

# Dalit Consciousness and Translating Consciousness: Narrating Trauma as Cultural Translation

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**Abstract:** How do we understand literary catharsis as a multilingual project? This paper focuses on scenes from Ajay Navariya’s short story “Subcontinent” (in Laura Brueck’s translation from Hindi) to ask about the responsibility of writers, translators and scholars in grappling collectively with the trauma of caste-based sexual violence (or what Sharankumar Limbale calls “injustices done to Dalit women.”) Put in conversation with Robert Young’s reading of Freud on cultural translation, Navaria’s story complicates straightforward understandings of consciousness as monolingual. Instead, the Hindi story in English reveals a complex connection between what Limbale and others refer to as a distinct “Dalit consciousness” and G.N. Devy’s notion of “translating consciousness” by asking us to redefine how the languaged self responds to the original trauma of being read as untouchable in the dominant vernacular. For Devy translating consciousness involves rejecting binaristic colonizer–colonized hierarchies, whereas for Limbale Dalit consciousness works to fight caste hierarchies operating primarily within India itself. This paper takes up Rita Kothari’s suggestion that the dominant vernacular might be just as foreign as the colonial language in order to radically rethink the dialectical relationship between the languaged self and cultural transformation.

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What is literature’s role in responding to the trauma of caste-based sexual violence a language away? I ask as a Hindi translator as well as a scholar and teacher of Dalit literature—of work, I should explain, that very openly claims to write from the perspective of those “oppressed” or “ground down” (as “Dalit” is usually glossed) by the entrenched system of untouchability in India.<sup>1</sup> Dalit writers in India have been asking versions of the question I have posed

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here within their own language traditions, and as a group seem to agree that the main purpose of Dalit literature should be to raise awareness—or as the well-regarded Marathi writer Sharankumar Limbale puts it more vividly, “to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus” (Limbale 2004, 19). It is not beside the point here that I quote Limbale from his book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, which has been translated into English by (avowedly upper-caste Hindu and Canada-based postcolonial studies scholar) Alok Mukherjee. Dalit literature, publisher S. Anand has pointed out, is a phenomenon in and of translation—from, to, and via English, as well as many other official Indian languages (Anand 2003, 4). Given current realities, I am suggesting here that we include postcolonial studies scholars and translators such as Mukherjee and myself in the project Limbale and others have begun when theorizing the purpose of Dalit literature. I propose here that we examine examples of Dalit literature to think more carefully about the relationship of Translation Studies to postcolonial theory.

Like many activists writing on the subject, Limbale contends that the work of Dalit literature is inspired directly by the revolutionary leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and can only be done by those with an explicit Dalit consciousness. A few pages later in his book on Dalit aesthetics—in a section devoted to the topic of Dalit consciousness—he explains:

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature, it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness. (Limbale 2004, 32)

To ask about literature’s role in raising awareness about untouchability as a human rights issue akin to slavery raises fundamental questions about these points of comparison, especially when expressed across multiple languages. How might we adapt current theoretical models to understand Dalit consciousness as a multilingual issue?

G.N. Devy has argued that multilinguality is so central to the

Indian context that it requires its own theorization, one that he discusses—serendipitously—as “translating consciousness.” Writing in the 1990s, Devy was primarily interested in developing a distinctly postcolonial “aesthetics of translation” (Devy 2014, 163) that would inform “a more perceptive literary historiography” (165) responsive to the perspective of the multilingual user (“such as a translator” he notes) who “rends. . .open” the multiple sign systems converging in a single consciousness (164). If aesthetic production is figured in Devy’s writing with the violent imagery of rending open, “translating consciousness” itself is imagined in a friendlier fashion, as an intuitive “open” daily negotiation along a continuum of mutual understanding, that he contends—most crucially here—our monolingually-minded, European conceptual tools have not been able to theorize properly:

