“The Wrath of the Goddess” and Other Acts of *Doktori*: Exorcising Colonial Possession in Translation

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“The Wrath of the Goddess” and Other Acts of *Doktori* Exorcising Colonial Possession in Translation

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“WHETHER... FREEDOM WILL BE... THE POSSESSION OF ALL”

How to attend to the contentious language politics performed in a piece of writing when we can only access it a language away? I ask not so much as a reader but as a translator with a specific project in mind: a first-person account written in Hindi by the Marathi-speaking feminist and Dalit activist Kausalya Baisantri.

Dohara Abhishap (Doubly Cursed) was published in 1999 and is considered ground-breaking for being the first autobiographical account by a Dalit woman written in Hindi, India’s national language. It is part of an emerging canon of literature from Indian vernaculars (including Marathi, Tamil, and Hindi) that is self-consciously Dalit (as in: ground down, oppressed) because it offers eloquent protest against untouchability and other forms of caste-based discrimination in contemporary India. By taking on the twin curses suggested by her title of gender-based inequality and caste-based injustice, Baisantri’s life story explicitly complicates the reductive binaries of postcolonialism that understand issues of power primarily in terms of the colonized versus the colonizer. Instead, she uses minute observations of life – both her own, as well as others – to pose her own version of the Dalit leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s provocative question in “A Plea to the Foreigner” about India’s forthcoming Independence, “whether in a free country freedom will be the privilege of the governing class only or it will be the possession of all” (Ambedkar 1945, 204). Sadly, Baisantri demonstrates that in postcolonial India freedom continues to be the privilege of the male, upper-caste Hindu governing elite. She constructs a nuanced narrative that offers insight into the complexities of ongoing, systemic problems that complicate postcolonial binaries. How do we read the interventions of this genre of protest in English?

Baisantri announces at the start of her account that she is writing a “*jivan ki katha*”, an unusual term which can be understood as “life story” or “life narrative”. Her publisher, however, in the front matter classifies the work – in English, in roman letters – as a “novel in Hindi”, in addition to labeling it – in Hindi, in Devanagari script – an “*atmakathak upanyas*” [autobiographical novel], ostensibly to associate

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it with the popular term used to categorize much first-person Dalit writing across languages. This curious multilingual overlap of generic labels is important, for it has created a unique set of expectations in the Hindi reader. Like many such “autobiographical novels”, *Dohara Abhishap* is plotted along the key incidents of the author’s life in the singular. At the same time, the “life” of this “life story” is also constructed in the plural, layering in stories told by family members, neighbors, distant clansman and friends, so that what emerges is a complex portrait of an untouchable community at a telling moment in history – leading up to and following Indian Independence in 1947 – in a manner that corresponds more closely to slave narratives like Frederick Douglass’s or *testimonio* like Rigoberta Menchu’s. Significantly, the popularity of each of these works on the global stage profoundly affected the domestic political scene in its day by inviting outside readers to empathize with members of their community, an alliance that served to put pressure on the governing elite and has therefore

– Opening pages of *Dohara Abhishap*, in which this work is classified (in roman letters) as “Novel in Hindi” while on the facing page there is a dedication in Devanagari script that refers to this work as a “*jivan ki katha*”.

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— A scene in a
Maharashtrian basti, just
before Independence, from
the 1946 photo essay by
Life. The caption reads:
“Indian male lying on a
shaded bed between shacks
in the lowest section of the
Chawls (quarters for the
Untouchables) where the
sweepers live.”

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inspired generations of Dalit writers and activists. Can the English translation of Baisantry's "*jivan ki katha*" be read in this tradition?

