



Globalization through Translation: Subaltern Crossing the Margins

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Abstract

The advent of translation has echoed the voices of the marginalized beyond the margins, making them heard after years of oppression. One such novelist, who has gained wide recognition through the translation, is Bama. In her autobiography *Karukku*, she has elaborately explained the life-long discrimination she has faced.. She expresses the way the world treated her as a subaltern in terms of caste, gender, and even for being a Tamilian. The path of education became her only solution to break free from discrimination. Bama emerged as a prolific author and was acknowledged as a noted novelist and a necessary mouthpiece of Dalit experiences. The translation of her autobiography *Karukku* into English (Lakshmi Holmstrom, 2000) has earned Bama global acclaim. This paper wishes to discuss the problems associated with the translation that had affected the original Tamil text and emphasize how a subaltern's voice was heard around the globe through translation.

Keywords: Post-colonial, Translation, Dalit, Subaltern, Marginalization.

Translations often act as an equipment to empower the marginalized, by allowing them to echo their voices into the ears of people who might only know about marginalization but have been fortunate enough to not have experienced it first-hand. Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, well known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj is one such voice. Born into a Roman Catholic Christian Paraiyar family of Tamil Nadu, Bama had not only heard people speak of untouchability but she had already seen, felt, and had been humiliated by it.

Bama's *Karukku* was published in 1992, but was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom seven years later. The author had poured her heart out to let the people know about the oppression and sufferings faced by the Dalits at all phases of their lives. However, she does not follow a chronological order to walk the readers through her life. Instead she tries to show us the same event from different perspectives. This repetition of each event gives a new aspect to touch upon. This may seem like her desperate attempt to make people familiar with the extent to which the life of a Dalit is steeped in suffering and humiliation. She devotes her life to the poor and the downtrodden, and for fighting injustice. To rid herself of the humiliation, the author-narrator chooses to get a better education as to her it brings with itself a promise of a high level of dignity, after the scholar suggests the same to her brother. The young author-narrator had also conceived of the idea of becoming a nun, so that she could liberate her whole community from the sin of untouchability. As she grows up, she does come out of the humiliation that she is subjected to due to lack of money, but the pain of marginalization, and enslavement of her community continues to prevail.

The reaction of Bama's community is epitomized through the use of the maxim that the naked truth is always the hardest to digest. Bama uses colloquial speech to narrate and describe her village and lifestyles as sincerely as possible. Her portrayal of the natives was not welcomed by her people, as they made her an outcast, took away her residential rights, and called her a traitor as according to them, their depiction was not very different from the pigs and dogs that loafed around the dust-ridden lanes of the town.

Subsequently, a voice that was condemned by everyone was then praised by the world. Herein the article would like to emphasize how a subaltern crossed the margin and globalized her voice which was possible only because of the translation of her work.

Bama as a subaltern

It is invariably observed that there is a continual shift in Bama's personality while dealing with the "caste business".¹ At various stages of her life, she variously reacts to the reception given to her. As she enters the convent, Bama loses her courageous self. In her young days, she refused to accept any distinctive treatment, merely because of her caste whether it was for a seat in the bus, or for permission to go home. She even stood her ground obstinately by refusing to take any advantage because of her caste. However, as she entered the convent, her Paraya identity² refused to let go of her, and her feeling of belonging to a marginalized section of her society continued to prick her on her side. This is best reflected in the way she was always afraid of the upper caste nuns, and she always forced herself to swallow her words. Although she was courageous before and proud of her identity, she now felt oppressed. She realized that she couldn't do anything to escape the suppression imposed by the rich or those of the higher castes. She, gradually, begins to come to terms with her subaltern identity, and her eventual acceptance towards being a subaltern becomes apparent.

The discrimination doomed her in discrete ways, as a *paraya*, as a woman, and also as a Tamilian. This realization of being a minority was so deep-rooted that even the games played by the children which revolved around the enactment or recreation of the day to day happenings of the village, also mirrored the casteist bias. In a similar such enactment and recreation, one of them acting like a Naicker deliberately humiliated another child who was playing the role of Pannaiyaal, and mirroring the actions of the adults, the drunken man beat his wife. This is how Bama alerts us to the fact that in a state where violence and discrimination are so prevalent that it has come to be normalized even in the games played by the younger children.

Similarly, Bama's first encounter with the experience of being humiliated was when she was falsely blamed for a stolen coconut, just because she belonged to the *paraya* caste. The convent that she thought would bring her closer to her goal of Dalit liberation only made it seem miles away. Not only were they criticized, marginalized, and exploited, but also reached a point where Bama was forced to pose the question: "Are Dalits not human beings?"³

Furthermore, Bama points out that the Dalits were looked down upon even by the nuns to such an extent that they were compared to snakes, while their dehumanization was carried out further by inadvertently referring to them as creatures. Bama voices her struggles in the convent as she was forced to deal with not only the discrimination as a Dalit, but also for being a Tamilian – an identity that was deeply frowned upon. Thus, through Bama's life, we are forced to acknowledge the double marginalization of the Dalit women, first as a Dalit and then as a woman, which is further step down the ladder.

In tandem with this, throughout the novel Bama explains how Dalits are overexploited for labor and do not get paid as much as they deserve, and along with it the disheartening part of being a women who despite doing the same work as the Dalit men are paid even lesser wage. Society thus, pressurizes women in the community to remain suppressed, remain a step lower than men. Women are also refused education as it will elevate them to a higher pedestal. Hence, Bama was also refused education by citing the justification that she would not be able to find a husband, for no man would prefer a wife who is more learned than him. Her way out of all this humiliation is derived from Anna's words:

Because we are born in the *paraya* jati, we are never given any honor or dignity with respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care and learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn.⁴

This is where Bama's fight for education begins, and her undying determination to pursue her dream of becoming self-sufficient by becoming educated. Although, she was no stranger to discrimination, but facing the same treatment even within her school was truly heart wrenching. However, she earned the respect of her friends due to her academic performance. She was constantly motivated to study hard and prove to people that Harijans could study as well as the other students. During her higher studies, it was her educational background that gave her enough confidence to survive among those who practiced caste-differentiation; and yet, caste discrimination did not seem to be easy to get rid of. In her village, schools, colleges, and even jobs, marginalization remained a common factor. Hence education seemed like temporary relief from this pain of humiliation.

