

Voices across Languages: English Translation and the Making of Dalit Autobiographical Literature

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Abstract

Dalit autobiographies have emerged as a powerful literary and political form that challenges the silences and exclusions of mainstream Indian literature. Rooted in lived experiences of caste oppression, these narratives function as acts of resistance, testimony, and self-assertion, foregrounding voices that have historically been denied visibility and authority. This paper examines the crucial role of English translation in promoting Dalit autobiographies beyond their regional linguistic contexts, arguing that translation has been central to their wider circulation, academic recognition, and canon formation. Drawing on literary theory, translation studies, and Dalit criticism, the study explores how English translation operates as a form of cultural mediation that both enables and constrains the representation of Dalit experience. While translation facilitates national and global visibility, it also introduces challenges related to cultural loss, domestication, market pressures, and ethical responsibility. By analysing debates surrounding authenticity, translator positionality, and institutional reception, the paper highlights the ambivalent nature of translation as a site of empowerment as well as potential distortion. It ultimately contends that English translation, when approached with reflexive and accountable practices, can serve as a critical tool for amplifying Dalit voices while preserving the political urgency and moral force of Dalit life writing.

Keywords: *Dalit autobiography; English translation; cultural mediation; canon formation; caste.*

1. Introduction: Dalit Autobiography and the Question of Translation

Dalit autobiography occupies a crucial position in Indian literature as a genre that challenges silence, exclusion, and misrepresentation. Unlike conventional autobiographies that often celebrate individual achievement, Dalit life writing foregrounds collective suffering, historical injustice, and everyday humiliation rooted in caste oppression. These narratives do not merely recount personal experiences; they intervene in literary, social, and political discourses by exposing structures of inequality that have long remained invisible or deliberately ignored. As scholars have noted, Dalit autobiographies mark a decisive break from elite literary traditions by asserting the authority of lived experience over aesthetic refinement (Limbale 1; Omvedt 72).

Translation becomes central to this project because most Dalit autobiographies are written in regional Indian languages such as Marathi, Tamil, Hindi, Malayalam, and Kannada. Without translation, these powerful testimonies remain confined to linguistic regions, limiting their impact. English translation, therefore, is not simply a linguistic exercise but a political act that

enables Dalit voices to reach national and international audiences, academic institutions, and global human rights forums (Nayar 84; Bassnett 23).

Emergence of Dalit Autobiography as a Counter-Narrative to Mainstream Indian Literature

Dalit autobiography emerged prominently in the post-Independence period, particularly from the 1960s onward, as a response to the systematic exclusion of Dalit experiences from mainstream Indian literature. Traditional literary canons, dominated by upper-caste perspectives, often portrayed Dalits either as passive victims or as marginal figures lacking agency. Dalit autobiographies disrupt this narrative by placing the Dalit subject at the centre of the text, speaking in a voice that is assertive, angry, and unapologetically political (Limbale 29; Rege 13).

These texts function as counter-narratives because they reject idealised representations of rural life, spirituality, and social harmony commonly found in canonical Indian writing. Instead, they present caste as a lived reality marked by violence, deprivation, and psychological trauma. By narrating experiences of untouchability, denial of education, and social segregation, Dalit autobiographers challenge the moral authority of mainstream literature and expose its complicity in sustaining caste hierarchies (Guru 254; Zelliot 156).

Moreover, Dalit autobiographies redefine literary value by prioritising truth over stylistic elegance. The rawness of language, episodic structure, and oral storytelling techniques often found in these works reflect the urgency of testimony rather than adherence to literary norms. This deliberate departure from conventional aesthetics is itself a form of resistance, asserting that lived pain is a legitimate and necessary source of literature (Limbale 63; Dangle 267).

Autobiography as a Form of Resistance, Testimony, and Self-Assertion

Dalit autobiography operates simultaneously as an act of resistance, a form of testimony, and a declaration of selfhood. Writing one's life becomes a means of reclaiming dignity in a society that has historically denied Dalits the right to speak, remember, and represent themselves. Through autobiography, Dalit writers assert control over their narratives, refusing mediation by dominant voices that have traditionally spoken *about* them rather than *with* them (Spivak 287; Guru 256).

As testimony, these autobiographies document caste oppression not as abstract social theory but as lived reality. Everyday experiences—being denied water, insulted in classrooms, or excluded from temples—are recorded as historical evidence of systemic injustice. In this sense, Dalit autobiographies function as alternative archives, preserving memories that are absent from official histories and dominant cultural narratives (Omvedt 91; Rege 18).