Throughout her narrative Baisantry makes strategic generalizations about the customs and traditions of the community she grew up in with the wide-angle lens of an ethnographer rather than the close-up perspective of an autobiographer, and so parts of her account read more aptly through an anthropological aperture than a literary one. Nonetheless, she makes a different kind of appeal to her readers than ethnographers trained in the Western academy, one based on knowledge of intimate details of life in "the basti", recounted with compassionate solidarity and a keen sense for the larger ethical and political implications of these specific details. Baisantry's Hindi likewise moves easily between registers – such as when her narrator refers as an insider to their neighborhood as "the basti". She uses her prose to stage the fraught hierarchical relationships between Marathi and Hindi, Hindi and English, as well

as between standard Marathi and various local, spoken dialects, in a way that amplifies her political aims as an activist fighting for the rights of all Dalit women. While her focus in Hindi is on challenging domestic hierarchies, in translation the account also requires us to rethink English's mediating role beyond top-down colonial paradigms in such a way that takes into account transnational, translingual generic expectations.

This can be seen most clearly in the sixth chapter when Baisantry describes with understated sympathy how those living in dire poverty contended with illness. She uses pan-Indian terms such as "pooja" and "neem" in colloquial-sounding Hindi prose to normalize the local beliefs of her neighbors, who are narrated in a generalized third-person plural. Occasionally she drops in common English terms that seem to have found their way into the local lexicon (here, italicized) in order to convey the wry suspicion her neighbors had of Western medicine, making Western *doktori* appear alien, rather than the exorcism rites a different ethnographer might have focused on, and even exoticized:

Children who were very sick would be taken to the *doktor*. Sometimes the municipal pharmacy or the government hospital. At home there would also be exorcists and others like that who would say mantras and incantations and do casting-out spells. People mostly believed in ghosts and spirits. And they did a lot of magic and other spells. Some of those exorcists who cast spells lived in the basti. Outbreaks of ringworm, measles and *typhoid* were thought to be the wrath of the goddess and so they would worship Sheetala Mata. There was a Mata temple in the basti. As soon as someone would come down with measles or ringworm the people of that house would offer neem leaves and water at the Mata temple every morning and evening. Every morning and evening they would bathe and go to the Mata Devi temple in their wet clothes. If the measles or ringworm had spread enough, women in the basti would gather in groups to sing songs to Mata, arriving with earthen jars of water and neem leaves on their heads which they had offered to images of Mata made from stone. As soon as the outbreak started a big pooja would take place. Whoever had an outbreak of measles in their home would place an earthen pot outside with water and a leafy branch of neem sticking out so that people would know that someone was sick with measles in this house. When anyone went inside the house, he would use the branch to sprinkle himself with water stored in the earthen pot, washing off his feet before coming inside. It was due to the Devi's wrath and that's why they didn't give the patients *doktori* medicine, they only had faith in the medicine of goddess worship. They wouldn't sweep the house until the patient's illness was better, would only wipe the house with a cloth. They wouldn't put any spice in the vegetables or comb their hair with a comb, would just straighten it with their fingers. (Baisantry 1999, 33-34)

She crafts her description in educated-sounding, standard Hindi, relying on syntactic mimesis to normalize the oftentimes unspoken ideas of her neighbors who, if pressed, would have explained their "faith in the medicine of goddess worship" in non-standard Marathi. In her telling, *typhoid* and *doktori* medicine is more foreign than exorcism and goddess worship. Baisantry's description conveys her neighbors' faith in the powers of the smallpox goddess Sheetala Mata using pan-Indian, Sanskritized terms that would be recognizable to most Hindi and Marathi speakers alike: she is referred to affectionately as "Mata" or "mother", more reverently as "Devi" or "goddess", or even as both at once ("Mata Devi"). The very texture of Baisantry's heteroglossic prose reorients the subjectivity of the postcolonial citizen depicted here, creating commonality between the imagined pan-Indian reader and the local Marathi-speaking subject of her description. How to produce a similarly complex effect on the English-language reader?