In most Third World countries, where a dominating colonial language has acquired a privileged place, such communities [of translating consciousness] do exist. In India several languages are simultaneously used by language communities as if these languages formed a continuous spectrum of significance. To conceptualize this situation is beyond European linguistics, which is based mostly on a monolingual view of language. The use of two or more different languages in translation activity cannot be understood through studies of foreign language acquisition. (165)

Both Devy and Limbale suggest independently that the development of any literary aesthetic (perceptive or no) is necessarily ideological; moreover, when explaining how each of their approaches to the project of literary historiography differs from the mainstream, each uses the term “consciousness” to describe an alternative to the demeaning hierarchical forms of discrimination a random language user encounters on a daily basis, that have become written into our own disciplinary conceptualizations. As a result, Devy and Limbale each call for a corrective literary historiography based on such a consciousness. For Devy, the crucial ideological difference informing a translating consciousness involves rejecting binaristic colonizer–colonized hierarchies, whereas for Limbale the crucial ideological difference Dalit consciousness works to fight is informed by the caste hierarchies operating primarily within India itself, both during the colonial period and after Independence. How might these two theories of consciousness be put in productive conversation with one another when

focusing on postcolonial literary engagements with human rights struggles?

I will attempt to address this larger question by reflecting on the inherent multilinguality of the translating consciousness Devy describes—whereby “several languages are simultaneously used by language communities as if these languages formed a continuous spectrum of significance” (65)—when it encounters caste-based discrimination. I will do this by analyzing a piece of postcolonial fiction that details a series of shocking events experienced by a Dalit family: the short story “Upmadwip” written in Hindi by the Dalit writer and activist Ajay Navaria. I will quote primarily from the version translated into English by Laura Brueck (2012) as “Subcontinent” in an effort to vex perceived limits of language when describing violent encounters in translation.

Only a few pages into “Subcontinent,” the narrator recalls a traumatic scene from his childhood in which he watches, helpless, as a gang of upper-caste men beat up his father to within an inch of his life, incensed that an “untouchable” (“achut” in the Hindi) would have the audacity to return to the village for a relative’s wedding in a clean new kurta, rupees in his pocket, greeting friends comfortably, and holding his head high. Significantly, the story is framed by a tranquil domestic scene of the narrator as an adult living in an unnamed city struggling to wake from a nightmarish sequence of horrific childhood memories, prompted by an impending decision over whether to return to the village once again for another relative’s wedding. The framing device is crucial for establishing two distinct perspectives on the same event: one of the adult looking back with a mixture of indignation and apprehension, and the other of the innocent child offering direct testimony (albeit fictionalized) of a series of traumatic events that in their ancestral village seem to be lamentably routine. The structure of the story thus invites us to read this as a scene of initiation—into a kind of consciousness that we might not immediately recognize as a translating consciousness but are led to infer will eventually become a Dalit consciousness. How?

Soon readers are introduced to a liminal dream state between waking and sleeping, past and present, city and village, and led down a stepwell at the edge of what appears to be the adult narrator’s consciousness, invited to witness a childhood scene from

the young boy's point of view as a group of high-caste villagers confront the father and his father's aunt (whom the boy calls "Amma") for forgetting "the rules and regulations of the village" (Navaria 2012, 87). The narrative structure allows readers to remain cognizant of the adult narrator's judgment on these "rules and regulations" while following the boy and his family through the village; this structure enables the implied author to call into question the entire system of signification the boy is being initiated into. The story dramatizes why what Limbale terms "rebellion against the caste system" (2004, 32) would entail so much internal struggle, starting with the fundamental act of recognizing oneself and other Dalits as human beings equal to all others.

As the scene continues, readers of the translated story are in turn asked to distinguish between the language of the past and of the present, of the village and the city, marked by the boy's discomfort at the time and the adult narrator's outrage looking back as his great aunt bows down at the high-caste villagers' feet, assuring them, "They'll never do it again in my life. They erred, having lived in the city" (Navaria 2012, 86). The narrative makes strategic use of the distance in perspective between the adult narrator (who is very conscious of the historical implications of this discrimination) and the boy (who is at first shocked by what he witnesses and seemingly unable to interpret it) to map consciousness as a series of encounters with others where imperfect (even horrifying) communication regularly takes place.

