The Contemporary Indian Novel and Its Mediations: Three Examples from Arundhati Roy, U.R. Anantha Murthy and Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract
This paper considers three Indian works of fiction presenting different degrees of mediation between the Indian subcontinent and the international reading public: *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Bhava* by U.R. Anantha Murthy and *Imaginary Maps* by Mahasweta Devi. These works exemplify three ways in which India can be presented, or interpreted, for an international readership: Roy is a dedicated cultural mediator; she writes in English, which allows her to address the vast Anglophone public directly and her narrative material is organised in such a way as to be understandable and pleasing for that public. Anantha Murthy's novel, on the contrary, offers hardly any mediation at all; written in Kannada, it is addressed to an Indian public and makes no attempt to 'explain India' to those outside. This is no doubt one of the reasons why the book has never been translated into Italian. Devi's collection of interlinked stories seeks to collocate itself between these two approaches: written in Bengali, it is translated into a 'hybrid' English which apparently imitates the oral languages of the tribal people who are its main protagonists; meantime, the paratextual apparatus deprives the narration of its freshness as it repackages the stories in the terms of Derrida's deconstructionism.
Keywords: India, novel, globalisation, translation

1. Introduction

A hundred-and-fifty years after its first appearance in the subcontinent, both in English and in what Thomas B. Macaulay superciliously called "dialects", the Indian novel today enjoys excellent health and an unprecedented international profile. But if, historically speaking, novels written in Hindi and in the other 21 Indian regional languages soon found enthusiastic readers, Indian novels written in English during the colonial period found it difficult to establish themselves: little read, rarely quoted, and never accepted

into the canon, they mostly disappeared without trace. Those who wrote in English had no clear idea of who their readers were, but judging from the titles and other clues scattered in the texts, they mainly addressed a small *élite* of urban readers who either lived in England or were involved in the colonial administration in India. Such readers were eager to hear about India from writers who emphasised qualities of otherness and exoticism rather than assuming a specifically regional or more generally Indian identity. Aside from their English readers, these novels also addressed the cultivated Indian male; women, it has to be said, were almost totally excluded from the phenomenon, whether as writers or readers[1].

The global boom of the Anglo-Indian novel, then, is a recent event which began with the publication of Salman Rushdie's comic epic *Midnight's Children*. Published in London in 1981, the success of *Midnight's Children*, followed in 1993 by the enthusiastic reception of Vikram Seth's *roman-fleuve A Suitable Boy*, launched the Anglo-Indian novel onto the world stage affording enormous visibility to two versions of Post-Independence India: the subcontinent as a habitat for magical realism in a post-colonial sauce; and again, in a realist vein, as a country of caste ties and complex extended families.

The success of both novels was accelerated and legitimised when they were awarded important literary prizes both in the UK and at an international level: the Booker Prize and the Booker of Bookers for Rushdie; the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Seth. Today, 65 years after Indian Independence, the Anglo-Indian novel can be found on the shelves of every Western bookshop, Italy included. Almost every Italian publishing house has a number of such novels in their catalogue, though they are unlikely to have novels originally written in Indian languages.

Indian writers also began to feature in academic critical discourse and were often included in post-colonial or so-called

[1] For a close examination of the tangled genealogy of the novel in India, see Mukherjee (2000; 2006). The latter ends with a question relevant to the subject of this essay: "Whether their disparity of audience (global and local) affects their respective concerns, thematic focus, attitude toward their material styles of representation, and fictional strategies still remains a largely unresolved area of critical debate" (Mukherjee 2006: 631).

global literature. To give just two examples, in the recent collection of essays *Going Global*[2], about the reception of women writers from the Third World, three essays out of ten are about Indian novelists, while, looking at the volumes published in Italy in recent years, *Oltre l'Occidente*[3] hosts some important essays by non-Western scholars writing about post-colonial translation and literature; three of these deal with Indian texts and authors.

Indian writers working in English tend to enjoy similar backgrounds and share a common cultural context: they belong to the same upper class and share an experience of privileged education, so much so that the critic Aijaz Ahmad has claimed that they now constitute the only national intelligentsia in India[4].

