

Translating the Autobiographical Subject: Reading Nalini Jamila's 'The Autobiography of a Sex Worker'

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Abstract

The meaning of autobiography lies in the manner in which it performs, enacts and encodes the ideological positions implicit in social relationships. This article will analyse how ideological underpinnings and the dominant literary discourses mediate the translation of an autobiographical self. This analysis closely reads the autobiography and the English translation of Nalini Jamila's "The Autobiography of a Sex Worker". In this analysis translation draws from a broader framework which has to be expanded to various intersecting discourses on gender, identity, language, representation, and experience. Such an examination of translation would then enable a close understanding of the specific socio-political and ideological undercurrents and power matrix inherent in the translation process in the case of narratives of gendered subaltern subject

Key Words: Translation, Autobiography, Life Narratives, Gender, Sexuality, Language, Identity and Representation

Studies of Black autobiographies have questioned the "ideological underpinning of classical mainstream autobiography" and it was observed that "they constructed self differently because they subscribed to a different cosmology of the self" (Ramakrishnan 67). Such studies deconstructed the notion of a rational modern self-untouched by the questions of race, community and, gender. William L. Andrews argues that the "self has to be understood as a dynamic notion in the study of Black autobiographies as it is being transformed by the prevailing structures of social oppression" (64). The studies which placed the subjects from different socio-political, ethnic and other marginal locations have contested the western

autobiography's conception of self a universal essentialised entity and showed the different ways of being subjects.

It was the autobiographies from the marginalised communities which posed such ideological questions to the dominant discourse of autobiography in India. Challenging the notion of a modern rational self, borrowed from the west exempted from the exigencies of caste, community and gender, autobiographical narratives from margins subverted the dominant literary practices by rendering the experience of a different subject echoing the collective experience of social oppression from different marginalised locations. The very process of writing about oneself becomes a political act of self-assertion towards the goal of achieving recognition and emancipation.

The autobiographies of women belonging to the marginalised communities inscribe more deep rooted questions of gender and caste and its intersectionality. Sherin B S in her paper titled "Counter Histories of Kerala's Modernity: Reading 'Not so Ideal' Women's Autobiographies" writes:

Women's autobiographies from the margins function as testimonies as Sharmila Rege names Dalit women's autobiographies. These testimonies redefine the genre, setting a different path from the male-defined and elite casteist framework of mainstream autobiographies. Also, they undertake social histories of communities that are located outside elitist modernity. The selfhood and agency of the narrators of such autobiographies negotiate with community identities and find spaces within marginalised communities to undertake the role of historians. Their voices reiterate multiple identities: as counter histories of elitist modernity, as feminist critiques of patriarchal oppression and as sociological treatise and above all powerful memoirs of politicized experiences (Sherin 4).

Autobiographies of women belonging to multiple cross points of marginality set new patterns of narrating selves raising new politically embedded questions on the lines of

Caste, gender and these narratives speaks for and beyond the self "reiterating multiple identities"(Sherin 4) breaking the boundaries of the genre of autobiography. They become "counter histories" of the communities belonging to locations outside the "modern elitist public sphere" and its narratives.

This new trend in the discourse of autobiography ,as rightly pointed out by E .V Ramakrishnan has made the genre move away from questions of the "'auto' to those of the

'bio' and the 'graphy' “ and this transition resulted in the emergence of a new alternative cosmology in the discourse of autobiography. In this context where the discourses around autobiography had met with a major shift, this study attempts to trace the discourse of autobiography in Malayalam placing it within the context of the increasing interest in publishing and translating autobiographies from the marginalised communities. Analysing the English translation Nalini Jamila's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* from Malayalam, the present study tries to understand how the politicised subjects while getting translated into a dominant languages and dominant literary discourses is mediated and incorporated into its fold to adapt into the dominant literary tradition of Malayalam

Gender has always been a crucial aspect in the imagination and creation of the Malayali modernity. The modern institution of family in Kerala placed the ideal woman who acquired the modern self within the private domain. The modern Malayali who stepped out of the most rigid and inhuman systems of caste and slavery never celebrated the fraternization of all men and women irrespective of caste and community, and definitely not by publicly embracing each other. All to the contrary, the public is still ruled by laws of public morality that regulates even body-contacts and has been internalized to that extent that any Malayali would immediately start or apologize when he/she touches or is touched in public by another person. Like this, until today, the woman's body is kept 'out' of the public.

