AboutUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

ContactUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

EditorialBoard: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

A Pragmatic Reading of Communism and Gender-based Political Discourse through a Case Study of a Translated Memoir

Surekha Chattopadhyay
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Swami Vivekananda University,
Barrackpore, West Bengal.
&
Dr Manish Prasad
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts and Social Studies,
St. Xavier's University, Kolkata,
West Bengal.
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14606432

Article History: Submitted-13/11/2024, Revised-18/12/2024, Accepted-21/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

Suffering of women through the hands of marginalized has been an alarming subject of Gender studies and the current Indian political discourse. In such a critical venture it is important to find out the methods of understanding those suffering and providing enough space to the suppressed marginalized voices of the women. Studying memoirs of those marginalized voices can be taken as one such method of understanding the suffering; and translation can provide enough space to the suppressed voices to make it audible in the global arena. Understanding this pattern of presenting suppressed and marginalized voices the current paper would like to explore how these methods can be helpful and may be taken as a model for more such gender based research studies. The paper would like to study pragmatically and explore the paranoid voices of Malika Amar Shaikh in *I want to destroy myself: a memoir*; and would try to relate how memoir in English translation can be taken as a powerful political discourse to give voice to these alarming subjects of the Gender Studies.

Keywords: Memoir, Translation, Gender, Politics, Discourse.

Introduction:

The customary meaning of the term memoir means not only that it is about memory but that it refers to one person's memories, that it articulates, if personal and subjective, tale about a person's life or a momentous moment in that person's life. Here one may think, what happens when that accustomed meaning meets not only with the translator, whose work it is to engage several subject matter positions, but with translation, which is always uneven and splayed across more than one language, culture and time?

A well-known Indian translator, Jerry Pinto in his translator's note to *I Want to Destroy Myself* by Malika Amar Shaikh writes, *"It is customary to say that one has enjoyed the process. I did not enjoy translating Mala Uddhvasta Vhaychay. It would often leave me feeling somewhat in danger of collapse"*, If Shaikh has read Pinto's words, one may believe she would have been moved beyond words – a man had not only attempted to understand her suffering, he had translated it into English (from Marathi), helping her to exert her voice to help those who brave abuse and present a facade of happiness.

The present article is an exploration of *I Want to Destroy Myself* from the perspective of the 'translating selves' and its experiential knowledge of translation practices as a way of thinking and engaging with life writing of Malika Amar Shaikh through the practice of translation. Following this present article one may find answers to these pertinent questions often associated with the area of translation, memoirs and gender politics; how do translation memoirs translate the gendered self out of the dominant paradigms of patriarchy? How is translation of memoirs itself reconfigures beyond existing 'instrumentalist' models of translation (Venuti 2019) and beyond the communist and marginalized gaze which underpins what Naoki Sakai calls the 'regime of translation'? This article examines these questions of what happens to the story of one, Malika Amar Shaikh, (subject, language, culture, text) as it unfolds into the multiplicity of translation. This is a co-contamination of a reflection on what it means to be a subject in translation, of what happens to a subject in translation, with another way of approaching a text through the winding pathways of its memories, voyages, potentials, its readings, rewritings, past, and future.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

For this reason too, the translation memoir studied in this article is read as another way of getting into texts, of philosophising about translation and even of undertaking research as creative- significant practices (Grass 2023; Robert Foley 2024).

Argument I:

The translation memoir give voices to the anxiety that is 'cultural, political and linguistic' and seeks to re-examine and confront the way that 'the subject and their general belonging […] are expressed in language' (Robert Foley 2024, 183). It can be read, especially in the context of feminist translation memoirs such as Malika Amar Shaikh's memoir *Mala Uddhvasta Vhaychay*, originally published in Marathi in 1994, was unknown for several years until Jerry Pinto was introduced to a copy and took the responsibility of translating it in 2016 under the English title *I Want to Destroy Myself* . The author was born to communist activist parents, Shahir Amar Shaikh and Kusum Jaykar, neither of whom chose to define themselves through categories of caste or religion, in their political and personal ventures. Malika Amar Shaikh was raised in the similar approach, without the understanding of a life governed by religion or caste. Other than this, since Amar Shaikh was a ailing child, she grew up reading books ranging from plays to poetry. As recalled by her in her memoir, because of her lonesome life as an ailing kid, in class four, she began to identify herself with the literary heroines of the novels she read. By virtue of her father's accepted and appreciated involvement in the arts of the communist politics in Maharashtra, Malika was familiar to prominent literary figures of the region such as Prahlad Keshav Atre from a very young age. Without dismissing the financial issues faced by the activist couple during Malika's childhood, her constant illness, the untimely death of her father and so on – this article attempts to explore whether or not the question regarding 'women' raised by her through her memoir, shows inclusivity towards the Dalit woman's voice as well. An attempt will be made to answer this question through a close reading of Malika Amar Shaikh's memoir, *I Want to Destroy Myself*.

