Paratext and the function of translation

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There is a sea of difference between reading a piece of work in one’s mother tongue and in a foreign language. While reading a work in our mother tongue we may slip into the text, get absorbed and become one with its texture. But in a foreign language one becomes sensitive to the nuances of the story. In a way emotions are depersonalized. The reader begins to rationalize, appreciate the style and the use of literary devices. For example, though Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and Pudumai Pittan’s “Chellammal” deal with the same theme – crudeness of poverty – as a Tamil reader, I could easily relate with the latter (especially when I read it in Tamil) due to my linguistic affinity with the text. This may sound to be a mere linguistic parochialism. But, if we see language as inseparable from culture, we will understand that language doesn’t carry and express just the meanings but carries certain cultural codes and signs which give a special significance and uniqueness to a work of art. It is this ‘uniqueness’ that poses a great challenge to translators. To decode those codes and signs and to cover them is a challenge for a translator, especially when the original work is written in a particular dialect. Translating such texts becomes a double challenge for translators for they have to transpose the readers to a particular region by capturing the nuances of the dialect and its cultural associations. This argument cannot be generalized for the process of translation as a whole but for Dalit texts in which language has its own politics and a significant role in representing the cultural specificity of the community as well as the region.

This kind of translation necessitates the bending and straightening of the target language and the help of paratext to capture the feel of the source text. Marginal writings, especially Dalit writings in the Tamil context, pose such a challenge for the translators. Translation, in this context, becomes a tool of either empowering or abating the text in the target language. A close look at the translation of Bama’s (a well-known Tamil Dalit woman writer) Karukku (2000) and Vanmam (2008) may help us understand this issue pertaining to translation.

Bama’s Karukku – roughly categorized as an autobiographical novel – has become a canonical text in the history of Tamil Dalit writings. It stands as the first of its kind in Tamil
especially for its language, its narration of events and for its brilliant use of certain caste
codes and signs with an aim to revealing the deep-rooted caste system in Tamil society.

Bama has used a local Tamil dialect in her work which is oral in nature. This Tamil, as
Lakshmi Holmstrom (translator of Karukku) says, is a “Dalit style of language” which aims
at subverting the given/built “decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste
Tamil” which Bama also approves. Since caste has its material and geographical existence in
India, especially in Tamil societies, use of this dialect has become a tool of strengthening the
content of Karukku. It also helps the readers to situate the issues in the culture proper and get
the region specificity. Inability to capture the dialectical variation may not be as serious an
issue compared to the failure to catch such cultural codes, especially in the context of Dalit
Literature. One who reads Bama’s Karukku in Tamil can obviously feel the rhythm, the
orality and the implied caste-cultural markers of the narrative. But by completing the broken
sentences of the dialect, wherein lies the orality of the text, Holmstrom seems to have missed
something in the English translation.

By pointing out the inability of Christianity (which claims to have maintained equality
irrespective of class, caste, race etc) to do away with caste, Bama in fact shows the casteised
vision of Christianity in Tamil societies. Depressed over the caste discrimination inside the
Christian institutions, Bama comes out of the convent. This double-edged critique of Karukku
as suggested in the title gives the uniqueness to the text. But the translation seems to have
foregrounded only caste in Christianity and silenced the larger level critique of caste in Tamil
society represented in the Tamil text. To accomplish this task, caste codes and signs are
simplified and blunted in the translation.

Karukku in translation though tried its best to capture the locale of the source text,
unfortunately fails to capture the rhythm of the narrative and its implications. This is a
problem not simply related to language or dialect but is related to the translator’s perception
of caste.

Before going into the issues relating to the ‘Introduction’ it would be useful to discuss
certain sections from the translated text. Let us first look at the story of ‘Bondan-Maama’ on
page four of the translation. There is a sense of celebration in the Tamil narration which the
translation has failed to capture. And in the Tamil original this story is narrated in reported
speech. This is typical of Marginal narratives (of numerous cultures) to oppose the traditional
way of story telling by not claiming to be authentic. It is apparent if one compares the narrative style of traditional autobiographies with that of the marginal which sprouts from the reminiscence of the persona rather than from recorded ‘historical facts’. But the English version of Bondan-Maama’s story is in direct speech which undermines the Tamil narrative and claims authenticity. Thus, the narrative has been inverted here.

