



Untranslatability as Resisting Appropriation: A Study of Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* and *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*

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Abstract

Untranslatability enables us to question the paradigm of World Literature and the cosmopolitanism upon which it is founded while rupturing the presumed coherence in the process of translation. This further exposes the inability of Western, and even Postcolonial discourses to encapsulate the heterogeneity of indigenous language-cultures. This paper aims to initiate an inquiry into the idea of the untranslatable, not just as a problem or obstacle in the process of translation, but rather as a form of reaching out to an 'other', whose understanding of the 'world' is tied to the language-culture(s) they are a part of. This view of translation instigates in us questions pertaining to the meaning and context of words such as 'world' and 'region', the 'global' and the 'local' within the niche of 'World Literature'. This inherent right to untranslatability can be seen as a mode of resisting homogenization and appropriation by the dominant discourses; and translation can thus be perceived as an exercise of power that seeks to efface the irreducible alterities of indigenous language-cultures. In refusing to be translated, we see a resistance to the violence of a mainstream language that is baked by social and political power. I shall draw inferences from Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* and his book *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* to study how untranslatable signs and symbols of the Santhal language-culture(s) become a refusal to be appropriated by the Anglocentric discourses of translation. Thus, untranslatability as a process resists the fetishization of indigenous discourses as 'exotic' and accepts the plurality of subversive elements latent within alternative ways of expression.

Keywords: Untranslatability, Indigenous Discourses, Translation, World Literature

“To erase difference as a condition of our lives is to deny the existence of both reality and humanity.”

Ipshita Chanda in *Of Equality I Sing*

Translation has been the locus of contention across various disciplines and philosophical inquiries since forever. As a process, it has always revolved around the dichotomy of self/other and the pursuit of knowing this ‘other(ed)’ figure. The differences that surround us, define us and shape our identity, perform many such undeniable ordinary roles in our everyday lives. Someone who is different from us, an ‘Other’, “therefore must be separate(d)” (Chanda 8). Translation as a process records these encounters across language-cultures, and marks the differences that are unique to each of these language-cultures. It is an attempt at knowing the ‘Other’, of crossing over (translation derived from the Latin word *translatio*, means ‘to carry across’) to the other side to discover what lies in the realm of ‘not’ us. Translation presumes a degree of ‘knowability’, or the preconceived idea of being able to find an equivalence which is often a prerequisite for any translator who begins with the hope of finding an equivalent.

It is conducive to my paper that I look beyond translation as a literal act of “creation of an expression in Language B that will be the equivalent of a pre-existing expression in Language A” as Haun Saussy in *Translation as Citation* notes, into the subtleties of translation as a metaphor that conceptualizes ideas, thoughts, world-views which constitute these differences that surface in encounters across language-cultures (Saussy 2017). This opens up a dialogue on the notion of ‘borrowing’ in the act of translation which as Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* points out, “Borrowing is never a

simple act of transfer, it involves the grafting of new terms and concepts onto existing bodies of knowledge, transforming both” (Chakrabarty xiv). Such a view of translation thwarts the presumed coherence and equivalence in the process of translation. It also forces us to rethink notions of meaning making in language “less in terms of accuracy and truth and more in terms of effective exchange” (Baer 11).

Added to this is the more cumbersome challenge of studying texts that try to connect the various belief systems and world-views of regions within the regional and the local within the global and the national. These alternate, under-represented world views illustrate the diminutive differences between them and the (im)possibility of translation. This (im)possibility of translation, or what Barbara Cassin in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, calls untranslatable; “that which one keeps on (not)translating” is of prime importance here since it is the untranslatable that ensures that these irreducible differences that form the very basis of one’s identity are preserved and rescued from being elided. Emily Apter in *On the Politics of Untranslatability: Against World Literature* defines untranslatability as “the intransigent nub of meaning that triggers endless translating in response to its resisting singularity” (Apter 235). Apter’s aforementioned view becomes problematic since it connotes the idea that all other worldviews that do not contain this intransigent nub of meaning is by default and unproblematically translatable. Barbara Cassin on the other hand defines untranslatables as symptoms of difference that in turn inspire repeated attempts at translation, and acknowledges the incommensurability that runs across languages. The ‘untranslatable’ then can be understood as “a symptom of widespread incommensurability rather than Apter’s

positing of a resisting “semantic” nub” (Baer 12). Haun Saussy declares that there is an edge and an ‘Other’ in Translation and it is in ‘this other thing, non-translation’, that our focus should be.

