

Translating Matricide: Orestes and Parashuram

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Abstract: This paper examines an unexpected encounter, and the conversation that unfolds, between Orestes, the ancient Greek prince, and Parashuram, the ancient Indian sage. This dialogue, found in Sisir Kumar Das' Bengali collection *Aloukik Sanglap* (Unearthly Dialogues, 2011) contains a series of speculative conversations, in modern Bengali, between ancient Greek and ancient Hindu characters, forming a fascinating triangulation of cultures. But how does such a conversation become possible? What does such an impossible translation bring to light? This paper will analyze the dialogue titled *Dui Matrichati* ("Two matricides"), referring to Orestes' and Parashuram's crime of murdering their own mothers. Drawing on the works of thinkers like Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Emanuela Bianchi, and Iris Young, I will consider how ancient Greek and Hindu thinking about the maternal-feminine (fails to) translate into each other. I shall read this dialogue in the context of ancient representations of the mother, the law of the father in psychoanalysis, and the possibility of unpredictable friendships grounded on the untranslatable.

Keywords: Orestes, Parasurama, Mahabharata, matricide, female sexuality

For having avenged his father's murder by killing his own mother, the young prince Orestes is being pursued across the ancient Greek landscape by the enraged Furies, whose duty is to protect the sacred ties of kinship. Orestes has been running without rest for seven days straight, looking for a place to hide, his feet bleeding, when he bumps into a foreign traveler. The traveler offers Orestes shelter in his leaf hut and introduces himself as Parashuram, a young sage from India. In the conversation that gradually unfolds between two complete strangers, under the silent glow of this fortuitous gesture of hospitality, both discover shocking truths, unexpected affinities, and a shared fate. Parashuram eventually confesses that he too is guilty of matricide: he had killed his mother on the command of his father, who suspected her of having desired another man. "It was perhaps for meeting you that I had been waiting at this deserted mountain for I know not how many years," says Parashuram to Orestes. "I have been to many a pilgrimage, travelled many countries. I have seen numerous gods carved into idols. But for the first time today I see myself in you. You are not you, you are me, you are my mirror, you are my shadow. O prince, fate has sent you to me" (Das 47-48).¹

This conversation is not from a lost Greek play, nor from an ancient Sanskrit text. It can be found in a Bengali book written by Sisir Kumar Das and published as recently as 2011. The book, aptly titled *Aloukik Sanglap* (Unearthly Dialogues), contains a series of speculative conversations, in modern Bengali, between ancient Greek and ancient Hindu characters, forming a fascinating triangulation of cultures. But how is such a conversation rendered possible? How do ancient Greek and Hindu thinking translate into each other? What happens when such thinking, already so distant from us, is translated to modern Bengali, and then again into English, as I am doing here? What is lost? What remains untranslatable? In this paper, I read the dialogue "Two Matricides" from Das's dialogues, referring to Orestes' and Parashuram's crime of killing their own mothers. As the two men pour their hearts out to each other, Orestes remains unflinching in his belief that he has committed no crime: avenging Agamemnon was his filial duty, even if it meant

murdering his own mother. While Parashuram agrees that he too was carrying out his duties as a son, his attitude is often more ambivalent and skeptical regarding their actions. He confronts Orestes on the inescapable cycle of revenge, asking whether revenge can ever be coterminous with justice, whether the logic of revenge does not then justify the wrath of the Furies, whether revenge is anything more than an uncritical adherence to tradition. Orestes, however, remains unconvinced, attributing Parashuram's guilt to a mind clouded by morality:

Orestes: I just can't make sense of what you are saying, Parashuram. Your mind is being dictated by a strong sense of morality. You are so scared, so weak because the one you killed is your mother. Had you killed some other woman, you possibly wouldn't be so unsettled.

Parashuram: Well said, Orestes. You too are being dictated by morality. It is the morality of the father. You want to avenge your father's death, hence your mother's death is of no consequence. My morality too is the father's. I have obeyed his order, hence mother's death hardly matters. The father and the mother. The seed and the field. To whom does the harvest owe more? (55)

