

## 'Translating the Subaltern' : A Study of Sara Joseph's Ramayana Stories

Dr. K.B. Bindu,  
Associate Professor,  
M.T.B Arts College,  
Athwa Lines,  
Surat-395001.  
E-mail- kbbindu@ymail.com

### ABSTRACT

*Gayatri Spivak, in her essay Can the Subaltern Speak? raises doubts about the recovery of the subaltern voice which can, in her words, 'know and speak itself. "The Ramayana is a living, evolving tradition which has given rise to a multiplicity of innovative retellings. One of such retellings is Sara Joseph's ' Ramayana Stories', originally written in Malayalam and translated into English.*

*The focus in this paper is on three stories written by Sara Joseph based on three different characters from the Ramayana, namely Sita, Sambooka and Soorpanakha. They are characters who are generally seen as marginalized. Undoubtedly, the subaltern becomes the subject in these stories, providing, in its own delicate manner, an answer to the question ' Can the subaltern speak'? The paper is also an attempt to look at translation as a political act which is able to make sense of the counter narrative to the " historical silencing of the subaltern."*

### Introduction

Raja Rao, in his very famous foreword to *Kanthapura*, talks about his dilemma of being an Indian- English writer. He says," We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians." It almost seems as though he was making out a case for the translator, the translator who, in much the same way, attempts to create a space between two cultures expressed in two different languages. The statement also explains the fact that every bilingual or multilingual writer is a translator, mixing languages consciously or unconsciously. This explains why a major proportion of Indian literature today is sustained and maintained through translation. This argument stands true even in the case of *Ramayana*, the most important work in Indian Literature apart from the *Mahabharata*. The noted playwright Venkatesh Murthy states:

"The Ramayana and Mahaharata are not only great epics- they are a language themselves. I want to converse in Ramayana .By writing in it, I can easily communicate with people because everyone in India knows it. (Richman,30)."

The fact remains however that all the available translations of Ramayana such as Ramcharitmanas written by Goswami Tulsidas, Adhyatma Ramayanam written by Thunchattu Ezhutachhan ,TulsiKrta Ramayana by Premanand Swami and Kambaramayanan written by the poet Kamban ended up as being neither translation nor

adaptation but as original works in their own languages. When we move on to the nineteenth century, adaptations, retellings, interpretations and regional versions start dominating and position themselves in the cultural and literary space meant for translations. There are around 300 versions of the Ramayana and many more retellings based on different episodes of the Ramayana. Several cultures across Asia also adopted the story. Apart from versions of Ramayana in various Indian languages, including Buddhist and Jain adaptations, there are also Indonesian, Filipino, Cambodian, Burmese and Malaysian versions of the Ramayana.

There are several dimensions along which a critique of translation might be developed. In the case of the Ramayana, notions of marginality of some characters are sometimes felt by the reading public and translation cannot include all this mainly because of the translator's attempt to be close enough to the original text. Translators are lost in the gigantic shadow of great writers, feeling themselves to be a subaltern group unable to deconstruct or reconstruct the authorial assertions and coercions. Self discovery is a taboo for the translator, dependency on the text a boon. If we take Gayatri Spivak's question- Can the subaltern speak?, another question raises its head with an unstated argument- Can the translator speak?

So, what are the options? How do you translate the subaltern and how do you translate the translator into a mediator, a thinker, an interpreter as well as evaluator and creator? The answer perhaps lies in a single word - 'adaptation'. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the word adaptation refers to the act or process of adapting or being adapted. In other words, it can mean alteration, modification, redesign, remodeling, revamping etc to adapt or change something so that it can be presented in another form.

Coming to the Ramayana stories and their adaptations or retellings, we find that the regional versions in the north of India are different in many ways, as compared to the versions in the south of India as well as south-east Asia. The difference is primarily because of different social aspirations, ideological leanings and interpretations with respect to the history, culture and society of their respective regions. There is also a diversity among the regional versions which includes many retellings by various authors based on different episodes of the Ramayana. One of such retellings is Sarah Joseph's *Ramayana Stories*, originally written in Malayalam and translated into English.

