



## **Narrating the Unheard Voices of Children: Translation beyond Time and History**

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**Abstract:** Drawing on the dynamic power-shift in the time of globalization where the cultural as well as political “other” came to be illuminated, this article focuses on how the child-eye-view is effective in the project of re-reading or re-constructing history. Especially in telling the negative side of human history, those voices of children who could not but live through harsh reality, Anne Frank’s for example, are so vital as to question what endures time. Both as narrator and witness, child-figures in the stories metaphorically translate “ history” into the lived moment of human experience, while creating an arena where past, present, and even the future meet with each other.

**Keywords:** “Otherness,” sense of history, Holocaust, translation.

### **Introduction: From silence to language**

“The Strength of the Minorities” is closely related with “globalism” in our modern world per se, for the project of coordinating the inherent and expressive powers of “minorities” is itself embedded in our literature today. It seems to me the term has somehow taken the place of post-colonial criticism as a literary term. Elleke Boehmer, a post-colonial theorist and scholar of Oxford University, stated in her academic concern with the recent discussions regarding the term “postcolonialism” that it is “a name for a critical theoretical approach in literary and cultural studies, but it also, as importantly, designates a politics of transformational resistance to unjust and unequal forms of political and cultural authority which extends back across the twentieth century, and beyond” (Boehmer, 2005: 340). Particularly after the Second World War, the colonial authorities in the West were challenged and overturned by the widespread upsurge of nationalism of those countries once colonized, while the critical theories illuminating the problems of hegemonic imperial power and its history were stimulated by such intellectuals as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and so on. It is in this change of climate that so-called the minorities and the oppressed came to be recognized as a postcolonial response to the modern age.

Therefore the new consciousness leading the ‘hegemonic’ power-structure that had been dominant over the globe to destruction has accelerated our desire to see the world as something inexplicably hybrid and multiple instead. That dynamic power-shift



is itself globalization, re-reading world history by re-fixing the axis from euro-centric to the multicultural context. The major point to be illuminated in the process is the recognition of both the cultural and the political “other” which had long been made invisible by the politics of power. With the emergence of “the other” as equal counterpart of “the self”, what used to be “invisible” and “unheard” came to be illuminated from the realm of silence to the forefront of “language,” as we can see in the so-called minority literature by African writers, or in Holocaust fictions.

It is here in this process that ‘children’s literature’ is so vitally able to function to illuminate “others” not as sub-culture but as something more important in viewing history from a different angle through child-eye-view. Especially when we think of the negative aspects of the past, Holocaust for example, those voices of children who could not but live through harsh reality exhibit a certain analogy with postcolonial discourse in which the silenced voices of the past have been gradually expressed in different narratives with different knowledge of the world.

### **Language beyond time**

Anne Frank who left her diary has inspired many contemporary children’s writers, which proved that history could be handed down to the following generations through children’s literature, continuously re-told and re-narrated in the new lights of the time we live in. What is remarkable with Anne’s *Diary* is its narrator’s eye-view of a teenage-girl: Both with a similar eye-view with readers whose experience of life is still uncertain and without the knowledge of the fate that awaited her — which is obviously a great gap between Anne and the readers —, she again and again expressed her aspiration towards the positive future. Anne Frank, a real figure of the past talks not only about her ‘present’ but about the future. Here, past and present, and even the future, come across in readers’ mind. Sense of history as something continuous is coming across with the search of selfhood in the course of reading where readers meet with Anne Frank.

Aidan Chambers highly appreciated Anne Frank being “a teenage philosopher,”



“studied life, using herself as her specimen, and found universal truths in herself.” as we can see in his acceptance speech of the Hans Christian Andersen Award;

*The Diary of Anne Frank* is a great work of literature. It is also one of the few great books written by someone in their teens. It demonstrates with innocent clarity precisely what young people in their early adolescence are capable of thinking and of feeling of understanding, and of writing (Chambers, 2002).

