

LAURA BRUECK

CRITICAL CASTE STUDIES AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATING DALIT LITERATURE

IN 2021, in a blog post for South Asia @ The London School of Economics, Gajendran Ayyathurai (University of Gottingen), made a call for a new subfield: “critical caste studies,” which he explained as “an interdisciplinary field in which caste is seen as an entrenched social crisis.” According to Ayyathurai, critical caste studies has two aims: first, examining “diverse cultural, religious, political, and economic mechanisms by which caste-power is produced and dispersed through a putatively inviolable caste structure.” Second, “it is devoted to unravelling the discursive and non-discursive counter-caste practices of women, men and children as well as their organic intellectuals and movements of subjugated Indians” as well as the “vernacular communities in India and in the Indian diaspora.” A year later, in spring 2022, the University of Chicago hosted a conference on critical caste studies, and Ayyathurai was there, along with several historians, anthropologists, literary scholars, and writers, and we thought together across our disciplines and our personal subjectivities and our institutional geographies to further articulate the contours of critical caste studies both as a field of scholarly inquiry and, importantly, as a methodology of engaged scholarly *practice*.

Two ideas crystallized for me over the course of those conversations: first, critical caste studies is “critical” precisely because, no matter what discipline it may be situated in (history, anthropology, gender studies, literary studies, etc.), it poses an explicit challenge, a committed and informed refusal of the biases of dominant histories, literary canon formations, linguistic hegemonies, archival biases, and cultural erasures. Second, critical caste studies also makes ethical demands on our scholarly work, the methods through which we engage our sources, and the debts we owe our interlocutors. Critical caste studies demands a scholarship of engagement.

The emergence of critical caste studies as a legible field, and the concomitant rise of institutional initiatives built around caste and race at several American universities, challenges the strange isolation of the study of South Asia that has always animated at least American institutional formations, bringing South Asia into the world and the world into South Asia. For example, while many are familiar with W. E. B. Du Bois's famous proclamation that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," to confront anti-Black racism in the United States, a comparative race-caste approach is equally informed by the much less frequently quoted part of Du Bois's aphorism that the color line is in fact "the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." The second part of Du Bois's statement is a reminder that national forms of oppression are concomitantly part of transnational systems that, far from obliterating the differences between the local and the global, evidence their connections.

The history of race and/as caste in the United States, and the corollary history of the impact of the colonial imaginary about race, as well as the subsequent influence of American civil rights and anti-racist discourse among anti-caste activists in India, have numerous inflection points that punctuate what we might call a "translational history." This history includes the use of the term *caste* for race by nineteenth-century reformers such as Frederick Douglass to portray Black oppression as foreign and outmoded. It includes the case of *Bhagat Singh Thind v. the United States* in the early twentieth century, in which the plaintiff advocated for American citizenship based on an equivalence of his upper-caste status with whiteness under American law. It also includes the popularity of the "caste school of race relations" centered in social science departments at Yale and at the University of Chicago in the 1930s, an epistolary exchange between Indian statesman and Dalit political leader B. R. Ambedkar and Du Bois in 1946, and Martin Luther King's surprise at being called an "untouchable" on a visit to India in 1959. Over the last fifty years, it also includes the powerful rhetorical and imaginative exports of the Black Panther and Black Lives Matter movements in the United States to India in the Dalit Panther and Dalit Lives Matter movements. The relationship of race and caste is not merely comparative, therefore, but deeply *translational*; its full story remains to be told, and its full impact, particularly on the contemporary discursive and embodied categories we use to inform social, political, legal, and affective understandings of

racial and casteist discrimination, social justice, and community identity and inclusion, needs to be understood.

I want to think further through translation—and as a literature scholar I mean translation in terms both metaphorical and linguistic—as a way to pause in this transitional and transformational moment of the emergence of critical caste studies, and of tracing its entanglements with anti-racist scholarship, by looking both backward and forward as a white American academic who has built my career over the last nearly twenty-five years largely on the study and translation of Dalit literature. I want to think about some of the fault lines of translational practice and how we might productively engage its real and often complex political impacts. How do we engage a translational practice that, as Ayyathurai says, can “unravel” counter-caste practices without co-opting them?