In their attempts to organise and categorise the many texts which form the now considerable *corpus* of Anglo-Indian literature, critics often seek to establish what idea or ideas of India emerge from these fictions. Priyamvada Gopal, for example, in his book *The Indian English Novel*, has a preface entitled "Ideas of India" in which he declares:

Many critics, including some scholars of Indian writing in English, have pointed out that the representative status and institutional strength of

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[2] Amireh and Majaj (2000). Bishupriya Ghosh reflects on the literary-political case of the autobiography of the Bengali activist Taslima Nasreen; Alpana Sharma Knippling analyses the "resistant reading" of an Indian writer of the second half of the 19th century, the poet and translator Toru Dutt, one of the first Indian writers in English; Jennifer Wenzel presents the collection of short stories *Imaginary Maps* by Mahasweta Devi, assessing the interpretative slant of Gayatri Spivak's translation.

[3] See Bollettieri and Di Giovanni (2009). Harish Trivedi writes about the construction of the East by English translators in India, showing how the translation of Indian works into English contributed to the awakening of nationalism and decolonisation; Niranjana proposes to overturn anti-colonial essentialist narratives through translation; Jumpha Lahiri gives translation the wider sense of "translation between worlds", saying that she herself has "translated" the city of Calcutta for the global public.

[4] "The only *national* literary intelligentsia that exists in India today – an intelligentsia constituted as a distinct social stratum and dispersed in all parts of the country, which brings to bear on its vocation and its work a *shared* body of knowledge, *shared* presumptions and a *shared* language of mutual exchange – is the one that is fairly well grounded in English" (Ahmad 1991: 278, italics of the author).

English fiction is starkly *out of proportion* to its actual presence as a spoken and comprehended language on the subcontinent. (Gopal 2009: 1)[5]

These scholars that Gopal mentions believe that Indian novels in English are over-represented in the publishing market, in part because they share the assumption that vernacular languages are the true repository of imagination and interiority, while English is above all a rational functional instrument for debates and public discourses[6].

Even if this idea has been partly revised, it has not been entirely discredited, except, not surprisingly, by Salman Rushdie, who has defiantly declared that the prose of the Anglo-Indian writers of the post-Independence period is more important than all the works in the 18 recognised Indian languages; as Rushdie sees it, Anglo-Indian literature represents the most valuable Indian contribution to the world of books[7].

Oddly enough, then, the herald of Indian post-colonial literature adopts a stance that is not very far from the scornful tone of Thomas B. Macaulay who, in his campaign to introduce higher levels of English education in colonial India, wrote: "All parties seem to be agreed on one point, that the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India contain neither literary nor scientific information" (Mukherjee 2000: 3)[8].

In this essay I would like to reflect on an issue that emerges in the form of a question in Gopal's preface: "What does it mean that the world reads and believes that it comprehends 'India' through Rushdie and Roy rather than Kamleshwar (Hindi), Ambai (Tamil), or Qurrutulain Hyder (Urdu)?" (Gopal 2009: 2). Today writers such as Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), U.R. Anantha Murthy (Kannada), Qurrutulain Hyder (Urdu), Fakir Mohan Senapati (Oriya) and Rabindranath Tagore (Bengali) are

[5] "Ideas of India" is an expression of Nehru discussed by the political scientist Sunil Khilnani (in Khilnani 1997).

[6] For a historic outlook on the different uses and functions of cosmopolitan and vernacular languages, see Pollock (2000).

[7] See Rushdie (1997).

[8] Archive research has shown that many authors who went back to their regional language for fictional writings continued to use English for their private letters and diaries. See Mukherjee (2000: 9).

in fact mostly accessible in English, though not in other Indian languages; nevertheless, they do not enjoy the wide international distribution in bookshops and libraries that Anglo-Indian authors do[9].

In response to Gopal's question, I shall present the cases of three Indian novels which present different degrees of mediation between the Indian subcontinent and the international reading public: *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, written in English; *Bhava* by U.R. Anantha Murthy, written in Kannada, and *Imaginary Maps* by Mahasweta Devi, written in Bengali[10].

2. Social commitment and rhetoric in Arundhati Roy

The first and to date only novel written by Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, was awarded the Booker Prize in 1997 and published in Italy by Guanda that same year in a translation by Chiara Gabutti. After completing her novel, Roy committed herself to political activism and essay writing. In 2002 the Supreme Court of India condemned her to the symbolic punishment of one day of jail for contempt of court; she had blamed the court for hushing up protests against a plan to dam the Narmada river.