Christopher Bigsby interestingly appreciates Anne Frank’s *Diary* in his book on Holocaust literature, pointing out that it develops “an idealistic vision of the world... no matter the ending might be tragic or happy” (Bigsby, 2006: 226). What is important is not “what” its content is, but “how” the human experience is expressed to be shared.

Being a schoolteacher himself when starting his career as a writer for adolescent readers, Aidan Chambers sensed Anne’s insightful talent. It is his heartfelt respect to this girl of 15 whose life was physically destroyed by Nazi Annihilation but whose words and spirit outlived her that urged him to make Anne Frank revive in his masterpiece *Postcards from No Man’s Land* (1999). Young Jacob Todd, a teenage protagonist, also a freak of Anne Frank himself – he never doubted that the diary was written for him –, came to know the historical facts in the time of War through his journey to Holland tracing back his grandfather’s footpath who died there. As Chambers himself said that “*Anne’s Diary* is a record of the human journey to self-consciousness”, the process of how Jacob eventually gets to self-awareness is narrated in the paralleled voices of Anne Frank and Jacob’s. Reflecting his inner emotions and quest in Anne’s words in the *Diary*, he tries to find his own self between the lines, between the experience of Anne in the past and his own in reality, and between “the other” and “the self.” In this sense, the imagined dialogue between Jacob and Anne becomes to be a key-note to make sense of the stories of “the others”, of the past, and of the inter-textual past at the same time.

Another important protagonist, old Geertrui lying in bed in a hospital while trying to record her past-story with the help of her grandson, represents in the novel a voice that used to be unheard, also echoing Anne Frank’s. She was eventually proved to be the woman who had loved Jacob’s grandfather with each other when he was taken



care of after the serious injury during the war. The sealed story of the past was gradually unveiled in her narrative which would not have been revealed without her strong will to record her own words, just as Anne kept her diary to make her voice heard in the future. Geertrui, an obscure figure in history, is an implied “everybody” who lives his/her life in a certain time of history, sometimes in adversity, and in the blessed time on other occasions. Each voice might remain unheard until somebody else tries to be intent upon hearing it.

Here is the point; by making the unheard voices of the obscure people speak out in the story with the help of reflection of Anne Frank, Chambers provides his novel with another sphere of history. Another sphere here signifies “sense of continuity” that makes history alive in human consciousness. Jacob’s self-awareness is the newly revealed knowledge that his own existence definitely has connections with “others” in the past, though they are no more present in the world. He feels that the unknown grandfather whom he had never met while alive, is now with him. He knows that Geertrui will be talking to him, even after she passes away. The dialogues are always possible whenever we have ears to listen to the voices of others, and have hearts to remember the past. Among the voices of the others, we can find not only Anne’s, but also many obscure people like Geertrui. So, what Chambers has done by so-called double narratives in this book is to make not only Jacob but also readers realize that many unheard voices were there in the “no man’s land” behind Anne Frank.

As is often cited in translation studies today, meaning of the original text does not reside in itself, but in the third space of “in between” emerged from the dialogism as Mikhail Bakhtin argues (Bakhtin, 1981). As he emphasizes, multiplicity of juxtaposed voices are important rather than one single voice. Here again, we are reminded that to get ears to listen to the voices of “others” is significant. To be conscious of language and of its multi-layered nature would therefore motivate our desire to know much more about reality, and now, the hybrid world in the time of globalization.

### **Language as savior**

The thematic concern with the power of language is quite interestingly vital in



the Holocaust fictions. Especially for those writers who survived the Shoah, Elie Wiesel for example, it was language and words that helped them to be liberated from the inexplicable trauma that had haunted them for long. Those writers of the second generation of the Holocaust however, often write memoirs of their childhood, being at once “translators” of the historical records and “narrators” of the stories.