At the level of self-assertion, autobiography allows Dalit writers to redefine identity beyond stigma. The act of naming oneself, one's community, and one's suffering becomes empowering. Many Dalit autobiographers draw inspiration from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, and organize," transforming personal narratives into collective political statements (Zelliot 173; Limbale 98). The "I" in Dalit autobiography thus often speaks for a larger community, making individual life writing a shared voice of resistance.

The Necessity of English Translation for Wider Circulation and Recognition

English translation plays a vital role in extending the reach and influence of Dalit autobiographies. Within India, English functions as a link language that enables texts written in regional languages to circulate across state and linguistic boundaries. Translation into English allows Dalit narratives from one region to resonate with readers in another, fostering inter-Dalit solidarity and broader social awareness (Nayar 89; Bassnett 31).

At the global level, English translation enables Dalit autobiographies to enter international academic discourse, comparative literature studies, and postcolonial debates. Translated texts make it possible for Dalit experiences to be read alongside other marginalized narratives, such as African American slave narratives or Indigenous life writing, highlighting shared histories of oppression and resistance (Smith and Watson 5; Davis 112).

Furthermore, English translations contribute to institutional recognition. Many Dalit autobiographies gain visibility only after being translated, leading to their inclusion in university syllabi, research publications, and literary criticism. While concerns remain about loss of cultural nuance and the risk of commodification, the absence of translation would mean continued invisibility. Thus, English translation, despite its limitations, remains an essential tool for amplifying Dalit voices and securing their rightful place in literary and cultural history (Venuti 15; Niranjana 59).

2. Dalit Life Writing: Themes, Voice, and Political Consciousness

Dalit life writing is not merely a literary genre but a mode of social intervention that foregrounds lived experience as knowledge. Unlike dominant autobiographical traditions that emphasize individual growth or self-realization, Dalit autobiographies emerge from collective histories of exclusion, humiliation, and resistance. These texts articulate a distinctly political consciousness in which personal memory intersects with structural critique. The thematic concerns, narrative voice, and ideological orientation of Dalit life writing collectively challenge aesthetic conventions and redefine the purpose of literature itself (Satyanarayana and Tharu xxi; Brueck 4).

Dalit autobiographies foreground the realities of caste oppression while simultaneously asserting agency and dignity. They expose how caste operates not only through overt violence but also through everyday practices of exclusion embedded in language, space, and social interaction. In doing so, Dalit life writing transforms autobiography into a radical form that documents injustice while envisioning social change (Rao 109; Paik 61)

Central Themes in Dalit Autobiographies

One of the most prominent themes in Dalit autobiographies is the pervasive experience of caste-based discrimination. These narratives document how caste governs access to education, employment, housing, water, and even basic human interaction. Episodes of untouchability—being made to sit outside classrooms, drink from separate vessels, or perform degrading labor—are recounted not as isolated incidents but as systemic patterns that shape Dalit existence from childhood onward (Pawar 37; Valmiki 18).

Another recurring theme is poverty and economic exploitation. Dalit autobiographers frequently describe lives marked by hunger, debt, and precarious labor, revealing the intimate link between caste and class. These accounts challenge romanticized depictions of rural India by presenting villages as sites of entrenched inequality rather than communal harmony (Paik 74; Anand 96). Economic hardship in these narratives is not accidental but structurally enforced, sustained by caste hierarchies that restrict mobility and opportunity.

Education emerges as both a site of oppression and a means of resistance. While schools often function as spaces of humiliation and exclusion, literacy becomes a powerful tool for self-awareness and social critique. Many Dalit autobiographies depict education as transformative, enabling writers to articulate their suffering and challenge dominant narratives (Guru 270; Rege 41). This dual role of education underscores the tension between institutional discrimination and individual empowerment within Dalit life writing

Narrative Voice: From Silence to Assertion

The narrative voice of Dalit autobiography is distinct in its refusal of neutrality. It is often marked by anger, irony, and moral urgency—emotions that mainstream literary criticism has historically dismissed as lacking refinement. However, this emotional intensity is central to the political force of Dalit writing. As Brueck argues, Dalit autobiographical voice is shaped by the necessity to speak against silence and misrepresentation, making emotional directness a deliberate stylistic choice rather than a flaw (Brueck 52).

