

The Complexity of Cultural Transfer in Mahasweta Devi's and Italo Spinneli's *Gangor*

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Abstract

Basing the enquiry on the concept of cultural transfer, this article examines the texts, Mahasweta Devi's and Italo Spinneli's *Gangor*, both in print and in cinema from twin vantage points: one, to embrace the two texts in a culturally productive mode, and secondly, to analyse the reading of one of the 'other' in the light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential, albeit controversial, article, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' which underscores the untiring concern—the proclivity of dominant discourses and institutions to marginalize and disempower the Third World 'subaltern'. What are the registers these texts (written and visual) subscribe to? What are their negotiations and accommodations on cultural transfer? How autotelic are these texts? Does the cinematic version reduce the complexity of the signals put up by the text in print? These are also some of the questions that this paper will attempt to answer.

Keywords: Cultural transfer, subaltern, third world, autotelic, marginalize, disempower

"Can the subaltern speak?"

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988)

This article uses the broad frame of "literature about the indigenous, its contexts and its transfers" to engage in "the reading by the 'one' of the 'other'." In this process it emphasizes the ethics and politics involved in this 'othering' process, seizing on the question of representation of the tribals in the Third World (Kapoor, 2004). The paper explores the

story of the tribal woman Gangor in the story called by the same name "Gangor" (also titled "Choli ke Piche" or "Behind the Bodice", included in *Breast Stories*, 1997) by Mahasweta Devi, the renowned Kolkata-based Bengali activist and writer from India who needs no introduction and the adaptation of the story in cinema by Italo Spinelli, an Italian documentary filmmaker and director of the Asiatica Filmmediale Festival in Rome. The setting of this Italian Indian co-production *Gangor* (2010) is West Bengal, where the largest number of India's tribal villages are found concentrated. With a setting and a story entirely Indian, the actors Indian and of Indian descent, and the language mostly English, this award-winning film unravels a story of gender violence, subjugation and apathy towards the double subaltern, the tribal woman. The narrative moves around the subjectivities and body posturing of a migrant tribal woman, Gangor and the fascination of Upin Puri (a photojournalist from Kolkata, sent to Purulia to cover a story on the exploitation of tribals) with the former's statuesque breasts. Fascinated with Gangor's breasts, Upin clicks pictures of her while she is feeding her child. This photo later appears in the newspaper along with an article written by him.

Basing the enquiry on the concept of cultural transfer, this paper examines the texts from twin vantage points: one, to embrace the two texts in a culturally productive mode and secondly, to analyse the reading of one of the 'other' in the light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential, albeit controversial, article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), which underscores the untiring concern—the proclivity of dominant discourses and institutions to marginalize and disempower the Third World 'subaltern'. Critics have not been kind to Spivak. It has been felt that the subaltern is silent without any agency. Spivak has often had to defend such interpretations, and has later revised both the article and the statement. What are the registers these texts (written and visual) subscribe to? What are their negotiations and accommodations on cultural transfer? How autotelic are these texts? Does the cinematic version reduce the complexity of the signals put up by the text? These are also some of the questions that this paper will attempt to answer.

It is true that today, most texts are read, broadcast and performed to both retell and question postcolonial theories and frameworks. Texts are performative, constantly contested and in a dynamic process of remaking. With this as a starting point, I aim to look at the ways how the performance of a text transforms and/or translates meaning from

the page to screen. This would hopefully provide further contexts for conversations that will open out the registers of postcolonial literature to different expressions and (re)definitions.

Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* examine women's bodies, their breasts in particular, as sites of subjugation and confrontation, often defiance, oppression and subsequent reclamation of agency, though in an ironic way. On a related register, a probe into the cultural signification and commercialization of the breasts uncover a larger debate on the female body, the Adivasi woman, the double subaltern and her agency. In this process, *Breast Stories* provide a localized ethnographical space to scrutinize and probe the overabundance of layers of conventional and capitalist male-controlled forces that violently collude to undercut, deplete and ultimately collapse women's reproductive systems and well-being.

