

**A LIFE UPROOTED: A DALIT REFUGEE REMEMBERS. A TALE OF LOSS
AND REHABILITATION**

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Received: 26-08-2023

Accepted: 11-11-2023



Translation not only connects writers to new readers but also shapes and alters the course of literary history across caste, class and gender boundaries. Translating Dalit writing entails personal and political ramifications. It comes with a set of conflicts - dealing with one's limitations and restrictions that is the result of a particular kind of upbringing, of one's caste-based subjectivities and of a carefully constructed cosmopolitan identity that translators translating into English are usually embedded in. The translators are expected to display a deep understanding of their position as translators and the responsibilities they own up to by making an unmistakably political choice. First and foremost a reader, they engage at a visceral level with the narrative, of pain and oppression, as is the case with Dalit autobiographies. According to Rita Kothari, translation is one of the many consolidations that show a Dalit subject as an active participant in Indian democracy. The concerns about the authenticity of English as the target language should best be sidestepped as "its ideological potential to 'translate' the Dalit life from fatalism to an identity of rights outweighs considerations of its distance from Indian reality" (67). The writer, navigating the difficult path of configuring trauma unearths the worst-kept secrets of the official narratives of any nation, amply manifested in the survivors of racism, sexism and casteism. Dalit autobiographies aim at triggering conversations, public debates and reader participation.

Mandakini Bhattacherya and Jaydeep Sarangi translate Jatin Bala's *Shikorh-chhenrha Jibon* (2018 2nd edn) as *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* (2022).

Bhattacherya is an academic, poet and translator while Sarangi is a well-known name in the field of marginal literatures in India. Jatin Bala, esteemed for his feisty presence in the field of Bengali Dalit Literature, is a poet, short story writer and activist. He has been one of the editors of the following periodicals since the 1970s - *Ashukh*, *Balmiki*, *Mushayera*, *Chhiyanobbui*, *Choturtho Duniya*, *Nikhil Bharat*, etc. He has won many literary awards, among which some of the most prominent include Nitish Smriti Sahitya Purashkar, Dabdaho Sahityo Potrika Puroshkar, Kobi Nikhilesh Sahitya Purroshkar, and Sahittik Moni Mondal Smriti Puroshkar.

The translation is a reminder of the realities of deep-seated discrimination meted out on the basis of caste. “The fact that this corpus of Dalit writing has proved itself to be so resilient is perhaps as much cause for celebration as for introspection and sadness,” says Sayantan Dasgupta in the introduction to *Dalit Lekhika: Women’s Writing from Bengal*. In Bengal, Dalit autobiographies have garnered pan-Indian critical attention with the works of noted authors like Manohar Mouli Biswas, Manorajan Byapari, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Manju Bala to name just a few. While Biswas focuses more on the survival struggles of Dalits in *Surviving in My World: Growing up a Dalit in Bengal*, Byapari in *Interrogating My Chandal Life* explores the historical trajectory of socio-political upheavals in Bengal featuring the deeply-felt impact of partition. Dalits, forced to belong to the lowest rungs of social hierarchy bear the maximum brunt of communal animosity during these troubled times.

Jatin Bala's works share an ambivalent relation with the formulaic structures of classical Bengali writing. In *A Life Uprooted*, a fictional autobiography, he brings together various episodes of his life that he revisits through an imaginary lens. Bala maps the coming-of-existence of refugee camps that eventually shape his Dalit self. He calls it the first Dalit refugee autobiography. It is at the intersection of caste and location, and the multiple marginalizations thereof, that the narrative positions itself.