Translated and published in 21 countries, her partly autobiographical novel tells the tragic story of an upper-middle class family from Ayemenem, in Kerala, one of the poorest regions of Southern India, historic home of the Communist Party. But if the reader expects that among the main themes of *The God of Small Things* there might be God or some "small things" – descriptions perhaps of the local settings, or the daily routines of the books characters – he or she will be disappointed. Incessantly associated to personal objects or precise somatic features, to the point almost of being reduced, as in a fairy tale, to the merest actantial functions, the characters exist first and foremost as victims and executioners or their respective helpers.

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[9] Kothari (2003) explores growing translation activity from Indian languages into English from the 1980s on.

[10] Devi's text is not a novel but a collection of three novellas which can be considered as an artistic whole, since, for example, a story from an oral tradition told in the second novella returns again in the third.

The story revolves around two main focal points, two unhappy events which, following a structure much exploited by the magical realists and in particular by Rushdie[11], are anticipated in the first chapter: the accidental death of little Sophie Mol, the English cousin of the twins Estha and Rahel, and the violent killing of the untouchable, Velutha, by the police (or rather by 'touchable' policemen, as a constantly repeated opposition in the text would have it); the killing is carried out to end the dishonour of Velutha's relationship with Ammu, the mother of the twins and daughter of an imperial entomologist.

Various other tragedies befall the family, the melodrama reaching its climax when Ammu, the adulteress, dies alone in a hotel room and her son, after the many bereavements and a long period living with his father, withdraws into silence.

As a backdrop to these family tragedies we have the war with China and the Communist demonstrations of the 1960s in Kerala, in which Velutha is involved. Political and politically correct themes abound, to the point of excess and even absurdity, as the novel sets out to sensitise foreign readers to the civil rights violations still perpetrated in the subcontinent, in short to the 'big things' of India: the aberrations of the caste system, gender inequalities, child abuse, domestic violence, tuberculosis, police brutality. The novel thus forms part of the same honourable political project that Roy pursues in her essays and through her political activism; these political elements, however, are mixed with a number of fictional clichés, such as telepathy between twins, the embittered old maid addicted to television, the charming savage opposed to the alcoholic husband, the Oxford-educated snob.

Key concepts of the book are fixed, indeed ossified, in frequently recurring metaphors: time is a toy wristwatch; religion is a play abridged for foreigners; history is the House of History, the heart of darkness where the threatening ghost of the old English owner who went native ("the Kurtz of Ayemenem") wanders: the ancient colonial mansion has now been reduced to a touristic attraction in the theme park described in promotional brochures as "God's own Country". This promotional slogan offers one of the few references to God in a novel where the misery of the main characters and the

[11] See Calabrese (2005: 191-225).

constant triumph of injustice suggest the absence of divinity in both small and large things. Significantly, in the Italian translation "God's Own Country" is slightly modified and exoticised with a shift from the singular *God* to the plural *Dei*. Even those unfamiliar with the Indian culture know that India has a pantheon of divinities, spirits and demigods with names and stories too fascinating not to be mentioned at least once. It is worth noting, however, that while historically used to refer to New Zealand, God's Own Country is indeed used, in the singular, by Kerala State Tourist Board.

Thanks to its descriptive digressions, which frequently interrupt both the opening and the main flow of the many turbulent events in the story, Roy's novel is not the smoothest of reads; however, what will not be an obstacle for the Western reader is any density of reference to Indian culture, this for the simple reason that such culture is hardly perceived at all, except perhaps in a much abridged and adapted version for strangers: "toy histories for rich tourists to play in" (Roy 1997: 126).

The fact is that the novel's cultural references are all Western: the film that the Ipe family watches at the cinema to pass the time while waiting for the arrival of Sophie Mol from London is *The Sound of Music*; the song that Ammu listens to on the radio while waiting for something to happen in the desolation of her room in the family house is the Rolling Stones' *Ruby Tuesday*; the novel she reads to her children before bed is Kipling's *The Jungle Book*; after the loss of their cousin, the desperate twins become "Hansel and Gretel in a ghastly fairy tale in which their dreams would be captured and re-dreamed" (Roy 1997: 278); the granddaughter of the local Communist representative recites Walter Scott's *Lochinvar* in Malayalam before her grandfather's employer, the pedantic Oxford-educated Chacko, who in turn declares himself a member of a family of Anglophiles; Mammachi, the entomologist's widower, plays Händel's *Watermusic* on the violin and has a bottle of Dior locked away in her safe. The list could go on.

