

Maya Pandit's *The Prisons We Broke*: Translation As An Act of Power and An Expression of Ideology

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Abstract: The *Prisons We Broke* (2008) is an English translation of Jina Aamcha(1985), a Marathi text by Baby Kamble. The translator is Prof. Maya Pandit, a feminist and a social activist herself. Baby Kamble's *Jina Aamcha*(1985) is the first work of Dalit women's writing. The book, an autobiography, written in Marathi language, deals with the lives of the Dalits in Veergaon, Kamble's village. It brings out oppression, exploitation of the Dalits by the upper class, women's status in a patriarchal society, the ignorant and superstitious lives of Dalits and the agonizing experience of being Dalit and also being a Dalit woman. The book also interrogates the various institutions like society, marriage, family, religion and God. The work crosses the boundaries of the 'personal' and the 'personal' becomes 'political' as well as 'a social comment' and also a story of a Dalit woman's search for identity in the caste based, patriarchal Hindu Indian society. Therefore, this paper aims at bringing out how Maya Pandit 'creates', 'disseminates' meaning and how her translation is an act of power. An attempt will also be made to show how this translation is an expression of a particular ideology of the translator and how Pandit attempts to unravel the deeper multiple meanings of the original text for the sake of a large number of readers.

Keywords: dalit autobiography, translation, act of power, ideology, multiple meanings, social change in India

The analysis and comparison of the two texts leads to the following conclusions:

- Jina Aamcha is a powerfully told story and the translation *The Prisons We Broke* is also pregnant with the same power and multiple meanings.
- The change in the title and the use of language by the translator initiates the reader into the deeper meaning of the lives of the Dalits.
- The translation certainly takes the critical issues to a wider horizon and therefore, it helps in creating a feminist consciousness and social awareness of power politics in a caste based patriarchal Hindu Indian society, on a large scale.
- The book is a great contribution to the field of translation studies and will bring social change in India.

Baby Kamble's *Jina Amcha*(1986) is the first work of Dalit women's writing. The book, an autobiography, deals with the lives of the Dalits in Veergaon, Kamble's village. It brings out oppression, exploitation of the Dalits by the upper classes, women's status in a patriarchal society, the ignorant and superstitious lives of Dalits and the agonizing experience of

being Dalit and also being a Dalit woman. The book interrogates the various institutions like society, marriage, family, religion and God. The work crosses the boundaries of the 'personal' and becomes a 'social' comment. The text is also a Dalit woman's story of her search for identity in the caste-based, patriarchal Hindu Indian society. In Kamble's memory, the Maharwada never had a prosperous life and ignorance as well as lack of reasoning ruled the Dalits. The life in Maharwada was dominated by poverty and epidemics. Death rate was high because of ceaseless starvation and lack of medical facilities for the fatal epidemics, moreover, superstitions was an integral part of their lives. Baby Kamble states, 'The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people and therefore, *Jina Amcha* was the autobiography of my own community.' According to Janhavi Acharekar, '*Jina Amcha* transcends the boundaries of personal narrative and is, at once, a sociological treatise, a historical and political record, a feminist critique, a protest against Hinduism and the sordid memoir of a cursed community'. For Kamble, a Dalit woman, her community is her family and therefore, she argues for the upliftment of her community or communitarianism. Kamble was born and grew up as a Mahar girl and therefore, suffered a lot. Her experiences are agonizing as they are sagas of suffering and revolution when the untouchables changed their religion for emancipation. Kamble is an activist of Ambedkar movement. She is aware of the oppressions under which Dalits had to suffer. She is proud to be a 'Mahar' and maintains that she is the real inhabitant of the land which is named after her caste. Land for Mahar is Maharashtra, according to her. However, she has a very practical view and is disappointed by the social conditions of the people of her community. She wishes to change their mindset and states that her aim is to introduce the new generation with the life of Dalits during the last fifty years and so she, in a way, writes the history of her community instead of just describing her life. So, the book becomes a socio-biography rather than just an autobiography. Kamble lived in the social structure of Hindu society in which woman is interpreted as subservient, the 'other'. She herself was a victim of her husband's suspicions and harsh beatings. However, her autobiography deals with her parents, grandparents and the Dalits. She describes the various traditions like Rede Jatra and other religious customs. For her, the suffering of her people becomes her own suffering and therefore, she finds it very difficult to think of herself 'outside of' her community. So, Kamble's work stands for community upliftment rather than self-development.

This text was translated in English by Maya Pandit and the title is '*The Prisons We Broke*' (2008). Pandit herself is an activist and a professor. Therefore, this paper aims at bringing out how Maya Pandit 'creates', 'disseminates' meaning and how her translation is an act of power. An attempt will also be made how this translation is an expression of a particular ideology of the translator and how Pandit attempts to unravel the deeper multiple meanings of the original text for the sake of a large