Many Dalit autobiographies adopt a collective voice, where the “I” frequently merges with the “we.” This narrative strategy emphasizes that the author’s life is representative rather than exceptional. The individual story becomes a lens through which broader social realities are revealed, challenging the bourgeois individualism often associated with autobiography (Satyanarayana 88; Rao 114).

Orality also plays a significant role in shaping Dalit autobiographical voice. Storytelling techniques drawn from folk traditions, public speeches, and everyday conversation lend these texts a spoken quality that resists elite literary norms. This oral-inflected voice asserts cultural authenticity and affirms Dalit modes of expression that have historically been marginalized (Anand 103; Limbale 121)

Political Consciousness and Ambedkarite Influence

Dalit autobiographies are deeply informed by Ambedkarite ideology, which provides both a framework for understanding oppression and a vision for emancipation. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s emphasis on rationality, self-respect, and social equality shapes the political consciousness articulated in these narratives. Many autobiographers explicitly reference Ambedkar as a source of intellectual awakening and moral strength (Zelliot 189; Paik 83).

This political consciousness transforms autobiography into a form of activism. Dalit writers do not merely describe suffering; they analyze its causes and identify caste as a system of power sustained by religion, tradition, and state institutions. By naming caste oppression explicitly, Dalit autobiographies challenge dominant narratives that frame inequality as social backwardness or personal failure (Guru 274; Rao 118).

Conversion, protest movements, and collective action frequently appear in Dalit life writing as moments of political assertion. These experiences highlight the shift from passive endurance to organized resistance, underscoring the role of autobiography in documenting and inspiring social change (Paik 92; Anand 111). The autobiographical act itself becomes a continuation of this resistance, transforming personal memory into political testimony.

Dalit Life Writing as an Alternative Literary Aesthetic

Dalit autobiographies challenge conventional literary aesthetics by prioritizing truth over polish and urgency over form. Critics have often labeled these texts as crude or excessively confrontational, revealing an implicit bias toward upper-caste literary standards. Dalit writers, however, consciously reject these norms, asserting that aesthetic refinement cannot be separated from social privilege (Limbale 124; Dangle 271).

This alternative aesthetic is grounded in realism and ethical commitment. Graphic descriptions of violence, humiliation, and deprivation are not intended to shock for effect but to bear witness to lived reality. By refusing metaphorical distancing or sentimentalization, Dalit autobiographies compel readers to confront caste oppression directly (Brueck 67; Valmiki 23).

Furthermore, Dalit life writing redefines the function of literature as a tool for social transformation. The value of these texts lies not only in their narrative craft but in their capacity to unsettle dominant consciousness and provoke ethical reflection. In this sense, Dalit autobiography occupies a unique position at the intersection of literature, history, and social justice (Satyanarayana and Tharu xxvii; Rao 121).

Hence, Dalit life writing, through its themes, voice, and political consciousness, represents a radical reimagining of autobiography. It transforms personal narrative into collective testimony and literature into an instrument of resistance. By foregrounding lived experience, rejecting dominant aesthetics, and articulating Ambedkarite political thought, Dalit autobiographies challenge both social hierarchies and literary conventions. This distinctive character makes their translation into English not merely desirable but necessary—a concern that will be explored in subsequent sections of this paper.

3. English Translation as Cultural Mediation

English translation plays a crucial mediating role in the transmission of Dalit autobiographies from regional linguistic spaces to broader national and global publics. Translation in this context is not a neutral or mechanical transfer of meaning but a complex cultural process shaped by power relations, ethical responsibility, and interpretive choices. Dalit autobiographies, rooted in specific social realities, idioms, and histories, pose particular challenges to translation, as they demand sensitivity to both linguistic nuance and political intent. As several scholars have argued, translation becomes a site where questions of representation, authority, and voice are negotiated (Niranjana 2; Bassnett 38).

The act of translating Dalit life writing into English thus functions as cultural mediation—bridging gaps between languages, social locations, and readerships. The translator operates at the intersection of multiple worlds, tasked with preserving the radical energy of the source text

while making it intelligible to readers unfamiliar with caste-based realities. This mediating role carries both transformative potential and ethical risk (Venuti 19; Trivedi 203).