Late last June, I logged on to Zoom from my home office in Evanston, Illinois, for a conversation “at” the University of Cambridge, hosted by the faculty of English as part of a workshop on Dalit literatures. Even as I bemoaned the fact that instead of romping around England I was tucked away in my house where I’d spent the better part of the last two COVID years, I was grateful for the ease of the technology that brought me together once again with my old friend Ajay Navaria, Hindi writer and professor based in Delhi, and introduced me to Vijeta Kumar, an English writer and professor based in Bangalore. We were there, with an audience from the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and beyond, to read from Ajay’s story “Yes Sir,” first published in the pages of the Hindi literary monthly *Hans* and later in my English translation nearly a decade earlier, in a collection called *Unclaimed Terrain: Stories by Ajay Navaria* (Navayana 2013). Ajay read the first half of the story in Hindi, which I followed up with my English translation of the same, then Vijeta led us in an engaging discussion about the story, the nature of our longtime collaboration, and the impacts of translation on the vernacular literary sphere, in particular the Dalit or anti-caste literary sphere. In the midst of this multilingual conversation moving easily across Hindi and English with Vijeta’s able guidance, she revealed that she had first read “Yes Sir” in English translation, picking up the Hindi only subsequently, in preparation for this event.

Though *Unclaimed Terrain* was published in India, and I always knew it was meant for an Anglophone Indian audience as much as for an international one, I was struck anew, as I have been over and over again for years, at the apparent irony of my translations being the medi-

um through which many readers in India encounter Ajay's unique voice and his interventionist anti-caste political aesthetic. Perhaps nothing drove this irony home, though, quite so much as the WhatsApp message I'd received from Ajay's daughter when she enrolled as a student at Delhi University a few years ago, telling me excitedly that my translation of her father's story "Yes Sir" sat alongside Ambedkar's iconic 1936 political treatise *The Annihilation of Caste* on the B.A. honors syllabus in English at Delhi University. I clearly remember the year that I labored over those translations, tucked away in another house, this one in Boulder, Colorado, with my trusty Hindi-English dictionary, its cover torn off and pages blackened from my constant thumbing. I remember the fortuitous evening, several years earlier, when Ajay and I met S. Anand, founder of Navayana publishers, over a plate of kabobs in Old Delhi and hatched the plan for the translated collection, and another dinner in another Delhi neighborhood a few years later when Anand and I handed Ajay his first royalty check.

There is little question that Dalit literature constitutes much of the most socially incisive and innovative writing in India today. Since it is written largely in India's many vernacular languages, however, it often skirts any deep engagement with primarily English-language readers both inside and outside of India (though this is beginning to shift with recent English language publications like Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters*, Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*, Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*, and Sumeet Samos's *Affairs of Caste*). Well before this, though, the modern phenomenon of non-English, regional, or "vernacular" Dalit literature has been a transformative element of the political and rhetorical reimagining of Dalit identities in modern India.

Against this backdrop, and the anecdotes and memories with which I began, it feels necessary to interrogate the reception of my English translations of Ajay Navaria's Hindi-language stories and consider the impacts this English-language book has had on his life as a writer, as well as mine as a scholar based in the United States. I'd like to consider the thorny issues of translating marginalized literature from a demographically significant but culturally minor language (from a "World Literature" perspective, anyway) to English; along the way, I'll also try to theorize the politics of voice and vernacularity that shape the process of translation and its outcomes in this very particular context.

It has long been my rather uncritical and exuberant opinion that the more Dalit, or anti-caste, literature that exists in English translation,

the better. When I began my graduate research on the subject in 2001, it was often difficult to make the case to my advisors and to my funders for a sustained research project on Dalit literature, because there was almost nothing in English translation beyond a couple anthologies of the works of Marathi Dalit Panther poets from the 1970s (most significantly Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, now considered a classic). But when I looked past English and its attendant academic and literary institutions in India, I quickly found a diverse and vibrant community, not just of writers but also of literary institutions: journals and publishing houses and literary salons and book launches and vigorous critical debates. The only "problem" was that the vibrant worlds of Dalit literature in India's various regional languages had not yet been "translated," or carried across from their original contexts and audiences to compel the attentions of sometimes myopic scholars, media, publishers, and non-Dalit readers both inside India and out. I felt then that the contribution I could make as a scholar, teacher, and translator was to work toward clearing a path—through translation—for Dalit literature from India in a language other than English to be read and received as urgent, interventionist, creative, and innovative Indian literature by Anglophone readers. It is as David Damrosch (2003) has described the conditions for a literary work's ascension to the status of "world literature": "a work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin." And to be completely honest, I also saw a vast, untapped body of work and an opportunity to carve out a space, to build a career by bringing attention to the creative and political innovation happening in the margins of India's literary mainstream.

