffering an alternative historical narrative unique to their own trajectory. Implicitly, this stance opposes the ethnocentric anthropological inclination to cast *adivasis* as a non-modern collective entity, negating subjectivity and history. In these senses, *adivasi* writings in translations are being read increasingly as alternative critical

archives of reference in understanding indigeneity, intimate geographies and local ecological knowledge.

Engaging with and reflecting on *adivasi* voices that had been «shrouded in polite silence for too long» (Hansdak 2023; Dasgupta 2018, 5) emphasize the need to move beyond unpacking colonial anthropological writings, ethnographic reports and missionary narratives and rethink on the means of production of knowledge about *adivasis*. The history of development of the term goes back to the political developments surrounding *adivasi* self-assertion in India. Besides its relevance in the political fabric of India, the term began to gain currency in the academic arena since the 1980s. The celebration of being and becoming an *adivasi*, both in the political and academic scenes, reflects a conscious shift in articulating the *adivasi* identity and an uncompromising sense of self-fashioning. The imposed identity of an «*adivasi*» (ironically a non-indigenous term used to refer to indigenousness) intended to mark their differences out from the dominant communities was internalized and embraced by the *adivasi* themselves as «an important tool for articulation for empowerment» (Xaxa 1999, 3589; Dasgupta 2018, 5). In this revival and remembrance of the «*adivasi*-hood», Ruby Hembrom, author and founder-director of adivaani (the first voices), an archiving, documenting and publishing outfit of and by *adivasis*, dedicated towards documenting *adivasi* voices and expressions, argues that memory plays the fundamental role towards their emancipation as *adivasis* themselves are «living documents» (Dasgupta 2018, 6). Remembering their oral narratives, customs, practices, along with their struggles, humiliations, challenges enable the *adivasi* individual to look at his or her past «self» and reconcile with the «self» that he or she crafts as a source of strength to cope up with changed lifeways. From this perspective, attempting to translate Adivasi literature, necessarily demands engagements with *adivasi* memories that corelates reminiscences of the past and the experiences of the present, the sense of «being an *Adivasi*» and «becoming an *adivasi*». To deliberate further on this issue, this paper would take a glance through select works of contemporary *adivasi* poets, like, Parimal Hembram, Jacinta Kerketta and Nirmala Putul which are available in public domains in English translations.

3. ENGAGING WITH MEMORIES: ENGAGING WITH HISTORIES

A prolific and versatile writer and performing artist with more than twenty books under his name, Parimal Hembram, in one of his major works titled «Then I Must Pick Up the Bow», translated jointly by the poet and Antara Dev Sen, writes:

> You order me, with blazing eyes,
> to leave all this
> and go away
> wherever-anywhere at all.
> But this was the land of legends
> The land of thick jungles
> a desolate land of trees and vines.
> We worked hard to clean it up
> to make it liveable
> and lived happily.

Now if you claim…these are not mine
then, well,
I must reach for my bow and arrow. (IGNOU 2019, 15-6).

One of the key differences between *adivasi* and non-*adivasi* worldviews is that the *adivasi* paradigm does not situate human beings at the focal point of the universe. Instead, it believes in a harmonious system of honour code existing among different elements of life on Earth of which human beings hold as much significance as any other. In this relational perspective, the «self» is situated both at individual and communal levels. The community serves as a space to which the indigenous individual holds a deep familial commitment, leading them to prioritize the community's interest over their own. The profound sense of connection that the indigenous individual experiences towards his or her community, ancestors, ancestral history, land and cultural roots forms the foundation of the indigenous value system that informs traditions of the indigenous family life (McCubbin et al. 2013, 354). In turn, the individual and the community's schemata are etched by their values and traditions. Land and other non-human elements, therefore, are not something which exist outside the *adivasi* being but are considered animate, agential and an extension of the same. Denial of attachment to land, therefore, leads to denial of attachment to history, memory, culture and identity. The «bow and arrow» in Hembram's poem then becomes an extended metaphor for collective remembrance that insists on honouring the relationship with land and its life force.

Similar feelings are echoed when another prominent contemporary *adivasi* poet Nirmala Putul pens her poem «Mountain Man» which is translated by Aruna Sitesh and Arlene Zide in consultation with the poet and PK Tiwari. Putul writes:

Sitting brooding on the mountain
The face of the mountain man shows
The geography of the mountain
Within him hushed sits
The history of the mountain…When a mountain somewhere is torn apart
His mountain-like chest shudders
He speaks to the mountain in mountain language. (IGNOU 2019, 8).

Putul emphatically claims that history is more than just an objective study of human activities at a given time and place since it is also about the environment that humans find themselves in. This is to argue a shift in perceiving history not as a discipline that is cut off from the environment but reading it in relation to perceivers' immediate surroundings. This change in looking at one's social history is an acknowledgement of the alternative view of time that is undivided from ecological knowledge, one that keeps lands, forest, air, water – environment in whole, at the focal centre, one that recognizes and celebrates non-human agency. With regard to how the Western Apache people of east and central Arizona, United States, feel connected to the landscape, Amitav Ghosh, in his book *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) refers to anthropologist Peter Basso who writes: «(f)or Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields – which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the ways they think»

(Ghosh 2021, 35; Basso 1996, 723). History to the people, in this context, is no less pronounced than that of written records.

