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The Politics of 'Counter': Untranslatability, Linguistic Displacement, and the Limits of Representation in 'Draupadi'

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Abstract

This article analyzes the political, linguistic, and epistemological disjunctures encoded in the word 'counter' in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation and theorization of Mahasweta Devi's short story Draupadi. Working as a bureaucratic euphemism of state-approved murdering (killed by police in an encounter), 'counter' is a place in which the language of the colony is evicted, subaltern agency is exercised, and academic representation is pushed to its limits. Based on the deconstructive paradigm presented by Spivak, I suggest that the very fact that Dopdi 's defining the term exposes the untranslatability of tribal resistance and deconstructs the pretension of the First-World scholar to interpretive mastery.This paper follows the history of linguistic displacement, state euphemism, and the irreducible ex-orbitant voice of the subaltern and how it comes to bear down on the traditional forms of literary and political representation. Finally, the story, Draupadi teaches some types of resistance that are not decipherable, but only challenged.

Keywords: Untranslatability, Linguistic Displacement, Subaltern Agency, Bureaucratic Euphemism, Deconstructive Practice, Corporeal Resistance, Academic Complicity

Introduction

Draupadi (1978) is a short story by Mahasweta Devi that is a by-product of the bloody consequences of the Naxalbari uprising and the vicious truths of state counterinsurgency in postcolonial India.The novel is written in a politically realistic manner and unfolds the story of how the Santal tribal revolutionary Dopdi Mejhen was captured, tortured, and fought against the state machinery symbolized by the Bengali expert Senanayak. A 1981 English translation and critical foreword by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak helped to transform the text into a regional political text rather than a primary document in postcolonial and feminist theory. Spivak presents her intervention as a "deconstructive practice" that previews the ethical and epistemological challenges of describing subaltern struggle (Spivak 382).The bureaucratic euphemism of 'counter' is at the center of this textual and theoretical intersection. As Spivak observes,"Dopdi does not understand English, but she understands this formula and the word. In her use of it at the end, it comes mysteriously close to the 'proper' English usage" (391). This is observed, and the main question of the present study is: How does the word"counter function as a linguistic, political, and representational fault line in *Draupadi"*? I argue that 'counter' functions as a destabilizing linguistic object, which reveals the boundaries of state discourse, and how it shows the paradoxical strength of

subaltern language appropriation, and reflects the intranslatability of tribal resistance. By doing so, the word finally unveils the epistemological inadequacy of First-World academic representation to fully grasp or disarm subaltern agency.The paper then articulates Spivak's deconstructive framework as a methodological perspective.It goes on to analyze the semiotics of 'counter' as state-tacited euphemism, as well as subaltern reclamation. Next, the politics of untranslatability and the boundaries of scholarly representation are discussed, and finally, how the story can be regarded in the long-term implications on postcolonial literary and political criticism is also discussed.

Theoretical Framework: Deconstruction, Translation, and the "Ex-Orbitant"

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explicitly bases her translation and critical foreword on a deconstructive practice which is actively opposed to the certitude of traditional interpretation of the literary work. Instead of seeking definite readings, Spivak foregrounds "the recognition… of provisional and intractable starting points… its disclosure of complicities where a will to knowledge would create oppositions" (382–83). This methodological position rejects the binary oppositions of oppressor and oppressed, theorist and subaltern, and insists that critical discourse "can never be adequate to its example" (383).Spivak recognizes the inescapable complicity of the critic with the very systems that she criticizes, thus creating a context of epistemological humility that explicitly grounds the argument of this study in linguistic rupture and representational failure. Cultural translation as Homi K. Bhabha notes is a performative act in which"meaning is never simply transmitted but rather reiterated, rearticulated, and transformed in the act of enunciation" (Bhabha 212), a revelation that supports the denial of stable interpretive authority by Spivak.

In this deconstructive approach, untranslatability is not understood as a gap in linguistics but rather as an intentional political state of affairs.The systemic opposition to assimilation by Bengali or English academic registers is offered by tribal languages, songs, and embodied experiences. Spivak uses the example of the tribal song of Dopdi, who notes that it still exists"incomprehensible yet trivial… and ex-orbitant to the story,thereby marking the place of that other that can be neither excluded nor recuperated" (383). The ex-orbitant is borrowed by Derrida to refer to that which is outside the gravitational influence of the dominant discourse–an irreducible residue that cannot be incorporated into the archive, mastered by theory, or domesticated by the scholarly apparatus.This serves to support Tejaswini Niranjana's view that translation in a colonial setting does not act as a neutral mediation but as "a site of political struggle where power relations are negotiated and contested" (Niranjana 2).Subaltern voice, then, is not aimed at legibility in First World paradigms; rather, it continues to exist in its tactical incomprehension and incarnate rejection.