A renowned contemporary writer in Malayalam, Sarah Joseph has published six novels and a number of short stories. Her first novel *Alahayude Penmakkal*, published in 1999, won her several prestigious awards including the Central Sahitya Akademi Award, Kerala Sahitya Akademi award and Vayalar award. Sarah Joseph has always been at the forefront of the feminist movement in Kerala and founded Manushi, an organization of thinking women. K. Satchidanandan, in a front page article on Sarah Joseph, titled 'Finding her voice', remarks:

" Sarah Joseph is the first writer in Malayalam to discover a woman's language, a poetic semiotics and a structure of symbols often centred around the female body and the world of nature adequate to express women's oppression." ( Satchidanandan, 2015 )

A woman's language is intrinsic to the articulation of Ramayana stories, according to Sarah Joseph. The focus in this paper, therefore, is on three Ramayana stories written by Sarah Joseph, collected and translated into English by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan under

the title *Mother Clan*, *What is not in the Story* and *Asoka*. The first story titled 'Mother Clan' begins with a description of Soorpanakha, the sister of Ravana, thus named because she had nails which "spread like sieves". Soorpanakha understands the magnificence of Ravana who "cannot be conquered in combat" and also that "his prowess and his sword shining like the moon, cannot be arrested." When the story begins, Lakshmana has already severed the breast and nostrils of Soorpanakha. Seething with uncontrollable anger and filled with vengeance, she feels helpless, unable to understand and fathom the intensity and complexity of her pain. It is at this particular intersection of language and text that we are able to understand Soorpanakha as the speaking subject and as a victim. The monologue goes on:

"They butchered the root and source of my breast milk. The roots of my clan and blood..... King Ravana had never lifted his sword to turn a woman's body into a barren land. No one in my clan has posed as a hero after destroying a woman's shape and form." (Joseph,118)

She also remembers that they had done the same wrong to Ayonmukhi, whose nose and ears were also severed by Lakshmana. Comparing herself to Mother Earth, the narrator makes up an argument in defence of Soorpanakha's rights.:

"The tree blossoms because of passion. The forest blooms, and the sea melts because of passion. If a woman's passion is denounced as wrong and harmful, it is the fruit bearing earth which will suffer." (Joseph,120)

Sarah Joseph adapts and retells the Soorpanakha episode in order to deviate from the popular Ramayana where Soorpanakha is portrayed as a *rakshasi* and hence worthy of disrespect. Paula Richman notes:

"Indeed, modern retellings are often richly self-reflexive because they build upon as well as respond to past renditions, benefiting from the distinctive narrative momentum available to writers who participate in an already established story tradition" (Richman, xiv)

These retellings have become a kind of alternate literature with examples from English literature such as Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, a retelling of Shakespeare's *King Lear* from the perspective of Goneril, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys from the perspective of Mr. Rochester's first wife.

Gayatri Spivak, in her influential essay 'Can the subaltern speak?', adds an additional question- Can the subaltern (as women) speak? The manner in which Soorpanakha is mutilated by Lakshman is shown as ethically problematic. Soorpanakha does not utter a single word throughout. She is presented by the author as a representative of femininity, somewhat refuting the generally accepted logic that the so called *rakshasis* cannot be feminine. She pleads for love and the response she gets is the mutilation of her body. She thus becomes the silent (gendered) subaltern woman, oppressed because of her gender, her class as well as her race. It must be mentioned here that the subaltern movement in India has contributed a lot to the sudden spurt of adaptations and retellings. The Subaltern Studies began in England in the 1970's when a group of Indian and English historians agreed on a proposal to launch a new journal on subaltern themes. Led by Ranjit Guha, the venture stimulated ten volumes of essays. In the 1990's subaltern studies

crossed over to other disciplines from history to political science ,anthropology, literary criticism, sociology as well as cultural studies. According to Ranjit Guha, the term subaltern is " a name for general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way." (Guha,vii)

From the angle of the subaltern , the plight of Soorpanakha poses a lot of questions in front of the reader because she reexamines her mutilated body as a mutilation of her motherhood. Soorpanakha is empowered by the writer who endows her with a thought process and awareness. Her body becomes a site of translation which represents and re-presents her. To translate the subaltern who cannot speak for itself, Sarah Joseph , therefore has to discover a language inscribed in bodily terms. This act of representation and re-presentation through the physiological inscription of the body, which Soorpanakha undergoes, is best illustrated through the story of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, the young girl represented in Gayatri Spivak's essay ' Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Spivak , in her essay, recounts the story of this girl who, at the tender age of 16, commits suicide. The actual reason for her suicide, according to a letter she left for her elder sister is that she was a member of a group which was involved in the armed struggle for Indian Independence. An active member, she was asked to commit a political assassination. Since she could not carry out the assigned task, she killed herself in a form of solidarity with the cause. Nobody knew the exact reason why this girl had committed suicide. Spivak notes that the girl's death was a puzzle, mainly because she was menstruating at the time. The question is- why had she waited for the onset of menstruation? The answer provided by Spivak is that she wanted to give a clear indication that she was not pregnant, the sanctioned motive attributed to female suicide. Spivak notes in her essay:

" Bhubhaneshwari attempted to speak by turning her body into a text of woman/ writing. The immediate passion of my declaration' the subaltern cannot speak', came from the despair that, in her own family, among women, in no more than fifty years, her attempt had failed.' ( Spivak,35)