In the story, "Behind the Bodice" ("Choli ke Picche") Devi boldly brings to us, how one of the most desirable parts of a woman's body, natural breasts, became the subject and purpose of study and fetish fascination by media and anthropologists. Devi strikes a cautionary note, "Cultural invasion is much more dangerous than cultural revolution" (Devi, p. 136 as cited in Capelli, p. 49) with breasts at its centre piece. She juxtaposes science and nature; manufactured versus homegrown in her discourse on two kinds of breasts, the silicon breasts that occupy the body of Upin's wife Shital, an artificial contraption that no longer captures Upin's sexual imagination (Devi, p. 152) and the other natural silicon-free *mammal projections*, the aboriginal breasts of Gangor who is a daily wager who works on a piece-wage basis in the kilns for light bricks and tiles. Sent on a mission to befog more serious issues of crop failure, water scarcity and food security—an implied gang rape of the earth as Capelli puts it, Upin's natural breast preoccupation complicates and interrogates issues related to commodification, objectification and exploitation by capital hegemonic forces. Once the story makes it to the headlines of a national daily, Upin's patriarchal positioning comes into play and he returns to save the breasts which have now become a recreational preoccupation of the police. Upin's frozen image exposes not only the Western gaze of the exotic natural woman's sexuality, but media construction of the breast as a commercial site of patriarchal fetishization and fascination. Devi probes the complex layers of socio-economic and cultural signification of the breast, and how it has been commercialized into an object of gaze

in India with England's exportation of the blouse and silicon as articles of moral cover-up (Devi p. 142 as cited in Capelli, p. 50).

It is important to note that Gangor "did not object" to the taking of the photo, but instead "put out her hand for money. "Snap a photo so give me cash!" she tells Upin (Devi, p. 141). Gangor's request for money subverts patriarchal relations in which women must assume a passive role of objectification. Instead, Gangor actively seeks compensation. Upin is able to sell his photos for exorbitant prices to media outlets such as *National Press* and *Lens Magazine*. The photograph ends up stealing Gangor's reproductive livelihood by forcing her into what Capelli says, a "sexually coded spotlight of patriarchal attention, sexual fantasy, and community disgust, pushing Upin onto the borderland ledge of insanity, and ultimate death. Gangor's engagement in a quid pro quo of photograph for monetary compensation ends up being a social transgression of patriarchal monogamy. Gangor is charged and chastised for breaking this heterosexual bond of male ownership of her body parts" (p. 50).

The role of the other woman in Upin's life, his wife Shital also requires careful examination. But Devi, while doing so, does not lose sight of the object of her enquiry: woman's body, in particular the breasts. Gangor's "statuesque" desirable natural breasts that preoccupy Upin, are rigorously interrogated by Devi. Behind his fiercely independent Himalayan climbing wife Shital's choli is, "a silicone chest" that "remain(s) aggressive forever" "like plastic flowers" (p. 147). Not so much a "natural Indian woman". Shital becomes just a commercial mix of both East and West. Neither the one, nor the other, she actually turns "something else besides" in a narrative that "intercut(s) across social sites and disciplines" (Bhabha, as cited in Capelli, 2016, p. 92). Shital's Western-breasted *otherness* no longer fascinates Upin. "Why Gangor and her natural, most complex sweat glands or bosom had turned Upin's head he didn't know" (Devi, p. 147). Upin feels "that Gangor and her chest were endangered" from the power that disempowers Shital's silicone breasts, the same forces that empower his livelihood—patriarchal capitalism. It is perhaps this complicity in the exploitation, violence, and endangerment of female's reproductive systems that ultimately drives Upin mad.

Finally, Upin's breast pictures reach the village, Jharoa and attract the

lustful police personnel. This in a way, allow Gangor's breasts to take on a power of their own. The powerful mammary magnetism tempted "everyone to sin against God" including the police who eventually gang rape her (p. 150). According to the caretaker, "the Gangors of this world don't come to die, Sir, they come to kill" (p. 149). Refusing yet again to be victimized by patriarchy, Gangor files a police report "and that's how all was lost" (p. 154). Abandoned by society, Gangor, like many of Devi's other women, must now earn a living as a prostitute—a result of Upin's initial objectification and consumerist gaze. By saying, "women have to be careful in Shiva's world", Devi indicts the entire phallogocentric system in the violent mutilation and desecration against the Gangors of India. She further adds harshly, "You're punished if you don't understand this" (p. 150).

