

Dalit, Tribal, and Indigenous Literature in Translation

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Abstract— *This paper examines the idea of New Literature in English and its relationship with post-colonial studies, with special focus on Dalit and Tribal literature in English translation. It explains why these literary traditions are considered forms of new literature and how translation into English creates wider recognition and academic visibility. Translation gives marginalized communities a voice and becomes a means of asserting identity, rights, and existence. It also creates space for these texts beyond their original linguistic and cultural contexts.*

Dalit literature represents the experiences of oppression, discrimination, struggle, resistance, and the demand for equality. Writing itself becomes a political act and an important part of Dalit activism. Similarly, Tribal literature reflects tribal history, culture, traditions, exploitation, and struggles for survival and rights. Much of Tribal literature existed for centuries in oral form before being written down. Some tribal communities developed their own scripts, while others adopted scripts from neighboring languages. Therefore, Tribal literature may also be understood as a form of translation from oral to written traditions.

The paper further discusses how Dalit and Tribal literature differs from mainstream literary traditions in language, themes, and aesthetics. Their translation is not merely cultural exchange but also a political and social intervention that challenges dominant systems. In India, Tribal literature should not be viewed as a single homogeneous category; rather, it is an umbrella term that includes diverse Adivasi, indigenous, and native literary traditions across regions and languages.

The concept of New Literature in English overlaps with categories such as Indigenous Literature, Aboriginal Literature, Commonwealth Literature, and Post-Colonial Literature. Literature written in regional languages becomes part of English studies mainly through translation, and today translated works occupy an important place in English literary studies and academic discussions.

Keywords— *New Literature in English, Post-Colonial Literature, Dalit Literature, Tribal Literature, Adivasi Literature, Indigenous Literature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation of marginalized discourses has emerged as a significant area of interest in contemporary Translation Studies. Translation, as a process, cannot be understood merely as the transfer of linguistic elements from one language to another; rather, it is a political act shaped by social, cultural, and economic factors. Dalit literature, as an important branch of Indian literature, has gained increasing recognition in recent years and has become one of the most frequently translated literary discourses in India. Since these writings assert the identity and existence of marginalized communities, translation must strive to recreate the ideological and experiential dimensions of the original text.

This raises a fundamental question: Who has the authority to translate texts that emerge from marginalized communities? The present study attempts to address this question with reference to Chinua Achebe's celebrated essay, "Thoughts on the African Novel" (1975). Language serves as a medium of communication and facilitates the development of creativity, innovation, and intellectual expression. However, in subaltern discourses, language also becomes a crucial site of resistance, as colonization often begins through linguistic domination.

Traditional Indian social structures relegated Dalits to the status of untouchables and excluded them not only from mainstream society but also from literary and linguistic spaces. They were confined to serving the upper castes without recognition of their humanity and cultural identity. The traditions, customs, and value systems of dominant communities often perceived Dalits as subaltern subjects and reinforced their social isolation. Against this backdrop of marginalization, Dalit voices have emerged to articulate authentic experiences of pain, humiliation, and resistance, thereby constructing a distinct identity of their own.

Dalit literature represents centuries of historical oppression, exclusion, segregation, and deprivation. In this context, an important debate arises regarding authorship and authenticity: Should Dalit experiences be represented only by Dalit writers, or can non-Dalit writers also narrate these realities? Similar concerns extend to the field of translation. The translation of Dalit texts raises questions about representation, ownership, and the ethics of interpretation.

Dalit discourses often encounter processes of compartmentalization within literary canons dominated by privileged linguistic and cultural traditions. Such structures have historically denied Dalits access to narratives of prosperity, dignity, and power, while continuously reinforcing stereotypes associated with deprivation and social stigma. Language itself can function as a mechanism of exclusion by preserving hierarchies that marginalize already oppressed communities. Dalit literature is fundamentally concerned with the lives and struggles of marginalized communities. It examines the specific challenges faced by oppressed groups and explores their responses to social injustice. When such texts, originally produced in regional languages, are translated for wider audiences by individuals who may not share the same social experiences, the process inevitably involves different political and ideological considerations.

