

Translating Historical Trauma and Systemic Oppression: Dalit Women's Narratives through Autobiographies

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Abstract

The paper investigates how Dalit women's autobiographies operate as forms of testimony that recount historical trauma while reconfiguring autobiography as a mode of resistance within Indian caste society. Through close textual and translation-oriented analysis, it examines *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story* (1988) by Sumita Bhawe, *Karukku* (1992) by Bama, *The Story of My Sanskrit* (2013) by Kumud Pawde, *The Weave of My Life* (2015) by Urmila Pawar and *The Prisons We Broke* (2018) by Baby Kamble. The paper explores how these narratives translate lived experiences of caste and gender-based marginalisation into literary forms that contest dominant literary narratives and how translation mediates their circulation beyond regional contexts. Drawing on Dalit feminist thought, trauma theory, and translation studies, the paper argues that the texts foreground embodied memory, expose the Brahminical patriarchy, and expand the analytical scope of life writing as a critical intervention in social justice discourse.

Keywords: Dalit women, autobiographies, translation, historical trauma, oppression, caste and gender, resistance

Introduction

The life narratives of Dalit women occupy a key place in subaltern and feminist studies because they provide both personal testimony and social critique.¹ Jerome Bruner mentions these autobiographical forms as the inventions of autobiographers who set the essential aspects of their lives in a new form.² The autobiographies act not only as personal testimonies but also as critical reflections on the intersecting structures of caste, gender, class, and religion that shape everyday life in India. Bhushan Sharma observes that Dalit women's autobiographies are cultural biographies and social narratives of a hidden group's experiences, revealing previously hidden realities.³ By documenting lived realities of

¹ Dalit, a term used to refer to people who were historically marginalised in Hindu caste society. The official designations given to them by the Indian Constitution is Scheduled Castes.

² Jerome Bruner, 'Self-making and world-making,' in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self, and Culture*, ed. Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1075/sin.1>.

³ Bhushan Sharma, 'Narratives of Dalit women and "the Outsider Within": Toward a literary practice of Dalit feminist standpoint,' *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 4 (2021), <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss4/3>.

discrimination, violence, and resilience, Dalit women writers transform individual memory into a collective archive that challenges dominant narratives. As a way of demonstrating their humanity, they volunteered to speak out against prejudices based on race, class, and gender.⁴ Autobiographies such as Bama's *Karukku*,⁵ Baby Kamble's *Prison We Broke*,⁶ Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*,⁷ Kumud Pawde's *The Story of My Sanskrit*,⁸ and Sumita Bhavé's *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story*⁹ reveal the layered forms of marginalisation experienced by Dalit women within caste-based Indian society. The narratives move beyond individual memoir to expose structural inequalities rooted in social institutions, cultural practices, and day-to-day interactions. Nath explores Dalit women's autobiographies that speak to the agony and trauma of social exclusion. They offer a counter-narrative to the prevailing cultural narrative of maternity in the context of gender ideology, family, and work relations.¹⁰ They also challenge the dominance of upper-caste and male-centric literary traditions by foregrounding voices that have been excluded from the mainstream literary canon.

While existing scholarship has extensively examined Dalit literature through frameworks of caste critique and feminist resistance, relatively fewer studies integrate the dimensions of historical trauma, translation, and spiritual transformation within a single analytical framework. Much of the critical discourse focuses either on literary representation or socio-political analysis, often overlooking how translation mediates Dalit women's voices for wider audiences or how spiritual shifts, particularly conversion movements, influence narrative strategies and identity formation. Moreover, the interconnections among collective memory, trauma, and linguistic mediation remain underexplored. In this paper I address these gaps by discussing select Dalit women's autobiographies through an integrated approach that brings together trauma studies, feminist theory, subaltern perspectives, and translation studies, while also attending to the role of spirituality in shaping narratives of dignity and self-respect. By examining both the original texts and their translations, the paper highlights how linguistic mediation expands the reach of Dalit women's narratives while raising critical questions about representation. It asserts that autobiographies operate as sites where historical suffering is documented, social hierarchies are interrogated, and alternative visions of social justice and belonging are articulated.

The paper is structured as follows: the literature review locates the study within existing scholarship on Dalit women's writing, trauma theory, and translation studies. The methodology section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. The discussion

⁴ Anna Abarao Muley, 'Dalit women's autobiographies: A protest of Dalit woman against caste, class and gender discrimination,' *Research Journal of English (RJOE)* 7 no. 1 (2022), 4–6.

⁵ Bama Faustina Soosairaj, *Karukku*, trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom (Macmillan, 1992).