The Devanagari script used to write Hindi maintains no distinction between upper-case and lower-case letters, so it is difficult to distinguish between a proper and improper noun – "Mata" versus "mother", or "Devi" versus "goddess"; in this English translation I slip from one to another in order to confound distinctions between the proper and improper, as well as between the high (Sanskritized) and the low (vernacular), in a way that simulates in English Baisantry's own interventions in Hindi. Likewise, I quite purposely do not italicize the neem leafs and poojas of

— 19th-century botanical
illustration of a neem
branch by Stephen Ravas.

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her neighbors’ local worship so as not to make them appear more foreign. Instead, I have followed Gayatri Spivak’s tactic – when translating Mahasweta Devi’s stories from Bengali – of italicizing English words to preserve the ongoing trace of the historic colonial encounter, thus hinting at ways it becomes part of the collision of languages and cultures at this local level. Spivak explains in a “Translator’s Note” to *Imaginary Maps*:

All words in English in the original have been italicized. This makes the English page difficult to read. The difficulty is a reminder of the intimacy of the colonial encounter. Mahasweta’s stories are *postcolonial*. They must operate *with* the resources of a history shaped by colonization *against* the legacy of colonialism. This “deconstructive embrace” is not only her message, but also her medium... (Devi 1995, xxxi)

Both Baisantry’s medium and her message are even more complicated, given that her life story is a postcolonial narrative operating with the resources of a history shaped by colonization against the legacy of colonialism, and using those postcolonial resources to call into question the legacy of patriarchy and caste hierarchies. This “deconstructive embrace” is multi-directional, turning the afterlife of colonialism against the governing elite.

We see this in the Hindi with the vernacularization of the English word “doctor” – appropriated as “*doktori*”. Such an amalgamation of sources depicts the situation her neighbors were in trying to rely on casting-out spells, goddess worship and other kinds of local medicine rather than the more expensive, modern allopathic remedies the elite might turn to. Baisantry’s narrative strategies suggest she is aware of the charges that these local practices are backwards and superstitious, but that she has intentionally cast her own descriptions in a way that does not reinforce such criticisms. Instead, she repeats the popular belief that a measles outbreak was due to the Devi’s “*prakop*”, a noun with Sanskrit (and therefore Brahmanical, pan-Indian) roots that means both “outbreak” and “wrath”.¹ The dual meaning is significant, for it conveys the belief system underpinning the reliance on traditional medicine, and subtly defends it by employing a multi-valenced lexicon familiar to readers across India.

I should emphasize that it is not primarily the fact of Baisantry having grown up in this particular basti that makes her account compelling, but her ability to translate the complexity of her experiences and a full range of perspectives on them into her writing in Hindi, taking advantage of the heteroglossic collisions between languages and hierarchical vantage points within India. Baisantry’s narrative can succeed as “life story” only if we have the critical tools necessary for reading her own discursive turns as agential – as strategic mediations Baisantry relies on, and that her translators recreate. Is this possible in English?

(1) See the definition in R. S. McGregor’s *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*: “1. Violent agitation; rage, wrath. 2. Violent outbreak (as of a disease). 3. Excess (of bodily humour.)” (652)

LIFE STORY AS CULTURAL TRANSLATION

To ask how such discursive practices translate into English is not only to ask a question about rendering the heteroglossia of Baisantry’s Hindi prose in another language, but is also, analogously, to ask how her work challenges generic expectations in English. Baisantry’s life story – in Hindi, and especially when translated into English – calls into question our trained models of reading what Talal Asad in his important 1985 essay characterizes as “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology”. He mounts a devastating critique of the discursive practices in the field of anthropology: he contends that its methods make readers and writers blind to their own exercise of power, which, as in the colonial context, institutes pat distinctions between those in control of these circuits of knowledge (in the first-person plural, “we”) from those under study (using the third-person plural pronoun “they”):

