



Bhuture Khad: On Translating Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay's Short Story of the Wounded Earth

Dr Santanu Banerjee

Assistant Professor, Department Of English, Kazi Nazrul University, santanu.banerjee@knu.ac.in

Orcid: <https://Orcid.Org/0000-0003-1734-2579>

Dr Manish Prasad

Assistant Professor, Department Of English, St. Xavier's University Kolkata, drmanish.asansol@gmail.com

Orcid: <https://Orcid.Org/0009-0006-4034-6091>

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a famous Bengali ghost story, 'Bhuture Khad' (The Haunted Mine) by Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, through the twin lenses of environmental study and translation theory. Instead of seeing ghosts as mere monsters, we argue that the spirits of dead mine workers represent the historical wounds of environmental damage and colonial greed. In our current era of climate crisis, translating such local stories for a worldwide audience becomes a vital act of historical justice. However, this eco-translation creates a fascinating clash with some of the ideas of Walter Benjamin. While Benjamin believes that translation should lift literature into a spiritual, 'pure language' that ignores the reader, we argue that eco-literature must keep its realistic message to warn humanity. To protect the voices of exploited workers and the plundered earth, we must preserve local realities rather than blend them away into abstract harmony.

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Introduction

We all love to read ghost stories, more or less. When we think about such stories, first of all, an old ramshackle house comes to mind. Then, probably a mysterious figure roams in the dark, foggy night. And then something odd, unexpected and disturbing happens in the peaceful world. We love to read these narratives for their pleasing fear, and soon after finishing with them, we all go back to our familiar lives. But are such ghost stories a means of entertainment only?

There is a long history of ghost stories in Bengali folklore. Later, with the foundational attempts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, this genre was introduced in the main arena of literature. Thereafter came Rabindranath Tagore, who gave Bengali ghost stories a unique psychological tweak. But in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially during the *Kallol* era, a radical change took place. The new authors suddenly turned their eyes to the rough, smoky and highly realistic world of industrialisation and urbanisation. One of the most pioneering and powerful litterateurs of this group was Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay. His *Koylakuthi* series of stories opened up a new horizon in Bengali fiction. In some of his narratives the element of ghostly horror is put to use especially. These stories depart from both the age-old folk tales and the works of the early exponents of ghost stories in Bengali literature. In fact, Mukhopadhyay took refuge directly in the dark pit of the coal mines and the lives of the marginalised working class.

In this article, we will analyse one of Mukhopadhyay's well-known ghost stories namely 'Bhuture Khad' (The Haunted Mine), in the light of eco-criticism and modern translation theory. Our main arguments are twofold. First, his created ghost is nothing else but a living memory of environmental damage. Second, in the current era of global climate crisis, it is extremely important to translate such a story onto the world stage, which is probably one of the means of environmental healing and historical justice. And to find a rationale for the way such a translation should be done, in this article, we will confront the famous essay 'The Translator's Task' by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin and examine how his theory of translation gives rise to a significant conflict.

Paranormal Beings vs. Ecological Memory

Before we delve deeply into this discussion, there is a need to rethink the conventional Western meaning of the word 'Bhoot' as ghost. When we use the English term 'Ghost', we usually mean the spirit of a dead person, whose job is to scare the living. But in Bengali, the philosophical and linguistic import of the word 'Bhoot' is much deeper. Renowned linguist Sukumar Sen has explained various ramifications of this



word in his book *Golper Bhut*. He has discussed some principal meanings, which may serve as the basis for our discussion (1 - 2).

According to Sen, the first one is the *Tatsama* connotation, directly related to our physical world. Consistent with its Sanskrit root *Bhuta*, it means that which is begotten and has a real material existence. For example, by *Panchabhuta* we mean the five basic elements of nature, namely earth, water, fire, air and sky. That is, we can think that the word 'Bhoot' does not mean a supernatural entity but is rather associated with the physical environment around us and the ecosystem. When the physical environment is threatened by human oppression and the balance of the five elements is destroyed, the ecosystem is damaged. The second one is its *Tadbhava* meaning, which refers to the remnants of the past. 'Bhoot' is a past that has not been completely erased; it is a history that does not want to remain buried underground forever. It is a living memory or a *karma* that claims its rights even in the present. Even though it is past, it is not past in a real sense, and in the case of the environment, it can be interpreted as a historical wound of colonial exploitation and plunder of natural resources, from which pus and blood still ooze out. When the pain of this wound returns suddenly, and most unexpectedly, we are compelled to imagine what the situation was like before it was created. And finally, the third meaning relates to the word 'Bhuyo', which expresses a structure devoid of any substance. In Bengali, it means something false in the sense that it has been stripped of all its internal elements or essence. From the outside, the form or structure looks as intact as before, but inside there is nothing left. Perhaps it is very much the empty earth left behind by the wholesale plundering of nature by man's boundless greed.