4. ENGAGING WITH/IN TRANSLATION

The practice of translating *adivasi* poetries and songs addresses the issue of absence of local knowledge and oral epical traditions in literary spaces. When an *adivasi* poem or a song is translated in English, it naturally carries the voice to a wider and global audience. By communicating philosophies shared by contemporary *adivasi* thinkers specific to their communities to an international readership, translation develops from an act of mere transference into an act of conscious political engagement. It ensures a wider engagement with the dynamism of *adivasi* writing and its characteristic plurality. Ensuring a re-reading of indigeneity that is not static, translation of *adivasi* literatures provides an afterlife to the narratives. Walter Benjamin in his 1923 essay «The Task of the Translator» argues that «a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife» (Benjamin [1923] 1996, 254). The question, therefore, stands as how to approach the concept of afterlife in relation to translatability in this context. For Benjamin, translation is not a mere transfer of meaning from one language to another but it involves the reconstruction of the original work's «aura». The afterlife of a text is its continued existence and impact beyond the original cultural and temporal context. It is shaped by each translation it undergoes, and the translator becomes only a mediator in the process. Deeply influenced by his broader deconstructive project, afterlife of a text, according to Jacques Derrida, involves a continual process of reinterpretations, re-readings and endless deferral of meaning. It contains an openness to multiple critiques and a constant negotiation of meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. To Derrida, translation allows a text to outgrow and outlive itself in its afterlife, it enables the text «to live more and to live better» (Carreres 2008, 177). The sense of extension of a text's life that is tied to its translation, as Benjamin and Derrida argue, does in no way mean an «extra» life adding on to a text's original life within a given cultural and temporal space. It may be understood as a departure from an isolated, fixed and fragmentary existence of a text and its emplacement into a network of continual translations, a recurring remediation of the past, and its entry into a realm of memorial intertextuality.

Approaching the phenomenon of «afterlife» in translation within the *adivasi* context of India, however, involves different layers of understanding. Practices of translation of *adivasi* writings from different *adivasi* languages and major Indian languages, like Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and/or Telegu to English does not only extend the *adivasi* cause to an international level but such practices also encourage continuance and survival of narratives of an informed and organized resistance against narratives of mechanized development, societal progress and environmental conservation. In extending awareness of indigenous communities, translation practices of *adivasi* writings play a crucial role in the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic reconstruction of memory sites. *Adivasi* communities in India have long been subjected to forced evictions from their homes and ancestral lands in the name of «national development». Constituting as much as 8,08 % of India's total population, *adivasi* communities make up more than 40 %

of the total population displaced in India (Singh 2020, 285) due to development projects-induced displacements. Territorial displacement does not only deprive *adivasi* communities of their homelands but also affect existing systems of economic sustenance and severs them from their cultural roots. One of the most prominent among the contemporary *adivasi* voices, Jacinta Kerketta, captures these feelings as she writes in one of her poems written originally in Hindi, titled «The Dust of Development»,

> Every night are dreams
> Crushed under the wheels
> Of some truck running amok.
> Then come, as they please,
> Bidders and auctioneers
> To put the price tags on lives lost.
> And in all this much ado
> Many lives are left to gather dust. (Kerketta, 2016, 83)

The doctrine of capital-intensive large-scale mechanized development teaches to relegate environment and the non-human elements of nature to passive, subservient and inert positions. Land, in this perspective therefore, has been considered solely as a site of cultivation and production. In contrast, indigenous *adivasi* communities accord psycho-spirituality to elements of nature. Being stripped off their historicity, dreams and culture, all that *adivasi* lives are left with is the dust that narratives of development and progress bring with it.

5. TRANSLATION AND BEYOND

Adivasi literary pieces, in their thematic content, intent and form, transcend the boundaries of mere literature. In advocating for the *adivasi* problem in India, in documenting the struggles and anguish of the *adivasi* population, in reflecting the worldviews of *adivasi* communities, contemporary *adivasi* voices in India have risen above the discipline of literature. The frames of capturing the collective image of *adivasis* have been carefully deconstructed in these fresh counternarratives by the contemporary voices. It would be rather misleading also to read these works essentially through interpretative frameworks of dissent and activism so as not to ghettoize them to a single dimension of engagement. Interacting with such expressions gives any reader an opportunity to recognize multiple means of *adivasi* expressions, including the differences, commonalities and «equivalences that do not unify» (Melas 1995, 275).

The act of translating contemporary *adivasi* writings not only ensures an amplification of the *adivasi* voice offering a wider readership but it also opens up an interactive space for such voices to communicate with one another. In their acquired mobility to emotionally relate the singularity of local experience to broader mutual discourse of self-articulation, crossing the boundaries of immediate context, tribal writings in translation develop a new cosmopolitanism (Nayar 2011, 23). Reading narratives of indigenous resistance in translation and in close proximity to one another does not necessarily dislocate them from their local contexts, rather expands their

boundaries to ensure cross-border travels, carving out a space that invites conversations, attitudinal shifts and temporal coalitions to amplify the voice of resistance.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, translating *adivasi* counternarratives takes up the issue of remembrance at two levels. Primarily, it ensures an extended remembering of traces of the past, of the cultural archive of a communal history, of the political tensions of articulating histories of «becoming *adivasi*». On the subsequent level, it directly addresses how the *adivasi* subjectivity is negotiated in the collective imagination of non-*adivasis*. Translations of *adivasi* writings necessitate a conscious distancing from colonial stereotype of the irrational *adivasi* always on the verge of rebellion to a re-reading of *adivasi* movements beyond the context of nation-building. The *adivasi* is no longer perceived as forever in opposition to the nexus between people in power but as a modern subject creatively negotiating with the state and its institutions (Dasgupta 2018, 1). In this context, translating practices develop arguably into conscious memory triggers since such practices not only arrange repeated recital of knowledge deliberately erased and devalued but also wake up multiple points of engagement with indigenous knowledge traditions. What, therefore, makes engaging with *adivasi* literature in translations more challenging and interesting is its ability to persuade readers to remember to unlearn and recognize diverse critical lenses it provides through which the worlds of both *adivasis* and non-*adivasis* could be observed.

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