

**Translation of Differences:  
Lost in Translation, Found in Translation**

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**Translating the Dalit Experience: Agency,  
Editorial Mediation, and Epistemic Violence in Kallen  
Pokkudan's Autobiographical Narratives**

Sruthi Sasidharan

Department of Comparative literature and India Studies,  
English and Foreign Languages University  
(Hyderabad, India)

**Abstract**

Translation is not merely a simple neutral linguistic act; rather it is conceived as a cultural act with its own equations of power and dominance, centre and margin. Writing happens in a specific linguistic, cultural and political context and the process of translating texts from one cultural system into another is not at all a neutral, innocent, transparent activity. It is rather a political activity. The very act of translation and the politics behind it deserves more attention.

Spivak in “The Politics of Translation” speaks about how Englishing the third world eliminates the identity of the politically less powerful individuals and cultures. She also refers to how translation becomes a means of creating and articulating cultural, ethnographic or sexual Otherness. In her eminent work “Can the Subaltern Speak”, she asks, How can we touch the consciousness of the people even as we investigate their politics? With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak? (Spivak, 1988, p. 285).

According to her any attempt from the outside to ameliorate the subaltern condition by granting them collective speech invariably will encounter more serious problems: a logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, and a dependence on (western) intellectuals to “speak for” the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves (spivak,1988, p. 308).

The translation of subaltern narratives from regional languages to English and other languages is an area of considerable academic interest. While

the international audience achieved through translation provides broader exposure for subaltern narratives, the process of translation presents numerous challenges related to language, culture, and politics. The representation of the complex social structures of caste, gender, culture, and dialects within the context of local subaltern discourses in English is a subject of growing scholarly inquiry. The translation of subaltern narratives into English is often motivated by the commodification of subaltern subjectivity, experience, and culture to cater to literary and academic interests. Consequently, the transformation of translation as a literary event into a market-driven event dominated by the politics of publication and market is evident in the translation of these narratives. These political interventions happen at different points, possibly even before the conceptualization of the text itself. One of the major interventions is that of agents of translation, including transcribers, editors and publishers. This paper aims to explore the epistemic violence that rise as a result of these interventions in translating dalit experiences into written form, by examining dictated dalit life narratives published in Malayalam.

**Key words:** Translation, Dalit, Editorial Arbitration, Life Narratives

“Does a Pulayan have a life-history? what life-history! Some might ask what there is to say about lives which only ‘die’ when everyone else ‘decease’”.

Kallen Pokkudan

Throughout history, literature has predominantly been a domain of the privileged, resulting in limited or biased representation of subaltern individuals and their experiences. However, a global literary emergence has been observed, which presents a strong challenge to dominant hegemonic structures, projecting subaltern perspectives and aesthetics. The mapping of such literature(s) with movements that celebrate diverse identities and politics is of utmost importance. Various literary and non-literary efforts from subaltern groups have arisen to contest the hegemonic voices of the

'normal'. These initiatives have led to the questioning and dismantling of conventional standards of literature, allowing alternative perspectives from marginalized sections to emerge. The subaltern writings that have emerged from the margins have probed, contested, and breached the mainstream norms of the literary world, marking a significant shift towards a more inclusive and diverse literary landscape.

Indian literature has not been immune to the global shifts that have occurred. As a nation defined by a complex caste system, India has experienced various Dalit movements in different parts of the country throughout its history, under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar, and other leaders. Although the roots of the Dalit movement can be traced back to the medieval Bhakti movement, it gained momentum during the Indian independence struggle when the nation's large Bahujan population was marginalized under Hindu majoritarianism. Colonialism played a significant role in realizing the human rights of Dalits in India by introducing English education and Christianity to the nation. Inspired by the Black Panther movement, Dalits began to assert their identity and resistance. Subsequently, Dalit women and queer minority groups highlighted issues of gender within the movement and redefined its goals. These writings, which chronicle the Dalit experience, also document the resistance and protests of individuals and larger Dalit movements. Despite harsh criticisms from both sides, the coexistence of these writings and movements strengthened and led to a better understanding of the complexities of caste.

The political and social landscape of Kerala, with regard to Dalit movements, differed from that of the rest of India. Although lower-caste lives were a recurring theme in Malayalam literature, there was a dearth of writings by Dalits themselves. Instead, sympathetic narratives about lower-caste lives were more prevalent. Within the left-led political movements in Kerala, class conflicts took precedence over caste conflict.