Translation is often viewed as a means of transmitting knowledge across linguistic boundaries. However, in the context of Dalit literature, translation cannot be reduced to the simple sharing of experiences with a different readership. Dalit texts engage directly with histories of caste-based oppression, discrimination, and exclusion. They embody acts of resistance and expressions of anger against entrenched social inequalities. Therefore, translating Dalit literature involves not only linguistic competence but also cultural sensitivity and ethical responsibility.

Undoubtedly, the translation of Dalit literature from vernacular languages can expand its reach and enhance its visibility on national and global platforms. Nevertheless, the question of the translatability of lived experience remains significant. The experiences of oppression endured by Dalits may not be fully accessible to translators who have not encountered similar realities. The processes of encoding and re-encoding these experiences across languages may result in the dilution or distortion of their original force.

Translation can be defined as the communication of meaning from one language to another without compromising the emotional and cultural integrity of the source text. Since translation is deeply embedded in cultural contexts, culture-specific expressions often resist direct equivalence in another language. This challenge becomes even more pronounced in marginalized literatures, where linguistic practices and cultural experiences are distinct from those of dominant groups. The frustration, trauma, and humiliation that characterize many Dalit narratives may therefore remain unfamiliar to translators and readers outside these communities. Issues of identity and self-representation consequently become central to the translation of Dalit texts. Historically, mainstream literary traditions have offered little space for Dalit voices, while dominant-caste writers frequently represented Dalits through stereotypical and distorted perspectives. As a subaltern discourse, Dalit literature documents the social realities of Dalit communities and establishes an alternative literary practice rooted in lived experience.

II. THE QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY AND REPRESENTATION

A similar concern can be observed in Adivasi literature. Literary representations of tribal communities, often produced by outsiders, have tended either toward romanticization or toward reductive portrayals of suffering. Reacting against such misrepresentations, Narayan, a member of the Malayarayar tribal community in Kerala, authored *Kocharethi* (2011), regarded as the first authentic novel written by an Adivasi writer in South India. At a time when tribal communities across India were struggling to preserve their land and cultural identities, the novel highlighted the multiple forms of marginalization imposed by the state, social institutions, and organized religion.

Reflecting on his motivation for writing, Narayan observed that existing representations of tribal communities contributed to their further marginalization. Consequently, he chose to write about his own life, upbringing, and culture, drawing upon experiences he knew intimately. Through its integration of history and culture, *Kocharethi* portrays struggles related to land ownership, displacement, and the preservation of myths, rituals, customs, and belief systems.

Literature possesses both social and political significance. It provides critical perspectives on everyday realities and enables readers to engage with the threats and challenges encountered by marginalized communities. The very term "Dalit literature" evokes a consciousness that distinguishes it from dominant literary traditions. By opposing feudalism, capitalism, and caste-based discrimination, Dalit literature advocates equality, dignity, justice, and human rights.

The suffering endured by Dalits over centuries finds powerful expression in their literary works. Translators must therefore develop an awareness of the political and ethical dimensions of these texts while addressing readers in the target language. Their methods of representation inevitably shape readers' perceptions of Dalit experiences.

In this context, the role of translation in a globalized world becomes increasingly complex. Translating Dalit literature into globally dominant languages may enhance visibility; however, it may also compel translators to conform to linguistic norms that reduce the distinctiveness and emotional intensity of the original texts. Translation, therefore, emerges as a culturally and politically mediated practice that has the potential both to challenge and to reproduce existing power structures.

As translation continues to gain recognition as an influential discourse in the contemporary world, it becomes necessary to acknowledge its role in redefining literary traditions and creating new spaces for marginalized voices. Nevertheless, the translation of Dalit literature remains a formidable challenge because it involves negotiating histories of cultural and linguistic colonization against which these literatures have long struggled.

This paper argues that the translation of Dalit and Tribal literature is not merely a technical linguistic exercise but a profound political and ethical act. The translator must navigate complex questions of representation, authenticity, and power while remaining sensitive to the historical and cultural specificities of the source text. The act of translation becomes a site of negotiation between dominant and marginalized discourses, and the translator's choices inevitably shape how these texts are received by broader audiences.

