Remapping the Indian Postcolonial Canon: Remap, Reimagine, Retranslate
Nirmala Menon
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Since the late 1990s, the confluence of postcolonial studies and world literature debates has resulted in an ever-expanding classification of the literary canon – hyper-canon (Euro-American), counter-canon (postcolonial), minor canon (peripheral) – but leaving the vernacular canon (regional) in the shadows of the Europhone canon. Two recent works that problematize postcolonial studies' arms-length relationship to the vernacular canon, and the assimilation of non-European writers into the fold of the world literary canon include Ankhi Mukherjee's *What is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (2013) and Subramanian Shankar's *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular* (2012). Nirmala Menon's *Remapping the Indian Literary Canon* is an audacious attempt at placing the vernacular Indian canon and translation theory at the heart of postcolonial criticism.

In the Introduction, Menon declares her intentions explicitly and clearly: postcolonial criticism pays disproportionate attention to texts written in English, thereby limiting the theoretical vocabulary of the field in understanding structures of power and habitations of agency. Menon is quick to name the culprits: the specific disciplinary practices of appropriating Indian writers into the Western curriculum, and, by extension, the mainstreaming of the so-called counter-canon (Anglophone canon hereafter): Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Amitav Ghosh, among others. Supported by data from the Modern Language Association, JSTOR, and academic journals in the constituencies of postcolonial studies, Menon compares these canonical figures with a similar archive of texts from Hindi, Malayalam, Telugu, Sanskrit and Gujarati. The results speak for themselves: between 2007 and 2015, in the same corpus of academic journals and novels selected by Menon, each Anglophone novel attracted nine publications, while only one publication appeared for every fiftieth regional language novel (17). Such disproportionate representation has been instrumental to the framing of two major theoretical currents of the postcolonial field, namely hybridity and subalternity, which Menon proposes to "remap, reimagine, and retranslate" through the prism of the vernacular canon. Although Menon is principally opposed to canon-building in general, she finds solace in Edward Said's notion of "nomadic centers" which operate from "provisional structures that are never permanent and that offer new forms of continuity, vision, and revision" (7).

In the spirit of Said's contrapuntal analysis (21), Menon outlines an interliterary methodology of comparison and translation between the English, Hindi, Bengali and Malayalam canons to remap the theoretical frames of subalternity and hybridity. In Chapter 2, Menon distinguishes the "self-consciousness" of subalternity from the "social construction" of subalternity in the European anti-humanist critiques that conflate intellectual desires with the politics of representation. Rereading postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak through the work of Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Group, Menon argues that Spivak's thesis is "less about speech than the power and ability of subalterns to make themselves heard" as conscious subjects of their histories (37). The syntax of the Anglophone canon, Menon argues, is susceptible to the social construction, as opposed to the self-consciousness, of subalternity by virtue of its discursive conditioning to translate other cultures into modernist parlance. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, for instance, despite the much-avowed agency of the gendered subaltern characters Ammu and Rachel, the Dalit servant Velutha barely speaks (46). When he does speak, Velutha finds himself "differentiated by two unfamiliar languages – the language of modernity and the medium of English" (46). There is no other reason, Menon contends, for Roy to pepper Velutha's speech with italicized Malayalam words (*naaley*, for instance) than accentuate his subalternity (in relation) to other subalterns in the narrative such as Ammu and Rachel who speak for him, and use such hierarchy to grant the oppressed "silent subjectivity as opposed to total non-representation" (39). In the vernacular canon, however, such hierarchy is erased by the absence of cultural, linguistic or translational barriers. Instead of reducing the subaltern into a knowable yet silent position, vernacular writers such as Mahasweta Devi (Bengali) and O.V.Vijayan (Malayalam) point to the opacity of subaltern subjectivity that resists cultural translation into modernist parlance. In O.V. Viajayan's *The Legends of the Khasak*, a schoolteacher's mission to educate the subalterns into a modern educational system is foiled by the Khasak villagers who transform the teacher into a student "learning from the subalterns" (61). In Mahasweta Devi's story "Pterodactyl, Pure Sahay, and Pritha," a journalist's attempt to put the remote tribe "on the map" is rendered futile as he fails to grasp the "rooted" narrative of Pritha's Pterodactyl myth. Yet, the vernacular canon is not entirely about the opacity or incommensurability of rooted traditions, but also about transformation, reinvention, and transgression. In Mahasweta Devi's story "The Hunt," the tribal woman Mary Oraon reinvents "the tradition" (62) of the tribal festival "Jani Parab" to hunt down the local *tahasildar* who threatens to rape her (53). Menon describes such angry, aggressive and anticipatory "self-awareness" of the subaltern in Devi's work as an exception, not the rule (53). In "Douloti the Bountiful," for instance, Mahasweta Devi kills her eponymous protagonist Douloti, a bonded prostitute, in front of a crowd gathered to celebrate India's Independence Day. Here, unlike Velutha's invisible death and silent agency in *The God of Small Things*, Menon argues that Douloti's

public death "symbolizes an individual experience that deliberately signifies and points to the larger tribal experience" (54).

