

Dalit Literature and Destitution: The Aporia of Customary Morality in Translation

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Abstract

Marathi literary texts branded as Dalit literature have been translated widely into English since there is a huge demand for those translations in the global market. This force, of demand, creates the possibility of translating these texts into English in a hurry which may result in missing the nuances in translations. Since these literary texts are written mostly in colloquial Marathi, it is necessary to provide special attention to words and expressions while translating. While translating Baburao Bagul's short story "Aai" into English the translator summarises, edits, omits, paraphrases the sentences and sometimes paragraphs of the source language text and struggles to eliminate her customary morality in the process. The use of standard, bland English to translate and to add justifications to the characters' behaviour are some of the aspects of translation to take away the destitution (I use the word 'destitute' the way Aniket Jaaware uses in his essay "Destitute Literature") that is an important feature of Baburao Bagul's works.

Key Words: Dalit literature, Translation, Destitution, Aporia, Antonio Gramsci.

In this research paper, I am concerned with theorising the notion of 'institutionalised ways of reading and writing' as opposed to the notion 'destitutionalised ways of reading and writing' with reference to Marathi Dalit writer, Baburao Bagul's short story "Aai" from his short story collection *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe*. This Marathi short story collection was first published in 1969. "Aai" was translated into English by Mira Manvi as "Mother" and was published in *Poisoned Bread: translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (2009), the first anthology of translations of Marathi Dalit literary works.

The distillation of the origin of the words 'institute' and 'institution' enables to assume that it has something to do with law, regulation, established law or practice, an established system and so forth. Every connotation of these words leads to an establishment and some kind of structure. It could be possibly stated here that any established structure is an institution. However, all that is excluded from the institution falls under the notion 'destitution.' The etymology of the word 'destitute' suggests something which is abandoned, forsaken, and excluded from the institution. 'De' in destitution means taking away, hence, destitution is to take away the institution. Aniket Jaaware in his book *Simplifications: An introduction to structuralism and post-structuralism* (2009) argues that:

"If there is any institution that is fundamental to modern culture, it is the institution of reading and writing. Ways of writing and ways of reading are regulated by this institution." (425) I speculate here that the state and the agents of the state decide and impart the ways of reading and writing to have control or hegemony on the institution of reading and writing so that something which might harm the propaganda of the state could be prohibited to do so and eventually, the state endures to be the sovereign owner of the institutions and ways of institutionalisation. The institutionalised reading and writing practices of literature are the 'common sense' or the hegemonic way to read and write literature. Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, vol.1 defines 'common sense' as a component that alters an average judgement of a particular society. For us, the leading ways of reading come out of 'common sense' established in the Marathi reading public by the hegemony of literature written by upper-caste Marathi writers. (173)

The short stories from the short story collection *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* by Baburao Bagul serve as the best example of a critique of institutionalised reading and writing practices formulated in Maharashtra in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. I attempt to analyse the relationship between the processes of destitution and translation in this

paper. Bagul's short story "Aai" and its English translation becomes a good starting point to analyse this relationship. The Marathi text begins as follows:

Taas ghyayla alelya mastaranni 'Aai' hi kavita ashi shikavaliki ma gasvargatil ti mule Taasbhar tari talapasun var uchalali geli. Shikshak path sampavun baher gele aani var geleli mule kavitechya kavetun satasat sataku lagli. Khali adalu lagli. Anolakhi adbhutata panyachya payane palun geli aani mule punha hoti tashi zali. (29)

The translator translates this as follows:

The children looked up- backward children with their peaked, ragged faces – at the teacher. The poem was about a mother, and they remembered the warmth of the mother's lap, the only place where they ever felt secure. (209)

What happens here? The first thing the translator does is that she overlooks alliteration used in the sentences and adds to it with her interpretation. She does not seem to pay attention to, for example, the repetitive use of sounds /ə/, /t/, and /m/ in the first sentence, /k/, and /s/ in the second sentence and the rhythmic effects it creates. Moreover, throughout the story, there is no reference to children neither looking at their teacher nor remembering the warmth of their mother's lap and feeling secure in their mother's lap. The source text does not seem to glorify the figure of the mother or motherhood, and the mother's lap.