In spite of the so called political and legal equality, women were considered ideal in the private domain. Family remained at the centre of Malayali culture which still stands as an unchallenged institution of patriarchy where women's subordination begins, brews and spills over to the other structures in large. Meena T Pillai in her article 'The Celluloid Women of Kerala' argues that the high social development indices have given rise to the 'Myth of Malayali women' as enjoying high status than their counterparts elsewhere in the country especially in view of the fact of high female literacy in the state (Pillai 141) .

The high level of female literacy and employment, one third reservation of seats in local governance bodies, high sex ratio and low fertility rates together with high female physical health indicate that the women of Kerala have definitely achieved a certain amount of social and political empowerment in the public domain. But feminism in Kerala remains to be a word invoking derogatory and hostile reactions. Kerala's peculiar native brand of what

Meena T Pillai calls “liberal patriarchal pseudo-feminism”, has provided women with legal equality, the right to education and other rights but education and social grooming have been kept at conservative levels with continuing emphasis on teaching girls that they are essentially wives and mothers. Feminist movements and agitations for equality and gender justice in Kerala have been by and large, issue-based and have not addressed the basic issues of women’s subordination within the family, issues of Dalit or Muslim women.

Modern Malayali identity not only silenced the real existing women by depriving her of her own voice, it also negated their respective 'inner world' as an independent and 'free' subjectivity that created her own vision of 'life'. J Devika in her article *Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer* deconstructs the myth of modern Malayali women by distinguishing the images of the domestic and the aesthetic woman.

The ideal woman was imagined to be not so much a unity as the union of two distinct figures, which may be called the “domestic woman”, and the “aesthetic woman”. While the former was the provider of progeny, the manager of material and the guardian of souls in the modern home, the aesthetic woman had a function which was almost in antipathy to this. The aesthetic woman was the provider of pleasure, she who cemented modern conjugality through ensuring pleasure (Devika 1676).

The ideal Malayali woman image who is self-controlled and the provider of aesthetic pleasure is constructed when the “classical veshya’s aesthetic attributes were slowly and steadily transferred onto the classical *kulina*, after ‘de-eroticising’ them.” (Devika 1675).

The imagining and actualizing of the modern Malayali woman always needed a binary of good woman- bad woman. The good woman is actualized by keeping the image of a woman outside the private, mostly woman in desire. The construction of the slut image evolved through all popular social institutions and arts including literature and cinema, in order to actualize the image of the chaste, noble, modern Malayali woman. Both Popular cinema and Literature including women’s magazines, promoted the patriarchy institutionalized within the structures of family and constructed family as modern and desirable. Men remained in the public domain, women within the domestic:

While it was admitted that a well-dressed woman would be more successful as a modern wife, delineating “aesthetic” ways of dressing from “eroticising”

ones seemed difficult. Thus, the mid- and late 20th century women's magazines and women's columns in journals in Kerala have continuously negotiated between "Woman-as-Reproducer" and "Woman-as-Vessel-of-Culture", shuttling between advice on culturing one's mind and beauty tips (Devika 1684).

The insecurities of women unable to adjust within the staid expectations of the middle class households and, emotional and aesthetic incompatibilities within marriages remained untouched. The control of female sexuality became imperative and is ensured through the institution of monogamous marriages. The tension between women's subjectivity and erotic desires within her given assigned role was never articulated. Her sexual initiations are read as seductive pursuits typical of whores, ideal women in the family remained asexual.