Devi reveals in this patriarchal assemblage that there is "no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it" (p. 155). Realizing that his aspiration to save the endangered breasts is hopeless amidst the corrupt institutional layers of society, Upin is crushed by the weight of his own desire by the "wheels of the railway train midway between Jharoa and Seopura" (p. 137) and dies.

Recalling his first and then subsequent long association with Mahasweta Devi, Ganesh Devy (2004) says, "She spoke of the civilizational graces of the adivasis, of how our society had mindlessly destroyed the culture of our great continent, and how the innocents had been brutalised.... Mahasweta brought to those poor and harassed people a boundless compassion, which they instantly understood though could they neither speak her language nor she theirs. She has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken" (p. 7).

Mahasweta Devi's art was born out of anger and frustration. She wrote extensively on gendered subaltern, have-nots, landless tribals and disempowered tribes like the Mundas, Santhals, Lodhas, Gangus, Dusads and Oraons. As one of the founders of the Denotified and Notified Tribal Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG), which works towards improved conditions for India's indigenous people through outreach, education, legal intervention, and community activism, her involvement had drawn attention to existing injustices in India, and she continually worked towards correcting those injustices. As a result, many tribal

people whose lives have been affected by Devi have had so much affection for her that they called her "Didi" (meaning "older sister"). She spared no one, in particular, snobs, ministers, insincere journalists and literary aspirants, recounts Ganesh Devy (2004): "When asked what she planned to do with the rest of her life in a 1998 interview, Devi answered, 'Fight for the tribals, downtrodden, underprivileged and write creatively if and when I find the time'" (p. 6).

This paper is also to be read in the broader context of postcolonial studies.

It is true that the subaltern women in the works of these writers speak the voice of resistance. Devi's women protagonists speak in a kind of counter language, which undergoes a certain kind of transformation which is highly empowering. An individual voice becomes a collective one opposing oppression initially by one but gradually transcending to become a protest statement against oppression of women by all patriarchal forces and state-sponsored capitalism. This enabling resistance displays remarkable strength and in many ways is almost celebratory. Thus, Devi's women characters do not only speak from a position of marginalization but also from a position of resistance.

While concluding, I make two quick points. Ganesh Devy (2004) recounts Mahasweta's remark, "This woman's body is a curse!" (p. 4). Yet her female characters such as Jasodha in "Standayani" ("Breast Giver") and Dopdi in "Draupadi", and "Gangor", even though constituted by patriarchal ideology, are strong and upright with an agency that is very much their own. Like Dopdi, a victim of gang rape who refuses to wash herself and walks naked towards the Senanayak with her thighs and pubic hair matted with dry blood saying, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (Devi, 1997, p. 57) pushing the Senanayak with her two mangled breasts. Gangor towards the end tells Upin, "You are a bastard too sir... you took *photoks* [photos] of my chest, eh? ... I'll show... but I'll take everything from your *pocket*, a-ll..." Then, Gangor takes off her choli and throws it at Upin. "Look, look, look, straw—chaff, rags—look what's there", Devi writes. No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin—*gang rape*...biting and tearing *gang rape*... *police*... a court *case*... again a *gang rape* in the *lockup*... now from Jharoa to Seopura... Seopura to Jharoa... the Contractor catches

clients... terrorizes a *public*... plays... plays the song, the song... (p. 155). The reference is to the song, 'Choli ke Piche'.¹ Upin runs out to meet his tragic end. In this case, as Spivak (1988) would say, the "sexed subaltern" (p. 307)) speaks her mind.