Yet, over the years, while I basically remain an enthusiastic advocate, I have at times found myself confronted with the question of what translation actually *means* for Dalit literature. When does it empower and when does it disempower? How do the hierarchies of literary languages and authorial celebrity in India collude to ironically disenfranchise vernacular texts, authors, and publishers, even as they seek to open new modes of access to understanding and appreciating the originals? Does a wider audience—readers who demand that their Dalit narratives be filtered through English or the interpretive lens of the literary elite—in fact ironically *endanger* Dalit literature?

The urgency of these questions could not be clearer. Questions of language as a means to knowledge, political organization, identity assertion, and self-understanding loom as large for Dalits today as they did for the Panther poets nearly half a century ago. On August 28, 2018, Telangana state police raided the home of Professor K. Satyanarayana, a scholar of Dalit literature and politics at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Hyderabad, India, as part of a wave of state-sponsored intimidation against activists and intellectuals perceived as “urban Naxals” and posing a threat to the social order in the wake of a hotly debated incidence of violence between upper and lower caste groups at a commemorative historical site in the state of Maharashtra some months earlier. Over the course of nine hours police ransacked his home and held Satyanarayana and his wife under house arrest; they confiscated his computer, files, pen drives, etc. The police questioned him over the pictures on his wall and the English books on his shelves; “They questioned me over every book with a red cover or Marx written over it. They asked me why I have so many books at home. How should I even respond to such a question?” And just a few weeks earlier on August 7, 2018, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, after a related ruling by the Bombay High Court, had issued a directive to the Indian news media to refrain from using the term “Dalit” in reporting on caste-based news, reverting instead to the colonial-era term, “Scheduled Castes” to refer to those groups once (and still) widely referred to as “Untouchable.” Dalit writers, politicians, and activists, among many others, have virulently rejected this advisory, arguing that the denial of the term *Dalit*, a term that has been wielded since the 1970s as an assertion of cultural identity and political mobilization, is a denial of the basic rights of self-definition and community formation. As Udit Raj, the head of the All-India Confederation of SC/ST (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe) Organizations explains, “This word has been in our life, our literature, and our writings globally . . . it gives meaning to this community.”

Another salient example illustrates the ways in which political meaning uncomfortably straddles languages and movements between them, in what might be best characterized as an act of “nonreading,” or perhaps as an act of reading preceded by a *lifetime* of nonreading. In her lengthy introduction to Navayana’s 2014 edition of the iconic Dalit political leader B. R. Ambedkar’s most seminal text, *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936), internationally celebrated author Arundhati Roy notes

that when she first read Ambedkar she felt “as if someone had walked into a dim room and opened all the windows.” Just one among many published works in Ambedkar’s voluminous oeuvre, *The Annihilation of Caste* is undoubtedly the most iconic example of his radical political thought, a methodical deconstruction and rejection of the sociopolitical workings of caste. Yet Roy, perhaps India’s most famous and outspoken leftist cultural and political figure, claims that she had never had occasion to read Ambedkar until S. Anand, the founder and editor of Navayana, handed her a copy of *Annihilation of Caste* in order for her to write its introduction. She explains in that very introduction, then, that Ambedkar’s work, “unlike the writings of Gandhi, Nehru, or Vivekananda does not shine out at you from the shelves of libraries and bookshops.” This remarkable admission of the erasure of the centrality of anti-caste political voices in modern Indian intellectual circles is countered by the text’s ubiquitous circulation among Dalit activist publics, for whom *Annihilation of Caste* has served as a critical articulation of social identity and political resistance.