Bagul's story "Aai" not only refers to Madhav Julian's poem "AaichiAthwan", published in the collection of poems *Pratham Bandha: SphutKavye*, 1977 (333) but also revalues that poem. The way the readers of Marathi literature read the emotions and value put in the idea of Mother is about to change in the original story. If we look at the history of traditional Brahmanical Marathi literature it is possible to argue that the figure of mother and motherhood (especially an upper-caste mother) has been discussed and glorified often. According to that, the mother is an ideal figure who sacrifices her comforts for her children. The poems include "AaisarkheDaivatSaryaJagtavarNahi" by G.D. Madgulkar, "AaiMhanoniKoni" by the poet Yashwant, and so on.

The students in the story feel overwhelmed after listening to the poem about mother "AaichiAthwan."

The narrator, Pandu, misremembers the title as "Aai." The poem influences Pandu to such an extent that he feels his mother too is *vatstsalyasindhu*, a river of affection and love and approves her greatness and grandeur. However, other children tease him by abusing his mother for having a lover. Since his father's death, many men living around them have tried to molest his mother, some have also tried to strip her and rape her. Women are jealous of her beauty and curse her for having a lover. She has been earning money and trying to bring up her son, living like a widow and caught in a dilemma of motherhood and sexual desire. Her son too doubts her sexual behaviour like his father did.

The story depicts the exploitation of a destitute woman at the hands of other deprived characters. Dalit women have been facing physical and mental atrocities at the hands of Dalit men including husband and others. Such deprivation though can be seen in other examples of Marathi literature, irrespective of caste, class and gender of the characters, it does not appear often and not the way Bagul's stories brings it out.

In the nineteenth century, Marathi literary works were expected to teach moral lessons to the readers and also to the audience in case of performances of plays. Numerous nineteenth century Marathi critics urged the writers and playwrights to teach ethical lessons to the readers and audience and argued in favour of the didactic function of literature. It would be good to discuss an example of how reading practices were shaped in the nineteenth century. The play *Cymbeline* by Shakespeare was translated into Marathi language as *Tara* and was published in the year 1879 and performed in 1877. Vishnu Moreshwar Mahajani the translator of the play in the introduction suggests that the drama not only entertains but also describes the characters of great men. It teaches a lesson of good human behaviour and helps people for betterment (4). In the case of the poems mentioned above, the readers can make ethical judgements; the practice as we have seen above is derived from the institutionalised reading practices in the nineteenth century. This is how the nineteenth-century notion of the function of literature works. Bagul's stories are an exception to this. These stories suspend readers' ability to make ethical choices by leaving the endings open and the readers into not only an ethical dilemma but also into aporia (an impasse, the inability to

move further) - much like the mother at the end of "Aai" where she too is caught in an impasse of motherhood and sexual desire. Such open-ended endings, as well as ethical undecidability, make the readers destitute. The readers too, like the characters, become ethically deprived as they are no longer in a position to make ethical judgements on character's behaviour.

There are two important aspects to make "Aai" remarkable. One is that it suspends readers from making value judgements and the other is that, the destitute characters are represented through the Sanskrit influenced Marathi style of using poetic devices and language. The figure of speech alliteration which is traditionally used in poetry and is believed to add beauty to the language is used in the story. If Bagul would not have used such Sanskrit influenced Marathi then these stories would have remained as the shocking and morbid accounts of the destitute characters. It is interesting to note that the story is written in Sanskrit influenced Marathi words but the incidences, actions, and characters represented in the story are rarely found in Marathi literary tradition. Dalit literature is seen using details of descriptions and prose style of writing to represent the plight of the characters.

The translator attempts an interpretation of the source text, however, she fails to produce a new text and rather ends up summarising and adding sentences to the source text that too using bland English. The translator has added a few sentences to the narrative of the short story while interpreting the source text. Let me belabour this point further by citing some examples here.

1. He had no father, and now everyone was saying that his mother was a whore (210).
2. His mother an unprotected widow (210).
3. And will she come home tonight or will she run away forever like Gangu next door? (212).
4. Pandu's mother, secure in her new-found love, rejoicing in the great physical prowess of the overseer, burned with anger, but walked straight, and threaded her way through the hostile crowd. The women started hurling abuse at her (213).
5. Pandu was just an infant then. The kitchen fires had to be kept going, and he needed medicines, and milk and fruit. All day she would work at the construction sites, hauling bricks and cement (214).