The only Indian cultural reference, more glocal than local, is the *kathakali* play from the *Mahabarata* ("for that regional flavour", p. 127). As in Rushdie's *Shame*[12] Roy seeks to anticipate and neutralise

[12] See Suleri (1992: 174-206).

criticism that she has exoticised India for a Western public by placing the critics in the text itself.

At almost 350 pages, *The God of Small Things* is not a short novel, yet its characters are only roughly sketched in, as though in a studio-made soap opera flavoured with a few pinches of magical realism (the spectre of the House of History, the corpse of the drowned child who, waking up during her funeral, turns somersaults inside the coffin). In fact the narrator tells us nothing about Velutha, the mostly silent untouchable from the lowest caste of Paravans, save that he has a bright black skin, is a skilled woodworker and very affectionate with his lover Ammu and her children. It is not clear what the alternative story promised in the novel's epigraph ("Never again shall a single story be told as though it were the only one") might be: is it the story of India or that of the beating up of Velutha by the police? The story of the tragic events that befall an upper-middleclass Indian family, or of untouchables bullied by members of a higher-caste?

The "small" stories upon which the author dwells more willingly are those of the characters who have lived outside India and married non-Indians. This is the case of Rahel, who, having begun her degree in Architecture in Delhi without much enthusiasm, meets an American doctoral student and decides to marry him and follow him to Boston. It is also the case of Chacko, Rahel's uncle, a Marxist with a "feudal libido" who studied and met his wife at Oxford; and of Baby Kochamma, the young great-aunt of the twins who, after entering a convent to follow a monk with whom she had fallen in love, is sent to the University of Rochester in New York to study ornamental gardening.

Always seeking melodramatic effects, Roy's style is verbose, overloaded with similes, lists, italics, emphatic capital letters, anaphoras, onomatopoeia and phrases coined by the author which the Italian translator tries to reproduce creatively, sometimes with grotesque results. See for example the frequently repeated phrase reminding us that Ammu's death was untimely: "not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age", which in Italian becomes "non vecchia, non giovane, ma vitalmente moritura".

In the end the reader finds it difficult to share the dramas of the characters simply because he does not know much about them. It seems that this novel appeals only to the religion of human rights,

the one religion retrievable in the book: the God of the title, as we have already seen, is just a suggestive lure. Alluded to only to be completely ignored, religion is the aesthetic lens through which the West often looks at India[13].

3. The authentic other in *Bhava*

U.R. Anantha Murthy is one of the major representatives of the modernist movement (*navya*) of Kannada literature: he has a long record of success, starting from his first novel *Samskara*, a modern classic of Indian literature, which became a film in 1970. In India he has been awarded prestigious prizes such as the Masti Award in Literature, the Jnanpith Award and the Padma Bhushan. Nevertheless he is still a perfect stranger for the Italian public, since none of his novels are available in Italian translation. *Bhava*, published by Penguin India in 1998, has been translated into English by the author himself, a former professor of English at Mysore University, together with the American poet Judith Kroll.

In the prefatory note to the novel the author expresses his early concerns in undertaking the translation: "Translating a tale in which an author aspires to the organic coherence and denseness of a poem in the language of its genesis makes one nervous and uncertain, for it doesn't possess the easily shared exterior of conventional realistic fiction" (Anantha Murty 1998: vii)[14]. Afterwards he explains how the translation was carried out: he suggested a literal translation, word for word, keeping intact the peculiar syntactic structure of Kannada language; then he explained the form, the meaning and the nuances of every passage while Kroll made notes or recorded his comments.

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[13] References to religion in Anglo-Indian novels often seem to be introduced exclusively for this purpose. To avoid generalisation, we might point to authors who have tackled Indian religiosity with great earnestness and respect like Roberto Calasso in *Ka* (1996), and more recently Dalrymple (2009).