The sole problem of postulating translation as a metaphor lies in its deferment of the epistemological question, “Who benefits from the claims of untranslatability?”. Peter Ives and Rocco Lacorte in *Gramsci, Language and Translation* write, “Translation as a metaphor is used to cast a vaguely positive glow of acceptance, accessibility and interest in things ‘other’ and is stripped of its political content” (11). I shall delve into this politics of untranslatability and study untranslatability as a mode of resistance against the hegemony of dominant discourses.

Hansda Sowendra Sekhar, a Santhal born and brought up in Ghatsila, Jharkhand, mediates the histories and narratives of the Santhals and the Non-Santhals through his writing that is indicative of his lived-experience that is characterized by the register variants, the idioms and phrases, signs and symbols that are rooted in a language-culture; which is constantly interacting with other language-cultures that bleed into each other. Providing the varied cultural, ethnic and economic identities, the landmass of Jharkhand plays a crucial role in Hansda’s play with complex identities and various ethnicities and dialectic variants; resulting in diverging realities of the people he chooses to write about. He brings together transactions and confluences between various communities that are distinct from one another, but often come in contact with each other for the purpose of survival. The constant rift between a tribal society that is land and nature based, that worships nature and a capitalist society that exploits and makes profit out of nature,

displaces its ancient dwellers, turning unskilled laborers out of independent farmers is captured in both *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* and *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* with great detail and humour.

Hansda's craft of capturing the indigenous idioms of the languages spoken in and around Jharkhand is reflected in the opening short story, "They Eat Meat" in his collection of short stories *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, where Panmuni-jhi is advised by Jhapan-di, to adjust to the vegetarian society of Vadodara, "What to do jhi? Jyamondeshtyamonbhes" (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 4). This Bangla idiom, retained by Sekhar not only adds to the dialectical richness of the narrative but is emblematic of the encounters between Santhals and Bengalis, connotative of the central government job of Panmuni-jhi's husband that allowed them to live and speak like the Bengalis, a privilege other Santhals would not have. In an interview with India Writers' Forum, Hansda mentions the reason why he could not use the equivalent "When in Rome, behave like the Romans" for the aforementioned phrase. The gap between the two language-cultures makes it impossible to locate a common referent and hence the idiom had to be retained in this colloquial register.

In the short story titled the same as the book, "The Adivasi Will Not Dance", the narrator, Mangal Murmu, an old man in his sixties laments at the loss of land, identity and his very being when he says, "I am a farmer. Or... Was a farmer. Was a farmer is right. Only a few of us still have farmland; most of it has been acquired by a mining company" (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 171). He talks about their resistance, their fight against the state machinery that violates The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act on the pretext of development and welfare, "It is not that we didn't find the

acquisition. We did. But we lost.” (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 171).

In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Hansda weaves a world of Santhal traditions, values, its beliefs and myths soaked in a magical realism that portrays the world of witchcraft, dahni-vidya, mohni-vidya, the tales of ghosts and spirits that almost is loaded with the grandeur of an epic. The world of Kadamdih is untranslatable, it cannot be penetrated by the apparatus of dominant discourses and cultural appropriation. Hansda is aware of the differences of the Santhal language-culture and the importance of sustaining these differences that retain the Santhal identity and he refuses to be assimilated into the dominant language he chooses to write in. His writing is pregnant with the reluctance to translate the signs and symbols of his Santhal language-culture. The innumerable untranslated words, idioms and phrases that are in Santhali, Bangla and Hindi and colloquial registers otherwise deemed trivial find a significant place in Hansda’s fiction. He presents a convergence of several language-cultures drenched in their traditions, customs and beliefs.

