Translating Human Rights Testimonies

by Christi A. Merrill

In our translation of the story, Laura Brueck and I have decided to maintain a range of registers analogous to what we see in the Hindi, but have chosen not to offer bald explanations for details that an insider might recognize as part of the daily discourse of discrimination against Dalits.

Translator’s Influence
Instead we refer to them in passing in such a way that we might initiate English-language readers in America unfamiliar with such acts, just as Navariya seems to be initiating potential upper-caste Hindi readers in India. “They think they can piss on our heads just because they live in the city? They’ve forgotten what their birth means,” one of the gang growls between kicks. There is no question in this reader’s mind with whom we are meant to sympathize. However, as one of the translators I worry that the portrayal of the good and bad characters might be too polarized, and that the dramatization is so heightened as to seem exaggerated, even implausible, in English. How can I reassure my readers that, however fictionalized, the story does indeed offer a legitimate protest against ongoing human rights violations Navariya and other Dalits have faced?

Fiction or Nonfiction?
For scenes such as these I want Navariya to call his writing nonfiction so that I can point to the label as evidence for any disbelieving readers, the way I brandish Arun Mukherjee’s English translation of Omprakash Valmiki’s 1997 autobiography, Joothan: A Dalit’s Life. In Valmiki’s world, a new headmaster can order a boy out of the classroom: “Go… And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation.”—simply because he rejects the laws of a newly-independent India insisting everyone has a right to education. Like Navariya, Valmiki employs literary techniques that lead us to sympathize with the young narrator’s profound feelings of humiliation and disappointment that “the other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping.” I would like to think that calling this account a work of nonfiction might render believable the headmaster’s outrageous behavior, but such a claim just raises more complex questions about how our collective institutions of literary interpretation distinguish fiction from nonfiction, and what the ideological stakes are of such distinctions.

Negotiating Literary Expectations
Admittedly the lines between fact and fiction or truth and falsehood are never very straightforward; this ambiguity is even more pronounced when reading literature of protest in translation. How far should the suspension-of-disbelief literary compact extend when reading work that purports to represent actual experience? Just as every practicing translator is aware of the discrepancy between the perfect
translation in the ideal world and the tier of compromises one is forced to make, so too does an author striving to convey real-world concerns to an imaginary (and sometimes hostile) audience set priorities and make calculations about what strategies will be most effective. Every participant in the literary enterprise (from author to translator to editor to reader) necessarily has to decide if it is acceptable for a protagonist to recount the death of a father by a racist mob or of a brother from starvation (to cite the controversial examples of Malcolm X and Rigoberta Menchu) in order to make a larger point about systemic injustices against a minority group, even if those horrifying events happened instead to someone else’s father or brother.

That the narrators of these accounts are activists crafting their stories in order to influence public opinion and effect change at home only raises the stakes of our provisional answers. Do we accept the claims of some defenders that the “self” in an autobiography of an African-American man or in a testimonio of an indigenous Guatemalan woman should be understood as representative of an entire oppressed people, and so the facts of which individual experienced which degree of violence are incidental? At the other extreme, should we rely primarily on the equally ideologically-driven research methods of a historian or anthropologist when endeavoring to ascertain the truth of these scenes?

As a literature scholar I understand that part of what is being negotiated here are the contours of our own generic expectations. And as a postcolonial studies scholar I recognize the dangers of assuming these generic expectations to be universal and self-evident. (Put crudely, in such situations those more powerful get to decide what versions of truth are acceptable, according to rules most familiar to them.) As a translator of postcolonial writing such as Navariya’s, I need to be especially attentive to the political and ethical implications of deeming a work “literary” or no, and how that qualifier is in tension with the expectations of legitimacy from work protesting real-life human rights abuses.

Valmiki describes coming into consciousness as Dalit (literally, “downtrodden”) and organizes his entire narrative around rejecting the “barbaric civilization” that has rendered him untouchable. Might there be another way for a subaltern subject from a former colonized country to gain authority for his narrative than to have the details of his life taken as evidence? On what basis are we to judge the validity of a story like Navariya’s?

