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SUBALTERN LITERATURE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Literature about marginalised communities is never simply a record of their lives; it is an act of representation that carries political, aesthetic and ethical consequences. Taking its cue from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's distinction between representation as political proxy (*Vertretung*) and representation as portrait (*Darstellung*), this article examines how Indian writing has spoken for, spoken about and spoken as subaltern groups. It reads Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Mahasweta Devi's Adivasi fiction, especially "Draupadi", "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, as instances of sympathetic outsider representation, and sets them beside forms of self-representation: Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded*, Narayan's *Kocharethi* and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. It then turns to translation and the global literary market through Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, the first Kannada book to win the International Booker Prize. The analysis argues that the opposition between outsider distortion and insider authenticity is too simple. Outsider texts at their best register the limits of their own knowledge, while insider texts must negotiate the expectations of readers, publishers, translators and the state, which often demand that marginal voices perform a recognisable suffering. Representation is therefore best understood as a contested field of mediation rather than a property that a text either possesses or lacks. The article closes by proposing an ethics of reading built on attentiveness to mediation, refusal and the unassimilable remainder that resists the reader's desire to know.

Keywords: subaltern; representation; Spivak; Adivasi literature; self-representation; translation; ethics of reading

1. Introduction

When a novelist from a privileged background writes about a sweeper boy, a forest-dwelling woman or a family branded by colonial law as hereditary thieves, a question arises that is at once literary and political: whose voice is being heard? For much of the twentieth century, Indian literature in English and in the regional languages answered this question with confidence. The humanist writer, armed with sympathy and realist technique, could carry the suffering of the dispossessed into the reading public's consciousness and so contribute to social reform. From the 1970s onward that confidence was steadily eroded. Dalit autobiographies, Adivasi novels and the memoirs of denotified tribes began to appear in Marathi, Hindi, Malayalam and Kannada, and the Subaltern Studies historians challenged the elite bias of colonial and nationalist historiography alike. The right of outsiders to represent marginalised lives, and the adequacy of their representations, came under sustained scrutiny.

The present inquiry examines this shift with a deliberately narrow focus. It is not primarily concerned with documenting the social injustices that subaltern literature depicts, nor with mapping every intersecting axis of oppression. Its concern is representation itself: the mechanisms by which marginalised communities are rendered into narrative, the authority claimed by different kinds of narrators, and the institutions of language, translation and

publishing through which those narratives reach readers. The argument advanced here is that the familiar binary between distorting outsider representation and authentic self-representation, though historically necessary, is analytically insufficient. Every representation of the subaltern, whether produced from without or within, is mediated, and the most ethically compelling texts are those that make that mediation visible rather than concealing it behind a claim of transparent access.

The discussion proceeds in five movements. It first sets out the theoretical vocabulary of the subaltern and of representation. It then reads two kinds of outsider representation, the reformist realism of Mulk Raj Anand and the self-questioning fiction of Mahasweta Devi. Next it considers self-representation across Dalit, Adivasi and denotified-tribe writing, attending to the pressures that shape testimony. It then examines translation and the global market, with particular reference to Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*. Finally, it draws these readings together into principles for an ethics of reading.

2. Theorising Representation

2.1 The Subaltern as a Relation

The term "subaltern" entered historical and literary study through Antonio Gramsci's prison writings, where it designates social groups excluded from the hegemonic institutions of the state and whose history is, in consequence, fragmentary and episodic. Ranajit Guha adapted the concept to colonial India. His programmatic opening statement for the Subaltern Studies collective begins with the charge that the historiography of Indian nationalism "has for a long time been dominated by elitism", whether colonialist or bourgeois-nationalist, and it proposes to recover "the politics of the people" as an autonomous domain that neither colonial administrators nor nationalist leaders had created or controlled (Guha 1982). Guha defined the subaltern negatively, as the demographic difference between the total Indian population and those classed as the elite, foreign or indigenous.

Two consequences follow for literary analysis. The subaltern is not a fixed identity but a relation of exclusion from representation, so that a group is subaltern precisely to the extent that it lacks access to the means of making itself heard on its own terms. Further, the archive through which we encounter the subaltern is always already written by someone else: police reports, revenue records, missionary memoirs, ethnographic monographs. Literature inherits this predicament. A novel about Adivasi life is, in an important sense, another archive, and the question of who composes it and for whom becomes inseparable from the question of what it can know. The historian's difficulty of reading against the grain of official documents reappears for the literary critic as the difficulty of reading against the grain of sympathetic narration.