There is no doubt that Malika's narrative about Namdeo's politics opens up a lot of problematic strands both with the Dalit Panther group and the supporting left parties. After marriage, when Dhasal entered into conflicts with Raja Dhale and J.V Pawar over taking funds from the Congress party, Malika recalled from her own knowledge about communist politics – that Dalits never favoured communists as the latter had Brahmanical political ideals and did not truly recognize the former's issues. But even so she claims that the Dalit Panther group was closely supported by communists as they had no ideology or discipline of their

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

own. The Panthers were drawn to money – no matter which side. According to Malika, the fall of the Dalit Panther Party took place due to their inability to handle funds and Namdeo's crass behaviour. Another very important dimension to her narrative is that it reflects ideas of 'masculinity' that existed among the Dalit Panther Movement of the 1970s. Also recorded by Sharmila Rege in her 1998 lecture in Pune titled, *A Dalit Feminist Standpoint* – even though the Party played an important role in the context of the Dalit question, their inclusivity towards Dalit women's voice in their politics was non-existent and women were only looked at in the roles of 'mothers' and 'wives' (Rege 1998, 1). Malika's narrative holds direct evidence to Rege's claim when she describes the way Namdeo treated both his wife and his mother.

Malika celebrates her mother-in-law as "a pillar in the movement", as she always served Namdeo's party workers with food, irrespective of the time of arrival, number of people; or if she herself ate anything. Namdeo's notions about women was also reflected when his behaviour towards Malika changed after their son was born. He stopped sharing his personal and political life with his wife and was hardly ever at home, almost entirely leaving the responsibility of raising their son with Malika. Further – when Malika was silenced and beaten for speaking about his political and their personal life, or when Namdeo's party workers took her hosting for granted – her role as a serving wife and woman is reiterated. After leading ten years of traumatic marital life with Namdeo, by the end of her memoir, she expresses anger over Namdeo's violent treatment towards his party workers – according to her which is also a form of patriarchal system. She also wonders about how after physical brawls and fights, the men would just get back together as friends solely on the basis of 'caste', which is all it took for them to endure anything.

One can argue that Malika opens the women's question explicitly by the end of her memoir and keeps it collective in nature without invoking it from a specific standpoint of either class, caste, religion etc. Her question is invoked with lived experiences of women residing in both urban and rural areas, of Siraj – a woman belonging to the Muslim community and also of women who do not hold education. She reflects on her own privileged position, by saying: "I chose to write because I can. Those who cannot, what happens to them?" As she points at negative literature produced by the Panthers or the failure of the movement, she blames the wrong human attitude shown by Namdeo. By giving instances of the suffering of Namdeo's mother throughout the memoir, even the Dalit female experience has not been silent in the

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

book. She invokes an idea of solidarity among women by criticizing the patriarchal system which binds women to roles restricted inside households, not allowing them to leave the domestic space to support other women. Even though the women's question raised by her is broad, throughout the memoir, it can be observed that her tone reflects contradictions if one reflects upon the question of Dalit women, oppressed not just by the category of gender, but also caste.

Returning to Rege's lecture, one must think why she questioned the absence of 'Dalit women's' voices (and not women belonging to other castes, religions, ethnicities etc.) and positioning in the movement. The idea of masculinity gets complicated when one reads the memoir from the vantage point of a non-Dalit woman writing the memoir. Malika herself claims that she was attracted to Namdeo because of his masculine personality; his violent political inclinations not being hidden from her. Even though Namdeo and his party workers took Malika and her mother-in-law's roles as serving women for granted, Malika – a non-Dalit woman, also superficially fed into these notions for the reasons she felt affection for him in the very first place.

Additionally, apart from exposure to education, literature and travel due to her parents' political careers, her religion-less and caste-less upbringing showed as she mentions traces of her childhood where she interacted with other religious families. In her description of one of her first friendships with V.V Bhatt's daughter, Rohini – she associates the lifestyle and strict regime followed by the family with Brahminism. This is soon contrasted with the untimely death of her father, after which her sister fills 'humanist' as religion in her job application, preceded by an argument with the clerk. While even today, the experience of menstruation among Hindu families is associated with pollution and dirt, Malika's narrative not only showed a lack of such notions, but due to her avid reading habits, she was already aware about the process of menstruation. This again hints at the range and nature of reading materials available to Malika while she was growing up.