While explaining the levels of suppressions in convents Bama explains how ‘Tamilians’ are discriminated and referred to as lower caste in that particular convent by the dominant Telugu people. In this kind of environment her situation becomes worse for she is not just a Tamilian but also belongs to ‘Parajathi’. According to Manu Smirti, untouchables (here Parayars) are considered as the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Bama’s argument is that being born in the Paraya caste she is already suppressed both in the society and in the convent. And in that particular convent she is suppressed further for being a Tamilian because of their linguistic bias. It is this complexity in the levels of suppression that Bama unveils here. But it has been translated as:

> It was only after this that I began to understand, little by little, that in that order, Tamil people were looked upon as a lower caste. And then, among Tamils, Parayar were a separate category. (21)

This fails to capture the vigour of Bama’s narration and the complexity of suppressions that Bama talks about in the text. In addition, certain sentences that are crucial for understanding this complexity are omitted in the translation.

On page 33 of the Tamil text, Bama narrates one of the distressed moments of her life. In class a teacher nun says that some convents do not accept ‘Harijans’ and there is a separate convent for them. Highly conscious of being a Dalit Bama approaches that sister in desperation and asks whether they would accept her in that convent. That sister puts forth a question, has any other convent already invited her. Bama tells her about the invitation of the convent school where she worked earlier. Then the sister says since another convent has also invited her (Bama), it is not a problem for them to keep her in that convent itself. It has been translated as: “Well, they asked you too, did they? Don’t worry about it. You may join us.” (33) It is not a question of entering/joining the convent that Bama reveals here. She is already in that convent and she was on the verge of completing her training period. Thus, it becomes
a question of being, surviving and continuing there. But the translation limits the intensity of Bama’s existential question by portraying it as question of joining.

In the next paragraph Bama explains how even convents are not free from caste bias. But Holmstrom has translated it as, “... this convent too was not without its caste divisions.” (33) She has literally translated the word “Jathipirivinai” as “caste divisions” without considering the fact that the word in that context refers to caste discriminations rather than caste divisions. The word ‘discrimination’ carries with it the caste hierarchy, oppression and bias whereas the word ‘division’ just means a separate category. A quote from Ambedkar’s Writings and Speeches would help sharpen our understanding of this issue.

**Chairman:** The inclusion in the Constitution of declaration of fundamental rights safeguarding the cultural and religious life of the various communities and securing to every individual without distinction of race and so on.

**Dr. Ambedkar:** After the word “rights” at the end of the paragraph I should like the words “without discrimination” added.

**Chairman:** It says already “without distinction of race, caste and sex”

**Dr. Ambedkar:** I should like the word “untouchability” be included there.

**Chairman:** “Untouchability”! You already have race, caste.

**Dr. Ambedkar:** I think we ought to make a distinction between caste and untouchability. Many people who have caste do not suffer from the difficulties of untouchability. (Vol. 2: 535-36)

Similarly, certain sections of Lakshmi Holmstrom’s Introduction to Bama’s *Karukku* also reflect her limited understanding of caste in Tamil societies. The introduction eschews certain deeper facts to convince the readers, especially the foreign readers.

According to Holmstrom, Bama “discovers... that the perspectives of the convent and the Church are different from hers. The story of that conflict and its resolution forms the core of *Karukku*” (viii). Seen from the history of caste atrocities, can Bama’s *Karukku* be limited just as a conflict between her perspective and that of the Church’s? Does Bama represent only ‘this conflict’ in *Karukku*?
Here, it is inevitable to look into the cause of Bama’s departure from the church as represented in the story. Bama comes out of the convent identifying the hypocritical nature of the church, convent, Christian institutions and its members. She is shocked to notice a contradiction between what is preached and practised there. They live a life of sophistication and strive to maintain it by serving the rich and the upper castes rather than the poor and lower caste people who really need their service. In short, Bama notices the ‘same’ hierarchal caste distinctions and discriminations in those institutions. It is this ‘same’ that the translation eschews. This ‘same’ is adopted by Christianity from the Hindu Brahminical casteist society. Thus, one can say life inside those Christian institutions is no better than the life in the Hindu Varna society. One’s understanding becomes shallow if he/she attacks only Christianity for these issues because Christianity in Tamil societies is not similar to Christianity elsewhere. In Tamil societies, one can say, Christianity is itself brahminicised because of the strong influence of the casteist Hindu society. It is this that Bama points out in her recent interview,

Especially after I became a nun, it [the vigour] was completely lost. I was merely spending my time in teaching, and that too, teaching students from wealthy backgrounds. In other words I was serving those who oppress our community…. I realized this. So I left the convent in 1992. (144)