When anthropologists return to their countries, they must write up “their people”, and they must do so in the conventions of representation already circumscribed...by their discipline, institutional life, and wider society. “Cultural translation” must accommodate itself to a different language not only in the sense of English as opposed to Dinka, or English as opposed to Kabbashi Arabic, but also in the sense of a British, middle class, academic game as opposed to the modes of life of the “tribal” Sudan... The translation is addressed to a very specific audience, which is waiting to read *about* another mode of life and to manipulate the text it reads according to established rules, not to learn to *live* a new mode of life. (Asad 1985, 159)

Asad ironizes the appropriative rhetorical gesture used by the anthropologist to represent the alien culture (“they must write up ‘their people’”) for the reader at home. Conversely, Baisantry’s ethnographic sections confound such distinctions between “us” and “them”. Instead, her account of her people addresses an audience that is not her people, and might very possibly be part of, or propping up, the male, upper-caste Hindu governing elite waiting to read *about* another mode of life. She manipulates the established generic rules so that her audience might yet learn to *live* a new mode of life, one not tainted by caste-based, gender-based discrimination. Certainly, Asad’s focus on questions of “audience” attend to similar inequities within the British system (here as “middle class, academic”) that Baisantry and Ambedkar address in the Indian system, and yet when considering examples that move transnationally (the former colonized presented to the former colonizer), Asad sees no possibility of positive transformation. Instead, he argues that the systemic inequality of the discipline of anthropology is underwritten by a basic inequity between languages and cultures that can only be reinscribed, never challenged. How to understand such sites of transformation when the hierarchies at play are triangulated – when a language culture of the colonized such as Hindi might be considered weaker in relation to English, but is dominant domestically – for instance, in comparison to the colloquial Marathi spoken in the basti?

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As we have already seen in the example from Baisantry’s life story, the very prose style of her account addresses the disparity between the various languages at play. She mobilizes a more complex set of relations than can be understood in terms of colonizer/colonized sites of power, especially given that she is part of a movement using these first-person accounts across languages (including in translation) to transform society from within. It is on this question of “transformation” that Asad argues anthropological method conserves the power of those already in power. He sees this hierarchy operating most explicitly across languages, with the anthropologist as translator between them:

To put it crudely: because the languages of Third World societies – including, of course, the societies that social anthropologists have traditionally studied – are “weaker” in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English), they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around. The reason for this is, first, that in their political-economic relations with Third World countries, Western nations have the greater ability to manipulate the latter. And, second, Western languages produce and deploy *desired* knowledge more readily than Third World languages do. (157-158)

Asad’s “forcible transformation” here operates very differently than the kind of agential change Dalit writers like Baisantry are working towards, in part because of the relationship each group of writers has to institutions of power, and thus the way each group of writers produces and deploys anthropological rhetoric. Insightfully, Asad emphasizes the important role “*desired* knowledge” plays in these encounters: it acutely becomes part of the equation when tabulating the relative value of languages in relation to one another, not to mention their potential for transformation, starting with the very medium of language itself. Nevertheless, in this case I would argue that the adroit appropriation of these rhetorical tools of Western nations by a doubly subaltern postcolonial citizen like Baisantry – and thus their translation from a Western language into a “weaker” language – is reversing the process Asad argues is rigged. This intervention is especially crucial in a hierarchical society where Brahmins are figured on top, in control of desired knowledge. How might I signal the agential, even revolutionary cultural translations of a Hindi writer like Baisantry in English? How to understand this rhetorical tool when doubly translated – first by Baisantry, and then by myself?