Acknowledging these structural constraints, Spivak views translation as an ethical and political act rather than a non-partisan linguistic transfer.Addressing the fact that even educated Bengalis tend to be dismissive or even racist towards tribal speech, she makes a conscious choice to use 'straight English' so as not to create the image of colonial stereotypes or exoticise the subaltern (391).Such stylistic decision is an attempt to admit the inability to entirely render tribal subjectivity and not corrupt it in scholarly consumption. Spivak cautiously makes it clear that"what one might falsely think of as a political 'privilege' knowing English properly stands in the way of a deconstructive practice of language" (391). Robert J.C. Young likewise argues that "translation is always implicated in the asymmetries of colonial power, and any claim to transparency obscures the violence of linguistic appropriation" (Young 47).

When the academic and state discourse is complicit and structurally unsatisfactory in nature, then the use of the bureaucratic euphemism of counter by Dopdi cannot be perceived as linguistic assimilation. Rather, it is a conscious discontinuity that reveals the boundaries of the representation. Dopdi uses the concept of untranslatability as a weapon to attack institutional discourse by using its own vocabulary but failing to internalize the ideological structure that it has sanitized.The term thereby sums up the deconstructive spirit of Spivak: it is a place where the language is being torn asunder, where complicity is being unveiled, and where the subaltern resistance is being irreducibly exorbitant. Benita Parry cautions against "the tendency to aestheticize subaltern resistance at the expense of attending to the material conditions that produce and constrain it" (Parry 68), a reminder that the bodily rebellion of Dopdi cannot be transformed into the textual play. Finally, postcolonial critique has to do with, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, the task of "provincializing the universal claims of Western theory while remaining accountable to the specific historical trajectories of subaltern struggle" (Chakrabarty 45). This tension, this localized, embodied refusal, is the result of the last word of Dopdi, which is a challenge to the very terms according to which the global theory attempts to understand it.

The Semiotics of "Counter": Bureaucratic Euphemism and Linguistic Displacement

In Mahasweta Devi, the word 'counter' is used in the meaning of counter in Draupadi as a bureaucratic euphemism that disinfects state violence by consciously displacing language. As Spivak mentions in her foreword, the word does work as "an abbreviation for 'killed by police in an encounter,' the code description for death by police torture" (391). By eliminating the violent overtones of the term, it becomes an easy administrative euphemism to document methodical murder and arbitrary killings without actually stating the offense. In what Achille Mbembe calls the "necropolitical logic" of contemporary states, this clinical use of language echoes that logic. The sovereign power in these states is not only through the taking of lives but also through the control of the dying process (Mbembe 27). Classification systems offer epistemic control to turn violent acts into depoliticised facts that can be understood, which Ann Laura Stoler defines as the archival grain of colonial government (Stoler 42). The application of language in a treatment context echoes of the greater methodological aim of Senanayak, what Spivak terms as"interpretive: he seeks to "decipher Draupadi's song and archive subaltern resistance within frameworks of specialist knowledge" (381–82). Such archival practices, as Guha reveals, consistently generate historical silence concerning subaltern agency, turning rebellion into administrative forms that can be easily dealt with and eliminating any political danger (Guha 114). Both the state bureaucracy and academic analysis strive to neutralize the subaltern by transforming lived terror into intelligible data through linguistic and epistemic control.

The last piece of information Dopdi speaks erupts this archival logic violently.When she challenges Senanayak after having been subjected to a long period of torture and sexual abuse, she says, "What more can you do? Come on, counter me, come on, counter me?" (402). Although Dopdi has had no formal training in English, she knows the formula of operation of the term 'English'. Her use of the counter turns its bureaucratic role and makes what is a governmentally approved code of disguised murder into a direct, embodied disputation with the state.This scene serves as a good example of what Judith Butler theorizes as the performative power of address, when the repetition of a regulatory term can be strategically usurped to create an unforeseen political impact that surpasses its original institutional purpose (Butler 156).This instance is an example of linguistic displacement as political protest: a tribal woman uses the language of the colonizer-state with a mysteriously close accuracy to its