Translation as a Political and Ethical Act

Translation of Dalit autobiographies is inherently political because it involves the movement of marginal voices into a language historically associated with power, privilege, and global visibility. English, as a colonial and postcolonial language, occupies an ambivalent position in Indian society. While it has often functioned as a marker of elite status, it has also served as a language of dissent and emancipation, particularly within Ambedkarite thought (Anand 118; Paik 97).

Translating Dalit autobiographies into English can thus be understood as an act of ethical solidarity. By enabling these narratives to circulate beyond regional confines, translation challenges the monopolization of English by upper-caste discourse and reclaims it as a tool for resistance. However, this process also raises questions about who translates Dalit texts and under what conditions. Scholars caution that translators must remain attentive to their positionality, as translation choices can unintentionally dilute or distort the political force of the original narrative (Niranjana 59; Spivak 384).

Ethical translation requires more than linguistic competence; it demands a deep engagement with the social realities that shape Dalit life writing. Translators are often compelled to make decisions regarding the retention of caste-specific terms, cultural references, and expressions of anger or pain. These choices determine whether the translated text preserves its confrontational edge or becomes domesticated for a comfortable readership (Venuti 25; Bassnett 41).

Linguistic and Cultural Challenges in Translating Dalit Autobiographies

Dalit autobiographies are deeply embedded in regional languages and cultures, making translation a particularly demanding task. Many caste-specific terms, insults, occupational references, and ritual practices lack direct equivalents in English. Translators must decide whether to retain these terms in the original language, explain them through glossaries or footnotes, or replace them with approximate English expressions. Each strategy carries implications for readability, authenticity, and political impact (Trivedi 207; Nayar 103).

The oral quality of Dalit life writing further complicates translation. These texts often employ colloquial speech, folk idioms, and non-standard grammar to reflect lived experience. Rendering this orality into English without flattening its texture or reinforcing stereotypes requires careful stylistic negotiation. Excessive standardization risks erasing the distinctiveness of Dalit voice, while overemphasis on difference may exoticize the text (Brueck 71; Anand 122).

Another significant challenge lies in translating affect—particularly anger, humiliation, and defiance. Dalit autobiographies frequently employ sharp, confrontational language that disrupts conventional narrative comfort. Translators may face editorial pressure to soften such expressions for broader appeal, thereby undermining the text's political intent. Preserving

emotional intensity is thus central to maintaining the integrity of Dalit life writing in translation (Paik 104; Valmiki 27).

Translator as Mediator and Co-Creator

In the translation of Dalit autobiographies, the translator assumes the role of mediator and, to some extent, co-creator. Far from being invisible, the translator's presence shapes how Dalit voices are heard and interpreted. Choices related to diction, tone, and explanatory framing influence the reader's engagement with the text and their understanding of caste oppression (Venuti 32; Bassnett 45).

Some scholars argue for a "foreignizing" approach to translation, wherein cultural difference is deliberately retained to challenge the reader's assumptions. In the context of Dalit autobiographies, such an approach can resist assimilation into dominant literary frameworks and preserve the text's alterity (Venuti 20; Trivedi 211). However, excessive foreignization may also alienate readers, limiting the text's reach and impact.

A balanced mediating strategy seeks to maintain cultural specificity while ensuring accessibility. This often involves paratextual elements such as introductions, translator's notes, and glossaries, which contextualize the narrative without interrupting its flow. These framing devices enable readers to engage with the text ethically and informedly, acknowledging their own positionality in relation to the narrative (Genette 261; Nayar 108).

English Translation and the Global Circulation of Dalit Narratives

English translation has been instrumental in positioning Dalit autobiographies within global literary and human rights discourses. Once translated, these texts are frequently read alongside other marginalized narratives, such as African American slave narratives or Indigenous autobiographies, facilitating comparative frameworks that highlight shared structures of oppression (Smith and Watson 14; Davis 119).

This global circulation has contributed to increased academic interest in Dalit studies, particularly within postcolonial, subaltern, and translation studies. English translations enable Dalit autobiographies to be taught in universities worldwide, expanding their interpretive horizons and fostering cross-cultural solidarity (Nayar 111; Anand 129). At the same time, scholars caution against the risk of homogenization, where diverse Dalit experiences are subsumed under a singular narrative of suffering tailored to global expectations (Brueck 78; Paik 109).