It was clear from the description of her childhood and early-teen memories, that Malika and her family were strongly against identity being defined by categories of religion and caste. For the very same reason, Malika's family did not object to her marital alliance with Namdeo Dhasal due to the latter's caste. In fact their first introduction with Namdeo took place because of his close friendship with Malika's brother-in-law, resulting in his constant visit to

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

their house. However, there was another category which can be viewed explicitly in her narrative – that of socio-economic class. This category indeed did not affect Malika's liking for Namdeo, but her family objected to their alliance when they witnessed Namdeo's living conditions. As Malika pens her first visit to Namdeo's home in the Golpitha *chawl*, she too is disturbed by the physical disabilities and conditions of living conditions of a *chawl*. When Malika moved to Pune with Namdeo, her frustrations about party workers always gathering in the house, resulting in a lack of privacy of a newly-wed couple was expressed very overtly. These traces of Malika's memories reflect that she was married to a person who lived and grew in a very different environment. Even before she married him, it was not hidden that Namdeo's political inclinations endorsed violence, that he roamed in the red light areas and was the only son of a father who supported his family by working in a mutton shop. At this point one wonders if this narrative voice is replaced by a woman who has been oppressed by categories of both caste and class (along with gender), would she hold the same ideas of privacy of a newly-wed couple, space and violence? Even though Malika also expresses memories wherein in the midst of quarrels between her and Namdeo in Pune, as she received taunts from the women in the *basti*, she would feel that the "illiterate women" did not hold the right to comment on her actions.

Returning to the question the paper posed in the beginning of argument I, one may not believe that the question of 'women' in this memoir accommodates the voice of Dalit women inclusively. Firstly, because Malika's upbringing and narration itself shows instances of lending to masculinity and a constant middle-class gaze upon the Dalit population based on education and hygiene. Secondly and most importantly, because Malika is not voicing the women's question through the categories of caste or religion and neither has she lived a life through religion at all, the category is absent from her voice. As long as this absence exists, the question cannot be all-inclusive. For instance, what if women belonging to caste panchayat communities are left with death as a consequence if they choose to end or voice opposition within a marital alliance?

Moreover, Sharmila Rege asserts the inclusivity of 'Dalit' women in larger Dalit politics because of oppression faced by them not only by men, but also by the universalized 'woman' who is often a part of the dominant feminist narrative of the region, speaking about the concerns of a selective population of women. In order to bring the caste and gender question together the lived experience and voice of a Dalit woman (in this case) is important. One can

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

only read Malika's narration of Namdeo's mother's experiences, without the latter sharing it herself through Malika. As readers, we are unaware of possibly many other instances of caste-related oppression faced by Namdeo's mother, along with her experiences as a woman. Therefore, an inclusive women's question could be raised only when voiced from categories of 'Dalit' and 'woman' together, without an absence of caste and religion categories altogether.

Argument II:

The genre of life writing particularly the memoirs has gained a great deal of magnitude while trying to understand and raise the voice of the suppressed and the marginalised. In this case the Dalits, particularly the women basically come under this category. And memoirs of women mostly deal with people in their life, their identity being based on relationships. In the twentieth century women who are doubly suppressed are also writing about their experiences; this adds up an extra section of life writing in India. And in this act of providing voice, translation and translator play a very important role.

It is a common aphorism that the translator must disappear, become 'invisible', as per Lawrence Venuti's well-known work, The *Translator's Invisibility* (1995). This proverb has been repeatedly challenged in translation scholarship, and this paper seeks to respond to this challenge and further it to see what happens when that invisible, silent subject position gets written out in full, untangled and unwound, its memories shared and multiplied. In other words, to explore what happens when one approach the literary from the situated and experiential perspective of 'the translator's gaze', which Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal define as 'the intense looking of the translator, which includes the full immersion of the translator in the text, with eyes, ears, skin, nose, limbs and heart' (Campbell and Vidal 2019).

In case of Malika's narration, her experience and untold voice, as explained in Argument I, became known to the readers only when the memoir was translated into English. Hence, the suppressed voice of the author overcomes the conflict of marginalized identity when her experiences are understood by the global readers. And in this case the role of translation requires special mention. It acts like a means in providing arena to Malika's memories. Thus, the meeting of life writing and translation sets in motion a wide range of avenues to explore. In fact, it is perhaps an increased visibility of rendition and language difference that has led to an explosion of translation memoir writing over the past decade or so. These have engaged

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

creative-critical reflections on the affective, political and transcultural work of translating literary texts, questioning the literary conventions which separate reading and writing, writing and translation.