2.2 Proxy and Portrait

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" remains the most influential, and most frequently misread, intervention in this debate. Spivak returns to Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* to separate two German words that English renders by the single word "representation" (Spivak 1988). Her argument can be set out in three steps.

- **Representation as proxy (Vertretung).** This is representation in the political sense: speaking for, standing in for, acting on behalf of a constituency, as a member of parliament or a party represents its voters. It involves a claim to authority and a promise of accountability.
- **Representation as portrait (Darstellung).** This is representation in the aesthetic and philosophical sense: depicting, staging, re-presenting. A novel, a painting or an ethnography represents in this way, constructing an image of its subject for an audience.

- **The danger of collapse.** Spivak's complaint against certain radical Western intellectuals was that they fused the two senses, assuming that by describing the oppressed they were also letting the oppressed speak. The intellectual thus disappeared as mediator while quietly installing himself as the transparent conduit of subaltern desire.

Spivak's notorious conclusion, "the subaltern cannot speak", does not mean that subaltern persons are mute. It means that their speech acts fail to be heard as speech within the available structures of interpretation. Her analysis of colonial debates on widow immolation condenses the problem into a sentence that has become proverbial: "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988). Between the colonial reformer who claims to rescue the widow and the indigenous patriarch who claims she chose to die, the woman's own voice is nowhere to be found. Her central example, the suicide of the young revolutionary Bhubaneswari Bhaduri in 1926, sharpens this: Bhaduri timed her death so that it could not be read as the outcome of an illicit pregnancy, yet even her own family later remembered it in precisely those terms. The utterance existed; the hearing failed.

Linda Alcoff extends the problem from the colonial context to representation in general. Speaking for others, she argues, is dangerous because the speaker's social location shapes what is said and can reinforce the very oppression of those spoken for; but a blanket retreat from speaking for others is no solution either, since it can abandon the oppressed to silence and allow the privileged to evade responsibility (Alcoff 1991). Alcoff's middle path asks speakers to interrogate their motives, to remain accountable to those spoken of, and to weigh the probable effects of their speech in the contexts where it will be received. These criteria offer a practical yardstick against which the literary representations examined below can be measured.

3. Speaking For: The Sympathetic Outsider

3.1 Reformist Realism and the Limits of Sympathy

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, published in London in 1935 with a preface by E. M. Forster, is often taken as the founding text of Indian writing in English about the outcaste. Its form is tightly controlled: it follows a single day in the life of Bakha, an eighteen-year-old latrine cleaner in the outcastes' colony of a north Indian cantonment town. Bakha accidentally touches a caste Hindu in the crowded street and is publicly humiliated and slapped; his sister Sohini is molested by the temple priest, Pandit Kali Nath, who then accuses her of polluting him. The novel's sympathy for Bakha is unmistakable, and its attention to his body, his longing for the trousers and puttees of the British soldiers, his shame and his rage was without precedent in the English novel of its time (Anand 1935). The humiliation in the street leads Bakha to grasp that he is required to announce his own approach, to call out "Posh, posh, sweeper coming", so that others may avoid contact with him. The novel registers this as a scene of self-recognition: the outcaste learns that his very speech has been scripted by others as a warning of his presence.

Yet the novel's resolution exposes the structure of its own representation. In the closing pages Bakha encounters three possible remedies for his condition, each voiced by someone else:

1. **Conversion.** Colonel Hutchinson of the Salvation Army offers Christianity and the promise that Jesus regards all men as equal, but Bakha cannot follow his talk of sin and is put off when the colonel's wife berates her husband for consorting with sweepers.
2. **Gandhian reform.** At a mass meeting Bakha hears Mahatma Gandhi denounce untouchability as a blot on Hinduism and call sweepers the cleansers of society, an address that moves him even though he only partly understands it.

3. **Technology.** A modern poet in the crowd predicts that the flush system will free sweepers from their work altogether, making the reform of attitudes unnecessary by abolishing the labour on which stigma rests.

Bakha listens, is stirred, and returns home to tell his father what he has heard. The solutions arrive from outside him and are articulated in idioms he does not command; his role is to receive them. In Spivak's terms, *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* are fused: the portrait of Bakha authorises the novelist and his reformist interlocutors to speak on his behalf, and the novel's narrative intelligence, which diagnoses and prescribes, remains located in the world of its educated readers. Anand's well-known revision of the manuscript after a stay at Gandhi's Sabarmati ashram reinforces this, since the novel's moral climax is a speech by the most powerful representative of the nation.