In the consciousness of the young boy these rules and regulations are as startling as they are incomprehensible:

"Oh God, I'm done for! Maaaa! Forgive me, master, kind sir! It won't happen again!" As Amma wailed, one of them struck her head hard with a shoe, and she cried out again. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Now they were all laughing. Seeing them beat Amma with their shoes, Father tried to get up again. When they noticed him moving, they fell on him afresh. Sticks, fists, shoes—flailing without stop. I stood trembling. One of them slapped me across the face. Father was lying on the ground. Unconscious. Blood dripping, *thap-thap-thap*, from his forehead. A streak of blood spread all the way down his pyjama. My lip had been split open. It was still bleeding. I stood there quaking. I almost pissed my pants. It seemed like it would never end. Father lay at peace. His new white kurta was torn from his chest to his stomach. Blood dribbled from his mouth. Father's dead, I thought. Seeing a body drenched in blood, that's the only thing an eight-year-old can think. (Navaria 2012, 86-87)

Here the boy is presented as being unable to interpret the physical details he witnesses, even while we can feel the pressure of the adult narrator's judgment about the situation. And the admission about the limitations of the boy's own awareness, narrated suddenly in the third person—"Seeing a body drenched in blood, that's the only thing an eight-year-old can think"—is all the more moving knowing that the adult narrator in the present tense of the story is picturing himself in a similar situation, anticipating trying to protect his own child from similar degradations, if he decides to travel back to the village with them for an upcoming wedding. The strategy of third-person narration thus generalizes the experience of the Dalit subject. Implicitly, the story asks the reader why I, why he, why anyone should have to learn how to interpret the blood stains on their father's still body.

This is not a postcolonial translating consciousness to celebrate. There is no triumph a few paragraphs later when the boy becomes more adept at speaking the village language of caste-based violence:

I quietly wiped the blood off my lip with my torn collar. There were no tears in my eyes. But I kept making small crying sounds, *hoo-hoo*, for fear of getting thrashed again if I stayed quiet. I'd quickly realized that it was better to keep up the whimpering in front of them. (87)

How might attention to translating consciousness here help us better conceptualize Dalit consciousness as a multilingual project beyond the monolingual limitations Devy warns against? In Hindi, we can imagine this scene of calibrated whimpering is playing as much to the upper-caste Hindu readers and fellow Dalits Limbale identified as the target audience for Dalit literature; in English translation, the readership is expanded even further, since the elite English-speaking reader in India as well as the reader abroad are similarly put on notice about the demeaning effects of the caste system, and in such a way that challenges the received colonizer–colonized binaries of postcolonial studies. Here the language of dominance we must theorize is predicated on caste, and thus suggests a more complex mapping of translating consciousness than the colonizer–colonized binary. We see in the English translation as well that the narrator's perspective is multiply displaced—both at the top of the stepwell and below, in

the past, present, and even future of the story. Bringing together the concept of translating consciousness with Dalit consciousness invites us to think afresh about the ways we might map such literary language, starting with the ways we theorize the very idea of “language” in literary work.

In *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, Limbale puts particular emphasis on what he calls—in the section title—“The Language of Dalit Literature,” explaining:

The view of life conveyed in Dalit literature is different from the world of experience expressed hitherto. A new world, a new society, and a new human being have been revealed in literature, for the first time. The reality of Dalit literature is distinct, and so is the language of this reality. It is the uncouth-impolite language of Dalits. It is the spoken language of Dalits. This language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar. (33)