⁶ Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, trans. Maya Pandit (Orient BlackSwan, 2018).

⁷ Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, trans. Maya Pandit (Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁸ Kumud Pawde, 'The Story of My Sanskrit,' *Poisoned Bread: Translations from modern Marathi Dalit literature* (Orient Longman, 1992).

⁹ Sumitra Bhavé, *Pan on fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story* (Indian Social Institute, 1988).

¹⁰ Arpana Nath, 'Baby Halder's a life less ordinary: Domestic work, motherhood and the Dalit woman,' *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change* 3, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455632718795221>.

section examines historical trauma, Brahminical patriarchy, autobiography as testimony, the role of translation in rendering marginal voices, and the significance of spiritual transformation, and the conclusion reflects on the broader implications of Dalit women's autobiographies for understanding systemic inequality and the transformative potential of life writing.

Methodology and theoretical framework

The paper employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on a textual and thematic analysis of select Dalit women's autobiographies. The texts are selected for their prominence in Dalit literature, feminist literature, regional diversity, and engagement with caste oppression, gendered subjugation, and historical trauma. Thematic analysis identifies recurring motifs of oppression, resilience, spirituality, and identity, while narrative analysis examines voice, temporality, and storytelling strategies, highlighting how personal experiences intersect with collective histories. Translation is treated as both a methodological and political concern. Paratexts, including prefaces, footnotes, and translators' commentary, are assessed to understand how translation mediates the author's voice and positions Dalit women's narratives within feminist and subaltern discourses. This approach treats translation as an ethical and political act rather than a mere linguistic transfer.

The theoretical framework is intersectional and interdisciplinary, integrating feminist theory, subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and translation studies. Intersectional feminism informs the coding of themes in which caste, gender, and class intersect to shape oppression and agency.¹¹ Subaltern studies,¹² following Spivak frames Dalit women as historically silenced subjects, thereby guiding analysis of narrative strategies that assert visibility, collective memory, and resistance. Postcolonial theory situates caste and gender oppression within historical continuities, informing sections that address structural inequalities. Finally, Ambedkarite perspectives guide the analysis of spiritual and ethical dimensions, exploring how conversion, moral philosophy, and caste identity shape narrative strategies, resistance, and collective agency.¹³ By integrating textual, thematic, and narrative analyses, the paper treats Dalit women's autobiographies as multi-layered cultural artefacts.

Discussion

Historical trauma and Dalit women's oppression

Historical trauma can be comprehended as the collective emotional, psychological, and social injury produced by long histories of structural violence, transmitted across generations through memory, social practices, and institutional arrangements.¹⁴ Veena Das highlights how violence becomes embedded in the ordinary rhythms of everyday life, shaping

¹¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour,' *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988).

¹³ Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, 1992).

¹⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

subjectivity and social relations over time.¹⁵ In the context of Dalit women, historical trauma is inseparable from the intersecting hierarchies of caste, gender, and class, a dynamic illuminated by Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, which explains how overlapping systems of power generate distinct forms of marginalisation.¹⁶ Therefore, Dalit women's autobiographies act as pivotal narrative spaces where the collective effects of structural violence are documented, interpreted, and contested. As Sharmila Rege argues, such narratives comprise a Dalit feminist standpoint that challenges dominant epistemologies and foregrounds embodied knowledge.¹⁷

Baby Kamble's *Prison We Broke* is emblematic of this process. The autobiography was originally written in Marathi, titled *Jina Amucha*. It was later translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit. The translator contends that the autobiography is possibly the first autobiography which is written by a Dalit woman, not only in Marathi but in any Indian language. This autobiography is basically a compilation of memoirs that were published from 1982 to 1984, in the magazine, *Stree*. This series of memoirs was compiled in book form in 1986; in 2008, the English translation was published. The translator argues that 'Kamble's autobiography is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography.'¹⁸

Kamble describes the conditions under which Dalit women in Maharashtra endured forced labour, humiliation, and social exclusion. Women were denied access to basic needs like clean water, proper sanitation, and education. Beyond physical deprivation, Kamble documents the emotional and psychological subjugation, revealing how social structures normalise violence and humiliation for Dalit women. Her narrative exemplifies how personal suffering is embedded within larger systems of oppression, highlighting the inseparability of individual and collective trauma. Kamble also writes about the use of casteist slurs and misogynistic comments by the higher castes in Phaltan.¹⁹ The Mahars²⁰ were forbidden from walking on the usual roads that were used by the higher castes; 'When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside.'²¹

From the trauma theory perspective, these experiences can be comprehended as forms of cumulative injury that become normalised within collective life, producing what Caruth describes as the persistence of trauma across temporal boundaries.²² Kamble's depiction of caste-based insults illustrates how systemic violence operates not only through overt acts but also through everyday social regulation, reinforcing feelings of vulnerability and marginality. Reading Kamble through Spivak's reflections on subalternity highlights how autobiographical narration becomes a strategy of reclaiming voice within structures that

¹⁵ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins.'