But it is this nonreading, and the attempts of Roy and Anand to bring the text to “new,” perhaps willfully ignorant audiences of readers—an audience of the privileged castes, as well as international readers much more familiar with Gandhi than Ambedkar—that run them afoul of some very vocal Dalit critics and activists. As Praveena Thali writes on Roundtable India, a website for Ambedkarite Dalit activists and intellectuals,

Though Dalits are perfectly capable of articulating their subjectivity, Arundhati believes “history has been unkind to Ambedkar and that consequently his books are not shining in the bookshelves unlike Nehru’s or Gandhi’s. In other words, Arundhati’s upper caste motherly sympathy operates to undertake a mission to deliver Ambedkar to the unreached, and to . . . ‘bridge the gap.’ It is this messiah consciousness that made Arundhati take on a hegemonic savior role with a mission of introducing *Annihilation of Caste* and Ambedkar to the Indians ‘schooled differently.’ However, if she wants to de-school Indians with her non-practicing caste ideology, shouldn’t she start with herself?”

Navayana’s publication of *Annihilation of Caste* and the events organized to promote it immediately elicited strident criticism from several Dalit writers and critics on social and other media and sparked a heated debate about the circulation history of *Annihilation of Caste*, a text that, at the new edition’s launch in Delhi, Anand explained as “having the curious

distinction of being simultaneously one the most obscure as well as one of the most widely read texts in India.” Its broad readership has always been among Ambedkar’s Dalit followers; it remains “obscure” only for upper-caste, upper-class Indians (but of course the power to define what is “mainstream” rests not in the hands of the masses but in the hands of the powerful). Following the book’s release, many prominent Dalit voices decried what they saw as the appropriation of *Annihilation of Caste*, and of Ambedkar: a text that has long been constitutive of a political Dalit identity and community had been annotated by a Brahmin and introduced by a (world-famous) non-Dalit, one who spilled as much ink in her introduction on a critique of Gandhi as on a celebration of Ambedkar. Further, a text that has been widely translated and circulated free of cost—in print and online—as a matter of principle by Dalit activists costs 525 rupees in this new hardback edition, a price that puts it well out of reach of much of its original audience. Anand has spoken of this new paratextual framing of the seventy-year-old text as an act of translation in its original sense, a “carrying-over” of a text from one audience to another. “Would all of you have turned up,” he asked of the well-heeled audience at Delhi’s elite Habitat Center at the book’s launch in 2014, “if this were a Dalit-run, Dalit-led enterprise?” The implied and obvious answer was, of course, no.

Ambedkar wrote *Annihilation of Caste*, and indeed all of his voluminous works, in English, so Navayana’s new edition did not involve what Roman Jakobson has defined as “translation proper” but rather a re-contextualization through Roy’s extensive introduction and Anand’s copious annotations, which include citations of historical scholarship about the people and ideas Ambedkar discusses, as well as etymologies of caste names and terminology, references to Ambedkar’s other works, and documentation of minor changes in wording and sentence-ordering that have occurred across various reproductions of the text. But interlingual translation, “translation proper,” is also part of the text’s story, as well as the controversy swirling around it. Anand does provide, in the notes, translations of Sanskrit *shlokas* (verses) from the *Manusmriti* (“The Laws of Manu,” a two-thousand-year-old text that prescribes, in excruciating detail, the kind of social isolation and approbation Dalits would be subjected to for millennia to come) and other classical texts that Ambedkar quotes, but leaves untranslated, in the original.

Additionally, the explosion of ire on social media from Dalit activists and critics seemed to have been sparked by an unfortunate case of *mis-*

translation. Roy's introductory essay, titled "The Doctor and the Saint," (referring, Roy asserts, ironically to Gandhi's status as "Mahatma" [saint, great soul] and unironically to Ambedkar's doctorate from Columbia University) was rendered in translation in Telugu in a local newspaper as "The Medical Doctor and the Prophet." What this fateful mistranslation falsely conveyed—in thoroughly disabling Roy's irony—was that Roy's essay diminished Ambedkar and valorized Gandhi. It was after this mistranslation of Roy's essay title appeared in the news that an SMS circulated calling people to protest the book launch—and the scheduled events, including a conversation between Arundhati Roy, Anand, and local Dalit activists, were canceled.