The translation memoir, as one has gone through the case study of Malika's *I want to Destroy Myself*, is therefore also a rewriting of cultural representations of women from the perspective of the translated, a re-calling and re-searching of lives and matters marginalised in; and as translation which re-centres the original voice as cultural discourse and action. In other words, the translation memoir is also a form which lends the gendered politics to self-reflection on how the women's identity is socially and historically experienced from the perspective of the marginalized, the displaced and of those, including women, who are more often used to being the objects, rather than the subjects, of dominant literary discourses. By highlighting the fluidity of marginalized and cultural identities (Jhumpa Lahiri 2016), then, translation memoirs investigate otherness of the Dalit women from the perspective of 'translatedness' and its treatment in dominant cultures, interrogating the limits of marginalized and gender narratives through the practice of rewriting the text and the self in other languages as in this case from Marathi into English. First published in 1984, Shaikh's book quickly disappeared after much acclaim. However, she came alive once again when translated into English, bitterly and consciously commenting on her experience, without distinguishing the personal and the political.

Conclusion:

A well known scholar of Translation Studies, Delphine Grass points out in her monograph *Translation and Creative Critical Practice* (2023), translation memoirs are predominantly written by women (12), and there is a recurrent red thread of feminist perspectives taking place in these works. This is related to a critique of positionality, in terms of power relations, representation, but also methodology in translation theory and in theory more generally. Indeed, the translation memoir can be thought through in the context of the auto-theoretical turn theorised by Lauren Fournier, specifically as they are related to 'histories of feminist practice' (Fournier 2021, 43; cited in Grass 2023, 18).

To insert the body and personal affective lived experiences of Malika Amar Shaikh into theory, as the case study in this paper do, is thus in some sense, to do the work of writing in a

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

feminist mode. This feminist critique also relates to the challenge to singularity in the subject, of kinship and of thinking about translation—and authorship—as collective practice, something that translation already does as it calls into question the very foundations of authorship as original. To sum up, Argument I and argument II of the present article is accompanied by rich reflections on how translations of women's bodies and health as in the case of Malika Amar Shaikh must be tailored and adapted for different cultural and linguistic contexts, and also on the role that emotion plays in these translations. Moreover, it is also important to understand the gender in translation and how it is deeply site specific and influenced by the positionality of translation, translator, publication and reading context. In brief, this article is a compelling case study of the power and potential of the collaborative voice of the suppressed and marginalized Malika and the tries to provide a new hope that translation memoir can come into play to underscore, reflect upon and transmit the process of these collaborations.

Works Cited:

Amar Shaikh, Malika. 2016. *I Want to Destroy Myself.* Mumbai: Speaking Tiger Books.

Bhanot, Kavita, and Jeremy Tiang. 2022. Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation. London:Tilted Axis Press.

Briggs, Kate. 2017. This Little Art. London: Fitzcarraldo.

Campbell, Madeleine, and Ricarda Vidal. 2019. Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders: Intersemiotic Journeys between Media. . Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Croft, Jennifer. 2019. Homesick: A Memoir. New York: Charco Press.

Fournier, Lauren. 2021. Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Galasso, R., Esther Allen, and Susan Bernofsky, eds. 2013. In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gansel, Mireille. (2012) 2017. Translation as Transhumance. Translated by Ros Schwartz. London: Les Fugitives.

Gepner, Corinna. 2019. Traduire ou perdre pied. Paris: La Contre allée.

Grass, Delphine. 2023. Translation as Creative-Critical Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Karpinski, E. 2012. Borrowed Tongues: Life Writing, Migration, and Translation. Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier University Press.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Kaza, Madhu, ed. 2017. Kitchen Table Translation: An Aster(ix) Anthology. New York: Blue Sketch Press.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2016. In Other Words. Translated by Ann Goldstein. Toronto, ON: Alfred A. Knopf.

Nikolaou, Paschalis, and Maria-Venetia Kyritsi. 2008. "Introduction: Selves in translation." In Translating Selves: Experience and Identity Between Languages and Literatures, edited by Paschalis Nikolaou, and Maria-Venetia Kyritsi, 1–16. London: Continuum.

Rabassa, Gregory. 2005. If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents: A Memoir. New York: New Direction.

Robert Foley, Lily. 2024. Experimental Translation: The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production. London: Goldsmith Press.

Sakai, Naoki. 2017. "The Modern Regime of Translation and the Emergence of the Nation." The Eighteenth Century 58 (1): 105–108.

Sharmila, Rege. 1998. "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint". Lecture delivered at Vikas Adhyayan Kendra Seminar, Pune.

Venuti, Lawrence. 2014 [1995]. The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation. London: Routledge.

Venuti, Lawrence. 2019. Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030