



## ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN MAINSTREAMING DALIT LITERATURE – AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN TRANSLATION

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### ABSTRACT

The rich diversity of human community cannot be appreciated or even understood without the essential tool of translation and it plays an important role in the literary life of India which in its multilingual, multicultural nature, is a microcosm of the whole world. The marginalization of the Dalits in India by the hierarchical upper-castes and the resultant sorrows and sufferings, their culture and beliefs which had been hitherto unrevealed in the mainstream literature is now exposed to the world through the literature of their own. Since many works of Dalit Literature are available in regional languages restricting them to respective regions, English translation of some of the texts seems to be a conduit to take the translated Dalit Literature closer to mainstream literature. Analyzing some translated autobiographies such as Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*, the present paper attempts to show the role of translation in the expansion of Dalit literature from the frontiers of marginal literature towards mainstream literature.

**Key Words:** Translation, Dalit, Conduit, Frontier, Mainstream.

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Literature is a window that provides space for the voices that have been silenced or remained suppressed for a long time to ventilate their views and translations widen the network of readers by breaking down the linguistic barriers and by disintegrating cultural borders. It makes the peripheral experience available to a larger public through its reproduction in connecting it to a language like English. Translation not only plays an important role in terms of creating an ethical impact upon the unruly self usually from the superior class, but also opens a moral strip within the hardened self of the inferiors.

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sorrows and sufferings, their culture and beliefs which had been hitherto unrevealed in the mainstream literature is now exposed to the world through the literature of their own. Since many works of Dalit Literature are available in regional languages restricting them to respective regions, English is the only access to Dalit Literature in different languages through translation. With the global status acquired by English, it is playing a pivotal role in transnationalizing the vernacular literary works from their restricted reach to the global domain. Translation of Dalit texts into English is not only an empowerment of Dalit writers but it is also enrichment of literature in English. English translation of Dalit Literature seems to be an eye-

opener for the Indian society in particular as it has been petrified with social bias and prejudice since long. At the same time English can also be a conduit to take the translated Dalit Literature closer to mainstream literature.

As far as Dalit women's autobiographies are concerned, it is heartening to mention that the insights that one can get from these works would now be able to a larger body of scholars as these are translated into so many languages. According to Spivak, the translator must be famous with the "history of the language, the history of the author's moment, the history of the language in translation" (*The Politics of Translation* 186). She also asks that the translator have graduated into speaking of "intimate matters in the language in the original" (187). Translation is, thus, a key component of Spivak's theory as it lends her project the specificity lacking in many western discussions of post-colonial texts. In her essay, *The Politics of Translation* (1993), Spivak was particularly damning the western feminist translation and feminist analysis of writing by "Third World" women. As according to western feminists, all writing by third world writers sounds the same, Spivak argues that it is not enough to have a progressive political commitment and attention must be paid to the forms, the language and the specific contexts of texts.

Spivak suggests that the task of the translator is not to re-describe and then re-inscribe power relations but instead to measure cultural differences in specific cultural historical situations. In terms of theory, Spivak accomplishes a double-writing in her translation, critiquing western metaphysical, humanist thinking and at the same time creating openings to imagine real cultural differences at work. Translators like Maya Pandit and Lakshmi Holmstorm while translating the Dalit women's autobiographies do not concentrate only on the literal translation of the texts, rather retain some regional terms to make the original flavour intact. They deliberately retain some of the regional terms as a strategy of making the text a little 'foreign' so that the reader can feel its distinct difference. As Dalit women's lives are different, translator like Maya Pandit feels the need of the texts to be

understood on that level of difference so that bridges of understanding can be formed.

Sometimes the translators are also able to fill the gaps that the writers left in their own writings. As English language has become a global language, the translation of Dalit literature from regional language to English may definitely give a great boost to this innovative literature because through these translated versions, the authors also may find a larger reading public in the other countries. According to Dr. Jay Prakash Kardem, a prolific Hindi Dalit writer, "...if Dalit literature is translated into English, it can convey its message to a larger mass, not only in India but at the international level also" (Choubey 23). Tharu and Lalita also observe that translating a regional language into English is an act of representing a regional culture to a more powerful national and even more powerful international reader (Rege 76).

Following the thrust of the Dalit movement to assert the identity and rights of Dalits, more and more voices of Dalit women are piercing the traditional silence all over India. Educated Dalit activists perceive that they have to possess their own literature and it is their own history which will help them to repossess their lives and identities. By entering the public domain, stories and histories written by these women challenge the regulations that impose silence on them. By talking about their lives and pasts through their autobiographies, Dalit women writers are taking a stand against the dominant social structure, particularly the patriarchy, caste system and its underlying value system. Moreover, these writers insist on speaking from their own perspective and are no longer satisfied to be represented by others and, thereby, turn from being passive subjects into active agents. Urmila Pawar's memoir *Aaydan*, published in the year 2003, and translated by Dr. Maya Pandit as *The Weave of My life: A Dalit woman's Memoir*, relates three generations of Dalit women who struggled hard to overcome the burden of their caste. In this intimate memoir, Pawar shares her untiring efforts to overcome terrible personal tragedy and also inculcates the excitement of a stirring consciousness in the midst of profound political and social turmoil.