UNCLAIMED TERRAIN

AS A NON-DALIT, indeed non-Indian, translator and scholar of Dalit literature in the United States, I cannot help but be implicated in the thorny politics of translation as appropriation. Both of the publications I'm discussing here, *Unclaimed Terrain* and *Annihilation of Caste*, constitute translations, but in different senses. Using the categories Roman Jakobson created to order disparate acts of translation, the first is interlingual, or "translation proper," while the second is intralingual or carried over from one audience to another by the means of "rewording"—or in this case, *re-contextualizing*—in the original language itself. In both cases, these translated books have opened Dalit writing—literary and political—up to new audiences, not only abroad, but in India as well; both have also revealed fault lines between literary languages and hierarchies of readership. The challenge before us then becomes how to make crossing these fault lines less treacherous.

Upon *Unclaimed Terrain's* publication in India, Ajay's stories were extraordinarily well-received by reviewers in the mainstream Indian media. Reading these reviews in mainstream publications like *The Hindu*, *The Express*, *Time Out India*, *The Hindustan Times*, *Biblio*, etc. I was struck by the irony of my translation as constituting a rare point of contact between two mutually isolated spheres of Indian literary discourse, one in English and one in Hindi. Many of the reviewers who so eagerly highlighted the unflinching social consciousness and stylistic originality of Ajay's text, I surmised, could have walked—much more easily than I can or do—into any Hindi bookshop in the capital and picked up one of Ajay's three published books, or grabbed the latest issue of *Hans* (the premier Hindi

literary magazine in India) to read not just Ajay's work but also that of many of his contemporaries in the vibrant Dalit literary sphere.

But I was particularly surprised when Pankaj Mishra proclaimed, at the time he listed it among the "best books" of 2013 in *The Guardian*, that the collection hinted "at the as-yet unrevealed depth and diversity of Indian literatures." In this view, the act of translating a Hindi text to English is no less than an act of revelation, and simultaneously an elevation of that text from the vernacular confines of "Hindi" or "Dalit" in India to the vaunted heights of "Indian literature" in the rest of the world. Simultaneously, such a view offers a tantalizing peek into the still murky "depths" of literary works in many languages that have yet to be so exposed. Mishra's comment does reveal, I suppose, the view from the top, the view from the perspective of World Literature, in which nothing exists until its arrival in English. But this revelation—as is also evident from Mishra's unintentionally ironic accolade—is not merely one for English-speaking audiences but for Hindi-speaking ones too, albeit ones who do not themselves choose to *read* in Hindi.

The question that arises then is what the role of translation—to English specifically—plays in mediating between these hierarchical spheres of language and literary expression? How, ironically, does a conscious "nonreading" of literary production in one language (Hindi) by another linguistic class (English, and I use the term "class" very specifically, as one's preference and/or ability to read in English or Hindi is very much socioeconomically determined) engender a culture of translation? Or to flip the question around, does a culture of translating in fact encourage "nonreading" across language divides? What are the consequences when a text requires mediation, by a translator or an academic, before it is deemed worthy of attention, critical engagement, or praise? Indeed, when it is deemed worthy of reading at all?

According to Emily Apter in her book *The Translation Zone*,

Translation studies has always had to confront the problem of whether it best serves the ends of perpetuating cultural memory or advancing its effacement. . . . while translation is deemed essential to the dissemination and preservation of textual inheritance, it is also understood to be an agent of language extinction. For translation, especially in a world dominated by the languages of powerful economies and big populations, condemns minority tongues to obsolescence, even as it fosters access to the cultural heritage of "small" literatures, or guarantees a wider sphere of reception to a selected, representative authors of minoritarian traditions.

In the context of Dalit literature in India, this problematic of the domination of English over the vernacular is compounded by the majoritarian-minoritarian politics of caste.

The case of poet, translator, and critic Meena Kandasamy provides a powerful exemplar. Meena Kandasamy is often hailed as the “first” Dalit female writer in English, or more misleadingly, as the first woman writer to champion the cause of Dalit women (often by journalists and critics who can—or again choose to—only read English, and so ignore the long history of vernacular Dalit feminist writing); she is the author of two collections of poetry (*Touch* and *Ms. Militancy*) and two experimental novels (*The Gypsy Goddess* and *When I Hit You*). In a 2015 interview with Kandasamy (published in 2018 in *ariel: a review of International English Literature*), the interviewer claims, “As the first Indian woman writer to champion the cause of Dalit individuals and their communities in an upper-caste majoritarian India, Kandasamy is an outspoken critic of the establishment and a spokesperson for the ‘others’ and underprivileged in her society.” In this statement, the invisibility and apparent irrelevance of Indian vernacular literary and political spheres to an “International English” audience is on full display.