usage according to its proper form, but decontextualizes it from its euphemistic veil (391).The colonized subject never makes a neutral project of assimilation by appropriating the language of the master, but a tense rearticulation, as Frantz Fanon long noted, which reveals the violence inherent in the colonial structures of language (Fanon 17). While Senanayak's project is based on the ability to decipher and on theoretical mastery, the repetition of Dopdi denies the possibility of interpretation.It is not a coded message to allies or even a call for rescue, but a performative demand that compels the state to face the physical and moral reality with which it tries to partially linguistically eliminate.Dopdi uses words that are meant to anonymize her to reveal the irreducible difference between the official state language and the language of tribal pain. Her speech is not a request to be translated; it is to be challenged, and the specialist is left behind "terribly afraid" before an "unarmed target" They have become unreadable and have to be faced (402). This emotional shock is in line with the theory of dread as a physical orientation towards power presented by Sara Ahmed; Ahmed states that the so-called epistemic stability of the specialist is disrupted by the unassimilated presence of the subaltern (Ahmed 68). Inverting the sense of the word, counter turns out to be the final sovereignty denial by the subaltern, not a weapon of state destruction.

Untranslatability and the Subaltern Voice:

In addition to Colonial Linguistics in *Draupadi*, untranslatability is not a language shortcoming but a purposeful political location that protects tribal subjectivity against absorption into mainstream epistemologies.Spivak notes the newly cultivated Bengali. "does not know the languages of the tribes, and no political coercion obliges him to 'know' it" (391).This deliberate ignorance is indicative of a larger systematic violence of making Indigenous speech illegible to the metropolitan academic and state apparatus. Instead of trying to fill this divide by means of exoticized transliteration or phonetic apediction, which tends to recreate colonial images of the primitive native, Spivak consciously uses "straight English" (391). This is a completely ethical decision to make, and this decision is in tune with Lawrence Venuti's criticism of fluent translation paradigms that eliminate cultural differences in the name of domesticating readability (Venuti 19). As Spivak warns,"What one might falsely think of as a political 'privilege' knowing English properly that stands in the way of a deconstructive practice of language…" (391). Achievement in the dominant tongue can be a formidable barrier to real experience, since it sets the level of fluency rather than the political displacement needed to occupy the margins.This epistemological position recalls Édouard Glissant's insistence on the right to opacity, according to which nothing is more oppressive than the colonial imperative towards complete transparency, but rather the right of the subaltern to remain unintelligible to colonial modes of knowledge to a certain degree (Glissant 190).

This epistemological limit is epitomized in the tribal song by Dopdi that Spivak has termed as "incomprehensible yet trivial, precisely because it marks the place of that other that can be neither excluded nor recuperated" (383).The message of the song, about beans of varying colors, cannot be utilitarianly or revolutionary decoded but rather exists as an ex-orbitalant leftover, spinning out of the gravitational influence of state archives and academic theory: Devi's subaltern does not come out and talk in a kind of way that meets the demands of the First World to be legible or ideologically consistent. The resistance is expressed rather in the form of strategic opaqueness: the ululation which announces a battle, the silence which protects the comrades, the physical exposure which denies patriarchal action, the tactical use of euphemisms of bureaucracy such as counter. These expressive modes exist outside the

ability of interpretive mastery, and they set about the problem of redefining fidelity that conventional translation studies face. Thus, true translational ethics do not require lexical equivalence but must be truthful to what should not be translated. Untranslatability proves to be a protective aspect of architecture, such that subalterity is not easily catalogued, theorized to conform, or digested by the very intellectual structures that have traditionally posed as its representatives. According to Talal Asad, when asymmetrical power exists, translation is never a neutral exchange of meaning but a place where colonial hierarchies are recreated or played upon for the benefit or detriment of colonial powers (Asad 152). Walter Mignolo also puts this into context under the decolonial theory as that kind of linguistic refusal is a form of epistemic delinking, which takes an active role in removing subaltern subjectivity off the Western regimes of legibility (Mignolo 127). These theoretical interventions confirm that the silence, song, and last words of Dopdi are not failures of representation but rather conscious measures of survivance that reveal the structural constraints of First-World academic and state discourse.

