

The Goddess English: Language of Protest and Empowerment

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Balbir Madhopuri

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Abstract

A few Dalit activists call English the Dalit Goddess as the language of resistance, protest and empowerment. The growth and significance of a socio-cultural revolution is achieved through English translation of Dalit writings. Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* (Against the Night) is one such Dalit autobiography to appear in English translation.

Madhopuri argues that caste based discrimination is one of the worst forms of racism because it is practiced against one's own countrymen. Like race, it is determined by birth and does not end with death but passes from generation to generation. Theoretically it is possible to escape caste (unlike race) by changing one's religion but practically caste follows us into whichever religion we convert to.

Key Words: Dalit Empowerment, English, Translation

First Punjabi Dalit Autobiography

Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* is the first Punjabi Dalit autobiography translated into English. *Changiya Rukh* means "a tree lopped from the top, slashed and dwarfed". The writer has used it as a metaphor for the Dalit Indian whose potential for growth has been marred by the Hindu social order. Its English translation titled *Against the Night* conveys the hopelessness and pain the author endured and the resistance he in turn put up against the forces

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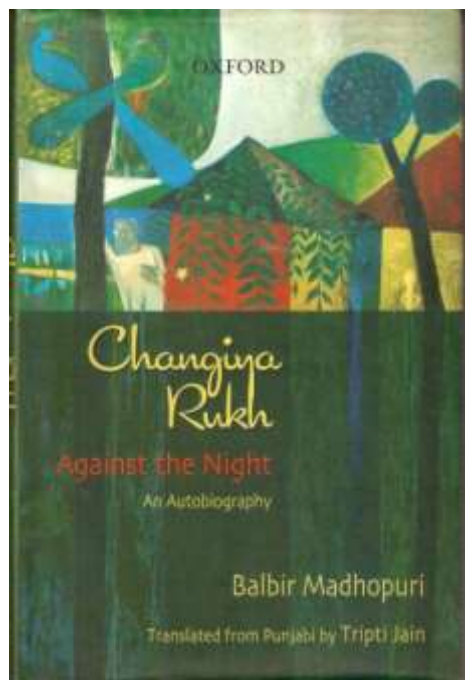
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of night that tried to suppress him. Significantly, the lopped tree denotes its inherent and defiant resilience that brings forth fresh shoots of branches and leaves. *Changiya Rukh* is the story of a Dalit's angst of deprivation, social exclusion and humiliation, as well as of resistance, achievement and hope.

Ambedkar and Gandhi

Dr B.R. Ambedkar pointed out to Mahatma Gandhi that the most serious evil in Hinduism was not the practice of caste hierarchy and exclusion as such, but the upholding of the caste system as a religious idea. Madhopuri objects to the obsession with religion and spiritualism among Dalits as an escapist distraction from the larger project of social democracy. Contrary to the Ambedkar's idea of political solidarity of Dalits, they are oriented towards distinct caste-based religious identity.



Dalit writings like *Changiya Rukh* are a powerful commentary on the intimate otherness of India's subaltern section of population. Its translation into English is yet another sincere effort in providing a strong voice by using English as the language of protest and empowerment.

English as an Urban Language in India

English is increasingly becoming urban language, associated with growing middle class. In fact Lord Macaulay's Minutes on Indian Education in 1835 created a firm ground for English at the cost of Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and other regional Indian languages. It highlights the new class divide in modern India — English-Speaking elite (minority) and Non-English-Speaking

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others (majority). "I consider the latter as Dalits and English for them is the key to a better life; as a tool of empowerment. The State and society cannot emancipate all Dalits from backwardness and poverty. The Dalits themselves should shape their own future," says the Dalit activist Chandra Bhan Prasad (Interview, 2001)

Finding a Voice

According to Professor Marcus Wood of Sussex University (Times of India, 2010) 'the British Empire was responsible for the standardization of English, which paved the way for its emergence as a global language, but now English does not belong to the English anymore'. The Dalits' quest for English is their attempt to find a voice. It has all the ingredients of an epic struggle that could usher in an era of cultural rejuvenation.

Translation as a Process – Empowering the Original or the Translated Text?

If the purpose of translation is to be accessible and to be heard by a larger readership, what happens to the text when it is transformed by the translator in the process of making it accessible to the readers of another language? Does the power of manipulation and interpretation that the translator has, empowered the source text or empowers the translated text?

This issue, which is vital in translation of texts, becomes more crucial as it comes to the question of marginalized literatures, which spring as a consequence of or as an element of the struggle in the life of the oppressed. Here each and every word springs up from the existing society, which is experienced or viewed by the writer or translator or both.

The writer seems to be uncompromising with significant issues like Dalit identity and indirectly criticizes the prevailing Dalit culture and demands to critically read the Dalit tradition. Some voices are mute, some others are hushed and some others are heard ineffectively and infrequently. If verbalization is empowerment, literature sanctions an opportunity for the voices that have been silenced or remained silent for a long time. If being heard by a huge community is empowerment, many voices settle on unheard and less heard because of a lot of causes, apparent and hidden.

Language as a Barrier

Among several reasons for not being heard or less heard, language is mainly the essential ground. It may be national and international languages compared to regional languages or standard language compared to dialects. When there is a need to voice and convey literature to more number of readers, translation, in the context mentioned above, seems to be one of the worthwhile strategies.

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Actually, a major part of Dalit literature is available only in regional languages. Then the only access to Dalit literature in different languages is through English. Apart from the fact that a very small number of Dalit texts have been translated into English, there have been quite a few disputes and controversies with regard to a variety of issues about translation of Dalit texts into English as there have been about any translations from regional languages into English.