¹⁷ Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies* (Zubaan, 2014).

¹⁸ Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, xii.

¹⁹ Phaltan is a city in the Satara district in the Indian state of Maharashtra.

²⁰ The Mahar caste is one of the scheduled caste communities in the state of Maharashtra. Many of the Mahars embraced Buddhism, inspired by the teachings and principles of B.R. Ambedkar, as a means of rejecting caste discrimination and asserting dignity and self-respect.

²¹ Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, 52.

²² Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.

historically have rendered Dalit women inaudible.²³ By documenting collective suffering, Kamble transforms personal memory into a social archive, demonstrating how testimony can disrupt dominant narratives that erase caste oppression. The text thus exemplifies how autobiographical writing participates in processes of witnessing and remembering that are central to trauma theory.

Similarly, Bama's *Karukku* illustrates the insidious and pervasive nature of historical trauma in the lives of Dalit women. Bama originally wrote the text in Tamil, and it was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. *Karukku*, which is considered one of the earliest influential Dalit women's autobiographical interventions in Tamil, foregrounds both external exclusion and internalised stigma. Bama's reflections on experiences within Christian institutions reveal how caste hierarchies persist even within spaces supposedly committed to egalitarian values. Through Das's lens of everyday violence, these experiences can be read as demonstrating how structural inequalities become internalised, shaping self-perception and emotional life.²⁴ Bama transforms her autobiography into both testimony and resistance, reclaiming agency and voice for herself and her community. Bama described *Karukku* this way:

The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma – of my community – whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.²⁵

Bama's articulation of collective suffering aligns with Caruth's argument that trauma involves not only individual experience but also the transmission of memory across communities.²⁶ The narrative voice in *Karukku* also reflects intersectional dynamics, demonstrating how gender intensifies caste-based marginalisation. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* extends this exploration of intergenerational trauma by situating personal experiences within broader community histories. Pawar wrote her autobiography titled *Aaydan* in Marathi. Maya Pandit translates the Marathi version of *Aaydan* into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. Wandana Sonalkar wrote the preface, and in her foreword to the English interpretation, she observes that:

The title of the book 'The Weave' is an illustration of the composing strategy utilised by Pawar, the existences of various individuals from her family, her husband's family, her neighbours and colleagues are woven together in a story that progressively uncovers various parts of the daily existence of Dalits, the complex manners by which station champions itself and drudgeries them down.²⁷

Pawar combines autobiographical storytelling with oral histories from other Dalit women, demonstrating how trauma is transmitted through familial narratives, social practices, and community memory. The weaving metaphor in her title aptly signifies the interconnectedness of individual and collective suffering, emphasising that Dalit women's struggles cannot be understood in isolation but must be contextualised within the broader structure of caste-based discrimination. Her narrative approach resonates with Rege's

²³ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak.'

²⁴ Das, *Life and Word*.

²⁵ Bama, *Karukku*, xx.

²⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.

²⁷ Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, xv.

emphasis on collective memory as a central component of Dalit feminist epistemology.²⁸ Pawar's recollections of social exclusion and everyday discrimination illustrate how trauma is rooted within social structures, emphasising its persistence across generations. Dalit women, historically positioned at the margins of both caste and gender hierarchies, have often been subjected to sexual abuse by upper-caste men and by male members within their own communities, reflecting patriarchal dynamics that are inseparable from caste oppression. Kamble and Bama do not merely narrate these acts of violence; they analyse the social and structural conditions that render Dalit women vulnerable, challenging readers to confront the systemic nature of their oppression.

Kumud Pawde's *The Story of My Sanskrit* is excerpted from her autobiography *Antasphot* and offers a profound account of her intellectual and social struggle as a Dalit woman pursuing education within a rigidly hierarchical caste system. Pawde's pursuit of Sanskrit, a language historically reserved for Brahmins, represents an act of intellectual and cultural defiance against systemic hierarchies. Furthermore, her engagement with Sanskrit, a language associated with upper-caste authority, can be interpreted as a symbolic challenge to epistemic hierarchies. Spivak's notion of epistemic violence provides a useful framework for understanding how institutional structures control access to knowledge and shape intellectual possibilities. Pawde's narrative demonstrates the psychological burden of navigating these structures, highlighting how educational spaces can simultaneously offer opportunities for empowerment and sites of exclusion. Sumita Bhave also documents these aspects in her autobiography.