III. TRIBAL LITERATURE: ORAL TRADITIONS AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Tribal cultural traditions have long been subjects of curiosity, speculation, and fascination. Tribal communities are often perceived as inhabitants of remote and inaccessible regions, leading to the construction of an image of them as mysterious and distinct from mainstream society. Until recent times, tribal populations had limited interaction with people living in the plains. Their social organization, cultural practices, and simple way of life have frequently been contrasted with those of so-called "civilized" societies.

Tribal communities are often described as possessing innocence and purity, yet lacking access to the intellectual and material advancements associated with modern civilization. Borrowing Matthew Arnold's phrase from *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), they may be viewed as "sweetness without light," suggesting that while their close relationship with nature and egalitarian socio-cultural values are admirable and worthy of emulation, they are often perceived as being less developed according to the standards of modernity. Consequently, administrators, policymakers, and scholars have frequently emphasized the need to protect, guide, and assimilate tribal communities into the mainstream.

Government policies have also tended to regard tribal populations as descendants of ancient human societies and have introduced various welfare programmes aimed at their social and economic development. However, many initiatives intended to preserve and safeguard tribal culture and literature have overlooked the fact that these cultural practices are deeply rooted in oral traditions. These traditions, transmitted from one generation to another through spoken narratives, songs, myths, and rituals, constitute the foundation of tribal identity and collective memory. Today, such oral traditions face the serious threat of disappearance and extinction.

The tribal population of India constitutes a significant segment of the country's demographic structure. Historical evidence suggests that tribal communities inhabited the Indian subcontinent long before the arrival of Aryan-speaking groups. The contributions of tribal communities to Indian civilization are reflected even in ancient literary texts. The two great Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, bear testimony to the role and participation of tribal groups in various aspects of social and cultural life. These references underscore the enduring presence and importance of tribal communities in shaping the historical and cultural heritage of India.

A major portion of tribal literature consists of songs, chants, and oral performances presented during significant life events and ritual occasions such as birth, death, and religious ceremonies. A closer examination of these performances reveals that several tribal rituals possess structural features similar to those found in classical epics. One such example is the ritual practiced by the

Dhangar community, a nomadic tribe predominantly found in Maharashtra. This ritual, known as Vaik or Khel (play), is performed as an act of devotion to their deity, Biroba.

The ritual is a complex artistic expression that integrates song, dance, narration, trance, and prophecy. It begins with the symbolic coronation of Biroba as king. Devotees carry tall, decorated sticks representing the divine palace of the deity and bring them to the temple where the ritual is conducted. A group of singers, accompanied by a chorus, performs *vowi*—traditional narrative songs that describe the various stages of the deity's marriage ceremony, beginning with the turmeric ritual and culminating in the wedding and coronation of the newly married god as the ruler of the world.

Dance performances form an integral part of the ritual and serve as preludes that sanctify and prepare the ceremonial atmosphere. Among the Khutekars, one of the subgroups of the Dhangar community, the dance is performed by two individuals at a time. In contrast, among the Hatkars, another Dhangar subgroup, a collective performance involving twenty to twenty-five men is common. The Dhangar community itself comprises more than twenty-two subgroups. These dances, known as *Gajanritya* (*gaja* meaning elephant), derive their name from movements resembling those of an elephant and are accompanied by rhythmic drumbeats. In the Hatkar tradition, the group dance is further enriched by songs sung by women.

Between these dance sequences, performers—usually two in number—narrate episodes that celebrate the courage, wisdom, heroism, and virtues of legendary figures or deities. These narratives often highlight the protective role of divine beings in safeguarding livestock, preserving the well-being of the community, and, at times, ensuring the survival of humanity itself.

The ritual then progresses to its central phase, during which the priest invokes the spirit of the deity and enters a trance-like state to establish communication with the divine. In this altered state of consciousness, the priest symbolically unites his soul with the deity's totem, often represented by a snake, and performs a hallucinatory dance synchronized with the rhythm of drumbeats. A group of singers assists the priest in attaining this trance by performing a *vowi*, a lengthy narrative song that invokes the deity with an appeal such as: "O Mother, O my Mother, please come and help me convey your message to the people."