Translation of Dalit Texts

Translation of Dalit texts into English is not only an empowerment of Dalit writers but it is also definitely enrichment of literature in English. It opens a world of actual knowledge of the oppressed, their animosity, their obligation and their engagements. The translations fill up major gaps in Indian writing in English which has not been able to hold the voices of the socially and economically marginalized sections. This paper tries to scan how Dalit writings have been empowered in translation into English in spite of the constraints of language and the use of dialect which act as an unusual limitation.

Significance of the Title

Changiya Rukh (Against the Night) as the title of Balbir Madhopuri's autobiography is significant. It means a tree lopped from the top, slashed and dwarfed. Madhopuri uses it as a metaphor for the Dalit or an 'untouchable' Indian whose potential for growth has been 'robbed by the Hindu social order'. Significantly, the lopped tree also denotes its inherent and defiant resilience that brings forth fresh branches and leaves. (Ravi Bhushan, 2010).

The Social History – Dalit Autobiographies

Set in the village of Madhopur in Punjab, *Changiya Rukh* traces the social history of the Dalit community in Punjab and brings out the caste relations constructed on prejudice and inequality.

Dalit autobiographies, address such divisive issues that refuse to go away. Autobiographies are also the most prominent and marketable genre of Dalit literature today. Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* dealt with the Bhangis in Uttar Pradesh, Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* portrayed life in rural Maharashtra, Vasant Moon's *Vasti* (translated by Gail Omvedt as *Growing up Untouchable in India*) spoke of life in an urban Dalit slum, and Kesharshivam's *Purnasatya* highlighted the plight of Gujarati Dalits. Narendra Jadhav's memoir *Outcaste* probed what it meant to be a highly educated Dalit.

The publication of Dalit autobiographies, coupled with their literary assertion has recast and revitalized the literatures of the regional languages.

Semi-Fictional Narratives

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Semi-fictional narratives like Bama's *Sangati* states what it meant to be young Dalit women under the shadow of casteism. Urmila Pawar's *Aydaan* (rendered into English as *The Weave of My Life*) is not merely testimony but also manifesto—seeking to locate the position of the Dalit woman within the stifling constructs of casteism and patriarchy without sensationalizing or romanticizing suffering.

Role of Translated Texts

Whether it really empowers the Dalit text or not is a question to be pondered. The augmentation of Dalit literature in translation itself is a representation of Dalit empowerment which can be associated with Dalit movement. It is influential that when a writer writes to assert the Dalit identity, the translation takes the text as close as possible to that identity.

'Non-Dalit literature emerges from imagination whereas Dalit texts emerge from experience', says Sharan Kumar Limbale, a well-known Dalit activist (Limbale, 1993). Most Dalit writers corroborate with this view that their life is their literature. Hence, it is only extending the established empowerment into the target language and target literature. This attempt to empower target literature and in turn Dalit literature places the responsibility of conveying culture, experience, identity and argument of the original writer.

Powerful Instrument

Sociologist Ashish Nandy says, "I certainly support every oppressed community or individual's right to pick up any weapon, be it political, academic or intellectual incorrectness, to fight the establishment. It's the sheer audacity of it that makes it so forceful." He further says that Dalits must no longer see themselves as oppressed and repressed, they have their own traditions and knowledge systems which must be preserved. There's a very powerful tradition of history, music, life, which the younger generation must be proud of. (Vrinda Gopinath, 2006)

Mother Tongue Influence and Empowerment via English

In a telephonic interview with Ravi Bhushan, Balbir Madhopuri, the author of *Changiya Rukh* firmly expressed the fact that writing in one's mother tongue has the maximum influence on the people and is considered to be most original expressions. He says that they write in regional languages for the local people to participate in the process of social transformation and Dalit empowerment.

Madhopuri accepted the fact that English as an international language is the best medium to sustain and reinforce the Dalit movement. With English the writer reaches to the wider audience and makes Dalit empowerment as a global phenomenon. Use of English as the medium of expression helps in preventing traditional and skewed thinking and establishment of hegemonic social structures. According to Madhopuri use of Hindi, Sanskrit promotes orthodoxy and hinders the participation of Dalits in the mainstream.

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Dalit ideologue Raj Gauthaman puts his argument forcefully in regard to the use of language by Dalits. He claims that it is the stated design of Dalit writings to disrupt received modern (upper caste) language properties, and to ‘expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its refinement, and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance’. He adds, ‘for it is according to these measures that the language of dalits is marginalized as a vulgar and obscene language, the language of slums’. Gauthman asks Dalit writers to reclaim and to develop these art forms, retaining sharply and without compromising to mainstream tastes, mask, gesture and language. (Iyer, January 2009)

English for the Change of Social Status

English has helped a great deal in making Dalits as ex-untouchables. Due to increasing use of English in Dalit writings in terms of translation, it could become part of university syllabi across the country and even abroad. Now this has helped the movement a lot because it could associate youth and intelligentsia in its fold. Any movement with youth as its force becomes a force to reckon with. Madhopuri also feels English education to Dalits has brought in rational thinking as an alternative to confirming to the established socio- cultural set up. The key to that change was education: *parhai kar ke zaat badalni* (altering caste status by acquiring education). This was the mantra that B.R. Ambedkar had given to his people.

Goddess English

Dalit critics like Chandra Bhan Parasad have given the status of goddess to English even supporting a temple for goddess English (Times of India, 2010). Dalit writers like Madhopuri feels that such moves would go against the very idea of anti-traditional establishment position of Dalits. Giving the status of a goddess to English would be anti-Dalit and supportive of the traditional set up.

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