6. Then she suddenly saw him as he really was: totally vulnerable, totally dependent on her, even as his father had been before him (215).
7. Do you know something, son? I was beautiful... Walji Seth would send a fifty-rupee note through a messenger every Saturday night and ask me to go over to his bungalow... I could have lived a merry life, but I gave up everything, son. I lived for you, hoping you'd grow up, be my support, but you have betrayed me (217).

The additions clearly show that the translator attempts to justify Pandu's mother's behaviour and actions with the help of the appealing dialogue that she was beautiful and many men were ready to support her but she sacrificed everything for her son but now he has betrayed her. She is also compared to Gangu, the character introduced by the translator in the short story, where Pandu compares his mother with Gangu who probably eloped with her lover. As I have argued in the beginning that the reference to mother's lap as a secure place denotes that the translator cannot overcome her institutionalised reading habit since she cannot avoid making moral judgements on the situation. Her translation does exactly opposite to the Marathi text. The source text brings the readers to a point where it becomes difficult to make ethical choices and suspends their existing morality. However, the translator uses her customary morality while translating and leaves no scope for the readers to make ethical choices. Bagul's story represents not only destitute characters but also makes the readers feel destitute while reading the story and the narrator too neither justifies nor criticises Pandu's mother's behaviour and actions. The translator seems to represent an upper-caste woman through this appropriation. How? The narrator is glorifying mother's lap, which has been glorified in Marathi poems like "RajahansMazaNijala", in which the mother is mourning over her child's death, who is lying on mother's lap.

If we agree with the idea that translation is reading then we could argue that this translation presents an institutionalised reading of "Aai." Let me elaborate on my point here. Gayatri ChakravortySpivak in her essay "Politics of Translation", published in the year 2000, argues that, "Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate" (398). What does

she mean when she says that she surrenders to the text and reads it carefully? She seems to suggest that the translator must provide special attention to the rhetoricity of the language of the text she/he is translating. She differentiates between the translation done with investing a lot of time in it, with great care and others done quickly. As she argues further:

I myself see no choice between the quick and easy and slapdash way, and translating well and with difficulty. There is no reason why a responsible translation should take more time in the doing. The translator's preparation might take more time, and her love for the text might be a matter of a reading skill that takes patience. But the sheer material production of the text need not be slow. (399)

If I stretch Spivak's elucidation little further then it can be supposed that the translation of "Aai" has come out in haste and become sheer material production. The translator has also ignored the literariness of the literary, as she does not use the figure of speech alliteration while translating. On the one hand, Bagul suspends the didactic reading of literature on the other hand the translator attempts didactic reading through translation. She interprets the text by adding, omitting, paraphrasing, summarising as it is unavoidable in translation and interpretation since both the translation as well as interpretation are unavoidable modes of attacks. However, while interpreting the source text in her attempt of translation, the translation suspends all the processes of destitution present in the source text.

"Aai" does not permit the 'institutionalised' or 'hegemonic' or 'common sense' way of reading literature. In my view, common sense way of reading literature is institutionalised where character's actions are judged on hegemonic ethical grounds. When I say institutionalised reading practices I mean reading literature with the belief that it teaches moral lessons rather than providing attention to the literariness of the literary, in other words providing special attention towards the literary devices like a figure of speech and style of writing. The translator too produces the institutionalised reading of the source text by ignoring the figure of speech alliteration and providing reasons to justify Pandu's mother's so-called unethical behaviour of being a

keep of Mukadam. The translator calls her 'unprotected widow' and adds a dialogue where the mother says that she has sacrificed her merry life for her son.

It seems to me that the translator gives in to the pressure of the global demand for translations of Dalit literature. Sharankumar Limbale in the introduction to the book *Bhartiya Dalit Sahitya* published in 2013 states that Dalit literature attracted the attention of the world between 1972 to 1992 and that caused the surge of amateurish translations of Dalit literature. It seems to me that this flurry of translations brought down the possibilities of destitution in translation.

It is possible to accomplish my argument by explicating that the English translator of "Aai" have missed the processes of destitution present in the source story, misinterpreted the story by letting her customary morality interfere while translating and skipped the literariness of the literary. This appropriation of the original Marathi short story in translation suspends the destitutionalised reading of the source text and gets institutionalised in the process. This is exactly opposite to what the Marathi story does to the readers. To translate Dalit texts, it is a precondition for the translators to not giving in to the global demand, translating the texts spending time and after examining each word meticulously, and overcoming to the conventional morality. Hopefully, these preconditions would prevent the Dalit source texts from losing the event of politics of destitution in the translations.

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