

**Translation from Geographical and Literary Periphery: A Study on
Mamang Dai's Borderland Writings from Northeast India**

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Abstract

Diachronic discourse on Translation Studies shows how the art of translation has developed as a discipline establishing its own methodology and theories. At the same time translation has been seen as a marginalized activity pertaining to originality, feminism, fidelity, and sexuality, etc. But the apologetic proposition on translation advances its status to primary level celebrating its 'in-between' being. So the conventional translation has also been sporadically amended as per the socio-political demands. With these alterations and innovations, Itamar Even-Zohar introduces Polysystems Theory in Translation offering certain set of norms for translation which provides a means for borderland experience to get translated. The objective of the research is to study the constitutive role of translation in the production of women's writing from the periphery, particularly Northeast Indian Borderland Writings, with reference to Mamang Dai's select works.

Mamang Dai is one of the eminent literary and socio-political figures from Northeast India who has been sharing the lived-in borderland experience of Northeast India. This paper will elaborate on the factors that typify Mamang Dai's works as translation. With prominence to her writings, this research paper locates translation within the Literary and Geopolitical space provided by her works.

Keywords: Mamang Dai, Borderland, in-between, periphery, experience, polysystems theory.

Translation has emerged as an academic discipline in the recent years and gained prominence in literary studies for its international and interdisciplinary approach. It is recognized as a means of communication to - understand, receive, promote and influence cultures. It has influenced almost all the major areas of literature such as Postcolonialism, Marxism, and Comparative Studies and so on. The primary understanding of traditional translation is that it is an art of introducing already existing literary texts to a new context, as Levy puts it, "The objective of translating is to impart the knowledge of the original to the foreign reader" (148). At first, translation happened at linguistic level, then this standpoint was competed by meaning translation and now it is studied under various viewpoints from interpretation, paraphrasing to "recounting and reassessment" (Bassnett 152).

Bassnett quotes Derrida by saying that "the source text, according to Derrida, is not an original at all, it is the elaboration of an idea, of a meaning, in short it is in itself a translation" (151). This statement clearly says that anything that is written is translation in itself. With this inclusive approach of translation, transcription of an oral form to a written text, even if it is not written in the language of oral, can also be considered as translation. Over the course of study, this paper will provide deeper understanding in accepting transcription as a mode of translation. Most of the translation happens in English language, so the paper will also focus on the necessity of translation in English and its position in the polysystems of source language and target language. Moreover, it will map the different ways of treating translation in postcolonial writings and particularly in the writings of borderlands which is an extension of postcolonial experience with reference to Northeast Indian Borderland writing of Mamang Dai's.

By the term 'borderlands', this paper refers to the writings which are relegated to the peripheral point in relation to the literary culture and geographical position of the writings in the polysystem of the given context. Itamar Even-Zohar uses the term 'polysystem' to mean the interconnectedness of social, literary and historical systems of a culture. In such a way, Borderland writings of Northeast India are drawn to the periphery for it is written from the forsaken margins of Indian Territory. 'Northeast' is a collective term for the eight states which form the northeastern parts of India. But these states are located far from the centre connected only by a thin pathway. In the polysystems of India, Northeast's literary culture is seen as a marginal activity. This paper is obliged to study the reason for considering this Northeast Indian borderland writings as marginal activity.

Foucault says, "... it is the primal nature of language to be written" (qt. in Ramakrishnan 131), and quoting Foucault, Ramakrishnan says that "The written or the printed word transcribes the world in a linear manner (132). So writing is a way of representing a culture and knowledge which was existed in an oral form at first. In this way, writing, at its primary level, is a transcript of oral form. In the case of Northeastern states in India, writing becomes a complex activity. It is because, it doesn't have a single language to represent as each state is a home for more than hundreds of tribal cultures which mean each culture has its own vernacular language which cannot be understand by other culture. So the literature produced from those states remains unexplored and so its culture. Moreover, most of the languages are non-script languages and so only few languages have representation on global stage. It is these reasons that titles Northeast Indian writing as marginal activity. But Annie Brisset says that a vernacular language "...which is local, spoken spontaneously, less appropriate for communication than for communing..." (345) which means, to communicate a culture, vernacular language is not enough. Spivak says, "I must speak in a language that is not my own because that will be more just... therefore these texts must be made to speak English. It is more to speak the language of the majority" (399).

In postcolonial context, writing in English is seen as a colonial activity which was opposed by many writers. But it is also widely accepted that writing in English alone can make global representation possible. It is said that the "postcolonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (Ashcroft 37). The

writers of *The Empire Writes Back* identified two ways of using English in writing. One is "abrogation" which means the complete rejection of English as a means of powerful communication and another is "appropriation" (37) which is an act of molding English to fit in the colonial experience by means of imposing cultural burden to it. Moreover, appropriation is seen as an act of "embracing of that marginality as the fabric of social experience" (Ashcroft 103). But it is also informed that there will be a tension between these two. 'In-between' this tension, translation as a mode of writing gains prominence. Even-Zohar lists out three major conditions under which translation can happen at greater extent:

(a) When a polysystem has not yet been crystallized that is to say, when literature is "young", in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either "peripheral" (within a large group of correlated literatures) or "weak," or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises or literary vacuums in a literature. (193-194)

As per Even-Zohar's premise, most of the northeast writings in Indian are translated works appropriating English language. Mamang Dai is one writer to produce such works from borderlands of Northeastern India.

Mamang Dai is one of the pioneering of borderland writers from Adi tribe of Northeast India. She speaks Adi language which is a non-script language and she writes in English. In one of her speeches, she says that "I'm writing about the people who may not even read the book, but it is their stories, it is a lot of their feeling and the areas totally about them" (Keynote). She is aware of the fact that her writings are not for her community to read but for the readers to experience her culture. She says, it is 'responsibility' of the writer to talk across the border by translating the culture to global language.

Annie Brisset says, "Translation becomes an act of reclaiming, of recentering of the identity, a re-territorialing operation" (343). Mamang Dai also exercises translation for the same purpose. In the prologue to *The Black Hill* she writes, "There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago" (ix) and she chooses to take a strand from those stories and writes it in 'linear manner' by appropriating English language to it. In the act of appropriating the language, Dai encountered "The problem of translating ... concerns with the choice of diction" (Ramakrishnan 133). In her children's book *Hambreelmais Loom*, Dai retells a story of a porcupine which existed in an oral narration of Mishmee tribe and which was also recorded by Dr. Edwin. She tells,

"The name of porcupine was actually something else in Dr. Edwin's written presentation and the Mishmee people were saying "no it is not that, it is this". It is a process of recovery, we were bringing it back and claiming it again for the people from where the stories had originated." (Keynote)

In such confusion, she 'appropriates' the name 'porcupine' to the confusing description of the creature, "in which it is more fully developed" (Peirce qt. in Jakobson, 114).

By means of translation, Mamang Dai appropriates English language to her culture. In spite of being a borderland writer, she facilitates an understanding on her culture on the global stage. As per Even Zohar's Polysystems Theory, Mamang Dai's writing claims primary position for she is one of the writers to fill the vacuum in Northeast Literature. Moreover, her writings can claim originality beyond geographical borders as Bassnett enunciates that "the translated text becomes an original by virtue of its continued existence in that new context" (151). In this way, translation enables borderland writings to establish its knowledge and culture for the world to explore.

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