Bhave's *Pan on Fire* was originally collected in Marathi in 1988 and published in English by the Indian Social Institute (1988). *Pan on Fire* is a collection of eight illiterate Dalit women, namely, Rukmini, Chhaya, Rakhma, Sangeeta, Mangala, Ashoka, Savitri and Leela, who tell their stories of oppression. The eight female storytellers come from different contexts, as regards family, age, education, religion or profession. Their sufferings are not impediments to realising that if they continued being silent, they would be further abused and discriminated against as Dalits and women. The title *Pan on Fire* is not only a metaphor of what their lives are like, with multiple oppressions and adversities. One of the female storytellers, in *Pan on Fire*, writes:

It must be generally understood and accepted in an ideal community that a woman is not a subordinate or a toy or a sex object, or a useful machine; she too has a body that tires, a heart, among her own desires. There must be an awareness of her as a person.²⁹

These words highlight the fact that Dalit women, whether in literature or in real life, are breaking down ancient caste and gender barriers. The historical trauma is an ongoing process shaped by structural conditions and social relations. Dalit women's autobiographies can be read as sites where historical trauma is both documented and reinterpreted. They reveal how memory operates as a resource for understanding the past and imagining more equitable futures. Through acts of narration, the writers not only bear witness to injustice but also articulate visions of resilience and collective transformation, underscoring the significance of literary testimony in confronting caste and gender oppression.

²⁸ Rege, *Writing caste*.

²⁹ Bhave, *Pan on fire*, 150.

Systemic oppression and Brahminical patriarchy

Brahminical patriarchy, as theorised by Uma Chakravarti, refers to the historically embedded system in which caste hierarchy and gender regulation operate together to sustain social order through the control of women's sexuality, labour, and access to knowledge. Chakravarti argues that caste purity is maintained through patriarchal norms that regulate women's bodies and social roles, thereby ensuring the reproduction of caste privilege across generations.³⁰ This framework is particularly useful for analysing Dalit women's narratives because it highlights how their oppression emerges not from a single axis but from the intersection of caste-based exclusion and gendered subordination.

It is important to distinguish between structural caste oppression and internalised patriarchy. Structural oppression refers to institutional and systemic practices such as denial of education, spatial segregation, exploitative labour, and ritual exclusion—that position Dalit communities at the margins of social and economic life. Internalised patriarchy operates within communities through gender norms that regulate women's behaviour, restrict their autonomy, and normalise unequal power relations. This distinction becomes evident in 'The Story of My Sanskrit' by Kumud Pawde. Pawde's pursuit of Sanskrit, a language historically associated with Brahminical authority, reveals education as a site where structural caste exclusion is enacted through subtle and overt forms of gatekeeping. Her experiences illustrate how access to knowledge is regulated to preserve social hierarchy. Rather than presenting education as an uncomplicated path to empowerment, she exposes its ambivalence, showing how institutions can reproduce caste privileges. Her narrative thus exemplifies how Brahminical patriarchy operates through epistemic control, limiting Dalit women's intellectual mobility while reinforcing notions of ritual purity. Her work resonates with the counter-hegemonic discourse introduced by the social reformers such as Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar,³¹ and the Dalit Panthers,³² situating her within a broader tradition of social reform that challenges the ideological foundations of caste and patriarchy in Indian society. Linking this example to the central argument, Pawde's narrative demonstrates that Brahminical patriarchy is not merely a theoretical construct, but a lived reality that shapes everyday interactions within educational institutions.

Economic oppression is another crucial dimension of Brahminical patriarchy. Dalit women have traditionally been confined to low-paying, menial, and often exploitative labour, such as agricultural work, cleaning, and manual scavenging. Along with arduous labour under harsh conditions, they had to fulfil domestic responsibilities as well. This dual burden reflects the compounded exploitation faced by Dalit women, positioning them as the most vulnerable within both caste and gender hierarchies. Kamble contends, 'I have to express this anger, give vent to my sense of outrage. But merely talking about it will not suffice. How many people

³⁰ Uma Chakravarti. 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14 (1993), <https://www.epw.in/journal/1993/14/special-articles/conceptualising-brahmanical-patriarchy-early-india-gender-caste>.

³¹ As anti-caste writers, the works of Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar and the Dalit Panthers critically dismantle the entrenched hierarchies of the social order and give voice to resistance against systemic caste oppression.