Nevertheless, the international visibility afforded by English translation has empowered Dalit writers by affirming the universal significance of their experiences. Translation thus functions as both a bridge and a battleground—connecting worlds while exposing the tensions inherent in representing marginality within global literary markets (Venuti 35; Niranjana 63).

Conclusion to Section 3

English translation, as cultural mediation, plays a decisive role in shaping the reception and impact of Dalit autobiographies. It is a politically charged and ethically complex process that involves navigating linguistic, cultural, and ideological boundaries. By mediating between

local experience and global readership, translation amplifies Dalit voices while also confronting risks of distortion and domestication. Recognizing translation as an act of cultural negotiation allows for a more nuanced understanding of its power to both enable and constrain the emancipatory potential of Dalit life writing.

4. Visibility, Canon Formation, and Academic Reception

The translation of Dalit autobiographies into English has significantly altered their visibility and status within Indian and global literary cultures. Once confined to regional languages and limited readerships, these texts have gained wider circulation through translation, enabling their entry into literary canons, academic curricula, and critical discourse. Visibility, however, is not merely a matter of access; it is deeply intertwined with questions of power, legitimacy, and representation. The inclusion of Dalit autobiographies in academic and literary institutions reflects broader shifts in cultural politics while also revealing persistent tensions surrounding canon formation (Guha 35; Nayar 118).

Canon formation is never a neutral process. It involves selection, exclusion, and evaluation based on dominant aesthetic and ideological norms. Dalit autobiographies challenge these norms by foregrounding lived experience and political urgency over formal refinement. Their growing academic reception signals a reconfiguration of literary value, though this inclusion remains uneven and contested (Rege 62; Satyanarayana and Tharu xxxi).

Translation and the Politics of Literary Visibility

English translation has been central to making Dalit autobiographies visible beyond their linguistic regions. Translation enables these texts to circulate across India's diverse linguistic landscape, allowing Dalit experiences from one region to resonate with readers elsewhere. This expanded circulation has fostered greater awareness of caste as a national, rather than merely regional, issue (Paik 114; Anand 137).

Visibility through translation also extends to the international sphere. English-language editions of Dalit autobiographies have attracted global readerships and critical attention, situating Dalit narratives within broader discussions of human rights, social justice, and marginalized identities. This global visibility has helped counter the historical invisibility of Dalit voices in world literature, though it often frames them within universal narratives of suffering that risk oversimplification (Brueck 83; Davis 125).

Moreover, translation contributes to media visibility through reviews, interviews, and literary festivals, which often privilege English-language texts. While this attention can amplify Dalit voices, it may also create hierarchies within Dalit literature itself, where translated works gain prominence over equally significant texts that remain untranslated (Nayar 121; Trivedi 219).

Canon Formation and the Reconfiguration of Literary Value

The inclusion of Dalit autobiographies in literary canons marks a significant departure from traditional Indian literary historiography. Historically, canons have been shaped by upper-caste perspectives that privileged classical texts, spiritual narratives, and aesthetic refinement. Dalit autobiographies disrupt this framework by asserting that lived experience and social critique are central to literary value (Dangle 279; Limbale 132).

English translations have facilitated this reconfiguration by enabling Dalit texts to be read, taught, and critiqued within mainstream literary studies. Anthologies, critical editions, and academic publications have played a crucial role in legitimizing Dalit autobiographies as objects of scholarly inquiry. However, this process often involves selective inclusion, favoring texts that align with existing theoretical frameworks or institutional expectations (Satyanarayana 141; Rege 68).

Canon formation also raises questions about representation within Dalit literature. Certain voices—particularly male, urban, or politically prominent authors—tend to dominate academic discourse, while women’s autobiographies and narratives from less visible communities receive comparatively less attention. This uneven representation highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to canon formation that acknowledges diversity within Dalit experiences (Paik 121; Brueck 89).

Dalit Autobiographies in Academic Institution

Academic institutions have played a decisive role in shaping the reception of Dalit autobiographies. English translations have enabled these texts to be incorporated into university syllabi across disciplines such as literature, sociology, history, and cultural studies. Their presence in classrooms challenges students to confront caste as a lived reality rather than an abstract concept (Nayar 124; Anand 141).

Scholarly engagement with Dalit autobiographies has expanded rapidly, with critics examining these texts through lenses such as subaltern studies, trauma theory, life writing, and postcolonial criticism. This interdisciplinary interest underscores the complexity and richness of Dalit life writing, while also raising concerns about over-theorization that may distance texts from their socio-political contexts (Rao 129; Brueck 94).