[14] Qurratulain Hyder had the same problems with her translation into English of *River of Fire* (1997), done almost forty years after the original publication in Urdu (1959). For this text, which became the 'authorised version' for further translation into European languages, Hyder imposed on the publisher the term "transcreation". See V. Mingiardi, "Nel fiume del tempo", preface to Hyder ([1959] 1998) Italian translation 2009: 557-67.

So here the degree of mediation is minimum: the text is full of loans from modern Indian languages or from Sanskrit, the sentences are short or paratactic, the quotations from Buddhist or Hindu texts frequent[15]. It is easy to perceive that so-called 'Indianisation' of English described by Raja Rao as a sort of transmutation of the *lingua franca* of globalisation for the purposes of translation and creation, a surface through which the regional language of the characters or the narrator shows up as if it were a watermark[16].

Although *Bhava* is a short novel, barely exceeding 150 pages, the non-Indian reader is immediately aware from the title that this is indeed a 'foreign object', and possibly a difficult read, something that might require a different 'encyclopaedia' (Eco 1984: 109-10), as it were, to be fully comprehended. In a note Judith Kroll explains the meaning of *bhava*, a term from Sanskrit that indicates both the concepts of 'being' and 'becoming', and explains some of her translating strategies, in particular the decision to include a glossary at the end of the book thus allowing her to keep some words in the text in their original Indian languages; this is done when a limited translation would considerably alter the text or introduce unwanted cultural connotations (as in the cases of "rosary" for *mala*, or "renunciation" for *vairagya*).

An example of this attempt to give the reader an authentic cultural alterity comes in the opening pages of the story with the presentation of one of the main characters, Dinakar, who is in a train compartment travelling to Bangalore: "Clearly the man opposite Shastri had taken the vow of Ayyappa – he was wearing a black

[15] The Sanskrit term *bhava*, which gives the novel its name, appears at the beginning of the second part in its equivalent *bardo* from Tibetan tradition and is also a shortened form of *bhavavali*, the cycle of death and rebirth of Jainism, as explained in the afterword. The English text could be considered an example of "thick translation", as defined by K.A. Appiah in Bollettieri and Di Giovanni (2009: 291-319).

[16] Raja Rao's analogy between the English writings of Indian authors and translation can be found in the preface to his first novel *Kanthapura* (1938), where he declares that he meant to shape his English into the rhythms of the Kannada spoken by the narrator. His idiosyncratic use of English was analysed in Prasad (1999); Rushdie (1991: 17) uses the same analogy in the famous passage about the condition of British Indians as *translated men*.

kurta, a black dhoti, a small black towel over his shoulder; and against these black clothes the amulet around his neck compelled attention" (Anantha Murty 1998: 4).

Most readers will know neither the word *Ayyappa*, nor the relevant cultural background. This is true of many of the more opaque signs that occur throughout the novel; hence the glossary becomes essential if readers are to get a better sense of where a character is coming from.

We are told that Dinakar is an Ayyappa pilgrim. Later he introduces himself with different names, depending on the person he is talking to: when a traveller wearing jeans and eating meat for his dinner recognises him as a TV celebrity, he says his name is "Swami", adding "I lost any other name"; instead he asks the book's other main character Shastri, a man who shares his evening meal with him, to call him Dinakar, because, he says, "you are my elder". But soon after tasting the food, a dish called *kuttavalakki*, he remembers the name his mother called him, Putani, and asks Shastri to call him that, if he thinks the name suits him.

It is only thanks to the notes and the afterword that we appreciate that Ayyappa pilgrims are supposed to make a pilgrimage of forty days to a temple at Shabarimala Hill in Kerala, taking a vow that submerges their ordinary identity: they must wear black clothes, call each other "Swami", follow food restrictions, abstain from sex and alcohol and live in austerity. This is why Dinakar declares that he shed every name but Swami.