### **Translating the Dalit Experience: Reading Kallen Pokkudan's Life Narratives**

The genre of life writing has emerged as a significant mode for Dalits to express their experiences and political views, enabling them to represent themselves in a literary form that was previously inaccessible to them. Works such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Sarankumar Limbaley's

*Akkarmashi*, Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, and Bama's *Karukku*, among many others, have not only brought the lived experiences of Dalits to the forefront but have also transformed the dominant genre of autobiography. Dalit life narrators, with their unique perspectives and literary styles expanded the boundaries of literary expression, making significant contributions to a more inclusive and diverse literary landscape. The process of writing about their lives has served as a means of resistance and empowerment for Dalits, who have been historically marginalized from mainstream literary culture. The genre of life writing has also emerged as a site of contestation, as the narratives of Dalit life narrators have challenged the dominant discourses of caste and power in Indian society. These works have exposed the ways in which Dalits have been systematically excluded from cultural and political institutions, and have contested the dominant narratives of Indian history and culture. In doing so, Dalit life narrators have not only brought their own experiences to the forefront but have also contributed to a broader project of social and cultural transformation. The dalit life narratives can be placed at the intersection of autobiography and history. It can be considered as a counter historical narrative that challenges the canonical history of the region with their own 'slice of history' (Udayakumar, 2008, p. 421). At the same time the dalit self-narratives make visible the life and politics of dalits, problematize the existing canonical knowledge of society and render possible dalit perspectives to understand society (Thankapan, 2016, p. 195).

The mainstream written models that fit into the rigid rules of the 'literary' were breached through new experiments. Rather than negating the written, the dalit literature quarrels with it, tries to break its standards, brings the cosmology of orality and the carnivalesque into the written. While many Dalit life narratives have been published in languages such as Marathi, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, the literary landscape in Malayalam presents a different scenario. Despite the prominence of autobiography as a genre in Malayalam literature, it has traditionally been inaccessible to lower caste individuals. The bourgeoisie genre of autobiography was largely male centred and that too of men belonging to the visible classes, like Swadesa-bhimani Ramakrishna Pillai's *Ente Nadukadathal* (1911), poet P. Kunhiraman Nair's *Kaviyude Kalpadukal* (1975), Kannerum Kinavum (1970) by social reformist V T Battathirippadu, *Athmakatha* (1969) by EMS Namboodiripad which were celebrated in Malayalam literature. It clearly neglected the experiences of women and marginal communities. The earlier male

autobiographies gave prime focus to the personal achievements and dogmas of individual self.

The subaltern life narratives, particularly dalit life narratives, challenge the conventional understanding of autobiographical self. They disrupt the unitary, linear, and comprehensible notion of the self that underpins conventional autobiography. Instead, the subaltern subjects represent themselves in opposition to power and document the effects of power on them and their resistance against it. Therefore, these life narratives are not just literary works, but also political narratives. The publication of autobiographies by Kallen Pokkudan, Janu, Mayilamma, and Seleena Prakkanam, Malayalam autobiography took a subaltern turn. However, despite them being dalit life narratives, they were not celebrated as such, but instead, the narrator's identities as environmental activists and public figures were foregrounded than their dalit identity.

The publication of Kallen Pokkudan's life narrative *Kandal kaadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (My Life among the Mangrove Forests, 2002) marked dalit voice in the genre of Malayalam autobiography. Commonly known as Kandal Pokkudan, the dalit ecological activist Kallen Pokkudan has another life narratives in his account titled *Ente Jeevitham* (My Life 2010). Pokkudan's account of his life in *Kandalkadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham* presents a direct challenge to dominant social, cultural, and literary imaginaries by depicting the individual and collective experiences of Pulayas in northern Kerala over the past century. Its structure, which does not conform to mainstream literary conventions, further challenges the Savarna past and structures of main stream literature. E.V. Ramakrishnan characterizes the work as a testimonial narrative, drawing parallels with autobiographies by other marginalized individuals such as C.K. Janu, Vinaya, Domitila, and Rigoberta Menchu. Through its subversion of dominant cultural norms, the work constitutes a powerful critique of Kerala's self-image as a progressive society.

“Does a Pulayan have a life-history? what life-history! Some might ask what there is to say about lives which only ‘die’ when everyone else ‘decease’” (Pokkudan, 2002, p.32).

This critique is two-fold, as it not only challenges the idea that the genre of life narrative is accessible to individuals whose lives are deemed valuable, but also exposes the societal belief that the lives of Dalits are worthless. It highlights the reality that Dalits were historically denied access to

education and, as a result, kept away from literature for a considerable period of time. Even though the constitution guarantees the right to education for everyone, many Dalits still refrain from literary expression, as their mindset has been shaped by the dominant hegemonic thought to consider their lives as unworthy. According to Thankappan,

What autobiographical writing means for a Dalit is well illustrated in the way Kallen Pokkudan describes it in his first autobiography. Pokkudan's question: 'Can a Pulayan write autobiography?' is posed as a strong Dalit critique of the dominant public imagination about Dalits. It offers a critique of the institution of publishing, which functions as a cultural site that reinforces the exclusion of Dalits in the mainstream history and print culture. In other words, Pokkudan suggests the indispensability of autobiographical writing in registering the political articulations of Dalits not only as a personal memoir but also for the construction of an alternative history. A figure like Pokkudan and the writing about his ordinary life become significant in this renewed historical context of the cultural turn of Dalit assertions (Thankappan, 2018, p. 205).