³² The Dalit Panthers emerged in Mumbai, Maharashtra, in 1972 as a militant socio-political movement inspired by the American Black Panther Party and the radical ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Formed by educated Dalit youth, the organisation sought to challenge caste-based inequality and injustice through direct action, literary expression, and political mobilisation.

can I reach that way? I must write about it. I must proclaim to the world what we have suffered.’³³ Kamble narrates an incident showing the hypocrisy of the upper caste Brahmins as follows: In the Mahar community, whenever any marriage is solemnised, the Brahmins are invited to do the rituals and ceremonial things. The Brahmin used to do the ritual by standing at a distance so that he would not get polluted by their touch. But when it comes to taking the Dakshina (fee or donation given to a priest), he never hesitates to take it from them.³⁴

In the ‘Introduction’ to the *Prisons We Broke*, translator Maya Pandit notes that, ‘if the Mahar community is the “other” for the Brahmins, Mahar women became the “other” for the Mahar men.’³⁵ She goes on to reveal how her mother was also kept confined within the four walls of the home. She writes, ‘My father had locked up my mother in his house, like a bird in a cage.’³⁶ In an interview with Maya Pandit, Kamble confessed:

Just like other women of the community, she too had to face physical torture at the hands of her husband for no fault on her side. Her husband used to doubt her every time. The domination and subjugation of women by men connote patriarchal hegemony. This domination and physical assault became so common for the women of the Mahar community that they neither complained about it nor raised their voices against it. They had accepted this physical torture as their destiny. She, too, had accepted that she was not an exception and tolerated it silently. She also adds that she was not even willing to write about her physical assault because it was the fate of most women; I wasn’t an exception. So why write about it, I felt.³⁷

Kamble herself is affected by this patriarchal hegemony imposed by the males of her community. Kamble takes the discussion ahead by pointing out that if the women from the high caste and class face gender discrimination, then the Dalit women face this discrimination threefold—being women, being lowest in the caste hierarchy and being poor.³⁸ Historically, upper-caste men have exercised control over Dalit women through sexual violence and exploitation, a phenomenon documented in autobiographies, including Kamble’s *Prison We Broke* and Bama’s *Karukku*. Dalit women’s oppression extends into religious and cultural spheres. Bama, in *Karukku*, illustrates how caste discrimination persisted even within Christian institutions, revealing that religious affiliation did not automatically dismantle caste hierarchies. Similarly, Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* demonstrates how social exclusion and ritualised discrimination permeated every aspect of communal life, from temple activities access to social ceremonies. Sunil Ramkete, in his article ‘Baby Kamble’s the Prisons We Broke and Urmila Pawar’s the Weave of my Life: feminist Critiques of Patriarchy,’ states that ‘Dalits were slaves of Savarnas. But the mentality of enslaving others was deep-rooted in the psyche of Dalits too. Hence, they used to enslave their daughters-in-law. The act of enslaving daughters-in-law is an indication of the hold of patriarchy on Dalits.’³⁹

The above section contends that Brahminical patriarchy functions as a key mechanism through which systemic oppression is maintained across social, economic, and cultural

³³ Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, 146.

³⁴ Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, 88.

³⁵ Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, xv.

³⁶ Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, 5.

³⁷ Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, 156.

³⁸ Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, 53.

³⁹ Sunil Ramkete, ‘Baby Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke and Urmila Pawar’s The Weave of My Life: Feminist Critiques of Patriarchy,’ *The Expression* 1 no. 5 (2015), 4.

spheres. The autobiographical narratives provide critical insights into these dynamics, revealing how structural constraints and internalised norms interact in shaping everyday life.

Autobiography as testimony and resistance

Unlike conventional autobiographies that often foreground individual achievement or personal introspection, Dalit women's life narratives function as collective acts of witnessing document structural violence and historical marginalisation. The texts may be read through the framework of *testimonio*,⁴⁰ a genre theorised by John Beverley as a form of narrative in which personal experience speaks on behalf of a broader community, transforming individual memory into political testimony.⁴¹ Similarly, George Yúdice emphasises that testimony operates as a mode of cultural and political intervention, articulating voices historically excluded from dominant discourse.⁴² Indian scholar Rege argues that Dalit women's autobiographies in India function as 'testimonios' because they narrate lived experiences of caste and gender oppression while simultaneously producing counter-histories that challenge dominant narratives.⁴³ This framework is particularly relevant because Dalit life writing often centres on collective memory and community suffering rather than individual identity.