So even a character's name may give an idea of the complex hierarchies present in India, something mirrored in the text by the nuances of polite forms of address and even the language used when one character talks to another. When they first meet, Shastri tries to start a conversation with Dinakar addressing him in the plural, in Kannada, and feels comforted by the fact that he does not know Kannada, since this suggests that he is not the man he feared he was. Then he tries to use his Bombay Hindustan, a sort of pidgin Hindi, but "he hesitated to speak in such a rough language to an Ayyappa devotee" (Anantha Murty 1998: 6), because "Shastri couldn't be certain whether his reply to Swami in the rude Bombay Hindi of his previous life was appropriate for the feelings that Swami's Hindi expressed" (p. 12). Having seen that Dinakar acknowledges the dish he offers him, Shastri remarks that if he knows it by the name

of *kuttavalakki* he must come from South Kanara, but the pilgrim misses the allusion.

From the opening pages, then, we are made aware that this is a complex world, where there is not just one language, one religion or one food culture; we see that two fellow countrymen find it hard to communicate with each other and totally exclude from their conversation the other two passengers in the compartment, because dressed in Western clothes and eating meat, hence presumably impure. The question of purity recurs throughout the book: Gangubai, the daughter of a woman from a low caste belonging to a community of prostitutes, has to eat her lunch ladled onto a banana leaf in the backyard, outside the house, so that it can be thrown away immediately afterwards, because her old host Sitamma "was very fastidious about eating taboos" (Anantha Murty 1998: 79). Sitamma herself seeks to remain in a state of *madi*, to do which she has to bathe before and after lunch, and so on. The author never takes a position with regard to these prescriptions, but just describes a context to which he belongs and to which he is intimately bound, without either explaining it or simplifying it for the sake of an uninitiated reader.

Bhava is full of signs which are hard to interpret: the cry of a lizard can announce an evil prophecy; the *kumkum* on the forehead of Shastri's presumed first wife could indicate that she was not a widow when she committed suicide, so it is not certain that it was indeed a suicide; the amulet Dinakar wears suggests to Shastri that for him death and rebirth are perhaps possible; a typical dish of a certain region instils doubt that the passenger opposite him is his son. But offering a definitive view of the mysteries around which the story is built is perhaps not one of Anantha Murthy's primary intentions[17]. He invites the reader into a complex fictional world dense with an atmosphere of ritual which the West has very largely lost.

[17] A.K. Ramanujan, who translated *Samskara* into English, sees a connection between Anantha Murthy's stories and traditional literature: "As in many traditional tales a question is raised; kept alive, despite possible solutions; maintained, till profounder questions are raised. Answers are delayed until the question is no longer relevant", from Afterword, in Anantha Murthy (1998).

4. The neglected India of Devi's *Adivasis*

Imaginary Maps by the Bengali journalist, activist and writer Mahasweta Devi is a collection of three short stories: *The Hunt*, *Douloti the Bountiful*, *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*, published in English by Thema in Calcutta in 1993, and by Routledge in New York and London in 1995[18]. They are macabre fairy tales which mix Hindu myth, oral legend and documentary[19]; as their main characters, they have the tribal people of India's 84 million *Adivasis*, or indigenous inhabitants, people deprived of their lands without any compensation.

As Devi declares in a conversation with Spivak included at the beginning of the volume, the story of *The Hunt* was taken from a popular song. The protagonist is Mary Oraon, who was born as the result of a white South African planter's rape of his tribal servant. During the women's hunting festival in the Northern state of Bihar, Mary kills an opportunist timber merchant who has been stalking her and who is described as "the biggest beast" (Devi 1995: 17) this in order to achieve her goal of marrying a Muslim man.

Douloti is set in the Palamu district and a society afflicted by bonded labour; it focuses on women, forced into prostitution like the protagonist herself to repay family debts. This is a phenomenon still common in some parts of India: before or after marriage, women whose husbands or fathers have taken out loans from members of a higher caste are taken from their houses and brought to brothels where their 'work' must repay the loan. In reality high compound interest rates ensure that loan can never be paid off.

Set in the village of the Nagesia people, *Pterodactyl* gives a general impression of tribal experience. A city journalist goes to the

[18] Among these short stories only *The Hunt* has been published in Italy in translation (Devi 2004), while among the approximately forty novels and fifteen collections of tales written by Devi the only other texts available in Italy are the collections Devi (2005; 2007), and the novel Devi (1996). The short story *Draupadi* was already translated by F. Orsini in Devi (1999). Devi has been awarded many prizes such as the Akademi, the Padmashree, the Bharatiya Jnanpith and the Magsaysay for her long literary and political activity; she was named *Officier des arts et des lettres* and honoured with the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian award in India.