Limbale’s assertions apply to many of the works of Dalit literature published prior to this book on aesthetics, including Limbale’s own prose. In Navaria’s story, however, the hierarchies are tipped once again, since the “new world, . . . new society, . . . new human being” is waiting at the top of the stepwell in the consciousness of an urbane, multilingual Dalit man while the boy is left to grapple with the old world, old society communicating in the horrifying idiom of caste-based discrimination. However shocking this language may be to the boy as well as offensive to the narrator and ostensibly to his readers in turn, it is especially horrifying that it is not considered “impolite” in the village context of the story—the upper-caste villagers do not grant their “untouchable” neighbors that kind of respect. It is precisely the standardization of this degrading idiom that Navaria’s story is asking us to consider. The narrative is offering a critique of this particular kind of language use, and thus we might say of the village translating consciousness depicted in the story. To understand how this critique might be inviting readers of both the Hindi story and the English translation to take part in a fraught project of recalibrating consciousness as a way of coming to terms with collective trauma, we must first think more carefully about the roles we play in the process of literary catharsis.

I should admit here that I am grappling with a more specific version of the question of trauma and literary language, occasioned

by a provocative encounter at a conference on the historiography of Dalit literature held in Delhi at Jamia Millia Islamia University in December, 2013. The conference was organized by members of the English Department and it brought together scholars from a number of different disciplines and areas of expertise along with creative writers working in a host of Indian languages.<sup>2</sup> There were three days of sessions starting with a keynote speech by Kancha Ilaiah, academic panels, and several roundtable discussions with published writers such as Limbale and Navaria, including one devoted to the place of translation in the reception of Dalit literature. On the particular panel I have in mind an English literature professor gave a polished, impassioned paper invoking a lineup of US-based scholars on trauma and testimony urging us to acknowledge the importance of autobiographical writing as an act of individual catharsis that ultimately leads to healing; she described this process as “translating pain into language” (Abidi 2013).

At the time, I see from my notes, I wondered about the relationship of catharsis to activism. I knew from reading Laura Brueck’s scholarship that a writer like Ajay Navaria thought of catharsis in much more politically engaged terms, as a collective, emboldened confrontation with society. In a discussion on aesthetics in her recent book, *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Contemporary Dalit Literature* (2014), Brueck explains:

Dalit writer Ajay Navaria colorfully compares the realist aesthetic of Dalit literature to the necessity of lancing a cyst on the body of Hindu society. While the substance that the cyst releases may be unpleasant, its cathartic release is said to be necessary for the healing of the social body. (85)<sup>3</sup>

The difference between the two types of catharsis proposed here is crucial: in the model the conference paper presenter was looking towards, it is the individual writer who has suffered the trauma, and so it is the writer not the social body who is sick and requires healing. What difference does this make in thinking about the role of literature in healing trauma?

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<sup>2</sup> International Conference on Dalit Literature and Historiography, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India, December 19–21, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Ajay Navaria’s original quote was from “Dalit Sāhitya kā Vigat Aur Vartamān,” *Prārambh (Dalit Sāhitya Visheshank)* 1, no. 3 (2004): 44.



In the ensuing discussion, the presenter was assailed by one imminent personality after another (speaking alternately in Hindi and in English): How does this model of therapy help us reduce intercaste violence? Are you trying to individualize Dalit experience? What is the role of the reader's subjectivity in this model? And, most vividly to me, Limbale shouted in frustration, "If my mother is being raped then I shouldn't be crying but crying out to stop it!" It is in this context that I am left wondering—alongside the presenter and others in attendance at that conference, I am sure—about the role of literature in responding to trauma. What type of catharsis do we seek through literature, and what is the role of a translator and literature scholar in that process?