number of readers. The translation will be also evaluated on the basis of the supporting material and the introduction and critical apparatus accompanying the published work which sheds light on the translation, challenges involved and on the basis of the solutions adopted. It will be examined whether the translator has apparently adapted the work to the frame of reference of its new audience. It will also be studied whether the translation offers new insights and emphases. The issue of translation's faithfulness will also be addressed. Maya Pandit seems to retain the spirit of the original text and also writes a detailed introduction to the Dalit movement. The translation also contains an insightful interview with the author. The translation brings in the nuances of the inner world of the Mahar community in Maharashtra. Pandit, while describing the status and the world of this community, states, 'we were just like animals, but without tails,' it was a 'world of lice infected rags for sarees, feasts comprising maggot-ridden innards of diseased carcasses, the tearing hunger of starving new mothers, babies cleaned with saliva instead of soap, and intestine-damaging cactus pods consumed to quell hunger'. Pandit also brings out how the author, though born to an entrepreneurial father could not escape from the abject poverty just like the people of her community. The translator does not delete the details like the marginalized position of the Dalits in the village who live on 'the fringes of society', the world of buffalo fairs and sacrifice, of people possessed by spirits and boys offered to mother goddess as potrajas, the houses of the Dalits, their customs, their joys and sorrows, the unflinching portrait of Dalit women, subjugated by both, caste and patriarchy (though the same women later on became a driving force for education), the younger women's worst fate as described by Kamble, their marriage at the age of eight or nine, their physically being chained or having their noses chopped off for annoying their in-laws or husbands and these women's embracing the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar in these very conditions.

The Prisons We Broke is significant since Maya Pandit traces the evolution of the Mahar community from pre Ambedkar days to its rapid transformation through education and mass conversion. Maya Pandit states in the introduction that 'The Prisons We Broke is written with a deep rooted urge to engage with the history of the Mahar community's oppression'. According to Pandit, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is 'the major source of inspiration for Kamble, as he is for many radical and Dalit writers in Marathi.' Pandit perceives 'Baby Kamble's engagement with 'the history Dalit oppression'. Pandit locates *The Prisons We Broke* in the 'tradition of direct self assertion' and opines that it is 'a head-on confrontation with Brahminical hegemony and patriarchal domination as well. And it is, according to her, not an autobiography but a socio-biography. Therefore, Maya Pandit intentionally traces the history of the 'revolution' brought in by Dr. Ambedkar. The translator directs the reader to perceive Kamble's text with all its contexts and subtexts. The introduction prepares the readers to read the book critically, with a directed perspective as Pandit interprets Kamble's text as the first autobiography by a Dalit woman and therefore, deals with the

development of this form of writing and guides the reader, thereby to read the book 'not only as a sort of autobiography but a social comment'. However, she also, by dealing with the Ambedkar movement and the caste system in India, the role of political parties in the oppression of Dalits, the development of Dalit related political parties like the Dalit Panther, the element of rebellion in the original text, 'difference in location', alienation of the Dalits and bringing to light Dalit feminist critique of patriarchy, educates the readers to read the text 'critically' in order to see the 'transformative potential of oppressed people to change the world' and resultantly enables readers to redefine 'autobiographical' writing. Pandit herself interviewed Baby Kamble and created a lateral context for the readers to read between the lines and justify Kamble's attempt to resist oppression in any form. The interview which leads the reader to the better understanding of Kamble as a person and Kamble as an activist also helps in the proper adoption of the frame of reference by the translator. The original text does not sketch Kamble's character as a person but it is this interview which projects her as a person and therefore, Pandit aids in providing a bird's eye view of the 'personal' and the 'social' aspects of Kamble. The insightful questions also bring out the malpractices involved in patriarchy and the Hindu caste system and this intensifies the emphatic effect of the original text: there are questions related to Kamble's writing, its hows and whys, Dalit women's attitude to Dr. Ambedkar, women and politics, men's role in the 'change', women's domestic responsibilities, their social roles, social customs and Kamble's familial life etc.

Dr. Gopal Guru's afterword to the text brings out how 'autobiography' is linked with individualism, how Dalit women's autobiographies differ from the life stories of the upper caste, how Dalit women's personal narratives are a kind of protest against the exploitation, how Dalit women protest also against their exclusion from the Dalit public sphere, how Dalit male autobiographies are 'more inward looking' and how the 'Self in Dalit women's autobiographies is historically located and sociologically constituted'. Dr. Gopal Guru states, 'the narratives of exploitation, humiliation and starvation are common to all the (Dalit) autobiographies'. According to him, the common themes of these autobiographies are: triple exploitation (caste, class, gender), resistance against Dalit patriarchy in particular and social patriarchy in general. Therefore, *The Prisons We Broke* offers us an insight into the possibility of understanding the tension between tradition and modernity, the journey to modernity (epitomized by Dr. Ambedkar) undertaken by the Dalits. Thus, Dr. Gopal Guru brings out that Kamble's autobiography 'provides us evidence to the contrary reading of the conversion decision' and the struggle for equal recognition. The glossary is a detailed document to help the reader adapt to the frame of reference of the original text and understand the ethos in its true sense of the term. As a result of this, the reader can understand the text with all its possible meanings with new insights. The translation follows the order of the original text and confirms to the receptors' language and culture as a

whole. Pandit looks beyond the text itself to 'deconstruct and decode' by assessing culture and recreates the impact of the original text. Thus, Pandit's translation attains dynamic equivalence. Therefore, to conclude, it may be said that the translation of Jina Amcha, the Marathi text, by Maya Pandit titled *The Prisons We Broke* is a discourse that communicates the urge to share the 'trials, tribulations and triumphs' of a community. The introduction and glossary provide an aid to a 'critical reading' of the text with a wider guided perspective. The introduction, afterword and glossary provide a better understanding of the frame of reference dealt with in the original text. The translator offers new insights and emphases which leads to a fuller understanding of the text.

Maya Pandit disseminates and creates meaning and her act becomes an act of power. The translator's ideology is evident since she makes it very clear through the introduction. So, the translation can be perceived as an expression of her ideology. With the use of the interview, the translator tries to unravel the deeper multiple meanings of the original text and therefore, *The Prisons We Broke* is a great contribution to the field of translation as well as social studies.

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