[19] J. Wenzel (2000) compares Devi's short stories with Grimm's fairy tales.

remote Pirtha region to write a report on the terrible plight of its inhabitants; here he comes upon a pterodactyl, which represents a messenger of the spirit of the ancestors of the place but whose message he can't decipher. The story suggests the inability of a non-native ever to understand an alien culture and explores the dangers of being exploited or misunderstood when one seeks to write about the lives of disadvantaged people.

Like other books by Devi, *Imaginary Maps* was translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a Bengali scholar who mediates the author's reception outside India interpreting her work in terms of her own "ecological, deconstructionist, Marxist feminist postcolonial critical practice", as she herself describes it.

In her preface Spivak refers to the American academy and its mistaken perception that India is a single entity: "'India' is not an undivided perspective, much as both conservatives and radicals in the United States would strive to represent it as such". She also argues that "Mahasweta must not be commodified as a 'national cultural artefact', *only* accessible to 'Indians', a seamless national identity after all, when her entire effort focuses on what has been left out of such a definition".

The critic Sujit Mukherjee complains that the English of Spivak's translation is not sufficiently accessible for Indian readers and indeed Spivak acknowledges that her language is closer to a rootless academic American prose than to the subcontinental idiom of her youth. Then she wonders: "This is an interesting question, unique to India: should Indian texts be translated into the English of the subcontinent?"[20].

This question problematises Roman Jakobson's concept of "intralinguistic translation" (Jakobson 2004), given that in her translation into American English Spivak uses a number of strategies to leave traces of the languages Devi uses: Indian-English words, for example, are italicised. In India native languages have absorbed English words at every level of the social scale; many such words have been lexicalised and exist independently, as is clear looking at the loans from Devi's Bengali (see, for example,

[20] The last four quotations are from Spivak's preface, in Devi (1995: pp. xxiii and xxviii). However the problem of which variety of English to write or translate in concerns all the post-colonial countries, not only the subcontinent.

the words pertaining to the semantic field of institutional power like *officer*, *policeman*, *halt*, *jail*, *elections*), and at other loans from Hindi and Urdu.

Spivak also keeps some hybrid Anglo-Bengali words, often putting either the indigenous terms or their English equivalents at their side between square brackets (*Comnis* for *Communist*, *mye-lay* for *MLA, Member of the Legislative Assembly*, *fillim* for *film*). However not every English word has its equivalent in the tribal languages: the protagonist of the third story, for example, is surprised that the Ho tribe language does not have a word for *exploitation* or *deprivation*[21], while the use of other words, like *famine*, has been banished by the central government.

At a syntactical level, dialogues frequently include questions without the auxiliary verb, simply with an inversion between full verb and subject. This makes the English pages difficult to read, but this difficulty, Spivak remarks, is necessary to bring the reader closer to an encounter with the colonial: the "deconstructive embrace" is not only the message, but also the medium[22]. In this approach, embracing *différance* would also mean accepting linguistic difference, the stratification of official, regional, tribal or pidgin languages which characterise many post-colonial texts.

Alongside the difficulties of reading and writing about others, mediation is also one of the themes of the final novella, *Pterodactyl*, something it shares which Spivak's essays, which constitute "mediating documents between the First World literary academy and Mahasweta's fiction" (Wenzel 2000: 232). But Devi herself had already made some attempt to mediate between Third and First World cultures in that, when describing tribal culture she deliberately mixes that of various tribes, putting together names, customs, and oral tales of one or the other tribe to emblematise them and bring them to the attention of the readers in a compact way.

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[21] "Brother! The word 'exploitation' is not in the Ho language. Puran thinks, Do the tribals, whose life is nothing but exploitation, nothing but deprivation, have a synonym for exploitation in any of their languages?" (Devi 1995: 118).

[22] "Translator's note", in Devi (1995: xxxi). As for the difficulty in reading and, even more so, in translating Devi, in the afterword of Devi (2004: 240), Anna Nadotti writes: "Che Devi sia un incubo per i traduttori non è un eufemismo".