Often scholars metaphorize the project of writing trauma as an act of speaking out against injustice. The assumption is a therapeutic one, that repressed trauma and other forms of silencing are unhealthy for the subject, and that she will be free of her resulting symptoms only once she has successfully narrated and fully analyzed these painful memories. Robert Young has recently suggested that Freud consistently described such work as a process of translation—he points out that the word for "translation" in German (*übersetzung*) appears at least forty-five times in *Interpretation of Dreams* alone, for instance—but in such a way that radically rethinks the dialectical relationship between the languaged self and what Freud ("tantalizingly," Young adds) calls "cultural transformation" [*kulturelle Wandlung*] (Young 2013).<sup>4</sup> This version of "cultural translation," Young contends, is not a simple, straightforward task of "moving from text A to B, leaving text A behind, but rather moving to text B by making text A unconscious, repressed, but with A still haunting text B as its shadow and liable to reappear in disguised form at any moment" (17). I will spend a moment detailing this insight, for it has important implications for catharsis as a multilingual project, and the role of culture in mediating such a catharsis collectively.

Young explains that in Freud's writing, dream thoughts are like an "unknown language that we have to decipher on the basis of the translation" (9). Young likens the process to cracking the code of the Rosetta Stone, where you work backwards, comparing the

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<sup>4</sup> Here Young is citing Freud 2005, 224.

language you know against the one you do not, until you begin to understand the system by which meaning is made in the language unknown to you. This because for everyone—in Young’s reading of Freud—“the psyche is multilingual, alert to the constant possibility of using translation as a mechanism of displacement in the face of repression” (4). Even in a healthy, nontraumatized subject the psyche engages in such a process, he explains, and culture’s role is to tame a person’s natural instincts.

Thus the psyche, in Young’s words, keeps itself “busy translating into a foreign language that is unreadable to the individual subject him or herself” (5). Young understands Freud as suggesting that there are a number of languages converging in a single psyche, including the distinction between “dream thoughts” (in the unconscious) and “dream content” (in one’s consciousness), both of which are individual and idiosyncratic, even if internally consistent enough for an analyst to begin to recognize a pattern. Young quotes Freud as writing in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

Dream-thoughts and dream-content lie before us like two representations of the same content in different languages—or, rather, a particular dream-content appears to us as a version of the relevant dream-thoughts rendered into a different mode of expression, the characters and syntax of which we are meant to learn by comparison of the original with the translation. (Young 2013, 8)

The role of multilingual performance is crucial in Freud’s theorizing, Young points out, given that Freud himself compared the process of decoding and deciphering dream content to Egyptian hieroglyphs, “whose characters need to be translated one by one into the language of the dream-thoughts” (2013, 9). The analyst is able to crack the code only after he sees how the individual, multilingual subject moves between other (conventional) languages, a technique he and Breuer began to pioneer in *Studies in Hysteria*, with the case of “Katharina.” Young quotes Freud as writing: “We had frequently compared the hysterical symptomatology with a pictographic script, which we were able to read once we had discovered a few cases of bilingualism” (132). This is a highly unusual “original”, however, when viewed in the broader history of translation. “What makes psychoanalysis more than just translation into another discourse,” Young adds provoc-

atively, “is that psychoanalysis is translating the unknown” (8). How might such a comparison enable us to rethink Dalit consciousness as a multilingual project?

If the job of the psyche is to “translate” or displace traumatic experiences into a language foreign to the individual subject, the work of psychoanalysis is then to interpret that idiosyncratic language and “de-translate” it back into a language she shares with her analyst, as Young explains:

Psychoanalysis finds the meaning of dreams not in dreams themselves but in their invisible origins. In dreams we have only the translation: the patient and analyst’s job is to translate the incomprehensible dream-content back into its original, and then to analyze and repeat in reverse the work of translation which has transformed the first into the second. Dream-interpretation, therefore, as Jean Laplanche has suggested, is more a question of de-translation, trying to de-translate the dream back into an original that remains hidden. This is where and why the work of interpretation through association must come into play: breaking the dream-content down into its constituent parts one by one, and working through the dreamer’s associations, analyst and dreamer engage in the laborious work of de-translating the dream-content back into its original dream-thoughts. (10)

Young’s reading of Freud insists that translation practice is at the core of our work as language beings (regardless of how many official languages we are said to speak), and that one of the central roles of culture is to train an individual to interpret to themselves, in a language that they share with others, the most hidden parts of themselves, such as traumatic events in the past. The case of Dalit literature is especially potent here because “culture” itself is accused of legitimizing the agents of that original trauma—not incidentally, but fundamentally.