Bama's *Karukku* exemplifies how autobiography operates as testimony. By narrating experiences of caste discrimination within educational and religious institutions, Bama exposes everyday practices that sustain social exclusion. In narrating her experiences as a Dalit woman in rural Tamil Nadu, Bama exposes the everyday humiliations endured by Dalit women, from restrictions in temple access to discrimination in schools. *Karukku* challenges both mainstream Tamil literature and dominant upper-caste feminist narratives. Her account may be read as a form of witnessing that contests what Spivak describes as the silencing of subaltern voices within dominant epistemic structures.⁴⁴ Dalit feminist scholar Uma Chakravarti praises *Karukku* for its unflinching portrayal of Dalit women's experiences and its contribution to the discourse on caste and gender.

Similarly, Kamble's *Prison We Broke* documents the lived realities of Dalit women labourers in Maharashtra, providing detailed accounts of forced labour, sexual exploitation, and social ostracisation. Kamble refuses to remain a passive observer of injustice, instead positioning herself and other Dalit women as active agents who resist systemic oppression through storytelling. Thus, we observe that the autobiography of Kamble is not completely an account of her own 'self.' As Rege notes, Dalit women's narratives disrupt dominant historiography by foregrounding experiences that have been systematically excluded from mainstream accounts.⁴⁵ Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* further demonstrates how autobiographical writing functions as testimony by interweaving personal memory with community histories. An account which highlights the plight of village women who took long walks through dangerous forests and hills in order to sell their baskets and firewood for their

⁴⁰ *Testimonio*, a Spanish term meaning 'testimony,' denotes a first-person narrative that bears witness to the lived experiences of marginalised individuals, often in the context of social or political oppression.

⁴¹ John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 31–32.

⁴² George Yúdice, 'Testimonio and Postmodernism,' *Journal of Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (1991), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X9101800302>.

⁴³ Rege, *Writing caste*, 13–15.

⁴⁴ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak,' 271–75.

⁴⁵ Rege, *Writing caste*, 231.

livelihood. In addition, they had to do household chores, prepare food for the family and they were also beaten by their husbands.

Moreover, Dalit women's autobiographies challenge traditional literary conventions through their narrative forms and stylistic choices. Fragmented storytelling and the integration of oral and vernacular modes of expression subvert the dominant literary canon. For instance, Bama's use of conversational, colloquial Tamil in *Karukku* resists the elitism of formal literary registers, foregrounding the lived realities and linguistic identities of marginalised communities. Similarly, Kamble's unflinching depiction of bodily labour and violence challenges literary conventions, insisting that social realities cannot be glossed over for aesthetic purposes. The narrative strategies emphasise the political dimension of autobiography, making the act of writing itself a form of resistance against literary, social, and cultural hierarchies.

The testimonial function of these texts may also be understood through trauma theory. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that testimony constitutes a process of bearing witness to collective trauma, enabling the articulation of experiences that resist conventional representation.⁴⁶ Dalit women's autobiographies similarly perform the work of witnessing by narrating experiences of caste violence and gendered marginalisation, thereby transforming private suffering into shared historical memory. Hence, Dalit literature has been theorised as a form of social critique that foregrounds lived experience as a site of knowledge production. Gopal Guru argues that 'Dalit women articulate experiences that differ significantly from mainstream feminist discourses, highlighting the specificity of caste-gender intersections.'⁴⁷ Likewise, Sharankumar Limbale conceptualises 'Dalit literature as literature of protest that emerges from the lived realities of oppression and seeks to challenge social hierarchies.'⁴⁸ These perspectives reinforce the interpretation of Dalit autobiographies as politically charged narratives that intervene in debates about social justice and representation. Significantly, reading these texts as testimonios highlights how autobiography functions differently from earlier discussions of trauma and structural oppression. The narrative voice in these texts does not simply recount events but actively participates in reshaping public understanding of caste and gender power dynamics.

Translation and representation

Translation plays a crucial role in bringing Dalit women's autobiographical narratives into the wider literary and political arena, enabling voices historically confined to regional linguistic spheres to intervene in national and global debates on caste and gender. Rather than approaching translation as a neutral transfer of meaning, this section examines how the English translations of the Dalit autobiographies actively shape the representation of experience and the articulation of resistance. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural translation, translation can be understood as a process that occurs in an 'in-between'

⁴⁶ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1992), 57–58.

⁴⁷ Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, nos. 41–42 (1995), 2548–50. <https://www.epw.in/journal/1995/41-42/commentary/dalit-women-talk-differently.html>.