Asad ends his essay by puzzling over the allure anthropological discourse has had over its English-language readers in particular, despite what he considers its “faulty” and even unethical methods. Why does it continue to persuade readers? “Is it perhaps because they are intimidated by a *style*?” he wonders, and goes on to muse: “We know, of course, that anthropologists, like other academics, learn not merely to use a scholarly language, but to fear it, to admire it, to be captivated by it. Yet this does not tell us *why* such a scholarly style should capture so many intelligent people.” (163-164) Asad goes on to surmise that the success of this style of writing is that it is:

easy to teach, to learn, and to reproduce [...]. It is a style that facilitates the textualization of other cultures, that encourages the construction of diagrammatic answers to complex cultural questions, and that is well suited to arranging foreign cultural concepts in clearly marked heaps of “sense” and “nonsense”. (163-164)

This is a style of writing and of thinking, it turns out, that a century ago captured an intelligent Ph.D. student from India named B.R. Ambedkar, precisely for its ability to foreignize cultural concepts from his home country, arranging them in clearly marked heaps of “sense” and “nonsense” – as one sees in a paper on “Caste in India: their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development” he delivered in 1916 to his Anthropology seminar at Columbia University. He relies on a scrupulously objective rhetorical style to call into question the “reality” of caste-based discrimination in India in comparison to notions of race operating in the U.S. at the time:

This critical evaluation of the various characteristics of Caste leave no doubt that prohibition, or rather the absence of intermarriage – endogamy, to be concise – is the one that can be called the essence of Caste when rightly understood. But some may deny this on abstract anthropological ground, for there exist endogamous groups without giving rise to the problem of Caste. In a general way this may be true, as endogamous societies, culturally different, making their abode in localities more or less removed, and having little to do with each other are a physical reality. The Negroes and the Whites and the various tribal groups that go by name of American Indians in the United States may be cited as more or less appropriate illustrations in support of this view. But we must not confuse matters, for in India the situation is different. (Ambedkar 1979, 8)

This same student would move to London a few months later to enroll in a barrister’s course at the prestigious Gray’s Inn while also working on a doctoral thesis in Economics from the London School of Economics. Upon returning to India he would rise to prominence in the nationalist movement advocating for the rights of untouchables in particular (as seen in “A Plea to a Foreigner”) and would be appointed the first Minister of Law in the newly independent India, as well as Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. In much of his writing we see evidence of a style of argumentation that combines the legal and the social scientific.

As one reads “Castes in India”, for instance, the reader can imagine sitting in Professor Goldenweiser’s seminar room at Columbia University² listening to this young student just as easily as one can imagine hearing him arguing this case in a court of law as a barrister. How do the generic expectations of international legal testimony differ from those of anthropological rhetoric? We might notice that Ambedkar uses his academic training to make comparisons demonstrating how very nonsensical a system like caste in India is:

As pointed out before, the people of India form a homogeneous whole. The various races of India occupying definite territories have more or less fused into one another and do

(2) In her timeline devoted to the life of Ambedkar, Columbia University professor emerita Frances W. Pritchett notes that Dr. Ambedkar read this paper 9 May 1916 “before a seminar conducted by the anthropologist Prof. Alexander Goldenweiser (1880-1940)”. She writes that “Dr. Ambedkar was very proud of this paper, and remained so” and even considered including parts of it in his famous 1936 speech “Annihilation of Caste”. See <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/1910s.html> (accessed 11 May 2016).

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possess cultural unity, which is the only criterion of a homogeneous population. Given this homogeneity as a basis, Caste becomes a problem altogether new in character and wholly absent in the situation constituted by the mere propinquity of endogamous social tribal groups. Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. (Ambedkar 1979, 8-9)

He never explicitly mentions his own experience as an untouchable growing up in a caste-riven society. Instead, he adopts a Western style of argumentation to dismantle systematically the logic of caste. He thus pits the language of a First-World society against that of a weaker (colonized) society in order to effect the kinds of social transformation he envisions. Reading Baisantry's prose retrospectively against Ambedkar's, one sees that Ambedkar has inspired generations of Dalit activists like her to testify to the injustices of the caste system, writing in a style that, as Asad might put it, facilitates the textualization of the diverse cultures within Indian society. How might I signal this critical genealogy when translating from Hindi into English?