While he does not name Dalit literary examples specifically, Young does suggest that such cases are central to Freud’s work on cultural translation. Young reads Freud as a major theorist of cultural translation whose contributions to translation theory have important implications most particularly for those translated subjects—like Dalit writers—until now often left out of our theorizing:

Freud’s. . .theoretical paradigm [on translation]. . .remains infinitely suggestive. It offers, for example, a possible way of reading the invisible, the subaltern, those whose forms of public representation distort their fundamental being, where the invisibility or repression of subalterns in official discourses and documents from the past require a de-translation exercise to make them visible in their own terms. (11)

Bringing together theories of Dalit consciousness with translating consciousness suggests that the very prospect of shared language is exceedingly fraught, in ways that are important for the project of handling trauma through literary work. Young further hints that the project of analyzing the relationships between those languages might be key to better understanding the “original” (as trauma, or otherwise.)

We see this most vividly in his reading of the case of Anna O, who responds to a childhood trauma by alternating moments of stark speechlessness (“aphasia”) with what Freud in English translation refers to as “paraphasia,” switching into languages (English, French, Italian) foreign to Anna O’s own mother tongue of German. Following Freud, Young uses this example of an upper-class woman to show how suspicious the psyche itself remains generally of culture’s role in taming one’s instincts. We see in Anna O’s case that being highly cultured only serves to make her subterfuges more elaborate, and the work of the analyst (not to mention the nurse who tended her) that much more demanding:

The paraphasia receded, but now she spoke only in *English*, yet seemed to be unaware of it, and would quarrel with the nurse, who was, of course, unable to understand her. Not until several months later did I manage to convince her that she was speaking English. She herself, however, still understood her German-speaking environment. Only in moments of great anxiety would her speech fail her completely, or she would mix up all kinds of languages. She would speak French or Italian at those times when she was at her best and most free. Between those periods and those in which she spoke English lay complete amnesia. (29)

The case asks us to rethink the fundamentals of cultural translation as a languaged relationship between individual and collective, especially since the collective itself is figured as a plurality of overlapping language domains. Young’s reading calls into question the very notion of a discrete “mother tongue” as source of a stable cultural identity, and echoes ongoing debates surrounding Dalit examples.

For instance, in a 2013 article—“Caste in a Casteless Language: English as a Language of ‘Dalit’ Expression”—Rita Kothari complicates any simple understanding of English as a colonial language, arguing that for writers and translators working with Dalit texts—like the poet Neerav Patel, whose example she

focuses on—English offers a more compelling alternative to regional vernaculars. Patel’s choice to write in English, rather than Gujarati, she suggests compellingly, “is animated by the misery of unwanted memories of language, and a desire to erase that memory” (Kothari 2013, 65). Kothari refers to a soon-to-be-published essay Patel wrote in response to a public query: “Who (all) can claim Gujarati?” (64) Kothari explains:

If standard Gujarati, Patel argues, is as distant and alien to dalits as English, he would rather embrace English, and use it to replace his “mother tongue,” thus making English what he calls his “foster-tongue.” By being foreign, English does not normalize and legitimize caste, and by being an ex-colonial language with global reach, it becomes empowering. (61)

I have suggested elsewhere that English is not in fact casteless, that the language’s encounters with caste started early in the colonial encounter—I use the example of “pariah” whose first usage in English is 1613 (Merrill 2014, 262). However, here I am more interested in the ways Patel’s critique of his “mother tongue” in relation to English introduces an important perspective on Dalit consciousness as translating consciousness. As Kothari’s discussion of Patel’s critique makes clear, the imperative of Dalit consciousness is to redefine the very domain of language and its relationship to collective memory:

An acclaimed poet and critic, Patel attacks the homogeneous idea of a “mother tongue” in India. Although this may seem a separate issue from English, it is very important to see how the idea of an Indian language that alienates the dalits and colludes with the upper castes in normalizing caste discrimination shapes the dalit response to English. The specificity of the case below provides a much-needed elaboration of this operation to bring home the fact that Indian languages do not constitute for all Indians a proud inheritance, which “globalization” and similar invasive forces may allegedly besiege. This is essentially an upper-caste view and luxury; those who wish to redefine themselves must do so by abandoning this inheritance and embracing English. (65)

While this seems neither Patel’s nor Kothari’s point, I would suggest that in the process Patel is also inviting us to rethink the very meaning of translation.