If we observe the construction of the Malayali woman in the structure of the Popular Malayalam cinema, the chaste and conforming heroines, always portrayed as having flawless skin, glossy hair or ample bosom, offer endless scope for fetishist scopophilia. They are always shown and looked at as the objects of desire. In contrast to this are the lower caste women- the women in desire who exercise complete power in regulating and controlling their sexuality. There is some kind of agency and subjectivity attached to them in terms of sexuality. It is interesting to see how these lower caste women with mobility and relative autonomy seem to be negotiating and asserting their agency in the highly patriarchal space of Malayalam cinema.

In a highly sexist and castiest framework of Malayali modernity, good, acceptable women are either a wife or a virgin. Sexuality like anger has never been considered feminine. It was the autobiographical narrative of Nalini Jameela- a lower caste woman, neither a virgin nor wife, the woman-in-desire in search of pleasure/meaning of life beyond institutional spaces like family- that broke open this fault line, subverting the false system of sexual morality.

Nalini Jameela, a sex-worker belonging to a lower caste, presents herself not as the object of exploited sexuality rather as the subject who actively asserts their agency in

regulating their sexuality while the chaste modern Malayali women inside the family have always been shown as submissive and their eroticism usually depicted in mute colours.

The sexual economy of the middle class upper caste extended family is disrupted by the Nalini's narrative. She negotiates with the new normative models of family and marriage without rejecting them completely while her sexuality is not being channelled into the system of marriage and reproduction. She also threatens endogamy which is a signifier of the caste solidarity which rests on the affirmation of the patriarchal authority.

Without compromising the autonomy of regulating their sexuality which is central to the construction of the modern Malayali woman image, Nalini Jameela's narrative produces the image of woman in desire outside the hypocritical Malayali morality as powerful and assertive and places her against the hyper-feminised, conforming, good woman. They break away from the burden of normative femininity forced upon them within the hegemonic, castiest, sexist framework of Kerala modernity.

J Devika in translator's foreword, discusses how the furious debates and controversies around Nalini Jameela's autobiography invoked the earlier controversies around the autobiography of Madhavikutty.

In *Ente Katha*, Madhavikutty uses the romantic notion of the self brilliantly to critique the entrenched womanly ideal of Malayali modernity. This autobiography (and indeed, much of her other writings) cuts loose the two figures joined together in the dominant womanly ideal. This signals the revolt of the aesthetic woman. First, she rejects the housewife's centring upon domestic labour as drab, demeaning, unhappy, and unbeautiful [for instance, Madhavikutty 2006: 58; also Das 2006: 69], projecting an alternate maternal figure defined by playfulness, storytelling, laughter, and the willingness to listen to and empathise with children [Madhavikutty 2006: 65; 100-03]. Secondly, she brings back the body – marginalised and de-eroticised in dominant reformist discourse – into her revision of the womanly. (Devika 1676)

Ende Kadha according to J Devika breaks the image of Ideal Malayali woman within the framework of Malayali modernity combining the images of 'aesthetic woman' and

‘domestic woman,’ that is a self-controlled woman whose sexuality is strictly controlled and channelized within the family. She argues that while *Ente Katha* “imploded” the dominant womanly ideal, Nalini Jameela’s *Njan, Laingikathozhilali* “explodes” it, announcing an oppositional voice in the Malayali public.” (Devika 1677)

Meena T Pillai attempts to analyse the process of translation by looking at the ways in which Madhavikutty of *Ente Kadha* gets translated by herself to Kamala Das of *My Story*. Kamala Das through possible negotiations transcreated her multiple subject positions while she translated her autobiography *Ende Kadha* into English as *My Story*. Revisiting Kamala Das/Madhavikutty as a writer/translator beset by different levels of cultural intervention while writing/translating her story in two different languages, it is argued that language and social conditions greatly influence the way in which self is being staged or being narrativised.