Kandasamy is also a prolific translator of several Tamil Dalit works, including those of E. V. Ramasamy and other Tamil Eelam writers and Dalit intellectuals. In her own writing, Kandasamy probes the intersectionality of gender and caste and seeks to rewrite the myths and stories that perpetuate these overlapping systems of subjugation and exploitation. I am setting aside, however, a discussion of the substance of her feminist critique here in order to consider instead the way she positions herself and her work vis-à-vis both Indian vernacular and transnational English audiences. During an interview in *Postcolonial Text* published in 2008, in a response to a question about how she would situate her writing within the context of other Tamil Dalit women writers, Kandasamy said,

I think contextualizing my work within Tamil Dalit literature is quite risky. I am a Tamil Dalit woman and I am extremely proud of that. However, I write in English, so I would like my work to be located only within Indian writing in English. . . . All of us, however, write about the same society. We write from the same perspective: as Tamil women, as Dalit feminists. We share the same social and cultural context. . . . I write in English because I want the Tamil Dalit voice to be heard on a national platform . . .

Kandasamy's careful self-positioning vis-à-vis the Tamil vernacular sphere is instructive; on one hand she is part of it (the "vernacular"—to use the term in a different sense—of shared experience and cultural referents is the same for her as it is for Tamil writers), nevertheless she distances herself from that world in terms of reception and circulation, seeing English as a language that transcends vernacular borders to reach the nation. She continued, in another interview published in *Wasafiri* in 2012,

I write in Tamil and also in English. This means that, even if there are people in India who want to marginalize me or discriminate against me, English has such a wide audience that there will be people around the world who do want to hear what I have to say. The caste system is what I am fighting against, and I care about getting my voice heard wherever I can.

Here, her rationale for writing in English—and translating the work of others from Tamil—shifts, and she suggests instead that moving beyond a "vernacular" or even "Indian" audience is a safeguard against discrimination and silencing.

These excerpts from interviews with Kandasamy clearly indicate a somewhat vexed interaction between vernacular and English/national/transnational discursive spheres. Translation—in both directions, though it is more often from a regional, or vernacular, language to English—emerges as the natural solution to the social and political boundaries thrown up by different linguistic spheres, but here too, there are critical questions about the politics of location. Does Tamil, or Hindi, or any other Indian language's Dalit literature translated to English become "Indian writing in English" for an international audience? And what of the politics of re-presentation and the inescapable difference in power and prestige of vernacular authors and English translators? Kandasamy writes, "Most of the translations of Dalit works are done by non-Dalits, which is hugely problematic. It is not merely the translation that is problematic but the complete absence of Dalits in the production process. Even the brilliant author is not often consulted. How could this process actually happen outside the author?"

How may we seek to destabilize the centralizing of discursive power inherent in the pursuit of the designation of World Literature, a process Pascale Casanova calls *littérisation*: "any operation—translation, self-translation, transcription, direct composition in the dominant language—by means of which a text from a literarily deprived country comes to

be regarded as literary by the legitimate authorities” (*The World Republic of Letters*). The key question, then, is which authorities are “legitimate”? Who embodies the power to declare that something written can be read “as literature,” and how, perhaps, can we begin to dilute and expand that power? Pankaj Mishra is an internationally renowned author who regularly publishes in *The Guardian*, one of the most visible mainstream media publications on the planet. Both would seem to constitute “legitimizing authorities” according to Casanova and Damrosch. But the authority invested in contemporary culture makers like Mishra and *The Guardian* is legitimized itself through a long and intricate history of the delegitimization of other more marginal and vernacular voices. Thus, the ire of many Dalit thinkers and activists is raised when suddenly such legitimizing authorities are marshaled—in the case of *Annihilation of Caste*, this is Roy and Anand—to renegotiate the status of a text to now belong to the world, no longer only to Dalits. The ground irrevocably shifts; the old readers of the text must share space with the new and contend with their analyses, their critical frameworks. No translation, no translocation of a text from one audience to another, is ever a neutral or beyond history and its entrenched hierarchical structures. As Gayatri Spivak writes in “The Politics of Translation” (1992), “the depth of commitment to correct cultural politics, felt in the details of personal life, is sometimes not enough. The history of the language, the history of the author’s moment, the history of the language-in-and-as-translation must figure in the weaving as well.”