The supernatural presence of the deity is further affirmed through ritual tests of endurance. These tests involve striking the priest's body, including the stomach, neck, and back, with a bamboo stick or sword. Despite the intensity of these acts, the priest remains unharmed, reinforcing the community's belief in divine intervention and protection.

The ritual concludes with the delivery of prophecies concerning the forthcoming year. These predictions typically address matters of practical importance, including the prospects of rainfall, the health and productivity of livestock, agricultural yields, market conditions related to animal trade, the possibility of natural calamities, public health concerns, and occasionally major socio-political changes. Such prophecies have traditionally served as sources of guidance and reassurance for farmers and rural communities.

The overall structure of this ritual closely resembles that of a literary epic. Similar to the invocatory passages found in epic traditions, the priest and a group of elder performers invoke the divine spirit, seeking its presence and assistance. The invocation song addresses the deity as a nurturing mother, expressing devotion and dependence: "O Mother, my Mother, do not forsake me. I am your child; you are my protector. Appear before us and safeguard our ancestral means of livelihood."

Furthermore, the ritual incorporates elements commonly associated with epic narratives, including supernatural intervention, trance experiences, magical occurrences, and heroic journeys. The descent of the deity's spirit from the celestial realm to the earthly domain symbolically mirrors the epic hero's journey through cosmic or subterranean spaces. Like many epics, the ritual ultimately culminates in the welfare of humanity, as the divine prophecies provide solutions and guidance for addressing worldly concerns. For generations, these prophetic utterances have functioned as guiding principles for farmers and ordinary people alike, reflecting the enduring social and cultural significance of tribal oral traditions.

IV. SONGS AND PERFORMANCE AS HISTORICAL RECORDS

Songs and dances are the essence of tribal oral lore. They are vehicles for establishing communication with mythic ancestors. Lyrical songs are either sung on special occasions such as marriage and death or performed for entertainment in village dormitories. These songs are usually accompanied by drum and flute. They are not merely mediums of entertainment but are vehicles to record tribals' historical experiences and convey tribal philosophy of life.

The life cycle songs are performed on special occasions such as marriage, birth, and death to inculcate moral and ethical values among tribal lineages. In a way, the songs of tribal communities are the constitutions that govern tribal society. Binti, the

Santhal marriage songs, for example, narrate episodes that explain how humans existed on the earth, whereas the creative songs describe "the growth of the tribe's population, their migration through different places such as Hihidi and Pipidi, the wars they had to wage with local inhabitants, and finally came to the land where they live now" (Devy 2006, p. 7). In short, the songs are historical narratives that trace the origin and development of tribal groups. Since these songs are transferred as a word of mouth, the full versions of many songs are missing. If not cherished and preserved, the incomplete versions will also perish with the death of aged performers and singers.

This oral tradition represents a form of cultural translation—the transmission of knowledge, history, and values from one generation to the next through performance and memory. The transition from oral to written forms, when it occurs, represents another layer of translation, as the dynamic, performative qualities of oral literature are rendered into static written text. This process inevitably involves choices about what to preserve, what to omit, and how to represent oral forms in written language.

The recognition, documentation, and promotion of tribal literature are essential for developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of India's pluralistic identity. Moreover, these literary expressions play a crucial role in safeguarding the collective memory and cultural knowledge of tribal communities. In an era marked by rapid modernization and globalization, concerted efforts are required to preserve and disseminate these invaluable cultural traditions so that they continue to enrich the nation's literary landscape and inspire future generations.

V. THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

The translation of Dalit and Tribal literature raises profound questions about ethical responsibility and the politics of representation. As Gayatri Spivak (1993) argues in "The Politics of Translation," the translator of marginalized literatures must engage not only with linguistic differences but also with the cultural and historical specificities that shape the source text. Translation in this context becomes an act of surrender to the other, requiring the translator to inhabit the space of the source language and culture.

Lawrence Venuti (1995), in *The Translator's Invisibility*, argues that translation in the Anglophone world tends to domesticate foreign texts, making them conform to target-language norms and expectations. This process of domestication can be particularly problematic in the context of Dalit and Tribal literature, where the distinctiveness of the source text—its linguistic particularities, cultural references, and emotional intensity—may be flattened or erased in translation.

