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Review: Riddles Of Belonging: India In Translation And Other Tales Of Possession

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Riddles of Belonging: India in Translation and Other Tales of Possession. By Christi Merrill. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. pp. i-xiv+380

In Riddles of Belonging: India in Translation and Other Tales of Possession, Christi Merrill has written an ambitious and capacious book in which the words/terms used in her title and subtitle resonate with various interests (and debates about these interests) significant in contemporary postcolonial theory and criticism. Thus, while centrally concerned with translation as both “practice and as trope” (173), Merrill’s analysis makes it articulate with a host of cognate postcolonial concerns such as: the demand for (but also deconstruction of) authenticity and origins; belonging to or within a (national) community; and following from (or related to) these the fraught issue of representation and of fidelity to a given linguistic and cultural formation. In the process of doing so, Merrill engages insightfully with what are also related cognate projects — studying world literatures, doing area studies, or pursuing comparative analysis across cultures. Indeed, it is more accurate to say that, as Merrill presents it, the former and the latter exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other so that her engagement with questions of authenticity or origins, belonging and fidelity is fuelled by her interest in mapping the study of world literature or carrying out comparative analysis much as the pursuit of world literature and comparative study inflect her take on authenticity etc. In keeping with the argument she develops, moreover, words like “plural,” “multidirectional,” “dynamic,” “generative,” “flexible,” “fluid,” and “dialogical” acquire considerable conceptual and emotional force, becoming integral to the reader’s

understanding of words/concepts like authenticity or belonging as they are tied to the task of cultural representation.

The meaning of translation Merrill foregrounds is equivalent to the Hindi word anuvad, which she defines as “a telling in turn” (5). The meaning more conventionally associated with translation – “The Latin-based English understanding of translated as ‘a carrying across’” (5) – is made to recede into the background until, that is, she makes it speak to her theoretical and critical investments: Averting that “the Latin root for the most common term for translation, trans-latus (“carrying across”) suggests a transaction in the most material sense, as goods transported across distances through networks that exist by and for such exchanges,” Merrill draws attention to how “people involved in those networks have negotiated the (constantly shifting) value of these translated[/transported] objects.” Emphasizing negotiation, Merrill would, therefore, have us “articulate a (meta)critical idiom more dynamic, incisive, and relational” that focuses not on the object of exchange, but on the “relationship that is formed as the text is passed along from one language speaker to the next,” making of translation “a performance in the sense of a ‘telling’” (42-43).

Predictably, the emphasis of Merrill’s understanding of translation falls on the translated text as a reading or interpretation, a re-creation of the “original” or source text deriving from what she, drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s work on irony, calls “the agential contributions of the interpreter” (72). With each successive (re)reading or (re)creation functioning as a means of revitalization of the prior version or versions,

translation comes to be seen, in Merrill's analysis, as a dynamic process through which a text undergoes constant change and re-interpretation. Merrill's understanding of translation emphasizes the gains, not losses it yields; and in this her view is at odds with some of its theorists and practitioners who focus on the loss entailed in translation. In pursuing what she considers a "more subtle inquiry" that enables her to question "the very division between true and false, original and derivative," "faithful . . . and transgressive," Merrill consistently characterizes her approach as "dynamically performative rather than statically informative" (20), much as she finds that the demand (and search) for origins and authenticity yields commentary that is "flat, humorless, static" (21) and likely to "play into the very rhetoric of colonial possession" that we should interrogate, if not altogether decry (26). However, while decrying the "rhetoric of colonial possession," Merrill does not necessarily recommend a view of translation that assumes possession by the "original" either.

It is no accident, as Merrill herself admits, that her argument finds its most significant support in translations that are an inevitable part of oral storytelling cycles, particularly those deriving from the work of award-winning Vijay Dhan Detha who "throughout his career" has rendered in writing "stories he [has] heard from politicians, prostitutes, farmers, potters, housewives, and wandering mendicants and claimed them, in part, as his own" (24). Having made these stories his own, not least by "combin[ing] fragments of various version of stories he [has] heard" or "by drawing out [a few lines] to more than thirty pages," Detha's (re)written narratives have themselves

re-entered the circuit of oral tales by being performed “out loud in storytelling sessions” (24) that in turn (re)create them, much as, as translator of Detha’s tales, Merrill has r(re) created Detha’s work in and through translation into English. In such a context, claims regarding origins and authenticity are rendered suspect, while meaning-making as an ongoing, interactive and negotiated activity among spatially and temporally distinct communities of readers and listeners is foregrounded.

Through her many renditions or, more precisely, “telling[s] in turn” of Detha’s (re)creations of oral narratives, Merrill opens up a whole new and delightful world of stories for her readers. Doing so, she seeks to (and, to my mind, succeeds in) de-parochializing not only the non-Indian reader, but also the English- but non-Rajasthani-speaking Indian reader, given that Detha has rendered his translations of oral narratives into “the local boli or spoken idiom of his native Rajasthan” that the latter is unlikely to have a sufficient grasp of. Indeed, Merrill asserts translation as an integral modality for interaction among Indians: “In multilingual India,” she notes, invoking Ganesh Devy, “all language speakers are translators, traversing categorical divisions between languages and cultures even when staying in one geographical place” (89).

Urging her readers to “recognize that translation has become a site where we might learn to better negotiate the terms of the world wide community that we are already taking a part in” (231), Merrill locates an ethics of translation in the means it

provides for “debates” across different cultures and languages “about what the world might become” (241).

As I have already noted, Merrill’s is a capacious endeavor that in any given chapter or unit of analysis puts several ideas in motion such that it is virtually impossible to summarize her arguments without doing violence to their dynamic interaction with one another. However, while this capaciousness is the book’s strength, it is also the source of a potential weakness. Sometimes her book is quite simply difficult to go through because unpacking all the interweaving strands of her multiple arguments requires patience and effort, which pays off when they add up, but sometimes they don’t and then they become a source of frustration. Her own explicit interventions aimed at guiding the reader through are unhelpful; certainly, they are less resonant than her readings of particular examples are. That said, as it should be evident from all I have said above, it’s a book I learnt much from, not least I got to hear stories that I most likely would not have heard, cultural knowledge that would have remained closed to me.

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