When we combine these three meanings, the ghost is no longer an imaginary monster wallowing under the bed. It becomes the pain that constantly haunts our society and reminds us how much we have wronged nature.

The Realistic Outline of *Bhuture Khad*

The narrator of Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay's text is a modern allopathic doctor who does not easily believe in anything supernatural. He has just been transferred by the company he serves to a new coal mine. His description reveals a realistic picture of an extremely unhealthy and stifling environment in the mining area. He clearly states that in his previous workplace, the air was suffocating, and there were only slums and dirty surroundings. However, the new coal mine seems a little different to him from the outside. But is it really different?



One evening, the doctor went out for a walk alone and met a strange man. This man was very ordinary in appearance, with a slightly fat belly, a dark complexion, a long moustache, and nickel-framed glasses, and he introduced himself as the head clerk of the mine. He told the doctor that he had been working tirelessly in this mine for the past ten years without taking a single day off. He was also the one who gave the doctor an early warning about ghosts. However, the real fear of this story begins as the doctor learns about accidents that happen almost regularly in the mine. (Parabaas) Ordinary labourers often die and get buried underground during those accidents. Many people believe that the dead men and women, as ghosts, continue their daily labour at night. Reading Mukhopadhyay's other story titled 'Raising Report', which is actually complementary to 'Bhuture Khad', hints are received regarding the mystery of these ghosts. Mukhopadhyay tells how nature and human being are simultaneously exploited by the colonial and capitalist systems to make a profit. While in art, ordinary realism has its own limits, greater truth is often presented by renowned artists by stretching the boundaries of realism. Just as Charles Dickens did in his unforgettable 'The Signal Man' and 'A Christmas Carol', Mukhopadhyay also introduces a ghost in his narrative: the spirit of the dead labourer Twila, a representative of the poor tribal people.

The Blending of Traditions

It is noteworthy that when Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay was writing against the backdrop of industrialised and urbanised Bengal, his style was approaching the elegance of some Western, mainly late Victorian English authors. Specifically, it seems that his storytelling formula is quite in tune with M. R. James and E. F. Benson. The two most valuable ingredients of a successful ghost story are creating the right atmosphere and building a crescendo or climax very subtly. The reader must first be introduced to the central characters' very calm, familiar and ordinary lives, where there will be no hint of evil. And it is in this calmness that the supernatural will suddenly pop up its head, and surprise the reader. Similarly, M. R. James argued that a modern and realistic setting can strike a lot more fear in the reader's mind than a broken castle from the distant past. A contemporary setting is necessary in a ghost story that the reader sees with his own eyes every day and whose naturalness he or she can judge for himself or herself. Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay uses the same technique in 'Bhuture Khad'. He introduces us to the daily life of someone whose job is to treat the mine workers. The ghost in the story does not come on a terribly stormy night. He comes to the doctor as part of the daily routine of an ordinary working-class environment.

Extractive Ecosystems and the Wounds of Postcolonial Environment

To understand why the setting of these stories is changing from rural to semi-urban coal mines, we need to refer to Elizabeth Caroline Miller's theory of 'Extraction Ecologies'. Miller shows in her book that



the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century completely changed people's primitive view of the world. (198 -203) In the pre-industrial era, human life was governed by agriculture and the laws of nature's renewable seasonal cycles. But with the rise of steam power, modern empires became completely dependent on underground mineral resources and fossil fuels. The earth was no longer seen as a living habitat or mother, but as a vast vault. The main goal of mankind is to plunder all the resources from there. Famous writers in this era first began to understand and explain that this unlimited resource extraction was pushing the world towards an irreversible destruction.

In this regard, it may be said that when the British Empire started coal mining in Bengal, it introduced an extremely cruel and exploitative system. This history of exploitation throws some important post-colonial as well as eco-critical questions before us. These mines were started by colonial rulers and capitalist corporations, whose only goal was to make profits. But in this business, the worst affected were the local people who were dying every day in the poisonous and dark tunnels. At the same time, the impact on nature was terrible, as fertile agricultural land was destroyed and forests were cleared. When the profit-making companies were digging their mines, the tribals were driven off their habitats. The mine owners did not keep any accurate record of the displacements and deaths of their workers; as a result, these people were lost in the pages of history.