The Santhals, the various hierarchies within the Santhalis: the Hansdas among whom the majhi or the head of the village was chosen, the Murmus, who were the jogmajhis, i.e, the organizers of weddings and funerals, the Tudus, who are considered to be lovers of poetry, music and art, the Marndis, who were the naikay-gushti were considered to be the bridge between the residents of the village and their gods have been described in detail throughout. Sekhar presents a history of the Chotanagpur region, mapping across Kadamdih, Tereldih, Chakulia, Jadugora, Ghatshila, Rakha Mines, Nitra; where documented histories are challenged by the (re)emphasizing of counter-claims. First came the Kamars, the

blacksmiths and the Kunkals, the potters. These two communities were Hindus and worshipped idols unlike the Santhals who 'follow Sarna religion and worship nature and its spirits.' This is the first encounter of the Santhals with the Non-Santhals in Kadamdih. The apprehensions and preconceived notions towards an 'Other', the fear of the unknown or that which is unlike us is an important element when we talk of translation. The notion of translation bordering on the dichotomy of the insider/outsider echoes in the constant references to the settlement of the Dikus in otherwise 'exclusive' Santhal villages.

The lower position of the Kamars and Kunkals in the Hindu caste ladder and yet their apprehensions towards the Santhals reflect the marginalized position of Santhals in a land that is their very own. This sense of superiority of the migrant, who looks down upon the native is indicative of the liminal position of the Adivasi in an Indian society. Both these communities "used to consider the Santhals of Kadamdih impure and uncivilized as they ate cow and pig meat, drank haandi and paura, and practiced polygamy. They believed that even the shadow of a Santhal was enough to defile them" (Sekhar *The Mysterious Ailment* 57).

In a particular incident in the book, Sido, a Santhal boy in his teens accidentally brushed against a Kamar woman who started bawling, "Ei Saotalchanna-ta amakechuidilo! Hey Bhogoban!", thus lamenting on being made impure (Sekhar *The Mysterious Ailment* 56). In response to this act, Sido instead of shying away resists the allegation and shouted back at the woman. In an otherwise state of affairs when an issue of untouchability would not be raised before the majhi or the village-head, this particular incident was reported since, "Sido, unlike other

Santhal children, had not shrunken back and tolerated discrimination, but instead, faced down the woman.” The Kamar woman’s lament, “That Sido, he threatened to touch me with his hands, his dirty hands. Doesn’t he know we are clean people? These Saotal, these cow-eating, pig-eating, dirty Saotal, they know nothing about us, about our religion. They will pollute us” (Sekhar *The Mysterious Ailment* 57). That the other does not know me and vice versa is at the core of any cultural encounter, hence the constant reference to the notion of differences across language-cultures. The fear of the unknown installs a prejudice that is fueled by the imaginary societal hierarchies in the form of institutions such as the caste system or untouchability. If the Kamar woman addresses the Santhal kid in the form of untouchability, Sido the Santhal kid refuses to be incorporated by this mode of address.

On a parallel note, in the short story, “The Adivasi Will Not Dance”, Mangal Murmu narrates the expectation on part of the Hindus that the Adivasi will give up their Sarna religion and convert into Safa-Hor. Hansda writes, “Safa-Hor, the pure people, the clean people, but certainly not as clean as themselves, that’s for sure. Always a little lesser than they are” (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 173). This innate desire to make the Santhal, almost Hindu, or almost Christian; can be seen as a desire to make the Other ‘like me’. The Other can only be accepted if they give up their differences, leave their identities and become ‘like us’. Translation is foregrounded on this basic principle of aiming to know the Other, but one’s understanding of the Other will always be based on one’s knowledge and the ability to empathize. This raises a double-edged rhetorical question as to whether we can know the other without empathizing, or empathize without knowing? This often

results in the appropriation and assimilation of the other, and their language-culture, which can otherwise be termed as systemic violence incurred in the process of translation. In “The Adivasi Will Not Dance”, the narrator uses the word Diku for non-Adivasis: “Marwari, Sindhi, Mandal, Bhagat, Muslim”. The fallacy of appropriation is present among those very people who are being appropriated. Hansda’s work unapologetically presents this bias, the apprehensions among the Santhals for the non-Santhals as well.