Ultimately then, what do we do? I find accusations of co-option by some Dalit political activists, like Anoop Kumar, founder of the online Dalit critical forum Roundtable India, compelling, unnerving, and in some ways unanswerable. As a white American scholar and translator of Dalit literature I cannot help but be implicated when he writes on social media to a host of upper-caste and non-Indian academics, translators, and publishers: “You are being cruel. Just too cruel merely using our pain for your Ph.D.s, for your academic careers, for your commercial gains, to establish your *maha*-revolutionary credentials and you want us to cheer for you, clap for you? . . . You will get nothing from me ever except contempt. Pure contempt. I spit on you, on everything you stand for.”

But then, in the next moment, I’ll get a message from Ajay, who writes enthusiastically about his participation in a translation workshop in Australia in which his stories—via my translations—are once again

translated into French, German, Chinese, and Indonesian, or that he has been invited for an academic residency in Turin, Italy, or that he is going to Japan to chair a panel discussion of his work, all opportunities made possible by the broad circulation of his translated stories. These engagements are enabled in a significant way by the decision we made *together*, to produce translations of his stories.

And I must also acknowledge the doors that Ajay has opened for me—by generously granting me his stories to translate and analyze in my own writing—enabling me to build my academic career, to find jobs, to publish articles and books, and to have the privilege of shaping my students’ knowledge of Indian literature and culture. Perhaps the “answer,” if there is one, lies in a concerted effort to seek collaboration over usurpation, to seek ways of “speaking with” rather than a “speaking for.” We must continually and consciously navigate the politics of language and caste and national literary hierarchies as we translate, and write, and teach, remaining vigilant that the work we do enables—rather than disables—the power of Dalit writing to speak its own voice.

Translation is a bridge. So while we cannot escape or ignore, as Spivak has pointed out, the historicity of both the languages we translated from and into, and the relative hierarchies of the translator and the translated, we can try to practice translation as a way to apply pressure on the future, to work to ensure that such imbalance is not sustainable. A collaborative approach could mean, as it has meant in my very lucky case, a productive working relationship with the author of the translated text in each step of translating and publishing and circulating the work. Or it could mean deferring one’s own legitimizing authority by emphasizing the role that translated text plays in its “original” context, by providing a translated text with a scholarly apparatus that works against the radical decontextualization that translation so often engenders and instead lay bare the labor of the original’s production and circulation. A critical caste studies approach will not overturn the myriad power imbalances undergirding the establishment of a giant like “World Literature” overnight, but through a concerted effort to be aware of them and to work toward a collaborative translational ethos, we might at least push back.

In October 2018, five years after the publication of *Unclaimed Terrain*, I published a translation of another short story by Ajay Navaria, this one in the online translation journal *Words Without Borders*, as part of a special issue I co-edited (with Christi Merrill) on “Rewriting Caste: Dalit Literature in Hindi.” The story follows a protagonist named Dev,

a scholar from India, invited to teach at a university in Sweden, who is on vacation in Greece. While in Greece Dev is haunted by voices in the hall and the ghost of a woman in his hotel room; he forges a relationship with a woman named Calista who fetishizes his Indianness but who in the end turns out to be a figment of his imagination. Dev's grip on reality crumbles, his consciousness is fragmented. The story is not a "Dalit" one per se, in that it does not deal explicitly with matters of caste discrimination or political consciousness-raising. And yet it is very much of Ajay's larger oeuvre, which in many ways consists of stories obliquely about himself or a man very much like himself: a middle class urban Dalit with a Ph.D. and a university posting, a man who has in many ways transcended the social marginalization fated by his birth in a Dalit caste, but who nevertheless struggles with feelings of alienation and a disintegration of his sense of self and his place in the world. In "Fragmentation," Dev is a Dalit translated, carried over from India to Europe on the heels of his literary work reaching an international audience in English. Indeed, "in real life" the global circulation of *Unclaimed Terrain* did in fact occasion invitations for Ajay to lecture abroad, and he traveled outside of India for the first time in his life.