In Chapter 3, Menon compares an Anglophone novel with two vernacular texts from Kannada and Malayalam to delineate what she calls "accommodative hybridity" and "interrogative hybridity." Although, like "subalternity," "hybridity" is originally conceived as a counter-discourse to colonial historiography, Menon argues that the many diasporic iterations of "migrant hybridity" have effectively domesticated the concept, thereby undermining its disruptive potential. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is one such case which neatly arranges desperate ethnic, migrant and social experiences from India to England to merely "accommodate" a hybrid narrative: "a simplification that allows the plight of unskilled immigrants in New York to be compared with Nepalis in Kalimpong" (86). In comparison, Lalithambika Antherjanam's Malayalam classic "Goddess of Revenge" defies "every clichéd stereotype" (95) about caste, ethnicity and difference by positioning Tatri, an upper caste—Namboodiri Antherjanam—prostitute on the margins of her community, who uses her privileged caste status to attract men, and effect a policy change in the court of King Ravi Varma to "give the accused women to have the right to cross-examine her alleged partners" (89). Such "interrogative hybridity," which disrupts the status quo, is enabled by Lalithambika's own positioning on the margins of the same community as her character—Antherjanam—and a temporal / interfigural hybridity of the narrative itself, in which Tatri remerges as a ghost narrator, summoning the real author to rewrite her historical legend for present day readers. In a similar vein, Girish Karnad's *Yayati*, a Kannada rewrite of an episode in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, inverts traditional hierarchies of caste, class and gender through hybrid (re)characterization of the plot itself: an accursed king exchanges his son's youth for nobility, while an upper-caste woman accursed to become a lower-caste maid becomes the queen. These vernacular texts, Menon argues, are exemplars of disruptive and interrogative hybridity where "there is no demarcated space, but a calculated position that the characters take on or the author creates for specific motives" (97).

In the last chapter, Menon reflects on the accessibility of vernacular texts to postcolonial scholarship and its implications for translation theory. Classifying the existing translation models into "academic translations" (Spivak's *Imaginary Maps*), and "faithful translations" (Walter Benjamin), Menon argues for a post-Eurocentric theory of translation that is attentive to "linguistic hierarchies based on political power and socio-economic inequalities" (137). To do so, Menon takes a vernacular route: the *Dhvani-Bhava-Shruthi-Rasa* theory of the Sanskritic tradition. If *Dhvani* (sound) exposes the text to the meaning of its various realizers (reader/actor/author), then *Bhavas* represent the text's "suggestion in realized emotional states" (139). And *Rasa* (aesthetic measure) is the culminative affect of *Dhvani* and *Bhava* as experienced in *Shruthi* (as heard and remembered). In addition to this, Menon introduces a salient translational interruption known as *sthayibhava*, a state of untranslatable silence, "which really

is what constitutes *rasa*" (138). Menon puts her model to test by translating the short story "Wang-Chu" by Bhisham Sahni from Hindi to English, and exposing the reader to the four-fold schemata of *Dhvani-Bhava-Shruthi-Rasa*, including the *sthayibhava*.

Collectively, each chapter contributes towards a pointed critique of postcolonial theory's preoccupation with "subalternity" and "hybridity" in the contours of the Anglophone literary canon. A major strength of Menon's book lies with the clarity of its task, the choice of texts, and its unwavering commitment to expand the postcolonial literary canon without undermining the critical impulses of the postcolonial *theoretical* canon—Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha or Dipesh Chakrabarty. However, it is not entirely clear if Menon relies on the same translation of Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* by Gayatri Spivak in Chapter 2, which she rejects as an "academic translation" in Chapter 4. Having said that, Menon's book is an original intervention in the study of canon-building both within and outside of postcolonial studies. It is rarely that a reader comes across a philological work dealing with five languages (Hindi, English, Kannada, Malayalam and Bengali), in which the author is both a critic and a translator.

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