Imagined in this way, Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay's text appears to be a unique symbol of a historical and ecological trauma. The ghosts that roam the darkness of the mine are actually suppressed voices of those nameless workers. At the same time, they act as a silent protest of the wounded nature. The text is therefore not building a fictional horror; it is portraying an absolute social reality, highlighting the terrible truth of colonialist and capitalist exploitations under the veil of the supernatural, which common history texts often fail to recognise.

Eco-translation

Now, the question is, how do we bring this local experience to the planetary reader in the Anthropocene, where human activity has become the chief driving force behind climate and environmental change (Chakrabarty 23 - 48). It is noticeable in this context that when on one hand, Amitabh Ghosh laments that in India, modern literature of the mainstream suffers from a kind of inertia, because it is unable to directly address such a real crisis as climate change (30 -32); it is on the other, Michael Cronin argues that translation can play a historical role in breaking this inertia, because it not merely unites two languages and cultures, but revives the environmental experiences on the planetary level (1 -3, 120). It means that when a translator translates Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay's story into English or any *lingua franca*, he or she



accomplishes three very important tasks. Firstly, he or she shows the world how even a century ago, Bengali authors were able to perceive the real character of the plundering of nature. Secondly, through translation, he or she demonstrates to the international community that today's environmental crisis is not a sudden event but the result of a long historical process of colonial exploitation. And finally, he or she helps people understand exactly where our relationship with nature has become dismembered, which in turn shows the way of needful environmental actions. Therefore, eco-translation of this ghost story is not just a change of language or culture; it must be rethought as a political and environmental responsibility.

Confronting Walter Benjamin

When we confront the moral and political assertions of eco-translation with Walter Benjamin's, 'The Translator's Task,' a sharp clash takes place over the concept of textual survival (Benjamin 151 -157). Benjamin introduces the notion that a great work of art possesses an independent afterlife (*Fortleben*), which calls out for translation only if it has achieved historical fame. This afterlife is a sacred, and a linguistic transition where the original text is elevated into a higher and purer linguistic sphere. However, the kind of afterlife witnessed in eco-literature such as the text of Mukhopadhyay presents an unambiguous contrast. It is not any spiritual elevation, but a living human being transforming into a ghost. While Benjamin views the afterlife as an objective and upward historical development of literature, the ghost represents a historical trauma that rises from the darkness of the mines to haunt the present. It brings us back down to the ground, to the plundered earth left behind after all the coal has been extracted. It is material reality, not a spiritual form.

This reality challenges Benjamin's declaration that it is never useful to take the reader into account when trying to understand a work of art. He further argues that any translation attempting to transmit a message is inherently a poor translation because communication is superfluous to true literature. In this era of climate crisis, literature cannot be treated as something that ignores the reader's reception. When Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay depicts the realities of a mining region, the text carries a very realistic, social and political message showing how the human soul is being appalled by capitalism and how natural resources are plundered by tearing open nature's breast. If an eco-translator were to follow Benjamin and dismiss this message as unimportant, he or she would commit a grave error by silencing the voices of the neglected miners once again. In eco-translation, the communicative message is not secondary. It is a realistic warning to save humanity, which should not be ignored.

A similar ideological rift emerges when the complex notion of "pure language" (*reine Sprache*) is closely examined (Benjamin 156 -164). Benjamin distinguishes between the intended object and the mode



of intention, saying that while different languages point to the same object, their unique intentional modes come into conflict and exclude one another. He asserts that individual languages are imperfect fragments that must complement each other through translation. And this would eventually dissolve all individual communication and meaning into pure language. Yet, standing against the backdrop of Mukhopadhyay's mines, we cannot dissolve local meanings into an abstract harmony. To understand and preserve the history of colonial and capitalist exploitation, we must hold the precise heaviness of specific local terms such as *coolie*, *khad*, and *kaylakuthi*. These words contain a specific mode of intent that smells of sweat, blood, and coal dust. Burning these material realities in the fire of a pure language would be a theoretical imperialism.

However, despite all of these differences, there is a shared rejection of “domestication” in translation. Benjamin supposes the common mistake of translators trying force a foreign text into the comfortable habits of their own native language. He argues that the translator must try to expand the target language under the intense pressure of the foreign tongue. To achieve this goal, a translation does not smoothly resemble the original's meaning but fashions its language to fit the unique contours of the original's mode of intention. It is indeed a proper way to call those nameless workers and the ghosts of endangered nature buried underground to the world stage, in another tongue.

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