This reading does not dismiss Anand. His project made the outcaste a subject of serious fiction and drew international attention to him. The point is rather that sympathetic representation has a characteristic form. It privileges legibility; it gives the marginalised character a consciousness that the middle-class reader can comfortably inhabit; and it tends to resolve the problems it depicts through the agency of reformers who share the reader's world. When Dalit writers later insisted on the difference between writing about them and writing as them, they were contesting not Anand's sincerity but this formal economy of sympathy.

3.2 Mahasweta Devi and the Ethics of the Unreadable

Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer from an educated, literary family who spent decades working among the Adivasi communities of West Bengal, Bihar and what is now Jharkhand, occupies a more complex position. She too was an outsider, yet her fiction repeatedly stages the failure of outsiders to understand those they describe, and in doing so it converts the problem of representation into its subject matter.

"Draupadi", first published in Bengali in the late 1970s and translated by Spivak, is set against the counter-insurgency operations of the early 1970s. Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal woman wanted for her part in an armed rebellion, is hunted by the army officer Senanayak, a man who prides himself on understanding his enemy by reading their writings and who believes that to destroy the enemy one must become one. After her capture she is raped repeatedly on his orders. In the final scene she tears her cloth, refuses to be clothed, and walks naked and bleeding towards Senanayak, challenging him: "come on, counter me" (Devi 1997). The verb is the army's own euphemism, the "encounter" by which captives are killed, turned back by its victim upon its author. Spivak's translator's foreword reads Senanayak as a figure for the First World scholar, a sophisticated interpreter who believes his knowledge of the other gives him mastery and who is undone at the moment the other refuses to be the object of his gaze. Dopdi's act cannot be absorbed into the mythological frame suggested by her name, in which a divine hand clothes the humiliated Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, nor into the counter-insurgency file. For the first time in the story Senanayak is afraid.

"Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha", the long novella that anchors *Imaginary Maps*, pushes this logic further. The journalist Puran Sahay travels to Pirtha, a famine-stricken Adivasi area in central India, at the invitation of the local official Harisharan, to investigate reports of an extraordinary creature. A boy named Bikhia has drawn its form on a cave wall, and the pterodactyl itself appears to Puran, who understands that it is sacred to the community as an ancestral soul. Puran recognises that he cannot communicate with it, cannot publish its existence without destroying what it means, and cannot translate the community's relation to it into the idiom of the newspaper. When the creature dies, the knowledge it embodied remains beyond his grasp (Devi 1995). The famine, the land alienation and the bureaucratic indifference that Puran witnesses accumulate slowly and without spectacle, which is why they elude the conventions of reportage.

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Chotti Munda and His Arrow takes the opposite route to the same problem. Spanning the decades from late colonial rule to the Emergency, the novel follows a Munda archer whose skill with the bow becomes a vehicle of collective memory, linked to the legacy of Birsa Munda. Here Devi grants her Adivasi protagonist an extended interiority and a central place in the story, but she embeds his life within the songs, rumours and stories through which the community narrates itself, so that Chotti is less a heroic individual than a node in a collective archive (Devi 2003). The arrow circulates as a sign within the community's own interpretative system, often opaque to the moneylenders, police and officials who surround it.

Taken together, these texts show a repertoire of strategies by which an outsider can represent without claiming mastery:

- **The failed interpreter.** Senanayak and Puran Sahay are educated readers of the Adivasi world whose confidence is exposed; the reader is invited to identify with them and then to share their humbling.
- **The untranslatable remainder.** The pterodactyl and Dopdi's final gesture mark points at which meaning exceeds the frameworks available to outsiders, including the reader.
- **Community as narrator.** In *Chotti Munda*, songs and rumour carry the story, displacing the omniscient narrator as the sole source of authority.
- **Activist paratext.** Devi's prefaces, interviews and journalism openly take up *Vertretung* in campaigns for land and rights, keeping political advocacy distinct from, rather than disguised within, the fiction.

Devi's fiction thus offers a model of outsider representation that is neither the confident humanism of Anand nor a retreat into silence. Measured against Alcoff's criteria, it interrogates the representer's position from within the narrative itself.