Moving tangentially along the line of difference, I would like to focus on the epistemological concerns of untranslatability that can be viewed as a mode of resistance. The very phrase, “The Adivasi Will Not Dance”, is an outright rejection of exoticization of indigenous discourses and language-cultures by dominant discourses. Hansda launches a scathing attack on the politics of tokenism, for the sake of mere representation in this story where the Adivasi refuses to be exoticized and resists homogenization; that seeks to eradicate the alternate ways of expressions that are sacred to the indigenous communities. The systemic oppression and subjugation that the Adivasi community foresaw in the garb of inclusion and representation is very well expressed through Mangal Murmu, a man who has seen everything unfold. He is witness to the freedom movement, the Dikus entering the Santhal domain, the government exploiting them for its selfish purposes, Santhal society being restructured from an agrarian society to a lower working class where men and women are forced to give away their land in return for an ‘unskilled laborer’ grade job in the mining companies. Mangal Murmu’s desolation echoes the woes of all Santhals who witness their nature being exploited, their gods being abhorred, their nature spirits being ripped apart,

homes being uprooted or destroyed and their culture and art being auctioned away at functions and weddings in the name of Jharkhandi culture. All that remains of the Santhal is, "Tatters to wear. Barely enough food. Such diseases that we can't breathe properly. We Santhals can sing and dance, and we are good at our art. Yet what has our art given us? Displacement, tuberculosis." (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 172).

The refusal to dance, to perform before those that fail to understand the sanctity of their culture or listen to their woes, is an outright rejection of the opportunity to be 'recognized', 'noticed' by the dominant cultures. Mangal Murmu laments the compromised state of the Santhals where 'hunger and poverty has driven us to sell what is sacred to us'. In the name of Adivasi culture and Jharkhandi culture, it is a token to make the Adivasis dance. A state that is claimed "our own" by Dikus, why should the "onus of singing and dancing" be upon the Adivasi alone!" (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 179) This control over one's culture and art is of the order of a systemic violence that Ngugiwa Thiong'o writes, "To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (Thiong'o 1994).

Religion as a tool for appropriation finds embodiment in the figure of the Christian missionary whose attempt is to convert Santhals into 'Kiristans', thus ripping them of their own Sarna religion, forsake Bonga-Buru and Marang-Buru and instead worship Jishu and Mariam. Religious appropriation thus uses the façade of education, health care and development. The Santhal names would be Christianized and Anglicized. In one of the instances Mangal Murmu says, "Santhal names-Hopna, Som, Singrai-are not good enough. They are renamed David and Mikail and Kiristofer and what not"

(Sekhar *The Adivasi* 172). In the short story, “November is the Month of Migrations”, the protagonist Talamai is a Christian who never got the chance to go to a school. Hansda writes, “Yet, despite the promises of the education the missionaries made, Talamai’s parents never got to see the inside of a school and neither did she. They either gathered coal or worked in the farms of Bardhaman” (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 40). The use of phonetic sounds specific to the Santhal language and the non-Santhal registers accentuate the elements of the local within the global and reasserts the politics of untranslatability as resisting homogenization.

This is a classic trope of cultural appropriation and assimilation where the White Christian thinks that the native Santhal must be saved from darkness by bringing them under the light of Jesus. Hansda mentions the “savior” role played by the Christian sisters and fathers who believed that they were “fighting for our rights. No one bothered to see that our boys had been fighting for our land and rights even before that Kiristan sister came” (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 171). The Copper Mines, The Iron Mines, forms an overarching presence in Hansda’s narrative, very well signifying the doomed inescapable presence it has on the lives of the people living in the area or the ones whose livelihood is dependent on it. Appropriation hovers above the Santhal lives just the way the blackness of the coal gobbles up the Santhal landscape, nature and lives. Just as the Santhals are painted and portrayed in one single color by the Non-Santhals, the coal paints everything black in Pakur. “The vines and flowers and peacocks we Santhals draw on the outer walls of our houses are black. Our children —dark-skinned as they are —are forever covered with fine black dust” (Sekhar *The Adivasi* 172). Thus, they are never seen beyond this color

that is the color of oppression and violence. The Dikus or the Bhadraklok would never see what lies beneath the koyla clad lives and landscape.

The sense of difference is never connotative of, (to use Derrida's phrase) "pure otherness" (qtd. in Baer 2020), but rather is a subtle reminder of the pluralities of alternate discourses that inspire repeated attempts at translation, yet never reaching a finitude. Cross-cultural encounters are thus the complex "generative sites of negotiation and world making, the very place at which "newness enters the world" (Baer 2020). Hansda's world view enables us to understand the various tenets of untranslatability: the political, philosophical and theological concerns that are embedded in specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. The Adivasi in the attempt to preserve their uniqueness shall not be comprehended or translated by the dominant language cultures. This resistance must be studied as a way to provide grounds to subversive elements of plurality that are latent within alternate ways of expression.

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