⁴⁸ Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, trans Alok Mukherjee (Orient Longman, 2004), 19–22.

space, where meanings are negotiated rather than reproduced.⁴⁹ In the context of Dalit life writing, this negotiation involves mediating between vernacular expressions embedded in caste-specific social worlds and a broader readership that may lack familiarity with these realities. Translation thus becomes a site where questions of voice, authority, and representation are continually reworked.

English translations of the autobiographies demonstrate how translation intercedes in not only language but also social experience. Translators such as Lakshmi Holmström and Maya Pandit make strategic decisions about retaining vernacular words, explaining cultural practices, each of which affects how Dalit subjectivity is perceived. A clear example can be seen in Holmström's translation of *Karukku*. The Tamil title itself, referring to the serrated edges of palm leaves and symbolising both pain and spiritual awakening, is retained rather than being replaced with an English equivalent. This decision preserves the cultural metaphor and signals the text's rootedness in Dalit Christian experience. Throughout the translation, caste-marked terms such as forms of address and references to labour practices are often transliterated, allowing readers to encounter the linguistic texture of Dalit life rather than a domesticated version. The sharp style of Bama's Tamil prose, characterised by short, rhythmic sentences reflecting oral storytelling, is echoed in English, maintaining the urgency of her critique of caste humiliation. In this way, translation sustains the affective force of testimony while making it accessible beyond Tamil-speaking contexts.

Pandit in *The Weave of My Life* preserves culturally specific references such as terms related to rituals, caste practices, and local social relations instead of substituting them with generic equivalents. This strategy retains the communal dimension of Pawar's narrative, highlighting how autobiography functions as collective history. The translation also conveys the tonal shifts between reflective passages and moments of indignation, ensuring that the political charge of Pawar's critique of caste patriarchy remains intact. These examples illustrate that translation is not merely a technical exercise but an interpretive act that shapes how resistance is communicated. As Susan Bassnett argues, translation can function as a politically engaged practice that re-creates texts within new ideological contexts.⁵⁰ In the case of autobiographies, translation contributes to feminist and anti-caste discourse by amplifying voices that challenge dominant narratives of Indian society.

Translation also plays a significant role in reshaping the literary status of Dalit texts. As Sujit Mukherjee notes, translation can function as both discovery and recovery, bringing marginalised works into broader recognition while reclaiming suppressed histories.⁵¹ The circulation of Dalit autobiographies in English has enabled their inclusion in academic curricula and scholarly debates, thereby challenging the exclusionary boundaries of the literary canon. Moreover, translation facilitates transnational solidarities by allowing readers outside India to engage with caste as a system of structural inequality comparable to other forms of social stratification. Translation also foregrounds the collaborative nature of knowledge production. As acknowledged in the paratexts of *Karukku*, the partnership between author, translator, and editor was instrumental in bringing the text to wider

⁴⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁰ Susan Bassnett, 'Feminist, "Orgasmic" Theories of Translation and Their Contradictions. In *Writing in No Man's Land: Questions of Gender and Translation*, ed. Harish Trivedi and K. C. Subramaniam (Sage Publications, 1992).

⁵¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee and Sujit Mukherjee, *Translation as Discovery* (Pencraft International, 2004).

audiences.⁵² Such collaborations highlight the ways in which feminist translators have played a crucial role in mediating Dalit women's narratives, ensuring that their testimonies reach readers without erasing cultural distinctiveness. In this regard, Hélène Cixous's words are relevant. She writes:

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.⁵³

English translations of the autobiographies do more than expand readership; they reshape how Dalit women's lives are understood within literary and scholarly discourse. Through careful negotiation of language, voice, and context, translation renders histories that remained marginal.

Conversion, self-respect, and dignity

Religious conversion in the autobiographies operates not only as a spiritual transformation but also as a critical mode of testimony and resistance that intersects with the broader themes of translation and representation explored in this paper. The conversion of Dalits to Buddhism, inspired by B.R. Ambedkar,⁵⁴ who advocated mass conversion to Buddhism as a pathway to dignity and equality, represents a significant dimension that functions as both a spiritual act and caste resistance

Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* provides a compelling account of conversion as a form of liberation. She narrates how Buddhism offered an ethical framework that affirmed human dignity and equality. The adoption of Buddhist teachings enabled her to conceptualise a life free from the social hierarchies that had structured her upbringing. Pawar's family converted to Buddhism following B.R. Ambedkar's principles. After the death of Urmila Pawar's father, her mother started weaving and selling bamboo baskets, which were their only source of livelihood. Pawar did the home delivery of the baskets, a process during which she often felt insulted in the name of untouchability. She remembers:

People never allowed me to enter their houses. They made me stand at the threshold; I put the baskets down, and they sprinkled water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then they touch them. They would drop coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact, as if their hands would have burnt had they touched me.⁵⁵

The critic Eleanor Zelliot observes about Pawar's biography that 'there is tucked in every story, a note about a Buddhist Vihara or Ambedkar. All her stories come from the Dalit world, revealing the great variety of Dalit life now.'⁵⁶ This alignment underscores how spiritual change is inseparable from testimonial narration and the assertion of dignity. Similarly, Baby

⁵² Bama, *Karukku*, xi–xxiii.