The translation of marginalized literatures therefore requires what Ato Quayson (2003) terms "Calibrations"—a reading practice that operates at the confluence between art, aesthetics, and the social. Translators must calibrate their approach to account for the social and political contexts of the source text, recognizing that these texts emerge from histories of oppression and resistance.

Furthermore, the question of who can translate Dalit and Tribal literature remains unresolved. Does the translator need to share the social identity of the author? Can a non-Dalit translator adequately convey the experiences of caste oppression? These questions do not have easy answers, but they must be grappled with seriously by anyone undertaking the translation of marginalized literatures.

VI. DALIT LITERATURE AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Dalit literature emerged as a distinct literary movement in the mid-twentieth century, with roots in the broader Dalit movement led by figures such as B.R. Ambedkar. The literature is characterized by its commitment to social justice, its articulation of Dalit experiences, and its critique of caste-based oppression.

Writers such as Arjun Dangle, Sharankumar Limbale, and Namdeo Dhasal have been instrumental in establishing Dalit literature as a significant force in Indian literary culture. Dangle's anthology *Poisoned Bread* (1992) brought together translations of Dalit writings from across India, introducing these texts to a broader readership. Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the distinctive features of Dalit literary aesthetics.

Dalit literature challenges mainstream literary traditions in several ways. It rejects the aesthetics of detachment and universality that characterize much of mainstream Indian literature, insisting instead on the primacy of lived experience. It foregrounds themes of oppression, humiliation, resistance, and survival that are often absent from dominant literary traditions. And it employs linguistic strategies—including the use of Dalit dialects, slang, and oral forms—that challenge the linguistic norms of standard literary language.

The translation of Dalit literature thus requires translators to engage with these distinctive features, finding ways to convey the political intensity and linguistic particularity of the source text in the target language. This is a formidable challenge, but it is essential if Dalit literature is to reach the wider audiences it deserves.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Dalit and Tribal literature in India function as invaluable repositories of diverse cultural heritage and distinctive worldviews. Through various forms of oral and written traditions, including songs, myths, legends, epics, and narratives, these literary traditions vividly portray the experiences, struggles, beliefs, and aspirations of marginalized communities. The translation of these texts into English creates wider recognition and academic visibility, but it also raises significant questions about representation, authenticity, and the ethics of interpretation. Translation in this context is not merely a linguistic transfer but a political act that can challenge or reproduce existing power structures.

The translation of Dalit and Tribal literature is a complex and politically charged endeavor that requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural sensitivity and ethical responsibility. Translators must navigate questions of representation and authenticity, engage with the political dimensions of these texts, and remain sensitive to the cultural specificities that shape them. At the same time, translation offers an opportunity to bring these marginalized voices to a wider audience, contributing to the recognition and appreciation of India's pluralistic literary heritage.

Tribal literature, in particular, represents a rich and diverse tradition that has existed for centuries in oral form. The transition from oral to written forms, and from regional languages to English translation, represents a complex process of cultural translation that raises important questions about preservation, representation, and authenticity. The detailed analysis of the Dhangar community's ritual performance demonstrates the sophistication and complexity of tribal oral traditions, which deserve recognition as significant literary and cultural forms.

The recognition, documentation, and promotion of Dalit and Tribal literature are essential for developing a deeper understanding of India's pluralistic identity. In an era marked by rapid modernization and globalization, concerted efforts are required to preserve and disseminate these invaluable cultural traditions so that they continue to enrich the nation's literary landscape and inspire future generations.

Future research should explore the specific translation strategies employed in rendering marginalized literatures into English, the reception of these translations among different audiences, and the ways in which digital technologies might support the preservation and dissemination of oral traditions. The ethical and political questions raised by the translation of Dalit and Tribal literature will continue to be relevant as these literary traditions gain increasing recognition in the global literary landscape.

Ultimately, the translation of Dalit and Tribal literature is not merely an academic exercise but a political and ethical act that contributes to the broader struggle for social justice, equality, and recognition. By making these marginalized voices accessible to wider audiences, translation can play a crucial role in challenging dominant narratives and creating space for alternative perspectives. It is therefore essential that translators, scholars, and readers alike approach these texts with the care, sensitivity, and respect they deserve.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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