Parashuram is here broaching a question that resonates across ancient and modern debates about the role of the woman in birth, in the origins of life as such. Ancient representations of women, in both Greece and India, frequently use the metaphors of seed and field, plough and furrow, to denote the difference between the sexes and their role in human reproduction. Ancient Sanskrit texts repeatedly mark sexual difference by using the metaphors of *Bija* (seed) and *Ksetra* (field). Page DuBois has drawn attention to the ample evidence in Greek myth and literature for the analogy between the earth and the female body as sites of unbridled fecundity. Homer describes the earth as "much-nourishing," "grain-giving," "much-feeding," adjectives that emphasize the mother's creating and nurturing capacities. In the preagricultural economy of Homer's *Iliad*, the intercourse between Zeus and Hera results in the flowering of the earth (Book 14). With the shift to an agricultural economy based on property rights in classical times, the female body is increasingly seen as a furrow to be ploughed by the rightful husband. The ploughing imagery is most commonly used in reference to the plight of Oedipus, who had unwittingly impregnated his own mother. In *Seven Against Thebes*, Aeschylus describes him as "father-murdering Oedipus,/ who sowed his mother's sacred womb,/ whence he had sprung himself" (ll. 752-54). Tiresias, in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, calls him "a fellow sower (*homosporos*) in his father's bed" (ll. 459) and Oedipus describes his mother's womb as "this field of double sowing whence I sprang/ and where I sowed my children!" (ll. 1255-57).

To whom, then, does the harvest owe more? To whom should Orestes and Parashuram be more obliged? In classical psychoanalytic discourse, the child's natural bond with the mother must be intercepted by the law of the father. The specter of the Oedipus complex, threatening the father with death and the child with neurosis, must be resolved so that the individual may smoothly transition into a socially functioning subject. The Oedipus complex is both the stumbling block and the stepping stone in this passage into civilization, an initiation rite that stabilizes and guarantees patrilineal succession. Froma Zeitlin has read Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as the archetypal text for this transition of the subject into paternal law which must conclude with the man's mastery over the woman. In the first play of the trilogy, Clytemnestra is the strong, rebellious, desiring woman who is plotting against the masculine regime of her husband Agamemnon and is in an affair with another man, Aegisthus. After brutally murdering Agamemnon, she is in turn killed by their son Orestes who colludes with her sister Electra to avenge their father's death. Consequently, the Furies, as embodiment of the archaic feminine principle, torment and hunt Orestes down until his case is championed by Athena at Apollo's court. Apollo and Athena justify the

superiority of husband-king-male over wife-queen-female by first arguing that conjugality is more important than blood ties, and then by asserting the primacy of the father in reproduction. Apollo unambiguously states, “The mother is not the true parent of the child” but merely “a nurse who tends the growth/ of young seed planted by its true parent, the male” (ll. 657-59). As an example of the perfection of androgenetic creation, he points to Athena, born of Zeus’ head, who gives the final vote acquitting Orestes of all guilt. Athena claims, “No mother gave me birth,” (ll. 735) proclaiming that the crime of matricide is outweighed by the murder of the husband-king-male.

It is perhaps no wonder then that Orestes, in Das’ “Two Matricides,” cannot seem to comprehend Parashuram’s dilemmas regarding his crime. While Orestes is yet to reach Apollo’s court, Aeschylus’ play tells us that the patriarchal culture of Greece would make sure that he finds there an unqualified vindication of his filial allegiance. Yet Das’ dialogue introduces a strange gap, an unexpected moment of hesitation, in this narrative: the tired Orestes pauses to take a breath, encounters a traveler from a far-off land, tries to listen to a way of thinking he cannot fully understand. Towards the end of their conversation, as Orestes is getting ready to resume his flight, Parashuram advises him to think more deeply, as “our actions would decide the future of civilization” (56). What would be the stakes of taking Parashuram’s advice seriously and rethinking the history of civilization? Ancient Sanskrit texts tell us that Parashuram’s story ended with the return of the mother – a point that Das’ retelling of the story does not consider. In these ancient narratives, Parashuram’s father, happy that his son has obeyed his order, asks him to make a wish. Parashuram uses this opportunity to have his mother returned to life unscathed. This story reveals a secret complicity between the mother and the son that has the potential to undermine the law of the father by turning it to their advantage. Is it then possible to understand the process of civilization as other than one that requires the repudiation, murder, and overcoming of the mother? What can we learn by resituating psychoanalysis in a different economy of desire, one that does not simplistically reproduce the logic of castration, penis envy, and lack?