Colonialism and Human Rights

As I’ve suggested, often human rights literature in translation is seen as doubly suspect, since not just the writer but the translator is seen to be tampering with the truth. Rather than defend against such charges, I would rather focus on our work as readers and inquire into the ways we mark the line between truth and fiction when engaging with work in translation. Postcolonial literature scholars have taught us to question the universals like “truth” underwriting most of our moral judgments, and to be wary of simplistic equivalents. For example, Lydia Liu’s article “Legislating the Universal: The Circulation of International Law in the Nineteenth Century” outlines the contentious history of a phrase such as “universal human rights” in 19th century China. W.A.P. Martin’s 1864 Chinese translation of Henry Wheaton’s Elements of International Law was provided as an

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Caribbean was based on an assumption of cultural superiority and was itself the product of a particular local debate in England over enclosing the commons, and an ideological stance that was forced onto the native population in ways both administrative and cultural. (Private property was equated with being civilized, and property held in common was thought to be the mark of wild savagery.) It’s the moralistic, “civilizing” mission of the imperial project that is particularly relevant to literary exchange, especially in work addressing issues of human rights. Dalit writers like Navariya and Valmiki issue an appeal, inviting their readers to form a negative judgment against the traditional society in which they grew up and to take their side in deeming casteism wrong. How might translators like Laura Brueck and myself participate in these exchanges without replicating Orientalist translation practices?

Interpreting Experience

In Siting Translation, Tejaswini Niranjana argues that one of the most insidious
aspects of the colonial project was the moral superiority of the British translator, and the assumption that Indian natives were inferior, childlike, and thus unable to handle their own affairs. This attitude not only justified colonial intervention but safeguarded an approach to translation premised upon (in Niranjana’s words): a) the need for translation by the European, since the natives are unreliable interpreters of their own laws and culture; b) the desire to be a lawyer, to give the Indians their ‘own’ laws; and c) the desire to ‘purify’ Indian cultures and speak on its behalf.

In her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak too warns against the moral superiority inherent in reproducing the reductive formula of “white men saving brown women from brown men.” Someone could argue that in the case of caste-based discrimination, Dalit writers like Navariya and Valmiki are self-empowered and are thus saving themselves from the upper-caste status quo, aided by their translators who are simply transparent conduits. However, such thinking contradicts everything we have learned about translation from postcolonial studies, especially when our institutions of interpretation suspect them of being unreliable interpreters of their own experiences.

I grappled with similar issues in my first book-length project translating the oral-based stories of the award-winning contemporary Indian writer Vijay Dan Detha. Then, too, the many centuries of debate in English over the proper ways to translate and allow the complicated history of such “jor” to shape the discourse of universal human rights in English. After all, notes Liu, one of the problems with Wheaton’s Elements of International Law is that he “simply equates Christianity with the universal and refuses to consider reciprocity.”

Now with Navariya story’s “Subcontinent” I must ask how we might define “truth” in our reading of human rights literature so that we are less convinced of the moral superiority of our own stance and more attentive to the range of interpretations suggested by other literary traditions than English.

**Universal “Rights” and “Truth”**

In my first book, Riddles of Belonging: India in Translation and Other Tales of Possession (Fordham University Press, 2009), I focused on the ways the complex meaning of a humorous story cannot be understood in the simplistic terms of whether or not the subaltern can speak. The exercise helped me to formulate a strategy I could rely on when translating stories for the two-volume collection, Chouboli and Other Stories. In the second chapter of Riddles of Belonging, for example, I reflect on the exuberant narrator of the riddling storytelling cycle “Chouboli” asking off-handedly, “What right did she have to object?” when recounting the nightly abuse a sequestered petty queen receives at the hands of her preening husband. I in turn asked: How does this particular version of rights (“jor” in Rajasthani) translate into the hegemonic language of world literature, which also happens to be the language of the former colonizer?

I suggest that a primary goal of translation should be to challenge the historically unidirectional flow of knowledge and power by allowing the complicated history of such “jor” to shape the discourse of universal human rights in English.