Secondly, the film, (produced by Bibi Film, Isaria Production and Nirvana Motion Pictures Ltd in collaboration with Rai Cinema, released in Italy in 2011, and in India even before that) as a critique of unethical journalism, underscores and makes a valuable point. The actors played their part with honesty and got a standing ovation when screened in Rome. But as is evident, Mahasweta Devi's art is born out of anger and frustration. This angst and annoyance is a mere shadow in its cinematic adaptation. As Mahasweta says, "Not only do I use dialects, I also use words from living language whenever necessary" (as cited in Devy, 2004, p. 7). Italo Spinelli did his best in living up to the fidelity discourse by travelling to India to understand the intricacies of this cultural transfer. In the narrative, the voyeuristic male gaze is not really narrativized and essentialized, but Italo Spinelli's *Gangor* graphically presents it. But the film's problems lie precisely in an excessively didactic and paternalistic tone, and characters that tend to be two-dimensional. Thus, the film director just about reads the 'other'.

That texts are autotelic is a truism, and reach other genres, but in debates over adaptation of literature in cinema and why literature still matters, the story by Mahasweta Devi triumphs. Ilan Kapoor (2004) in her article, "Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World 'Other'" writes that Spivak (1988) begins the piece, "Can the Subaltern Speak" by pointing out how 'progressive' Western intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze tend to engage in gross universalizations when they speak on behalf of the Third World 'masses' or refer to 'the workers' struggle' in a way that ignores the international division of labour. Later, she goes on to show how colonial and 'native' representations are similarly problematic. Kapoor continues to problematize Spivak's argument in the essay by quoting her, "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears...There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak' (Spivak, 1988, 306–307, as cited in Kapoor, 627-628). Kapoor also stresses on concluding nevertheless the contentious thesis by Spivak that even when the female subaltern does speak, she cannot be heard (Spivak, 308). Contrapuntally, as we have seen and I have

tried to present, Mahasweta makes her sexed subaltern speak, ... and be heard, boldly and unpretentiously. By showing her scarred, burned and chaffed flat holes where her breasts used to be, to Upin, Gangor displays a rare empowered selfhood of a woman to a dismantled patriarchal capitalist society represented by Upin. Spinelli, in his film, through the protagonist Gangor, essayed by Priyanka Bose, tries to match his step with the assertive, brutal truth of Mahasweta's convincing prose. Often, cinematic adaptations overpower the print. A case in the point is Mira Nair, the academy award nominated filmmaker's exploration of the theme of immigrant experience and the clash of cultures in the US, as presented by Jhumpa Lahiri in her novel, *The Namesake* on celluloid in 2007 by the same title. The film, with brilliant performances from the Indian actress Tabu and the male lead, the sensitive late Irrfan Khan, brings to the fore the near perfect handling of the vulnerability of the immigrant experience by the master storyteller on celluloid. We can easily say that the uniqueness of the original text (Lahiri's) is further illuminated by the exquisite cinematic refraction of the original (Pellow, 2000, p. 30).

As stated earlier in the article, the eternal debate around adaptation of literature into cinema can go on endlessly. The fact is that in assessing an adaptation, we are never really comparing a book with a film, but an interpretation with an interpretation—the novel that we ourselves created in our imaginations, out of which we have constructed our own individualized 'movie', and the novel on which the filmmaker has worked a parallel transformation: "...a mild hegemon, literature, matters!" (Srivastava, 1998, p. 43). Additionally, in this present case study, the famous film critic, Timothy Corrigan's (1999) assertion about the contemporary era of toppling hierarchies, rewriting sensibilities and cultural transfers into different mediums in which the digital rules, continues to resonate and—literature still matters. In many ways that subaltern-writer has spoken, just a little louder.

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Note

1. This song is from the Bollywood feature film, *Khalnayak* (transl. Villain), a crime action thriller produced and directed by Subhash Ghai in 1993.

Late Prem Kumari Srivastava was a Professor of English, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. Her teaching, research and publications display an overarching focus on gender, popular culture, the indigenous and the marginalized, American literature and English language materials production. This article, especially written for Fortell, is amongst her last.