THE RHETORIC OF TRANSFORMATION, MULTIPLY TRANSLATED

Writing nearly a century after Ambedkar, Baisantry's prose invites less objective scrutiny of one's society, even when we consider her at her most ethnographic.

– Photograph of Kausalya Baisantry (seated in the front row, on the far left) with Dr Ambedkar and other Dalit activists.

© Personal archives of Sujata Paramita, daughter of Kausalya Baisantry

Yet, her writing is squarely in an Ambedkarite tradition that the Indian sociologist Sharmila Rege argues be read as *testimonio*, since:

[...] the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle. The narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation." (2006, 13)

What does Rege mean precisely by "some agency"? She wrote *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* to provide an incisive scholarly overview of Dalit feminist first-person writing in Marathi, explaining the importance of this political movement to the educated Indian reader in English, and interweaving excerpts of (others') published translations from Marathi into English. She writes movingly of the need for having "sociological categories" in the university system in India challenged by "accounts that derived directly from lived experience and the politics of that experience" (3) and prizes objectivity as rhetorical weapon, claiming that "dalit women's historical narratives provide 'objective' ways of looking at the world" (75-6) since they provide "objective knowledge of phenomena like caste and gender, whose distorted representation benefits the dominant..." (75). How might this style of "objective knowledge" invite English-language readers to make moral judgments on behalf of the Dalit feminists?

Rege is acutely aware of the important role language politics plays in these sites of translation. Drawing on Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's own 1991 project of *Women Writing in India*, she notes that "translating a regional language into English is an act of representing a regional culture to a more powerful national and even more powerful international reader", and goes on to observe that "this question becomes even more complicated in a collection" of dalit women's testimonies that "challenge the hegemony of brahmanical linguistic practices". (76) Read historically, we might notice that the postcolonial paradigms from the era of Asad's interrogation of "cultural translation" or Tharu and Lalita's *Women Writing in India* here are being applied to institutions of power operating within India a decade or more later, using the specter of foreign power to put pressure on the domestic elite, in much the same way we have seen Ambedkar urge in "A Plea to a Foreigner". Rather than an ostensibly foreign addressee, however, Rege's imagined reader is part of the Indian elite of which Ambedkar himself was skeptical. She proposes ways in which the Indian academic can use her position to become an ally in the Dalit movement. How then do we understand this genre of writing when its very methods and rhetoric are multiply translated?

While Rege begins her book using terms such as "life narrative" (1; 7) and classifying these accounts as "autobiographical" (7; 10), she turns to the italicized, and hence foreign *testimonio* as "a Spanish term, which literally means 'testimony'" (90) in order to emphasize an explicit connection with politicized examples like Rigoberta Menchu's *testimonio*. Crucially, Menchu's life story was recorded and written in Spanish by the anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, whereas nearly

– Ambedkar as a student, 1912.

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(3) For a fuller discussion of the ways the mediations of *I, Rigoberto Menchu* in English translation apply to Baisantry's life story, see Merrill 2014.

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all of the narratives considered in Rege's study – like Baisantry's – were written by the author herself.³ How important is this distinction? Throughout her book Rege insists on reading "dalit testimonies as historical narratives of experience [as] a way of introducing the counter views on the caste system" (15) since they have "offered counter narratives that challenged the selective memory and univocal history of the dalit and the women's movements" (75). She sees in the genre the possibility for transformation, starting with its very rhetoric: "As subjects of historically and culturally specific understandings of memory, experience, embodiment and identity, narrators both reproduce the cultural modes of self-narrating and critique the limits of these modes." (13-14) The danger in classifying these narratives as *testimonio* is not the foreign genealogy of the generic term, for strategically, that is seen as an advantage. Instead, the problem, especially in translation, is that we are not able to access the transformative potential of their narrative beyond – in Joan Scott's important 1991 formulation – the evidence of experience.