Furthermore, academic reception often shapes public understanding of Dalit literature. Scholarly interpretations influence how these texts are framed in anthologies, reviews, and teaching materials. While academic validation can enhance legitimacy, it also risks imposing interpretive frameworks that prioritize theoretical sophistication over the political urgency of the narratives (Rege 71; Guru 281).

Critical Debates and Institutional Challenges

The growing academic reception of Dalit autobiographies has generated important critical debates. One such debate concerns the criteria used to evaluate these texts. Traditional literary criticism often emphasizes narrative coherence, stylistic elegance, and aesthetic innovation—standards that may be ill-suited to life writing rooted in testimony and protest. Critics argue that applying these criteria uncritically can marginalize the very features that make Dalit autobiographies politically powerful (Limbale 138; Dangle 284).

Another debate centers on the role of English in mediating Dalit voices. While English translation facilitates visibility and academic engagement, it also raises concerns about linguistic hierarchy and cultural alienation. Some scholars question whether institutional recognition through English risks reinforcing the dominance of elite languages at the expense of regional linguistic traditions (Niranjana 67; Paik 127).

Institutional barriers also persist. Despite increased inclusion, Dalit autobiographies remain underrepresented in mainstream curricula and literary histories. Their study is often confined to specialized courses or electives, limiting their transformative potential. Addressing these challenges requires sustained institutional commitment to inclusivity and critical self-reflection (Rege 75; Satyanarayana 148).

Conclusion to Section 4

Visibility, canon formation, and academic reception are deeply interconnected processes that shape the circulation and interpretation of Dalit autobiographies. English translation has been instrumental in enabling these texts to enter literary canons and academic institutions, redefining literary value and expanding critical discourse. Yet this inclusion remains fraught with tensions related to representation, evaluation, and institutional power. Recognizing these

5. Challenges and Critiques of Translating Dalit Autobiographies

While English translation has played a crucial role in expanding the reach of Dalit autobiographies, it has also generated significant critical debates. Translation is not a neutral act, especially when it involves texts produced by historically marginalized communities. Dalit autobiographies, rooted in specific social, linguistic, and political contexts, present unique challenges that complicate the process of translation. Critics argue that translation can both empower and constrain Dalit voices, depending on how linguistic choices, editorial practices, and market forces shape the final text (Niranjana 70; Venuti 41).

The critiques surrounding translation focus not on its necessity but on its implications. Scholars caution that without ethical awareness, translation risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge. Issues of authenticity, representation, and power lie at the heart of these debates, making Section 5 central to understanding the limits and possibilities of English translation in promoting Dalit autobiographies (Spivak 399; Brueck 101).

Loss, Distortion, and the Problem of Cultural Specificity

One of the most frequently cited challenges in translating Dalit autobiographies is the potential loss of cultural specificity. These texts are deeply embedded in regional languages, caste practices, and local histories. Terms related to caste identity, labor, ritual, and insult often have no direct equivalents in English. When such terms are translated loosely or omitted altogether, the social intensity of the original experience can be diminished (Trivedi 224; Paik 132).

The problem becomes particularly acute when culturally loaded words—such as caste slurs or occupational labels—are rendered into neutral or euphemistic English expressions. Such choices may make the text more palatable to unfamiliar readers but risk erasing the violence embedded in language itself. Critics argue that retaining untranslated terms, accompanied by contextual explanation, may better preserve the political force of the original text (Nayar 129; Anand 147).

Furthermore, regional variations in caste practices pose difficulties for translators seeking to convey nuanced realities to a global audience. Without adequate contextual framing, readers may misinterpret or generalize specific experiences, reducing complex social structures to simplified narratives of oppression (Brueck 107; Rao 136).

Domestication, Sanitization, and Market Pressures

Another major critique concerns the domestication of Dalit autobiographies for English-speaking audiences. Publishers and editors often prioritize readability and marketability, encouraging translations that conform to mainstream narrative expectations. This process may involve smoothing rough language, reorganizing episodic structures, or softening confrontational passages—practices that risk sanitizing the radical edge of Dalit life writing (Venuti 45; Bassnett 59).