Meena T Pillai argues that this ‘transcreation,’ as she terms it, “skilfully uses the English tongue to manipulate and control the normative and regulatory codes of Malayalam” (Pillai 105). As the language changes, the ideological contexts in which a memory is being remembered also changes and this results in a change in the cognitive mapping of that memory, resulting in two different inscriptions of the self. Drawing from Foucault, “all manifest discourse is secretly based on the already said,” she argues that *My Story* is the “incorporeal discourse that permeates the silent breaths of *Ente Kadha* (103).

As the frame of reference changes, both culturally and spatially, from Malayalam to English, the ease at which she remembers and narrates her life story gets smoothed, which Meena T Pillai puts as, “for a woman the weight of patriarchal ideology is more intense and excruciating in her own native language than in English”(103). The use of English language, which can escape Malayalam’s inherent cultural tone, helps Madhavikutty to transform into the culturally neutral, more universal identity of Kamala Das.

For Nalini Jameela, unlike Madhavikutty, this is the first trial of writing. She titles introduction as ‘I try Writing’. She writes, “Paulson was the one who wanted the story; Maitreyan suggested I write an autobiography. To tell the truth, I didn’t have the clue about the differences between the two.” The only thing that she knew about the genre was indeed a tip given by one of her friends that she should write one page each day. Her slippage into the descriptions of her own life whenever she spoke or converse and go on and on about it was

one thing that made friends suggest her to write her story, she does not explore more the differences between genre of narrative rather stresses on the skill of spontaneous narration which made her friends suggest her write suffice.

It is indeed not the genre of the narrative but the memory, remembering, and the process of narration which is central to the creation and recreation of identity and self.

In addition to being the simplest and commonest of writing propositions, autobiography is also the least "literary" kind of writing, practised by people who would neither imagine nor admit that they are "writers." Here all sorts of generic boundaries (and even lines dividing discipline from discipline) are simply wiped away, and we often cannot tell whether we should call something a novel, a poem, a critical dissertation, or an autobiography. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche remarked, "Little by little it has become clear to me that every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography."

Nalini, unconcerned about the generic boundaries, names her autobiography *Njan Laingikathozhilali*, Njan meaning me (I) and Laingikathozhilali meaning sex worker- a title which signifies the self and its very being a sex-worker. The earlier version of the autobiography *Oru Laingika Thozhilaliyude Athmakadha* which Nalini Jameela herself revised, renamed and published in 2005. But the English Translation chose to keep the title of the first version translated as *The Autobiography of a Sex worker* omitting the "I" and the being of sexworker. *Njan* suggests the emphasis for the narrative agency and assertion of sex work as a profession and the 'I' who is a public woman and her expertise in her profession whereas the title *Autobiography of a Sex worker* negates certain narrative agency.

The title clearly reflects a third person interference- the third person who narrates a sex worker's autobiography. The reason for the translator's choice of the title from the version Nalini Jameela herself revised can be probably in view of the probability of increasing the market value. To lure the readers as the sexworker ultimately for anyone is of curiosity. J Devika says, "The text not only creates an oppositional voice that challenges morality but by the intentional titling "sex worker," also announces the marginalized "poor laboring women's voice" (Devika 2006: 1677).

When Nalini Jameela's text gets translated, it is this titling image aimed at eroticizing the image of sexworker and her sexuality that is projected, obscuring her narrative agency in

the very title of the book. Tom Thomas in his article *Orientalism Within*, terms this the “oriental gaze”:

Orientalist representations of women have always been obsessed with their sexuality and the misrepresentations of the excessive sensuality of Oriental women. “Orientalist gaze in general has had sexist blinders rendering Oriental women objects of a male power-fantasy. The Oriental women have been seen as unlimitedly sensual, lacking in rationality, and, most importantly, willing” (Jouhki 2006: 4)

Janu, Mai and Jameela, by their subject positions maybe “exotic” tales to be rendered, but the reality check of life situations tilt their stories heavily in favour of the authentic, challenging patriarchal, casteist, elitist notions of “honour,” “morality” and “civility.”