The term *aaidan* means weaving of cane baskets which was the main economic activity of the Mahar community. Another meaning to the word *aaidan* is the utensils used by them. Looking back on her childhood, Urmila sees a close connection between the weave of the aaydan that her mother made and her writing. Weaving happens to be the central metaphor of Urmila's life story and weaving of bamboo baskets, being the main profession of the protagonist's mother indicate their status in the hierarchal order of caste-structure as well as their dire economic poverty. Pawar writes, "My mother used to weave Aaydan and I was writing this book, both were activities of creation of thought and practical reality of life" (75). And it was because of this resemblance that she called her autobiography *Aaidan*. Pawar narrates the incident in her memoir like this,

Aye was weaving her baskets as usual. She did not see me when I crossed her and entered the house. Her face looked worried. She was engrossed in her own thoughts and her fingers flew over the basket. Going to her, I told her about the scholarship and held the twelve rupees before her. Suddenly her face lit up with a sunny smile and eyes sparkled. (76)

Pawar was much sensitive about her caste as well as her poverty. Dalits, she argues, are not those who are only oppressed and humiliated by the social system but also those who bear the courage to stand in rebellion against their repression and humiliation as rational-humanists. According to her, there is a widespread misconception about caste having disappeared from society, but she clarifies that it still exists in society in several hidden forms and the question that constantly troubles her is the identity of Dalit woman in the hierarchal Indian society. Nevertheless, Urmila Pawar's faith in the stubbornness of human beings steers her to go forward leaving behind all the constrains of family life for she believes that human beings have the capacity to find new paths and new courage and this faith on humanity subsequently guides her to write her autobiography. As a womanist, Urmila Pawar always looks out for ways of affirming human relationships in her community and also attempts to celebrate the empowerment of the marginalised.

Maya Pandit's translation succeeds for a great extent in conveying the flavour of the autobiography and to give an earthly humour in her writing style. She retains the use of Marathi kinship terms that are part of family relationships and gives her readers a glossary to their meaning. Though it is always challenging to linguistically diverse text from one language to another, here it has been done with considerable expertise. Her autobiography has been much acclaimed in Marathi literary circles and has won prizes even in its third edition.

Baby Kamble, one of the Dalit women writers and an activist of Ambedkar Movement, lays bare before the eyes of the world the life of the average Dalit woman- the poverty, discrimination and violence which are necessarily a part of their lives. The narratives of Kamble were serialised in 1982 as *Jina Amucha* in the magazine *Stree*. Maya Pandit, Professor and Teacher-Educator at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, translated *Jina Amucha* from Marathi to English in 1986 with twelve chapters. She also wrote a detailed introduction and an interview of Kamble. Veteran social scientist, Prof. Gopal Guru gave a scholarly and meticulous afterword about the progress of Dalit women and their literature.

*The Prisons we Broke* raises a big protest against the unyielding and established social order and rejects the entire hegemonic tradition imposed upon them by the upper caste people. It is a sensible revelation of the inner world of the Mahar community where women wear lice-infected rags for saris, where people eat food comprising maggot-ridden innards of diseased carcasses, where new mothers starve to death, where babies are washed with saliva instead of soap and where intestine damaging cactus pods are consumed to suppress the gnawing hunger. Though Dalit communities are sentimentally idealised as being more equal in terms of gender relations, Baby Kamble's autobiographical work focuses the existent patriarchal domination that the Dalits endure and provides a rare opportunity to study how Dalit women construct their own identities and represent their community by the aid of resistance and protest.

According to Maya Pandit, the translator of Baby Kamble's autobiography, 'this autobiography is

probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Marathi. As most of the Dalit autobiographies written by men were for a mixed readership, *The Prisons We Broke* is not only representative of the Dalit community but is also an engagement with the “history of Dalit oppression” (Intro IX) and is “located in the tradition of direct self-assertion” (Intro IX). Located on the margins of social imaginary, this narrative is the representation of marginality and emerges as a “tremendous transformative potential for oppressed people” (Intro, XI). *The Prisons We Broke* remains in its essentials the protest of Dalit women in discarding their distorted images and foregrounding their true self which is completely imbued in strong individualism. This book is entirely different from the upper caste women’s autobiography which most of the time expresses longings for gender equality and tells stories of breaking the traditions. But Kamble aims to plead the world audience with her autobiography as she narrates here Dalit women’s realistic experiences with an appeal for mass transition of both culture and caste. Transcending the boundaries of personal narrative it becomes a sociological treatise, a historical and political record, a feminist critique as well as a protest narrative against the hierarchal tenets of Hinduism. Baby Kamble with this sordid memoir makes protest as the watchword in her path of attaining self-esteem which is, indeed, a perfect characteristic of an ideal feminist Dalit narrative.

Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupatti village in Tamilnadu in the year 1958. Her ancestors were landless labourers and her grandfather converted to Christianity to escape the disgrace attached with being Dalit. Bama took vows to enter the convent in her passion to serve her people at the prime age of 26. Later she left the convent to seek an independent life. During that period, she was encouraged to write her memoirs by a friend. Her three books – *Karukku*, *Kisumbakaran* and *Sangati* received critical acclaim. She won the Crossward prize in 2008 for her debut work *Karukku*. Hailed as the first Dalit writer in India and Bama has become one of the finest contemporary Indian writers and a powerful voice of Dalit consciousness in the fourth world literature.

As an exponent of Dalit feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* a right platform to express the hardships and agonies of Dalit women. This book enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the sweeping feminist discourses by a Tamil Dalit woman. Beginning with the first person narration, *Karukku* moves from the past to the present in exploring the varying manifold sets of different incidents which have taken place in Bama’s life. It is a powerful portrayal of Dalits’ life and their exploitation and suppression, their excruciatingly agonising life which is charred by experiences, experiences that were not able to find room in other literary creations.

Bama, in her touching work *Karukku* (1992) expresses various forms of violent oppressions unleashed on Dalit Christian from her region. Through Bama’s web world, the readers can gain insights into the complex social relationship between the Dalits and the upper-caste people mainly the ‘Pallars’ and ‘Paraiyars’. She identifies herself with the movement of Dalit feminism in Tamilnadu and firmly believes, “Casteism must be annihilated basically” (268). The title of her narrative substantiates the validity of the world she lives in. The word ‘*Karukku*’ means the saw-like double-edged stem of the ‘palmyra’ leaves with their serrated edges on both sides are like double edged swords resembling the life of a Dalit woman who are tortured by the double edged sword of upper caste patriarchy as well as Dalit patriarchy.

The metaphor of the palmyra leaf, the *karukku*, comes alive in Bama’s self-presentation and in the representation of various women in her life. Like the interlocked knife-like edges of the *karukku*, Bama highlights the interwoven layers of caste, religion, and gender structures that strangle the Dalit woman’s subjectivity. Another Tamil word ‘*Karu*’ means embryo or seed, which also means freshness or newness. The embryo Bama refers in the book actually means the Dalit consciousness and the symbol is the new revolution, which aims at bringing a new social order into the Indian society. Apart from ‘scratching’ and ‘tearing’ with its double-edged leaves, *Karukku* has a different function of sprouting new consciousness with its fresh seeds. It can help Dalits to regain their lost dignity. As she

writes: "There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged *Karukku*, challenging their oppressors" (Preface xiii). Thus, *Karukku* signified both Dalit oppression and Dalit struggle to get out from such an oppressive state.

In her works, Bama discusses the necessity and potential of the Dalit woman to forge a positive identity despite limitations and distortions imposed upon her. She uses her literary skills to subvert the traditional image of the Dalit woman as the imperfect object of caste imagining. Though Bama's social identity is that of a Christian Dalit woman, her personal sense of identity comes from being a Dalit woman rather than a Christian Dalit woman. Bama joined a catholic order of nuns with the hope of serving the Dalit community but was soon disillusioned by institutional Christianity. She revealed the frailty of her hopes in the Catholic Church to lift her out of her identity as an untouchable.

In maintaining the self and identity, Bama takes up a fresh and new linguistic technique in *Karukku* as she is completely unconventional in using the colloquial routinely, as her medium for narration. She uses a 'Dalit style of Language' which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of upper class and knowingly she chooses the language which represents the voice of her own people and provides her people a platform to recognise their identity. For asserting the value of Dalit vernacular she violates the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, by eliding words and joining them differently and thus, exhibits an inherent subverting sense. While introducing and addressing the characters in their personal narratives, the Dalit writers like Bama use the pronouns 'I', 'we' and 'our' for representing Dalits and 'you', 'yours', 'they' and 'their' for addressing the non-Dalits especially the so called upper caste Hindu elites. In *Karukku*, Bama does not employ the formal, grammatical-bound Tamil. Instead, she uses the colloquial Tamil with its regional and caste inflections and even in the English version Lakshmi Holmstorm, the translator retains some regional Tamil words to make the flavour

intact. In keeping with such a choice of language, the events which populate this text are ordinary and belong to the everyday. The author-narrator and the characters use the same non-standardised, spoken Dalit vocabulary. Using the confessional, conversational mode of narration, Bama in her *Karukku* celebrates Dalit women's lives, their wit, their humour, their resilience and their creativity.