She adds that,

In reality, there is no difference between Hindus and Christians in the way they treat Dalits. The only difference between the two is that while Hinduism is basically hierarchical, Christianity claims to be caste-free, but in practice it preserves the caste hierarchy. (146)

Thus, simplifying Bama’s conflict as just a conflict between Church’s perspective and her perspective limits the depth of the issue, by exclusively blaming Christianity. Holmstrom says, “Karukku is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic church and its institutions” (ix). According to Holmstrom Karukku attacks only Christianity and portrays the conflict between Bama’s Christian-self and the Dalit-self. At last the Dalit-self wins – Bama comes out of the convent. This, again, implies that the text in its translation is an attack only on Christianity and not on Hinduism and the Varna system. Here, it raises the question why the caste oppression seen in the translation is cut off from its umbilical cord – the Varna system of Hinduism/Brahminism – and connected only to the Catholic Church.
Holmstrom chooses to represent the “way in which the Church has ordered and influenced the lives of the Dalit Catholics” (viii) and refrains herself from criticising the Hindu Brahminical influence on Christianity. It is crucial to analyse why the root of the caste system was spared and the branches had been criticized.

In another context Lakshmi Holmstrom says, “She [Bama] refers neither to Ambedkar nor to Periyaar, who not only attacked the Caste system, but whose remarkable speeches and writings against the oppression of women were published in 1942 under the title Pen Yenn Adimaiyaanal? [Why women were enslaved?]” (ix). This sentence is again obscure and comes to justify her position. She places Ambedkar and Periyaar together in the first part of the sentence and in the second part she speaks only about the contribution of Periyaar. This could delude the global readers to think that Periyaar and Ambedkar worked together for the above mentioned issues and their speeches and writings were collectively published as Pen Yenn Adimaiyaanal? This creates a danger of placing Ambedkar and Periyaar on a same scale, ignoring their differences in operation.

Lakshmi Holmstrom identifies the “parallel double perspective” of Bama – (1) “the nurturing of her [Bama’s] belief as a Catholic” and (2) the “socio-political self-education” through which Bama “understands what untouchability means” (viii).

When she [Holmstrom] could identify both, why does she develop only the perspective connected to Catholic Christianity and avoids Bama’s “socio-political self-education” in the Introduction? When she could elaborate discuss the influence of Christianity on the life of Dalits, why hasn’t she placed it within the context of the Brahminicised nature of Tamil Societies?

Her comment that, “Not indeed does Bama – again like Vidivelli – make a connection between caste and gender oppression. Not in Karukku at any rate” (ix). This, again proves to be a limited argument for one could notice certain sections in which Bama speaks about the inequality in the wages of Dalit men and women, difference between young Dalit girls’ recreation and that of young Dalit boys’ and the reason for which Dalit women in her place are restricted from going to cinema theatres. Though she instigates she does not develop them. Bama might have done it deliberately to show the crude nature of Caste system and its discriminations without going deep into gender issues. But the statement “gender issues are raised not in Karukku at any rate” makes the readers suspect whether this leads to the
development of the strategy which uses Dalit Feminism to unvoice Dalitism and encourages the forthcoming Dalit women literature to operate in that sphere.

Issues mentioned above show that this translation of *Karukku* and the Introduction tend to make things more obscure instead of making them clear to the readers.

But the translation of *Vanmam*, the third novel by Bama, by Malini Seshadri stands different. *Vanmam*, through its focus on contextualized animosity between the Pallars and Parayars, refrained from its critique on caste and endorses the Brahminical casteised vision of social hierarchy (privileging Parayars over Pallars). The language (as Bama claims the Dalit style of writing), which proved to be a tool of empowerment in *Karukku*, has become formulaic and weakens *Vanmam*. The language of *Karukku* in Tamil attains a flow and orality. But the so called Dalit language of *Vanmam* seems to be forcibly inserted into the text. Reading *Vanmam* in Tamil informs us that the author was very conscious of and keen on inserting the language which weakens the plot. This is obvious in her use of written form in artificial oral expressions. Words like “*poruma ezhandhupona*” (29), “*Eruchala*” (29), “*veroru*” (30), “*urchaga vellam karaperandu*” (30), “*thoyandhu oru naalanju*” (32), “*vimarsanam senjaan*” (32) and “*aaththurama*” (34) are few examples. After the popularity of *Karukku* ‘naturally’ there was a demand and expectation in the publication market for ‘Dalit style of writings in Dalit’s language’ and Bama’s *Vanmam* in Tamil is an offspring of this marketing demand.