Market pressures also influence which texts are translated. Autobiographies that align with dominant narratives of victimhood or redemption are more likely to attract publishers, while texts that foreground anger, militancy, or ideological critique may be sidelined. This selective translation shapes global perceptions of Dalit experience, privileging certain voices while marginalizing others (Brueck 112; Paik 139).

Such editorial interventions raise ethical concerns about whose comfort translation serves. Critics argue that translating Dalit autobiographies should prioritize fidelity to political intent rather than reader convenience, even at the cost of narrative discomfort (Spivak 402; Niranjana 75).

Translator Positionality and Power Asymmetries

The positionality of the translator is another critical issue in the translation of Dalit autobiographies. Many translations are produced by scholars or writers who do not belong to Dalit communities. While this does not invalidate their work, it raises questions about representation, authority, and interpretive control. Who has the right to translate Dalit lives, and how does social location shape translation choices? (Brueck 115; Guru 289).

Power asymmetries between authors, translators, and publishers can further complicate this relationship. Dalit writers may have limited control over how their texts are translated, marketed, or framed. Translator's introductions and explanatory notes, while helpful, may inadvertently position the translator as an authoritative interpreter, overshadowing the author's voice (Venuti 48; Genette 268).

Some scholars advocate for collaborative translation practices that involve close consultation with authors or Dalit communities. Such approaches can help mitigate power imbalances and ensure that translations remain accountable to the lived realities they represent (Nayar 133; Anand 151).

Language, Emotion, and the Ethics of Representation

Dalit autobiographies often convey intense emotions such as anger, shame, and defiance. Translating these affective dimensions poses ethical challenges. There is a tendency within English literary culture to value restraint and subtlety, which may conflict with the direct emotional expression characteristic of Dalit life writing. Translators may feel pressure to temper emotional language to suit literary norms, thereby diminishing its political urgency (Paik 144; Brueck 118).

Additionally, there is the risk of voyeurism in the global reception of translated Dalit autobiographies. Graphic descriptions of suffering may be consumed as spectacles of pain rather than calls for ethical engagement. Translators and publishers must navigate this risk carefully, ensuring that representation fosters empathy and solidarity rather than passive consumption (Smith and Watson 23; Davis 131).

Ethical translation, therefore, requires a commitment to preserving emotional intensity while resisting sensationalism. This balance is crucial to maintaining the dignity and agency of Dalit subjects within translated texts (Spivak 404; Venuti 52).

Conclusion to Section 5

The challenges and critiques surrounding the translation of Dalit autobiographies reveal the complexity of mediating marginalized voices through English. Issues of cultural loss, domestication, market influence, and power asymmetries underscore the ethical stakes involved in translation. While English translation remains an indispensable tool for promoting Dalit life writing, it must be approached with critical awareness and political responsibility. Recognizing these challenges does not undermine the value of translation; rather, it strengthens the call for practices that honor the integrity, agency, and radical intent of Dalit autobiographies.

6. Conclusion: Translation as Empowerment, Responsibility, and Resistance

The journey of Dalit autobiographies from regional languages into English reveals translation as a powerful yet contested cultural practice. Far from being a neutral linguistic transfer, English translation has functioned as a transformative force that has amplified Dalit voices, expanded their readership, and secured their presence within academic, literary, and global human rights discourses. Through translation, Dalit life writing has crossed linguistic boundaries to challenge dominant narratives of Indian society and expose caste as a persistent structure of inequality rather than a residual social problem.

At the same time, this paper has demonstrated that translation is inseparable from questions of power, representation, and ethics. The very processes that enable visibility—canon formation, academic reception, and global circulation—also risk flattening difference, domesticating anger, and privileging certain voices over others. Translation can both disrupt and reproduce hierarchies, depending on how attentively it engages with the cultural specificity, political urgency, and emotional intensity of Dalit autobiographies.

What emerges, therefore, is not a rejection of English translation but a call for responsible and reflexive translational practice. Translators, scholars, and institutions must recognize their mediating roles and remain accountable to the communities whose lives are being represented. English, when approached critically, can serve not as a language of erasure but as a language of assertion—one that carries Dalit testimonies into wider conversations about justice, dignity, and equality.

Ultimately, the significance of translating Dalit autobiographies lies in their ability to transform literature into an ethical encounter. These texts compel readers to confront uncomfortable histories and ongoing realities of caste oppression. In doing so, they reaffirm autobiography

not merely as a literary genre but as an act of resistance, and translation not merely as technique, but as a political and moral responsibility.

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