The first chapter begins with a heart-wrenching detailed account of the mindless violence unleashed during partition. The following ten chapters, including “Search of Roots”, “A Seed Sprouts”, “The Sapling’s Roots and Shoot”, “The Sapling Caught in a Storm”, are thoughtfully framed along the transition of a seed into a sapling, of childhood into adolescence. He then goes on to chart the decade-long painful journey of ceding basic

human rights for food, clothing and shelter in the three refugee camps he is compelled to inhabit, symbolically weaving the images of loss, displacement and homelessness with that of a tree forcibly uprooted. The eleventh chapter named “Partition - Exile: The Noise of Bloodshed” announces the beginnings of the irretrievable loss of identity, tied with the loss of mooring and a crumbling faith in human relationships, all of which Bala continues to describe with vivid immediacy. “Partition not only changes geographical boundaries and maps — It rends apart men’s minds and the heart of a nation” (75). It is at moments like these that the translators’ artfully exercised restraint, immaculately comes forth. Some chapters - of the twenty-seven composed over a period of twelve years - for example, “The Septic Wound Bleeds”, “Glowing Embers”, “A Life Floating in the Current of Calamity” are poetically graphic, stark and poignant.

As opposed to upper caste autobiographies Dalit autobiographies are more about voicing the collective suffering of Dalits. Bala’s portrayal of characters is remarkably distinctive as he goes further with an all-inclusive approach. Delving into trauma as an interpersonal experience Bala brings within its ambit an eclectic range of perspectives and responses. The multiplicity of voices gives the narrative a deeply rich and layered texture. The form - fictional autobiography - allows Bala to reproduce the nuanced interface between memory as reimagined remembrance and the veracity of lived experience.

The various dialects in the narrative bear testimony to the keen perceptiveness Bala brings to his sharply etched characters. He uses the *bangaal* dialect of the East Bengal refugees, especially that spoken by the people of Jessore district, to express their instinctively felt emotions and anxieties. Bala’s discerning response to different linguistic registers surfaces through the culture-specific words he employs to highlight differences in the lifestyle of the Hindu and Muslim communities. This undoubtedly is a native-language prerogative. Later the narrative integrates the plight of the Dalit refugees and their rehabilitation within the wide Refugee Movement. This language of protest marches, petitions, slogans and protest songs eventually takes on a refined Bengali flavour, inclusive of Bengali idioms.

The translators admit the untranslatable aspect inherent in the diversity/plurality of these asymmetrical registers: “Unfortunately, these differences could not be shown in the translation, which uses standard modern English uniformly, as the differences of Bengali dialects could not be shown by adopting different dialects of English” (2022: xvii). This

echoes Arun Prabha Mukherjee's discomfiture while translating Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*. In the Preface Mukherjee candidly confesses her apprehensions about having successfully conveyed the timbre of Valmiki's voice: "its honesty, its anger, its mockery and its sadness" (Intro xxxix). Addressing the loss incipient in the very act of translation Mukherjee acknowledges the awkwardness that the English version of *Joothan* might induce in the reader. This very awkwardness - however self-defeating it might have been - is endorsed by her instead of the more tempting "over-falsification" or "softening". The impossibility of conveying the different registers of Valmiki's Hindi may also resonate with the readers of *A Life Uprooted*.

In coming up with the translation Bhattacherya and Sarangi negotiate the slippery gaps between realities (Dalit and non-Dalit) languages (Bangla and English) and nations-in-making (India and Bangladesh) with cautious elan. What comes across is a powerful rendition of largely unheard and silenced voices. The translators traverse the culturally and socially fraught alleys of subjugation without glossing over the alarming episodes of violence. The writing treads steadily, armed with a strong sense of purpose, poised between unbridgeable linguistic exigencies and a carefully crafted self-awareness. Memories of Partition have survived in varied forms - often bordering on selective amnesia. The translation faithfully relives these accounts ensuring that the language becomes a vessel, a repository and at times a sieve; self-conscious and yet unflinching - "The peasants wander away. We weep endlessly; the skies, the trees, the rice plants, the streams - all seem to cry with us! Those who had proudly held their heads high even a day earlier had suddenly turned into homeless wretches" (11). In the detailed and insightful introduction to the book the translators remark: "The discourse of dignity is paramount in contemporary Dalit literature..." (Intro xiii). The English version reflects an honest and immersive engagement with this very sensibility preserving in the process the original voice and style of the writer.

Sharankumar Limbale, the noted Marathi Dalit writer, poet and critic proposes that what the readers and critics need more than anything else when reading Dalit writing is empathy, that we measure the success of a Dalit text by how powerfully it affects the reader's consciousness. Bhattacherya and Sarangi in *A Life Uprooted* have successfully managed to do just that.

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