This exoticisation of Jameela’s subject position is clear in the translation project of her autobiography. The cover page of Nalini Jameela’s autobiography in Malayalam carries her image where she smiles and is looking away and on the other side, her manuscript, her imperfect Malayalam letters which is slowly built into her complete story, is given whereas the English translation’s cover page carries the image of a woman standing and looking out through a window. A faceless woman contemplating and looking out enables an outsider gaze. This image reinforces the “dominant, home-centred, self-controlled feminine ideal and the prostitute stereotype” which the autobiography itself challenges and invokes the Malayali reformist consciousness which would reform woman.

Nalini Jameela’s identity as a lower caste woman is also important while analysing her story getting translated. Unlike Kamala Das, Jameela as a semiliterate in the traditional sense in the process of writing as well as in the processes of translation; there is a certain mediating force which is at work. It can be the interest of the publisher, translator or that of the market economy. This lack of privilege in negotiating with all these, places Kamala Das and Nalini Jameela at different positions. Her autobiography was condemned by the mainstream writers in Malayalam including M Mukundan. J Devika writes in the translator’s note:

Her work has been condemned as ‘prurient literature’- neoliberal contagion. Mukundan’s tirade against Jameela reveals how misogyny can be passed off as moral outrage against ‘bad woman’, in this case disguised as concern about

Malayali reading habits. He laments that the future best sellers will not be written by a great author of our language but by a sexworker or a sex trafficker (Jameela xiii)

J Devika, as a feminist historian, while choosing to translate Nalini Jameela's autobiography, struggled to retain the complexities of the argument in which a neoliberal political language often jostled for space with contrary positions as well as Jameela's personal writing style"(Devika xx). J Devika, while attempting to understand and translate Nalini Jameela's autobiography, is well aware of the factors of privilege which separates their subject positions and of the risky task that she has taken up and "hopes that this risk has paid off at least minimally"(Devika xxii).

For Nalini Jameela, who was forced to stop her education at the age of 9, her autobiography is her first trial of writing. She titles the introduction to the autobiography as 'I Try Writing'. She writes "Paulson was the one who wanted the story; Maitreyan suggested I write an autobiography. To tell the truth I didn't have the clue about the differences between the two." The only thing she knew about the genre was indeed a tip given by one of her friends that she should write one page each day. Her slippage into the descriptions of her own life whenever she spoke or converse and go on and on about it was one thing that made friends suggest her to write her story, she does not explore more the differences between genre of narrative rather the skill of spontaneous narration which made her friends suggest her write suffice. M S S Pandian in his article 'Writing Ordinary lives' identifies 'ordinariness' as one of the foremost extraordinary character of the autobiographies from the margins as In the book *Autobiography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East* Samar Attar

In addition to being the simplest and commonest of writing propositions, autobiography is also the least "literary" kind of writing, practised by people who would neither imagine nor admit that they were "writers." Here all sorts of generic boundaries (and even lines dividing discipline from discipline) are simply wiped away, and we often cannot tell whether we should call something a novel, a poem, a critical dissertation, or an autobiography. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche remarked, "Little by little it has become

clear to me that every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography.

But the dominant discourse around autobiography in Malayalam has condemned the book as ‘prurient money-spinner’.

It is indeed not the genre of the narrative but the memory, remembering, pace and the process of narration which is central to the creation and recreation of her identity. J Devika expresses how difficult it was to retain the nonlinear narrative wherein Jameela “digresses into the past and moves into future”. She says the jump sometimes appeared too “awkward and disruptive to retain”. This disruption and awkwardness is the aspects which make her story break the generic boundaries but the English translation has tried its best to fit into the dominant discourse around autobiographical narrative to be coherent linear and invoking a pattern to life.

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