Eva Hoffman, whose experience of being a child of the Holocaust survivors is painfully yet beautifully expressed in her self-reflective language of her biographical novels such as *Lost in Translation* (1989) and *After Such Knowledge* (2004), recalls that her first memory was war. At the beginning of the first chapter of *After Such Knowledge*, she remarks; “In the beginning was the war. That was my childhood theory of origins, akin perhaps to certain childhood theories of sexuality. For me, the world as I knew it and the people in it emerged not from the womb, but from war” (Hoffman, 2004: 3). Here again, we are reminded that “childhood” is itself the time with its own autonomy and authenticity which could not be judged from adults’ view. Being born after Anne Frank’s death into the second generation of the Holocaust, Hoffman could not but bear the burden of her parents’ painful memories and loss on the one hand, and be always aware that “how we interpret the implications of our primary narrative, how we translate psychic information into information about the world, matters for more than ourselves” (Ibid.: 103) on the other.

Here again, “children’s voices” are crucially important. By employing the child’s eye-view, a writer can create the arena that enables the story to be told in multi-vocal narratives; looking back into the trauma of the past with a certain distance and with the knowledge s/he acquired afterward, while seeing a child’s reality as on-going event irresistibly given. The former narrative is that of the “translator” while the latter is of “narrator” as witness. It was only after Hoffman wrote on her childhood memory in language not of her own mother country but of the one she consciously acquired that she could liberate herself. Childhood and memory are irresistibly intertwined with language, for language is in nature what develops human consciousness in child’s psych, transforming images into something more enduring. By recollecting her childhood in the realm of language, Hoffman retrieves lost childhood in terms of



“memory.”

And so, the story is a dialogue between “the translator” of her past and “the narrator” who actualizes the imagined past in the narrative. Readers are therefore advised to read the story by making dialogues with those voices heard from the multi-layered arena, which is itself an experience of “reading”.

Anne Michaels’ fiction *Fugitive Pieces* (1998), a story of a boy who scarcely escaped Nazi Annihilation and who tried to regain his “self” by learning foreign languages and finally to be a writer, is a good example to see how the multi-vocal narrative invites readers to be conscious of the power of language. Actually, the implication is the power of language that can regain what is lost, as Jakob, another protagonist with a different spelling from Chambers’, finds new “meanings” in languages and pours them into his past that was once lost. The author does not have any direct connections with the Holocaust herself, but her poetic imagination illuminates the nature of “loss” in human history, referring to the Holocaust and the Civil War in Greece where so many “voices” were made unheard and silenced. Jakob was accidentally discovered by Athos, a Greek Archaeologist, who took orphaned Jakob to Greece where he stepped forward into the new realm of language. Here is a quotation of Jakob’s narrative, looking back into his past: “Gradually Athos and I learned each other’s languages. A little of my Yiddish, with smatterings of mutual Polish. His Greek and English. We took new words into our mouths like foreign foods” (Michaels,1998: 21).

Through different languages, old Athos and young Jakob come to share their knowledge of each other, which eventually unites them deep in their emotions. The new lights of language invite Jakob to see the new world, into time, and into reality emerging in front of him. So it happened, and Jakob finds his way to recover himself from the loss and begins to step forward to the future, instead of going back to the past. He recollects later; “Four years I was confined to small rooms. But Athos gave me another realm to inhabit, big as the globe and expansive as time” (Ibid.: 29). We can see even in these short passages that “language” is a key for us to have encounter with “others” and their world.



Memories of trauma, narrated by 7-old-year child's eye-view with a sharpening sentiment of Jakob, are followed by the recollections thereafter of the experience given to him through new language, which gradually transforms the whole story into that of spiritual redemption.

In a different context, however, I would like to quote a very impressive passage that refers to language and memory.

Memory is in the end not, as Nietzsche thought, the enemy of peace but ultimately its repository. In one sense we are all exiles, speaking a language inadequate to express our needs and fears, yet exile offers its gifts, a perspective, a different sense of time and place which has its own acuties (Bigsby, 2006: 111).

“Exile” here reminds us of Jakob who was astray in the vast unknown world, but just as he could firmly get the world in his own hands with the power of language, literature as something like “repository” of memory, is sure to illuminate our inherent power to communicate with others, and with the world. In the era of globalization, power of language is much more expected than ever.

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