In her theory of the semiotic *chora*, Julia Kristeva identifies the maternal body as the realm of a mobile, rhythmic, and vocal organization of pre-Oedipal, semiotic drives that are anterior to the symbolic order of language. The mother’s body, for Kristeva, is the site of an unrepresentable, pre-discursive, abyssal experience, “a thoroughfare, a threshold where ‘nature’ confronts ‘culture’” (“Motherhood” 238). Maternity represents for her a “material compulsion, spasm of a memory” (239) in which instinctual drives, as yet unsymbolized, are constantly struggling for expression. Describing the semiotic *chora* as the mediating ground for the subject’s entry into paternal law, she writes, “[i]ndifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation” (*Revolution* 29). According to Kristeva, in the experience of maternity, the subject undergoes a radical diremption where the boundaries of the self and the other become tenuous, fluid, even unthinkable, and where the alterity within the self emerges as an issue for ethics. If the thetic break initiated by the castration complex marks the child’s entry into the law of the father, the *chora*, now as the abjected maternal body, continues to haunt the subject, as a longing to fall back into the choric plenitude, as the fear of being consumed by the phallic mother, or as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one’s subjectivity. For Judith Butler, however, Kristeva’s theorization naturalizes a specific cultural configuration of maternity and ends up consolidating the power of the very law that it seeks to destabilize. In “The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva,” Butler argues that for Kristeva, the symbolic order remains thoroughly paternal, in which it is impossible for the feminine to find cultural intelligibility except for temporary eruptions in art, or, more dangerously, through the experience of psychosis and the collapse of cultural life itself. In granting motherhood an ontological

status that is prior to language, Kristeva reifies it in a way that leaves unexamined its construction through discursive mechanisms. As Kristeva maintains the Lacanian stance that the incest taboo founds the subject by severing its relation of maternal dependence, poetic language for her necessarily marks a return to the maternal terrain, thus threatening the subject with psychosis. Butler criticizes Kristeva for not questioning how the “maternal body” might be an effect of the law rather than its cause, how culture might be prohibitive and generative at once, and how repression might actually produce the object it appears to deny. Butler writes:

The law that is said to repress the semiotic may well be the governing principle of the semiotic itself, with the result that what passes as “maternal instinct” may well be a culturally constructed desire which is interpreted through a naturalistic vocabulary. And if that desire is constructed according to a law of kinship which requires the heterosexual production and reproduction of desire, then the vocabulary of naturalistic affect effectively renders that “paternal law” invisible. What Kristeva refers to as a “pre-paternal causality” would then appear as a paternal causality under the guise of a natural or distinctively maternal causality. (115)

For Butler, the maternal body here becomes no more than another manifestation of the law, such that “a full scale refusal of the symbolic [remains] impossible, and a discourse of emancipation, for Kristeva, is out of the question” (110).

Against Butler’s indubitably powerful critique of the *chora*, Emanuela Bianchi offers a phenomenological reading that urges us to see Kristeva’s identification of the mother with the *chora* as figurative instead of literal. In turning to the question of ethics, Bianchi interprets the *chora* as figuring an originary dynamic between self and other where – as in the touching-touched relationality of Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm or Irigaray’s two lips – one side is not subsumed to the other. In this sense, the maternal body emerges as not reducible but “strictly only apprehensible as *chora*, as restless motility, as the dispersal and separation of *choriston*, as an impossible traversal of the unthinkable and unrepresentable abyss between self and other, and as a vertiginous abyss within flesh, within being, within language itself” (139). Similarly, Iris Young, influenced by Kristeva’s analysis, writes about the possibility of a mother-child relationship *within* culture that is not necessarily founded on the violent break from the maternal body. In her essay called “Breasted Experience,” the mother’s body, flowing with sexual drives and desires, becomes a way to reclaim an erotic bond with the child. Young argues that patriarchy has always tried to desexualize mothers because the association of motherhood and sexuality threatens the heteronormative order. This separation between motherhood and sexuality is important for patriarchy in order to ensure her dependence on the man for pleasure. If, for instance, it is acknowledged that the mother experiences erotic pleasure in suckling her child, this would mean that she may find the man dispensable, even within a heterosexual economy. The sexuality of the mother’s breast is therefore suppressed by patriarchal culture and is relegated only to its nurturing function. Young interprets the breasts as a bodily site where motherhood and sexuality flow together. If the mother takes pleasure as well as gives pleasure while nurturing her child, then the conception of woman as an idealized self-sacrificing nurturer dissolves. Young maintains that nurturing is an exchange of pleasure, even sexual pleasure, between the mother and the child that threatens patriarchal control over feminine sexuality:

When I began nursing I sat stiff in a chair, holding the baby in the crook of my arm, discreetly lifting my shirt and draping it over my breast. This was mother work, and I was efficient and gentle, and watched the time. After some weeks, drowsy during the morning feeding, I went to bed with my baby. I felt that I had crossed a forbidden river as I moved toward the bed, stretched her legs out alongside my reclining torso, me lying on my side like a cat or a mare while my baby suckled. This was pleasure, not work. I lay there as she made love to me, snuggling her legs up to my stomach, her hand stroking my breast, my

chest. She lay between me and my lover, and she and I were a couple. From then on I looked forward with happy pleasure to our early-morning intercourse, she sucking at my hard fullness, relieving and warming me, while her father slept. (88–89)