4. Speaking As: Self-Representation and Its Burdens

4.1 Testimony and the Claim of Experience

The emergence of Dalit autobiography in Marathi from the 1970s, and later in Hindi, Tamil and other languages, changed the terms of representation by establishing the marginalised subject as author rather than character. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, published in Hindi in 1997 and translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, takes its title from the leftover scraps of food that the narrator's family collected from upper-caste households after weddings and feasts. Its narrative turns on the intimate, repeated humiliations of childhood in the village of Barla in western Uttar Pradesh: the headmaster who forces the young Valmiki to sweep the school grounds for days instead of attending class, until his father bursts in to protest; the family's dependence on food that others discarded; the mother's eventual refusal of a demeaning bargain (Valmiki 2003). The difference from *Untouchable* is not merely of perspective. The narrating consciousness that interprets the humiliation is the same consciousness that suffered it, and the text claims the right to judge as well as to describe. Where Bakha receives solutions from others, Valmiki's narrator acquires literacy and turns it into a tool of analysis, so that the autobiography records the very process by which the subaltern becomes a speaker.

Sharankumar Limbale theorised this shift in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (Limbale 2004). His argument may be summarised in a few propositions:

- **Rejection of inherited aesthetics.** Classical Indian and Western theories of beauty and pleasure cannot be the measure of Dalit writing, since they were formed by and for the communities that excluded Dalits.

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- **Experience as authority.** The value of a Dalit text lies in its fidelity to lived experience, which gives the writer an authority that sympathetic outsiders cannot claim.
- **Literature as awakening.** The purpose of writing is to produce consciousness and social change in the reader, so that its effects matter more than its ornament.
- **Values as criteria.** Equality, freedom, justice and fraternity are proposed as the standards against which literary work should be judged.

The aesthetic of authenticity was a necessary corrective to a literary establishment that had treated outsider representation as the norm. Yet it introduces difficulties of its own. Testimony depends on a compact between narrator and reader in which the narrator's experience is presented as representative of a collective and the reader is invited into solidarity. The genre's power lies in this claim to truth; its vulnerability lies in the reader's tendency to consume testimony as information about a group rather than as a crafted literary act. Valmiki's narrative, with its controlled ironies, its delayed revelations and its reflections on the surname he chose to carry, is as deliberately shaped as any novel. Recent scholarship gathered in *Dalit Text* argues precisely that Dalit writing must be read for its formal and aesthetic choices and not only for its documentary value, lest the critic reproduce the old division in which the marginalised supply experience and others supply theory (Misrahi-Barak et al. 2020).

4.2 Adivasi Writing from Within

Adivasi literature in the Indian languages faced an even steeper path to recognition, partly because many Adivasi languages lacked a print tradition and partly because the image of the "tribal" had been fixed by anthropology, missionary writing and sympathetic fiction alike. The silence imposed on these communities was less an absence of speech than an absence of listeners within the institutions of modern Indian culture.

Narayan's *Kocharethi*, published in Malayalam in 1998 and translated into English by Catherine Thankamma in 2011, is widely recognised as the first novel in Malayalam by an Adivasi writer. It portrays the Malayarayar community of the Western Ghats in Kerala through the life of Kunjipennu and her family from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, as land laws, cash crops, moneylenders and missionaries transform the community's relation to the forest (Narayan 2011). Its representational techniques reward close attention:

- **Normalised custom.** Rituals, agricultural cycles, kinship obligations and beliefs appear as the ordinary fabric of life rather than as ethnographic curiosities, and the narrative rarely pauses to explain them for an outsider.
- **Historical depth.** By following several generations, the novel refuses the timeless, static image of the tribal and presents the community as a historical agent responding to change.
- **Internal critique.** The Malayarayar are shown with their own hierarchies, quarrels and accommodations with outside power, rather than as an idealised, homogeneous people.
- **Retained vocabulary.** Thankamma's English keeps Malayalam kinship terms and ritual words, supported by a glossary, so that the translation registers the distance between the community's idiom and the reader's.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, published in 2015, brings the question of representation into direct political confrontation. In the title story, Mangal Murmu, an elderly Santhal musician who has led a dance troupe for years, is commanded to perform before the President of India at a ceremony to lay the foundation of a power plant that will displace Santhal villages. On stage he refuses, declaring that the Adivasi will not dance while their land is taken, and he is beaten and silenced (Shekhar 2015). The story is an allegory of representation itself. The state wants the Adivasi to appear in the form of picturesque performance, a *Darstellung* that displays the nation's diversity, while

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denying the Adivasi any *Vertretung* in decisions about land. Mangal's refusal to dance is a refusal of a mode of representation, and its cost is the violent reassertion of the state's authority over who may speak.