Spivak's argument finds resonance in another story written by Sarah Joseph titled *Asoka* which centres around Sita, The battle is over ,Rama has won and Sita is waiting for her husband to take her back. However, she is surprised at the very strange order from the newly coronated King Vibhishana:

*" Come after a bath, dripping wet!*

*Without wringing out wet clothes!*

*Without wiping your hair..... ( Joseph,109)*

As per the orders, Sita takes a bath and after the purification ritual ,Sita is led by Vibhishanan. She feels humiliated on being led in front of her victor as a culprit. With her dreams of a happy reunion shattered, she comes to know that she has to pass the test of fire ( *agnipariksha*) so that Rama could accept her back. The lighted pyre and the purification ritual thus becomes a very potent symbol in this story, having obvious linkages with the practice of sati- suicide .Clearly, purification is mandatory in both cases and as Spivak says, " the unclean widow must wait , publically, until the cleansing bath to become eligible for Sati." ( Spivak,34)

The lack of the subaltern voice in Ramayana is pointed out in another story titled *What is not in the story*. The story begins with a description of a journey. The travellers who are featured here are Lava and Kusa, Sita's children by Rama during her exile in the woods. The children are accompanied by their teacher, whom they call 'thatha' or father. Both Lava and Kusa feel that they are being followed by somebody but when they actually turn around, they don't see anybody. Finally, they decide to take rest for a while and then continue the journey. They then come across a boy and his sister. Both of them are singing a song. The boy stops singing and when his sister rebukes him, he says that he wants to cry and not to sing. The girl replies, " I too feel like crying. Wasn't mother crying when she sang all these songs to us?" ( Joseph,130)

The story reaches its climax when Valmiki identifies the children as the children of Sambooka, the sudra ascetic killed by the king Rama because he violated the prohibitions against sudras performing *tapasya*. Sambooka's daughter identifies Valmiki as the writer of Ramayana and asks: " Writer, why didn't you give us a place in your writing?" Sarah Joseph ends the story by pointing out to the lack of a subaltern voice in the Ramayana thus: " What we do not have any information about is Sambooka's children.... After the recital of the poet's version, ( by Lava and Kusa) , did they( Sambooka's children) sing their version of Sambooka's story? We do not hear anything of them in history, epics or even oral folklore." ( Joseph,136 )

Coming to the title of this paper, ' Translating the Subaltern', needs a few clarifications, especially in the case of Ramayana. Perhaps it is because of the absence of a subaltern voice in the Ramayana or because it represents a far removed time and culture, that many writers , instead of translating the original Ramayana, resorted to Ramayana adaptations rather than translations. It is important to look into the reasons why retellings rather than translations are preferred by a large section of the reading public as well as by the writers. Most writers preferred to retell the Ramayana story in an attempt to question or critic the gender as well as caste prescriptions in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Further, retellings could always be written in everyday speech, which would not have been possible in the case of translation. As Narayana Rao explains, " Tradition so far had dictated that all mythological characters speak a dialect removed from modern speech ...This strategy elevated the characters above the human level and provided them with an aura of distance and divinity."(Richman,24)

The writers also preferred retelling because it helped them to adopt new stylistic techniques such as stream of consciousness technique, flashback techniques, use of regional dialects etc. In the case of Ramayana stories written by Sarah Joseph, she is able to take particular incidents such as the mutilation of Soorpanakha or the killing of Sambooka and imagine what would have happened after the incident. The writer could not have taken this freedom in a translation. Retelling the Ramayana in a short story form also enables Sarah Joseph to analyse particular incidents from the subaltern viewpoint. She also connects the incident of Sita's *agnipariksha* in both the stories, enabling her to draw obvious interpretations. For instance, the story of *Mother Clan* ends when Ayonmukhi reports to Soorpanakha that Lanka was destroyed and Ravana was killed. Soorpanakha just listened, without uttering a word. Both of them stared silently at the moonlight when suddenly Soorpanakha asks Ayonmukhi about Sita. Ayonmukhi replies that they did not mutilate Sita as they had done to Soorpanakha and Ayonmukhi .The story concludes thus:

" But for the sin of  
having spent her days fearful'  
weeping, in King Ravana's garden,  
they prepared a blazing coal-fire  
and asked her to jump into it!" ( Joseph,125 )

To conclude, Sarah Joseph's stories tell us that translating the subaltern could not have been possible by translating the Ramayana. It could happen only through retellings and adaptations suited to the changing times. The Ramayana tradition has got sustenance only because it has perpetuated a tradition of openness, allowing for a multiplicity of tellings and perspectives.

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