For Young, the erotic relationship between mother and child is a scandal as it shatters the fine line between motherhood and sexuality, renders it undecidable. Even while acknowledging the dangers in defining the maternal body as an extra-discursive site, it would be productive for feminism to say yes to this undecidability, to think through the possibilities it opens up for a feminist ethics that recognizes the radical alterity within language, law, subjectivity, and that does not shy away from affirming sexual difference.

This would also return us to Parashuram and his secret pact with his mother, a pact that would utilize the father's phallic, wish-granting power to undermine his own authority. Unlike Orestes' absolute submission to a paternal law that is founded on a primal matricide, Parashuram's story concludes with the mother's return and thus remains open to other configurations of desire. In Das' reimagining of this encounter between the two, there is a brief moment when Orestes does seem to pause and introspect, as he recalls listening to his dead mother's eyes speaking to him in a language he could not translate. He tells Parashuram that even as he was scurrying through the forests to escape the Furies, he saw two eyes in the moon speak out to him "in another language" ("*onno bhashay*"), urging him to question his dogged belief in the logic of revenge (53). In this medley of different languages imagined by Das – the Greek of Orestes, the Sanskrit of Parashuram, the Bengali through which they attempt to communicate, the sounds of the Furies charging towards Orestes, and even the strange lunar language through which the mother speaks – one wonders whether any translation is possible at all, whether these sounds and voices end up as anything more than desperate noises lost in confusion.

And yet, this encounter between the two heroes ends on a note of declared friendship. The dialogue had begun with Orestes addressing Parashuram as "*bideshi jatri*" ("foreign traveler", 43); it ends with him telling Parashuram "*biday bondhu*, Parashuram" ("goodbye friend, Parashuram", 56). While the dialogue suspends the final word on whether Parashuram could make his thoughts intelligible to Orestes, suggesting instead the possibility of a total failure of communication, what transpires even in this failure, even in this inability to listen to the other speaking, is the journey from "foreigner" (*xenos*) to "friend" (*philos*). The encounter between Orestes and Parashuram, then, instead of synthesizing two individuals and cultures in a way that would disavow and erase their difference, points towards a friendship (*philia*) that is founded on the untranslatable. As Parashuram tells Orestes towards the end of their conversation (in Bengali, of course), "We are treading the same path, we share the same destiny, and yet we are different" (56). While Parashuram had previously called Orestes his own reflection, he now begins to realize that despite the convergences between their actions, their ethical responses are after all distinct, that the image reflected in the mirror does not neatly coincide with oneself, that one's shadow is perhaps never fully one's own, that there is something that resists translation.

And yet, it is this very non-coincidence of their respective positions that brings them closer and turns them into friends, as they begin to share a bond that remains open to possibilities that are otherwise than the mere self-duplication of identity. Indeed, such a bond thrusts the friends beyond themselves and towards an open horizon where it would no longer be possible to simplistically even speak of identity, as if identity could be preserved intact and pure, uncontaminated by the alterity that the other activates in oneself, as if border policing and anti-immigration laws could readily stave off such a contamination. It is perhaps not a coincidence then that this arrival at a friendship grounded on difference happens through a dialogue on the maternal body, the site that figuratively stands for the fundamental schism within language and being. It is as if only in speaking of that maternal

territory where the boundaries between self and other become porous and fragile (without ever being reduced to one another) that these two ancient characters can speak (in) their difference. While acknowledging that both of them had acted according to what Parashuram calls “the morality of the father,” their dialogue gestures towards an ethics that is otherwise than paternal. Speaking in modern Bengali about the mother (and her possible return), an ancient Greek and an ancient Hindu hero thus arrive at a logic of friendship and hospitality that is based not on complete agreement, mirroring, or even understanding (of) the other, but instead on a sharing that is pervaded by difference, loss, and untranslatability, pointing to the self-differing nature of friendship as such – friendship as less a transactional reciprocity than an experience of a radical incommensurability within oneself, as a continuous and in(de)finite grappling with the language of the foreigner – friendship itself as foreign, the stranger a friend, the self always already a stranger to itself.

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Notes

¹ All translations from this text are my own. No translation of this text exists yet and I have obtained the official rights to translate it into English.

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