But the English translation of *Vanmam* shows that translation – as a discipline – has travelled a long way and has consequently improved a lot to accommodate the nuances and intricacies of the regional and cultural differences and significances of a language and culture. It also promises that it will have a considerable impact on the studies on Bama in particular, and Dalit Studies in general. Certain expressions, descriptions of people and places and the narrative have been well-captured in the translation which positions this translated text as a significant contribution to Translation Studies as well as Dalit Studies.

Localized expressions like “coming home” (2), “school holidays” (3), “beginning of the street” (5), “common meeting place” (5), “middle of the night” (9), “involve me also” (10), the use of “now” in many places, “play without arguing and fighting” (17), “super joke” (20), “you son of a waster” (24), “too busy” (35), “copied our fellows” (52) and some such
expressions and syntactic deviations capture not simply the local colour but also the tonal variations suggested in the Tamil original.

The descriptions of people and places strike a balance between the oral nature of the source text and the communicability to the non-native readers. Even in narration, a conscious effort has been made to ‘tell’ the story without falling into the impulse to ‘narrate’ the story. This again manages to capture the orality of the source.

Bama’s writings (can be read as all Dalit writings too) are set in a particular context and region. Thus they put forth a great challenge on the translator to capture its complete essence. In such cases, it becomes the responsibility of the paratext (Introduction, translator’s note, author’s note etc) to provide proper guidelines on the situatedness of the text and the context of Tamil Dalit writings to make the readers understand the significance of the text, overcoming the hierarchal representation of conflict within Dalit communities.

The translation of *Vanmam* goes past the original not only because it has effectively captured the nuances of language but also in its way of representing the issues. It sets a perspective together with the paratext – the Introduction, interview and photos – helping readers to see the complexities of the caste dynamics. This perspective is contrary to the perspective of the Tamil text.

As Gerard Genette in his essay “Introduction to the Paratext” argues, paratext acts as a “threshold…which offers to anyone and everyone the possibility either of entering or of turning back” from the text. In the case of the translation of *Vanmam*, it applies not just to the text but also to the issues that the text deals with, for it is the paratext that gives a perspective to the text. As Genette rightly points out “An element of paratext…necessarily has a positioning” (263). It is here that the significance of editing is revealed for it is this that determines the positioning in the text. This change in the position of the narrator in the original and in the translation is a change from a Gandhian to an Ambedkarian perspective.

The subjective account of the author’s note receives importance vis-à-vis the Introduction, interview, the photos and the translator’s note that reveals the complexities in translating an issue-based work like *Vanmam*. Bama’s interview exposes the author’s conception and understanding of caste and facilitates an understanding of the issues and their representation in the text. The Introduction points out that:
The focus on the animosity between the two Dalit communities need not be seen as merely commenting on their internal differences, but also as highlighting how caste remains sacrosanct and inviolable, and the dangerous consequences of what Ambedkar would call, the ‘caste-mindedness’. (XV)

In this way, one can say that the paratext sets the perspective of the translation and the issues represented in the text.

The photos that accompany the interview give a local flavor to the text and help the readers to situate the plot in the region represented. If one compares the glossary of *Vanmam* with that of *Karukku* one can see the development and the elasticity of Translation Studies in incorporating the cultural variations and expressions of a language (here a particular dialect) and efforts taken in the translation and editing of *Vanmam* to decode them in the target language.

Thus, the translation along with the paratext creates an awareness which helps the readers overcome the caste assumptions suggested in the source text. In this sense, this text is a significant contribution to Dalit Studies as well as Translation Studies. This would also help us to re-read many of our assumptions regarding certain intricate issues of our culture. But this development within Translation Studies poses a great challenge on the critics and reviewers who are caught in a web of issues relating to the source text and the translated text. While Lakshmi Holmstrom is an academician exposed to the issues of representation and identity politics (discussed in Post-colonial studies, Dalit Studies and Feminist discourses), Malini is a freelancer. Ironically, Lakshmi’s translation foregrounds only caste in Christianity but avoids a critique of caste in Tamil society. But Malini’s translation manages to focus on the implied issues in the Tamil text and allows the possibility of seeing a general critique of caste in Tamil society. Thus the critics and reviewers of today have a difficulty in fixing their focal point – the content and context of the source text, the translator, translated text or the act of translation. To those who do not have access to a source text and have difficulties in understanding the issues involved in a Dalit text, this complexity is mounted further. It is here that we get an opportunity to discuss the role and function of an editor of a translated text which is quite often ignored within translation studies.
Bibliography