The collection's reception sharpened the point. In 2017 the Jharkhand government banned the book, citing objections that the story "November Is the Month of Migrations", in which a young Santhal woman named Talamai exchanges sex with a railway policeman for food and money, portrayed Santhal women in a degrading way. The ban was lifted before the end of that year. The controversy shows that self-representation offers no protection from contestation; an insider writer may be accused of betraying the community's image by depicting its vulnerabilities. The demand that marginalised writers produce only dignified and heroic images is itself a form of representational pressure, and it can be exercised by the state and by self-appointed community spokespersons as readily as by outsiders.

4.3 The Branded Body

Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya*, published in Marathi in 1987 and translated by P. A. Kolharkar as *The Branded* in 1998, narrates life within the Uchalya community, one of the many groups declared hereditary criminals under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and denotified after Independence. Gaikwad describes children trained in pickpocketing, the routine brutality of police who arrest community members whenever a theft occurs nearby, the hunger that underlies both, and his own uneven path through schooling and labour activism (Gaikwad 1998). The title condenses the representational problem: the community was branded by colonial law long before any writer depicted it. The criminal-tribe classification was itself a representation with devastating force, a *Darstellung* enforced through *Vertretung*, in which the state's portrait of the group became the basis for registration, surveillance and punishment.

Gaikwad's autobiography therefore writes against a pre-existing representation rather than into a silence. It does not deny the thefts; it recontextualises them, showing the economic and legal structures that produced them, and it narrates the narrator's gradual entry into trade-union and social work as an acquisition of public voice. In this respect *The Branded* resembles *Joothan*: both trace a movement from being the object of others' descriptions to being a subject capable of contesting them. The case of the denotified tribes also shows that the most consequential representations of the subaltern are frequently not literary at all but administrative, and that literature's task may be to answer the archive of the state with an archive of the community.

The texts considered so far can be compared along the axes that matter most for the politics of representation, as Table 1 summarises.

Table 1. Positions and modes of representation in the principal texts examined

Text (original language, year)	Author's position	Mode of representation	Key representational move
Untouchable (English, 1935)	Outsider	Reformist realist novel	Remedies voiced by others; subject receives them
"Draupadi" (Bengali, late 1970s)	Outsider	Short story in translation	Captive turns the gaze on the interpreter
"Pterodactyl" (Bengali, 1990s)	Outsider	Novella in translation	Narrator confronts what he cannot report
Joothan (Hindi, 1997)	Insider	Autobiography	Sufferer becomes interpreter of suffering
Uchalya (Marathi, 1987)	Insider	Autobiography	Answers a colonial legal label
Kocharethi (Malayalam, 1998)	Insider	Multigenerational novel	Custom presented without explanation
The Adivasi Will Not Dance (English, 2015)	Insider	Short stories	Refusal of performance; contested by the state
Heart Lamp (Kannada, 1990s–2020s)	Insider	Short stories in translation	Critique from within; opacity in translation

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5. Language, Translation and the Market for Marginal Voices

Most readers outside a given regional language encounter subaltern literature in translation, usually into English. Translation is thus a second layer of representation superimposed on the first. Spivak's own translations of Mahasweta Devi, with their extended prefaces and afterwords, make the translator conspicuously present instead of invisible; in the preface to *Imaginary Maps* she reflects on the risks of rendering Devi's mixture of Bengali registers, tribal speech and bureaucratic jargon into a smooth English that would erase its unevenness (Devi 1995). The global literary market adds a further layer. Graham Huggan's account of the "postcolonial exotic" describes how cultural difference is commodified and marketed to metropolitan readers as consumable otherness, so that marginality itself becomes a valuable literary property (Huggan 2001). The mechanisms through which the market mediates subaltern voices can be distinguished:

- **Selection.** Publishers and translators choose which texts cross into English, and their choices tend to favour works whose themes already match metropolitan expectations of what an Indian marginal story should be.
- **Framing.** Covers, blurbs, introductions and prize citations position the text, often stressing suffering, resilience or exotic setting over formal achievement.
- **Domestication.** Translation may smooth regional idioms, code-switching and untranslatable concepts into a readily consumable standard English.
- **Representativeness.** A single translated author can be made to stand for an entire community, burdening the writer with a proxy role the work never claimed.

Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp*, a selection of twelve stories written in Kannada between the 1990s and the 2020s and translated by Deepa Bhasthi, offers an instructive case. Its award of the International Booker Prize in 2025, the first for a book translated from Kannada and the first for a short-story collection, brought international attention to stories of Muslim women and families in small-town Karnataka (Mushtaq 2025). Mushtaq, a lawyer and activist associated with the Bandaya, or protest, movement in Kannada literature, writes of women within families and religious institutions that constrain them. In the title story, Mehrun, exhausted by her husband's neglect and his affair, and sent back to him by her own family, prepares to set herself on fire and is held back by her young daughter. The collection ends with "Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!", in which a woman addresses God directly and asks him, if he must create the world again, to come into it as a woman. A celebration of such a book could easily reduce it to an exposé of minority oppression, a narrative that suits majoritarian prejudice as well as metropolitan curiosity.

The stories themselves resist that reduction. They are written from inside the community, with humour, irony and an intimate knowledge of its domestic and devotional life, and their critique of patriarchal authority coexists with a refusal to offer the community up as a spectacle for outsiders. Bhasthi's translation retains Kannada, Dakhni and Urdu words without italics or a glossary, a choice that reminds the English reader that the text originates in a multilingual world whose terms are not organised for that reader's convenience. Here translation works against domestication, preserving a measure of opacity. The case demonstrates that the market need not only exoticise: prize culture can bring regional-language writing into view while translation keeps its specificity intact. It also shows that representation of a religious minority is doubly mediated, since such writing addresses both an internal audience, for whom its critique is an intervention within the community, and a wider public prone to read the same critique as confirmation of stereotype. The meaning of an insider's self-criticism thus depends on who is listening, which returns us to Spivak's insistence that the failure of the subaltern to speak is, in the end, a failure of hearing.

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6. Towards an Ethics of Reading

If every representation of the marginalised is mediated, the ethical burden cannot rest on writers and translators alone. It falls also on readers, critics and teachers, whose habits of interpretation determine whether subaltern speech is heard as speech. Drawing together the readings above, four principles may be proposed.

1. **Attend to mediation.** Ask who narrates, in what language, through which translator and publisher, and for which audience. The outsider and the insider text alike carry traces of these conditions, and the extent to which a text makes them visible is a measure of its honesty.
2. **Respect refusal and opacity.** Dopdi's final gesture, Mangal Murmu's refusal to dance and the unglossed words in *Heart Lamp* all mark limits to the reader's access. Such limits are not defects to be explained away but part of the text's meaning.
3. **Read testimony as art.** Autobiographical and testimonial texts deserve formal attention to structure, irony and rhetoric. Treating them only as documents repeats the division between those who theorise and those who merely supply experience.
4. **Resist the demand for representative images.** Neither the market's appetite for suffering nor a community's wish for flattering portraits should determine how a text is valued. Writers such as Shekhar and Mushtaq show that critical self-representation is itself a form of agency.

These principles do not dissolve the tension Alcoff identifies between the dangers of speaking for others and the dangers of retreat (Alcoff 1991). They redistribute it, making reading itself a site of accountability. A reader who has learned from Puran Sahay's failure to report the pterodactyl will be less inclined to believe that a single novel, however moving, has made a community knowable; a reader who has watched Senanayak's interpretive confidence collapse will be wary of the pleasures of understanding the other too quickly.

7. Conclusion

The literature of marginalised communities in India has moved, over the course of a century, from representation by sympathetic outsiders towards representation by members of those communities themselves. That movement is real and important; it has brought into print experiences, languages and forms of knowledge that the literary establishment long ignored. But the analysis offered here suggests that the shift cannot be described simply as a passage from distortion to authenticity. Anand's *Untouchable* reveals how reformist realism fuses portrait and proxy, while Mahasweta Devi's fiction shows that an outsider can make the limits of her own understanding the very substance of her art. Valmiki, Gaikwad, Narayan and Shekhar write as members of their communities, yet they too must negotiate prior representations imposed by law and anthropology, the expectations of readers and publishers, and, in Shekhar's case, the censorious attention of the state. Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* demonstrates how translation and global prize culture can both amplify and endanger the specificity of a minority voice.

Spivak's distinction between *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* remains valuable because it prevents these two operations from being confused. To portray a community is not to speak for it, and to speak for it is not to let it speak. The texts examined here suggest that the most responsible representations keep both operations in view, acknowledging the gap between the life depicted and the depiction, between the speaker and the community, between the original language and its translation. Subaltern literature, read in this light, is less a set of authentic testimonies to be consumed than a continuing argument about who may speak, in what forms and to whom. Its lasting contribution is to teach readers

that hearing is an active, ethical labour, and that the silence of the subaltern has always been, in large part, a failure of listening.

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