⁵³ Hélène Cixous, ttrans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. 'The Laugh of the Medusa.' *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>.

⁵⁴ On 14 October 1956, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar publicly embraced Buddhism in Nagpur, leading a mass conversion involving lakhs of his followers, predominantly Dalits. This historic act was the culmination of his lifelong struggle against the caste system and his belief that Buddhism, founded on the principles of equality and human dignity, provided a rational and democratic alternative to Hinduism.

⁵⁵ Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, 65.

⁵⁶ Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, xii.

Kamble recounts the profound impact of Ambedkarite Buddhism on Dalit women's sense of self and community in her biography. Kamble emphasises that embracing Buddhism provided a framework for resisting not only caste oppression but also gendered subjugation. In her narrative, the act of conversion is deeply intertwined with empowerment, enabling women to negotiate new social identities. By joining Buddhist movements, Dalit women became part of collective efforts to dismantle caste hierarchies and assert social equality. This solidarity is highlighted in both Pawar's and Kamble's writings.

A comparative perspective emerges in the work of Bama, whose experiences within Catholic Christianity reveal the limits of religious institutions that fail to confront caste structures. Bama's narrative exposes how Christian spaces can reproduce social exclusion despite egalitarian theology. As a child, Bama grew up in an atmosphere instilled with faith in the Christian religion. Religion for her was a sense of duty and obedience. She learnt very early what it meant to be a Dalit in Tamil society, and realised what it meant to be a Dalit in the Catholic Christian society. She narrates her experience that, at the first place of work, a nun asked, Are you Nadar? She said, I am Paraya. After she entered the convent, she realised there is no place without caste. And in the convent, they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people. They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings. Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper castes who hold all the high positions and show their authority. We find there is no place for us.⁵⁷ Pawde also talks about the embrace of Buddhism as a conscious choice for liberation following Ambedkar's principles. Ambedkar's rational thinking is relevant here, and he writes in the preface to his book, *Buddha and His Dhamma* (1956), as follows;

A question is always asked to me: how I happen[ed] to take such [a] high degree of education. Another question is being asked: why I am inclined towards Buddhism. These questions are asked because I was born in a community known in India as the 'Untouchables.' This preface is not the place for answering the first question. But this preface may be the place for answering the second question. The direct answer to this question is that I regard the Buddha's Dhamma to be the best. No religion can be compared to it. If a modern man [sic] who knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the Religion of the Buddha. This conviction has grown in me after thirty-five years of close study of all religions.⁵⁸

These perspectives underscore how religious transformation becomes part of a broader discursive strategy through which Dalit women articulate dignity and critique social hierarchies.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to Dalit feminist studies by demonstrating how Dalit women's autobiographies function as critical sites where caste, gender, spirituality, and historical memory converge to articulate forms of resistance that are both personal and collective. By foregrounding the intersection of testimony, translation, and lived experiences, the paper extends existing scholarship that has often examined these narratives primarily as sociological documents, arguing instead that they operate as complex literary interventions that reshape dominant historiographies. In doing so, the paper contributes to translation studies by showing how translation mediates not only linguistic meaning but also ethical responsibility, and the global circulation of subaltern knowledge. These narratives do not merely recount

⁵⁷ Bama, *Karukku*, 23–28.

⁵⁸ Ambedkar, *Buddha and His Dhamma*, ii.

experiences of marginalisation, they actively contest dominant narratives by documenting everyday practices of survival, critiquing Brahminical patriarchy, and articulating alternative visions of dignity. By tracing how themes of historical trauma, systemic oppression, religious conversion, and linguistic mediation intersect within these texts, the paper argues that autobiography becomes a methodological tool for theorising resistance rather than simply narrating it.

Further research could examine comparative trajectories of Dalit women's writing across regional languages, explore the role of translation in shaping global receptions of caste narratives, or investigate how autobiographical writing informs contemporary social problems. Pedagogically, incorporating translated Dalit women's texts into curricula can foster critical engagement with questions of inequality and representation, encouraging students to understand literature as a space in which marginalised voices challenge dominant knowledge systems.

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