Scott trains her critical attention as a feminist historian on nonfiction genres popularizing issues of "difference". Like Rege, she focuses on works that circulate domestically – in this case, an American male's coming-out story written in English – to ask how we evaluate these narratives methodologically. She asks provocatively, "What could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through?" and argues:

It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation – as a foundation on which analysis is based – that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. [...] these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. They locate resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it. When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject [...] becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured [...] are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (Scott 1991, 777)

Her emphasis on interrogating "the constructed nature of experience" and "exploring how difference is established" rather than accepting "the fact of difference" refines and extends Rege's claim that narrators of *testimonio* "both reproduce the cultural modes of self-narrating and critique the limits of these modes" (13-14). How do we attend to modes of narration that confront "difference" across languages, when the very genre arbitrating the limits of these modes is itself translated? We have already seen that Baisantry locates resistance very much in what Scott suggests

is "its discursive construction" by employing narrative strategies that challenge "the fact of difference" in the basti where she grew up. If we agree with Rege that "the narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation", then how might Baisantry's agency perform in English? How is an English-language reader able to judge whether my version of Baisantry's narrative appropriately challenges what Rege terms "the hegemony of brahmanical linguistic practices" (76)?

Rege warns that one must guard against "stereotypical sanskritisation...in the name of accessibility to the 'common reader'" and likewise that one must make an effort to "retain as much as possible of the regional and caste specific overtone without rendering dalit cultures as exotic sites" (76). Here we can see Rege taking the lessons of postcolonialism, and applying them to the domestic hierarchies operating within India, but in a way that attends specifically to the multilingual play of Dalit feminist rhetoric in particular. When we look again we might notice ways Baisantry's mode of writing upends colonizer/colonized distinctions, and uses the translated genealogy of the testimonial genre she has adopted to complicate simplistic binaries. By naturalizing a non-foreignized "home" as the place of exorcists and poojas to Sheetala Mata, and rendering an English-language doctor working in state-run (colonial, then postcolonial) institutions (foreign, italicized), she effects her own casting-out spell, one that turns the remedies for colonial possession against caste prejudice:

Children who were very sick would be taken to the *doktor*. Sometimes the municipal pharmacy or the government hospital. At home there would also be exorcists and others like that who would say mantras and incantations and do casting-out spells.

Baisantry takes advantage of the heteroglossic collisions between languages and hierarchical vantage points within India to show that a government hospital might be as far away culturally as an English-language classroom, and renders it foreign. It matters little whether this reader is engaging with the text in Hindi or in English, or whether she is imagined sitting in a classroom in India or a classroom in the U.S. Her mode of narration suggests that the people in the basti where she grew up view such *doktori* as a site of power, and conveys ways such colonial/postcolonial institutions might be more democratically appropriated.

I would like to close by suggesting that the transnational circulation of these works of "cultural translation" is part of what allows them to challenge reductive colonizer/colonized, First World/Third World binaries. The fact that Ambedkar's anthropology paper or Menchu's *testimonio* presents itself as a foreign genre allows the reader in English to become more attentive to the complicated hierarchies being challenged in the act of narration, allowing Baisantry's rhetorical play with difference to become agential. The Dalit movement has long made use of anthropological genres considered foreign precisely to challenge discursive constructions that rely on "stereotypical sanskritisation" for their authority. Instead of reifying her agency

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and Other Acts of *Doktori*
(continuation)

by claiming individual or even collective experience as "origin of knowledge" in the way Scott warns against, Baisantry's narrative emphasizes her ability to produce and deploy what Asad calls "desired knowledge" as a multi-sited phenomenon, one in which colonial hierarchies are re-possessed in order to submit both patriarchy and the caste system to "forcible transformation". In Hindi, and in English in turn, the narrative can only succeed if it is able to play the "weaker" local dialects of the basti against the pan-Indian, sanskritized vocabulary of the national language of Hindi with the help of the former colonial language of English, illustrating that in this case that this Dalit feminist is in full possession of her narrative. ■

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