Young, too, in his reading of Freud, asks us to rethink the enterprise of translation as a relational exercise between language and memory, as we see in his discussion of the case of Anna O:

Cultural translation, in Freud. . . is not a process by which the former text or elements are ever entirely left behind, but one in which the new text always remains doubled and haunted, its translations perpetually remaking themselves, the translated text perpetually seeking to revert to its original, like a ball held under water. The different languages, as in the dream, remain perpetually present. In some sense, therefore, according to Freud we live in two or more languages at once. This bi- or multilingualism in which, as it were, like Anno O., we read one language but translate it simultaneously into another, can illuminate how, in this model, the general sense of loss in translation modifies its gain—for while in cultural terms much is gained, in the individual this gain produces at the same time a constant sense of unease, of disease, malaise, of “cultural frustration,” cultural denial, or as we might say today, of cultural dislocation. (Young 2013, 17-18)

Young is implying that every language is haunted by a series of unconscious memories, be they individual or collective. His startling proposition is that the ensuing struggles to articulate difficult truths—to find apt language for these invisible “originals”—put productive pressure on whatever languages we have in common. We might then surmise that every speaker has a translating consciousness that holds within it (“like a ball held under water”) the potential for radically rethinking the possibilities of the language(s) she speaks. How might this complex understanding of the relationship between translation and consciousness apply to literary work?

According to Limbale, one of the features of Dalit consciousness is the ability to identify with any injustice ever visited upon any member of the group. While detractors contend that such a stance results in literature that is predictable or propagandistic (charges his translator Mukherjee renders in English under the rubric of “univocality”), Limbale defends such politicized identifications instead as a sign of cohesion and thus of strength, since it allows individuals to read a host of traumatic experiences visited upon Dalits as part of a programmatic effort at group discrimination: “Social boycott, separate bastis, wells, and cremation grounds; inability to find rental accommodation; the necessity to conceal caste; denial of admission to public places; injustices done to Dalit women; dragging and cutting of dead animals; and the barber refusing to cut hair—these experiences are alike for all Dalits” (Limbale 2004, 35). Limbale’s emphasis here is less on direct experience of such injustices, and more on the daily acts of interpretation that renders someone part of the very category deserving

such discriminatory behavior. Understood this way, “original trauma” begins with the possibility of being read as untouchable by others; acknowledging that reading of untouchability subsequently then becomes part of one’s consciousness as distinctly and defiantly “Dalit.”

Approaching Dalit literature through Young’s reading of Freud on “cultural translation” helps complicate and thus confound any simple glosses of the terms in play. If we look more closely at Young’s proposition that cultural translation is not a simple, straightforward task of “moving from text A to B, leaving text A behind, but rather moving to text B by making text A unconscious, repressed, but with A still haunting text B as its shadow and liable to reappear in disguised form at any moment,” then we might infer that all language speakers sharing an idiom of discrimination like the caste system are haunted by a text A such as “injustices done to Dalit women.” I will spend a moment pursuing this proposition through a later scene in Navaria’s story, in large part because it resonates with Limbale’s outburst that day: “If my mother is being raped then I shouldn’t be crying but crying out to stop it!” And in the process helps us rethink the theoretical categories by which we too might read such a scene.