Bama's second work, *Sangati*, which is called an autobiography of her community, is originally written in Tamil and translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 1994. As the word 'sangati' denotes news or events or happenings, so accordingly, it makes the readers delve deep into the life of Dalit men and women through the occurrences and confrontations to which they come across. *Sangati* explores the changing perspectives from generation to generation as it is the story of three generations of women- the narrator's grandmother, the narrator herself and the generation coming after her. The canvass is larger in the context of casteism and church where her counterparts are subjected to humiliation, caste and gender discrimination and remain marginalised in the new social spiritual space.

In spite of being doubly pushed to the periphery, Bama in speaking her 'self' has not only invented her own narrative discourse but at the same time has sought to represent the so far non-represented ones. In writing the subjective self she is no more the subaltern that listens to or is spoken of but the one who shouts out her "I", thereby relocating to the center and making heard the silenced other. *Sangati* shows a move from 'I' to 'We' as Bama moves from the individual to the community. The frequent use of "we" instead of "I" and the very personal note of addressing the reader, create a collective experience since the writer gives an impression of directly addressing the reader.

Illustrating a chain of interrelated events that have been observed by the writer in her village, *Sangati* expresses the inward turmoil of the Dalit women who are considered Dalits in the hands of religion, upper caste men, the rich, the politicians and educational institutions and also among the Dalit community as well as the Dalit man. The novel spans from the twelfth year of the narrator until she

is a woman by the end of the novel with mature reflections. It is unconventional, in the sense that it has neither a plot nor protagonist rather day-to-day cases and events of Dalit community, incorporated in the framework which the novelist has herself witnessed in her real life.

*Sangati* presents a naturalistic picture of the condition of Dalit women in Indian society where the inequalities and exploitation is accepted as a way of life, and yet the writer is never defeatist in her approach. She, again and again, throughout the novel, gives a word of hope to all oppressed and believes that women can do everything if they realise their potential. She wants Dalit women to achieve the goal of self-sufficiency through self awakening and knowledge. The chief factor which is repeatedly emphasised by the writer in the text is lack of education in Dalit women which does not allow them to come out of the psychic cycle of poverty and oppression. Bama's call to struggle against the oppressive fate surrounding women has relevance beyond Dalit women and takes cognizance of women everywhere irrespective of their caste and colour.

Language, for the Dalit women, is one of the effective tools they deploy against their oppressors. Their language is rich and resourceful- giving way to proverbs, folklore and folksongs. The folkloric native language of the Dalits itself becomes a language of protest and political challenge. To this Bama adds the language of human rights articulated by her liberated protagonist. This new language of political resistance also includes a free use of abusive terms as these women give vent to their feelings by calling their neighbours abusive names or shouting the names of their body parts.

The use of obscenities by Dalit women during quarrels serves a dual purpose. The abuses, for them, are effective defence mechanisms or a kind of resistance to maintain their psychological equilibrium. These are purportedly used as a strategy to shame the violent male and thus save themselves from further physical as well as mental injury. At the same time, the invectives using the names of sexual organs become a source of catharsis through which the suppressed emotions of anger and frustration get purgation. As far as the

narrative methodology of this testimony is concerned, it focuses on three aspects, firstly the oral narrative style that Bama adapts to tell the stories, secondly the legends and songs that she has woven into her text and thirdly using of food trope to narrate an alternate "her story". Bama uses a language unfamiliar to the mainstream, upper caste society to write her works. This testimony adopts a new innovative technique of writing as Bama opts for the language which is devoid of similes, metaphors, symbols and anything romantic. Instead, the lives of those men and women are described with precision in each utterance. The strong narrative of Bama is revealed in sentences relating to the successive duties of a woman which is rich in proverbs, colloquial usage; swear words, nicknames and folk language.

For a long time, Dalit literature in India has been suffering from the step-fatherly treatment by the mainstream or canonical literature. Though it has not yet been acknowledged as a literature in its own right, and there is scanty reference found in the standard literary journals of India, but its reverberations are now being heard all around the globe. Having effected a reversal of centrality and marginality, they are now in a position to be privileged enough to view their literature having a prestigious position in the gamut of Indian literature. With a bulk of translated and published works, Dalit literature is about to reach the stage of self-authentication. Over the last three decades, it has grown sustainably stronger and is wielding over readers and critics alike and in its journey from marginal literature to mainstream literature, Dalit literature is becoming the 'celebration of difference'.

Being emerged from the conflicts as well as creative dialectics between self and society, these autobiographies of Dalit women are also establishing themselves as a distinct genre in the gamut of mainstream Indian literature.

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