Limits of Representation and the First-World Scholar's Complicity

By using the allegorical character of Senanayak, Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* rigorously questions the limits of academic representation. His practical guilt in methodical killing is hidden by his hypothetical sympathy, and Gayatri Spivak openly describes him as a pluralist aesthete, a metaphor of the intellectual of the First World (381).Another evident expression of this dualism is the realization that "In theory, Senanayak can identify with the enemy. But… in practice, Senanayak must destroy the enemy…" (381). His scholarly exploration is fundamentally interpretative in nature under the misleading notion that all-encompassing knowledge would ultimately amount to power, and he thus consumes Western texts, as well as tribal codes, in an insatiable attempt to unravel the mystery of resistance. Spivak, in his critical analysis, refers to such an approach as a"colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval" (382), a mental compulsion to gather, examine, and defuse subaltern warfare into understandable numbers.As Smith identifies research as an extension of colonialism, these extractive epistemologies feature the mining of Indigenous and subaltern experiences in an academic capitalist way, rather than on their terms (Smith 34).

This is the rupture of the archive logic in the final meeting of Dopdi.The free usage of the bureaucratic counter and her deliberate nudity in public do not fit any norms that can be interpreted. Rather than being a legible text on the knowledgeable gaze of Senanayak, she becomes an incarnate of "unreasonable fear" (391). Fear takes hold of the specialist both on the physiological and the epistemological level, when the subject he is dealing with steadfastly refuses to be deciphered, the instruments of his interpretation, which rest upon the theory of the West and the officially approved linguistics, fail him. This breakage, by converting the horrific physical experience into comprehensible narrative forms, discloses the violence of attempting to document the sufferings of the subalterns in the archives of academic knowledge, a move that Saidiya Hartman warns would recreate the hegemony it aims to challenge (Hartman 11).The work that Dopdi is assigned-- "What more can you do? Come on, counter me, come on, counter me?"demands a visceral confrontation rather than academic mediation, stripping Senanayak of his theoretical armor (402). Her physical resistance can be seen as what Anzaldúa imagines as a strategic failure of binarism, a bodily resistance that requires the oppressor to exist in an irreducible ambiguity in which the old interpretive resources are ineffective(79).

The narrative's closing image, where "…for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (402), identifies that representational assertions on the part of the First

World have been unsuccessful in their conclusiveness.Subaltern agency cannot be maintained, turned into translation, or theorized into submission, as evidenced by Devi 's paralyzing the academic before a naked tribal lady.The deconstructive sense of ethical academic engagement (as Spivak sees it) requires abandoning the notion of open representation. Rather, it involves living with ambiguity and embracing the fact that one is part of a biased mind and directly facing the structural limits of their critical discourse. Researchers must understand that their own knowledge is subjective, location-specific, and ultimately responsible to the individuals that they claim to represent, according to what Donna Haraway calls the god trick of academic neutrality (Haraway 189). As such, *Draupadi* is a powerful warning story: scholars will never be truly united until they recognize the intrinsic inadequacies of their theoretical frameworks and learn the right way to know the subaltern. Lastly, to deconstruct the one-dimensional oppressive people as mere objects of knowledge, the ethical postcolonial critique needs, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Mohanty 333) says, to replace academic extraction with the politics of joint vulnerability and epistemic humility.

Conclusion

This politicized act of using the word counter in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi exposes the cruel euphemisms of the state, the counterfeit power of the subappropriated words of bureaucrats, and the translability of tribal resistance. Rather than attempting to normalize this break, the deconstructive translation presented by Spivak is a structural boundary of academic representation.The final confrontation between Dopdi and Senanayak is not merely a case of power inequality but an epistemic issue that weakens the authority of the specialist in the interpretation.The Western literary and administrative paradigm to decode resistance is basically an interpretive one, as Senanayak suggests (Spivak 381-82). But the unashamed and straightforward demand of Dopdi--Come on, counter me--come on, counter me? (402) is unintelligent, replacing material struggle with abstract eating.Thus, the story reiterates that subaltern activity in certain forms is intransferable, non-archivable, and non-theoretically explicable. *Draupadi* is an important call to action in today's academic climate, when talking about marginalized problems may lead to the "epistemic extraction" of knowledge. Spivak and Devi demonstrate that acknowledging the inherent constraints of one's own critical discourse is the initial step to achieving real academic unity, as opposed to cracking the subaltern voice.The final aim of radical resistance is not cognition but an ethical face-off, which revolves around ex-orbital outside representation.

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