There is a suggestion early on in “Subcontinent” that sexual violence in the village has been ongoing and systemic, to the extent that many “untouchables” are themselves offspring of a union (directly forced, or manipulated) between a high-caste man and an untouchable woman. We see this referenced directly in the story when the narrator makes clear that he himself is related to one of those high-caste thugs in the village who are beating up his father: “‘Pandit-ji, it’s not even her husband’s. It’s her lover’s. This bastard child is Harku’s!’ He was pointing at Father” (Navaria 2012, 87). The passing comment seems to affect the character of the pandit, who at first appears ready to protect the boy’s father, possibly because he is related to Harku. Even though this is another instance where the adult narrator looking back seems to understand the implications of this moment more than the child narrator, the narrative reveals the turmoil this causes on the young narrator’s part. As a boy, the narrator tells us, he held out hope the pandit would take pity on them, but was soon to be disappointed. Not only does the pandit bond with the high caste thugs, joining in with

the verbal and physical humiliation, but he later seems to be the one to take advantage of Amma.

The scene of Amma's further humiliation comes late in the story, after the violence has escalated even further, when high-caste members of the village take umbrage over the groom daring to ride a horse to the door of his bride and they attack the wedding party with lathis. The boy falls down unconscious—the significance of this is important for this study—and we watch him in retrospect try to put language to the ongoing village drama he has witnessed:

When I opened my eyes, it was still dark. An oil lamp was still burning in the hut. My aunt was sitting near the smoldering stove. The wedding party had left. . . . My head was throbbing. Someone had tied an old piece of dhoti around it. I don't know when I dozed off again, but a woman's shriek shocked me awake. I made haste to get up, but as soon as I rose, a blow struck my back, and I fell on my face. Half outside the hut, half inside.

"Fucking city boy, if you move, I'll unload a bullet in your skull," someone yelled, tilting my face up with the muzzle of a double-barreled gun pushed into my jaw. To my right, a few feet away, I saw, beneath the white, dhoti-clad bottom of a pale pandit-god, the darkened soles of someone's feet flailing and kicking; swinging on the back of this pale pandit was a fat, snake-like top-knot. . . .and another scream. Terrified. Uninterrupted. Splitting the sky in two—*chhann!* (95-96)

Like the boy in the story who lies halfway out of the hut, wavering between consciousness and unconsciousness, the character of the woman being violated too has no language at the ready to defend herself with—she can only flail and kick and scream. Navaria's rendering of the scene raises unsettling questions about the very meaning of consciousness, and how language—any language—plays a part in making and remaking that consciousness.

In this scene we have a series of confusing, upsetting pairs: the boy being threatened by an unnamed gunman, the "pale pandit-god" riding a woman we only know by her flailing dark feet, and then the "fat, snake-like top-knot" and the disembodied scream, which seem to emanate from the entwined bodies. At this heightened moment of violence, the boy and the violated woman can share no words of support, or mutual understanding, can only each submit to those who have enough power over the language to demand silence of the others. And yet, the treatment of this scene of sexual violence as the boy's memory, of a moment that haunts him as an adult, delineates how someone who is witness to vio-



lence (even a form of violence he may never experience directly) might be traumatized, in exactly the way Limbale has argued.

If we then pursue the implicit analogy between Anna O. and the narrator of “Subcontinent,” we might begin to formulate a more nuanced understanding of translating consciousness when we consider carefully the process by which a traumatized Dalit subject struggles against aphasia. The fact that languages like Hindi and English have a mechanism in place for silencing both the subject who experiences the rape and the boy who witnesses it, puts a lie to the contention that it is only the individual subject who is haunted by these violent incidents in the past. Instead, the language cultures themselves might be understood to be haunted, and the moments of paraphasia an indication of the ways such hauntings do not dwell in discrete language domains. Navaria’s story helps us understand how an act of translation (in both the commonly-understood sense, and also with Young’s more specialized meaning) might reveal the ways simply being part of a language community unthinkingly we might be part of the process of repression. Taking seriously the project of Dalit consciousness, read in terms of an active translating consciousness, might afford us a more complex understanding of literary catharsis.

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