Devi does not set out to offer a personal idea of India; on the contrary, she seeks to tell, in a form that mixes documentary and ethnographic report, the 'small' stories of tribal people who, living in a condition of marginality, destitution and isolation, do not even know what India is. When in the story *Douloti the Bountiful* Sadhuji, "the Holy Man", that is the Brahmin, who, after paying off her father's debt marries the protagonist with the aim of prostituting her, lavishes praises on Mother India in nationalistic tones, a washerwoman replies: "– Who is that? – Our country, India. – This is our country? – Of course. – Oh, Sadhuji, my place is Seora village. What do you call a country? I know *tahsil*, I know station, I don't know country. India is not the country" (Devi 1995: 41).

Behind all these stories lies the universalist wish for an "impossible undivided world"[23] without which, as Spivak sees it, no literature would be possible. She also advances a concrete ethical proposal which she first refers to as "ethical singularity", then more simply "love", a proposal aimed at overcoming the impossibility of communication with the tribal people and the ineffectiveness of a rational approach to solving their troubles. Criticism and fiction are thus complementary, both are engaged forms of writing aimed at impacting on society by bringing the voice of subject peoples to Western audiences[24].

In conclusion, the works of the writers analysed here exemplify three possible kinds of mediation through which India can be presented to the world. Roy embodies the dedicated cultural mediator, or *translated woman*; she writes in English, which allows her to address the vast Anglophone public directly and to have her work rapidly translated into other European languages. Her novel is firmly in the tradition of colonial Anglo-Indian fiction in the way it exoticises India for a public of Anglo-Saxon readers and for an *élite* of cultivated and cosmopolitan Indians. Unlike previous Anglo-Indian writers, however, instead of rejecting political engagement *tout court* Roy looks at the Indian politics from outside, criticising it from a detached position[25].

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[23] Afterword, in Devi (1995: 197).

[24] See Spivak's essay about the possibility of subaltern communities to express themselves without being assimilated instrumentally into the dominant discourse (Spivak 1988).

[25] Parks (2012) refers to this attitude in Salman Rushdie.

Roy's decision to focus on an Anglophile family, and in particular the family of an imperial officer, makes her task easier. Another element which softens the meeting between the two cultures is that the main places where the story is set are what one might call non-places: a highway, an airport, a hotel, a cinema, an anonymous church, an unspecified forest by the river, and so on; these are places of transit without any particular geographical or cultural feature[26]. Apart from the historical events in the background and some touches of local colour, there is not much that is actually Indian in her novel: this shifting of India towards the West proved very successful, since *The God of Small Things* was given the most important literary award in the UK. The novel is a homage to consumer goods and to pop, movie, art and music culture, in brief to the Western way of life, but always under the cover of a *j'accuse* aimed at the caste system and state violence in India.

In the case of Anantha Murthy's novel, on the other hand, there is hardly any mediation at all, which perhaps explains why the book has never been translated into Italian. The rich paratextual apparatus, composed of two prefaces, an afterword and a glossary, offers a useful tool to approach the text, which nevertheless remains full of obstacles at linguistic, cultural, religious and geographical levels. The cultural context and tradition of reference are clearly far from those of the international reading public and the text makes no attempt to hide this; in the end, for the patient reader it is precisely these obstacles that constitute the richness of the text, inviting him or her to savour a great delicacy of tones and pregnancy of themes.

Devi's collection, as I see it, finds itself caught between two contradictory approaches: on the one hand, the hybrid language of the English translation in which the stories appear both in the United States and India imitates the oral languages of their tribal

[26] See Augé (1992). Similar reflections could be made about the fiction of Aravind Adiga, winner of the Booker Prize in 2008 with the novel *The White Tiger*: this novel too is set in non-places and has one-dimensional characters; it is a window on contemporary India with its outsourcing companies and wild capitalism. The structure of the epistolary novel makes it a sort of guide to Indian metropolitan society written by a 'native' and fictionally addressed to the president of the People's Republic of China.

protagonists, eschewing any embellishment; on the other, by framing the narratives in terms of Derrida's deconstructionism, Spivak's critical essays offer a parallel, and intellectually sophisticated support text which seems out of place beside Devi's raw accounts of tribal life. The effect is to drain the stories of their freshness and strength, justifying them for their ethical content, rather than their aesthetic achievement.

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