Problems while translating *Karukku*

Bama narrates in her autobiography, in the most realistic way possible, not only her but the voice of the Dalit community as a whole. Naturally, the language used is also in favour of the Dalit style of language. The translator finds it challenging to retrieve the real, colloquial dialect used by Bama; as explained by Raji Narasimhan, “dialect is difficult to reproduce in any language.”⁵ Bama’s refusal to stick to the formal use of Tamil poses difficulties for the translator which makes us rethink the limitations of literature and translation.

Lakshmi Holmstrom comments on this resistant language as:

She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading.⁶

When she translates the same scenarios of the autobiography into the English version, it faithfully represents the emotional complexity and the linguistic dexterity carried by the original Tamil version. The first-hand experience of Bama narrated by her in the Tamil original, when translated by Holmstrom, gets converted into a formal language used by an observer to narrate those experiences. However, Holmstrom refines the harsh language used by Bama which sprouted from the harsh situations of her life. For instance, “They, who have been oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku, challenging their oppressors” translated by Holmstrom seems to be the refined version of Bama’s original expression in Tamil which can be translated as, “Now, these people, the crushed, becoming like the sharp double-edged karukku, slash and rip those who crush them”.⁷

Hence, in this context it could be pointed out, that the word ‘crushed’ used by S. Shankar to describe the Dalits is more apt to the original Marathi meaning of Dalit, “broken or reduced to pieces”.⁸ Perhaps, it happens due to the lack of intimacy of the translator with the particular incident as compared to the writer. The use of an extremely colloquial dialect indicates the sense of ownership of the writer’s Dalit identity which adds to the individuality of her community. According to Anushiya Sivanarayanan, “Rather than reading *Karukku* as a Tamil novel [sic] translated into English, it would be more accurate to read it as a Tamil Dalit novel translated into literary Tamil and then into English”.⁹

Globalization of *Karukku*

The English translation helps the translators to reach the target readership. The translators who translate Indian texts into English tend to make the translations fluent to suit the target readership. It is the most common mode of communication that allows people to communicate and understand each other despite belonging to different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. *Karukku*, which was originally written in Tamil made its way into the world literature which was possible only due to its English translation. People all over the world thus began to understand the plight of a Dalit Christian woman by being able to read the translated version of her autobiography. The autobiography has been included in the literature syllabi of numerous colleges and universities across the world. *Karukku* becomes an apt novel to be studied as a text for various subjects such

as marginal literature, subaltern studies, feminist literature, Dalit literature, literature in translation, and autobiography.

Karukku can be considered as the aftermath of Ambedkar's lifelong contribution towards the alleviation of the conditions of the Dalits. Lakshmi Holmstrom mentions this in the introduction of the autobiography that "It has gone hand in hand with political activism, and with critical and ideological debate, spurred on by such events as the Ambedkar centenary of 1994, and the furor following the Mandal Commission report".¹⁰ Bama, the author herself also mentions in an interview that the novel got recognition as it got published in this period, she says, "If *Karukku* were published in the 80s, it probably would not have drawn this level of attention."¹¹ This factor as well, adds up to the novel's global recognition on some level.

Karukku, being a Dalit novel, succeeds in explaining the Dalit condition to the world at large. Through the translation of *Karukku*, the condition of Dalits could be brought to light not only to the Tamil readers but to all those who speak and understand English. Raji Narasimhan also says in her lecture that, "the English translations wake you to the landscape and landmark writings of so many languages in our country. That's a pretty big job of networking that any Indian language cannot but English is doing. Just for that reason, translation into English must go on."¹²

Karukku made the readers walk through the lanes traversed by a subaltern and it makes people understand the situation of a Dalit, what all he/she faces just to be alive and live peacefully. In tandem with it, the translation of the novel into English had greatly helped the work transcend the borders of language and the socio-political circumstances, and let the voice of Bama be heard throughout the realm of world literature.

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Notes

¹ Bama, 2000, p. 19. Caste business In the novel *Karukku*, Bama refers to the caste discriminations and it's ramification as caste business.

² Paraya = It is referred to the lower caste community in Tamil Nadu.

³ Ibid, 2000, p. 24.

⁴ Ibid, 2000, p.15.

⁵ Raji Narasimhan. *Karukku* By Bama In Tamil and English Oct 7, 2008. YouTube.
<https://youtu.be/zPdpKO0o9_M>

⁶ Holmstrom, Lakshmi editor. "Introduction". *Karukku* by Bama. New Delhi: Macmillan Book Pvt Ltd., 2000. pp. x – xi.

⁷ Shankar, Subramanian. "The "Problem" of Translation." *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular*. Berkeley: U of California, 2012.

⁸ S. Shankar's explanation about translation of words. This is one such example that S. Shankar uses to argue his point.

⁹ Sivanarayanan, 2009. p. 148.

¹⁰ Holmstrom, Lakshmi editor. "Introduction". *Karukku* by Bama. New Delhi: Macmillan Book Pvt Ltd., 2000. p. iii.

¹¹ Mangai. "Twenty Five Years of Bama's *Karukku*". *The Hindu*. January 6, 2018.

¹² Narasimhan, Raji's YouTube video.

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