In an interview (translated from Hindi) in India's national English-language newspaper *The Hindu* on November 2, 2018, Ajay was asked about the impacts of translation on his career. He responded, "Being translated into English has made a huge difference. If my work had been available only in Hindi, my readership would have been restricted to three or four States in North India. Soon after the English translation of my stories [*Unclaimed Terrain*] came out, my work went international. My stories are prescribed in Harvard and University of Minnesota and read in Europe and Australia. Without English translation, I would not have received worldwide acceptance." Ultimately it is acceptance that the characters in Ajay's stories too ultimately seek.

In her book *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*, about the fraught politics of language in multilingual India, Rashmi Sadana writes, "The globalization of English has been especially relevant for the most socially disadvantaged, those who are from the lowest castes. In the realm of Dalit and Dalit-*bahujan* politics, access to the English language has come to symbolize a new political consciousness. In fact, some see the language as the most feasible and direct method of social empowerment. They are less concerned with the so-called linguistic authenticity of the *bhashas* (regional languages) since the "culture" (and specifically,

religion) associated with that authenticity is one from which they are already excluded.” Ajay Navaria, like Meena Kandasamy, seems to unequivocally embrace the power and opportunity of translation for seeking global acceptance and, as a corollary, local respect.

But this does not obviate the need to proceed carefully when we translate Dalit literature to English and engage it with the “legitimizing” authorities and institutions of World Literature. In his book *What Is World Literature?* David Damrosch defines it in three ways: first, as an “elliptical refraction of national literatures,” second, as “writing that gains in translation,” and finally “a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.” Dalit literature, both in its origins and its contemporary manifestations, is itself a response to the erasure of Dalit voices and Dalit experiences in national Indian literatures, and in that way fits perhaps even more comfortably in a world literature context alongside other, comparable literatures of resistance. The Dalit Panthers, after all, looked beyond India to the world from the outset to situate the meaning, methodology, and power of their writing. As for Damrosch’s second point, I have tried to demonstrate the ways in which Ajay’s writing not only “gains in translation” but, in many ways, so do he and I both. It seems to me that the crux of the matter at hand in this essay lies in Damrosch’s third point, and that this is precisely what is at stake in the Dalit critique of people like Anoop Kumar and others who reacted so virulently to the translation-by-recontextualization of *Annihilation of Caste*. Dalit literature is socially-politically-personally engaged literature, and it is not only an impossibility but an *unethical* practice to read or translate it in a detached way, because this is both an affront and a usurpation of Dalit pain, from which their literature is born, according to their own critical frameworks, as well as Dalit labor in transforming that pain into powerful, interventionist literary narrative.

In April 2023, as I traveled in India again after a years-long hiatus due to COVID travel restrictions, I gave a version of this essay as a lecture at Ashoka University outside Delhi to a lecture hall full of college students who had been reading my translations of Ajay’s stories in their class. Just a few days after that lecture (and a few days before I brought my own son and mother to share a lunch with Ajay and his family at his house), a column called “Rereadings” in the popular Sunday Indian lifestyle magazine *Mint Lounge*, a weekly feature in the business newspaper *The Mint*, featured a thoughtful reassessment of the stories in *Un-*

claimed Terrain, ten years on from its publication. “In 2013, when I first read Ajay Navaria’s collection of Hindi short stories, *Unclaimed Terrain*, in Laura Brueck’s translation, I was shaken,” writes Somak Ghoshal, a writer and editor based in Delhi.

As a journalist, I had been exposed, for years, to a steady stream of stories of atrocity spawned by identity politics. News media, then as now, was strewn with accounts of caste violence. . . . With the advent of social media and wider access to the internet, such heinous crimes now get aired on virtual platforms—either as twisted bravado or to seek justice. However, Navaria’s stories, with their running theme of cruelty, alerted me to nuances that I, as an upper-caste man, hadn’t picked up on before. . . . His crisp, searing prose exposes the fault lines hiding in plain sight. Rereading the stories ten years on, in the lead-up to Dalit History Month, I was besieged with a renewed sense of despair.

I was grateful to be reminded of the continued reach of these stories, especially in India, to have the experience of speaking with students who’d only just read them for the first time as well as to hear the sensitive reflections of someone rereading them and recognizing their continued impact a decade later. And when we met later for lunch, my translation skills tested anew by navigating the bilingual conversation between Ajay’s family and my own, we both committed to work together on a new collection.

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