The production of dalit life narratives in Kerala is often marked by the presence of a mediating figure who serves as a transcriber or editor, and is often someone who does not belong to the dalit community. Given that many of the dalit life narrators are illiterate, this mediation becomes essential for the textualization of their narratives. However, the presence of a mediator creates a problematic dynamic, wherein the life narrator risks becoming alienated from their own experiences, and the transcriber's or editor's subjectivities gets entangled with the narrative. This authorial mediation further complicates the already complex negotiation of subjectivity in the dalit life narrative, as it implicates the power dynamics of representation and the influence of social hierarchy in the textualization process. An in-depth examination of the mediations involved in the transcription of Dalit life narratives reveals the intricacies of power and language at play. The act of transcription itself embodies a power dynamic, where the transcriber, possessing authority over the subject or informant, wields more power than the transcribed. Consequently, the transcriber or editor may impose their own interpretations and biases on the subject, resulting in a potential distortion or misrepresentation of the dalit experience. This power asymmetry

can lead to a suppression of the dalit agency, as the transcriber enforces their own language and cultural norms upon the dalit, thereby further marginalizing their voice.

An analysis of Kallen Pokkudan's life narratives reveal how he is relegated to the margins of his own narrative. The publication of his first life narrative is accompanied by an introduction by N Prabhakaran, which situates the autobiographical narrative within a leftist framework, followed by a scientific study on mangroves by Jafer Pallot and the script of Babu Kambrath's documentary on Pokkudan, among others. The structure of the book is such that only 45 out of 115 pages are allotted to Pokkudan to recount his life story, while the remaining pages are dominated by the perspectives of other 'intellectuals'. Silencing Pokkudan's political self with these additional narratives is indicative of the politics of imagining a Dalit in modern Kerala. The introduction itself characterizes Pokkudan as a "*pacha manushyan*" or "raw human being", further reinforcing his marginalization within the dominant cultural and literary imagination. Thankappan writes,

In this case, the politics of publishing Dalit autobiography structures it in such a way that it dehumanizes the Dalit subjectivity, and frames it in the mode of being a 'subject-to-be-humanized' through modern civilizing projects or radical politics (Thankappan, 2018, p. 208).

Through the narrative of his life, it becomes clear that this individual, who is commonly identified as an illiterate Pulaya, actually embodies the subaltern self of knowledge and wisdom. His life story thus serves to exemplify the subaltern self of knowledge, as well as the politics of the Dalit community and alternative ecological perspectives from the perspective of the Dalit community, both in the context of history in general and literature in particular.

It was his dissatisfaction with the editorial arbitration and exclusion of certain thematic concerns that made him 'write' another life narrative. In the second life narrative he declares that "In short, my life is the *transition* through which Kallen Pokkudan *became* Kandal Pokkudan" (Pokkudan, 2010, p. 9). Unlike the first life narrative which focuses on the *Pachamanushyan* image of Pokkudan, the latter one emphasizes on how he became Kandal Pokkudan. In the preface to his second life narrative, Pokkudan writes,

Some people feel and opine that Pokkudan does not deserve to write a book as he is born to a lower caste mother. They like the subservient Pokkudan... I think writing a book is important. It is not for fame or wealth. This is to mark that someone like me lived here. I can see many who think that it is problematic. Many of my own village and community people also share the same feeling. Somehow, they cannot think that it is the life and book of someone among them (Pokkudan, 2010, p. 7).

It narrates his lived experiences as a dalit, communist and an environmental activist. Breaking the exotic, apolitical environment activist image that was attributed to him in the first autobiography, Pokkudan identifies himself as a political subject and asserts his agency. At the same time, it also tries to follow the conventionalities of the autobiographical genre by fitting into a conventional narrative format following a chronological order.

The production of Dalit life narratives involves multiple levels of editorial intervention. In this process, the Dalit narrator may not have any influence over what is included or excluded from the text, how the narrative is structured, or how caste-based dialects and idioms are translated into mainstream written language. The power dynamics and cultural context of the narrative must be understood, as editorial decisions can silence the narrator's voice. These decisions are often influenced by the expectations and assumptions of dominant (caste) readers, resulting in homogenization of the narrative. It is crucial to recognize and analyse these negotiations and the shaping processes in order to better comprehend the impact of editorial interventions on Dalit life narratives.

The imperative to safeguard the narratorial voice and the linguistic and cultural particularities in Dalit life narratives is a matter of importance. The accurate portrayal of Dalit lived experiences depends on the fidelity of these narratives to the Dalit narrator's perspective. The editorial interventions at different stages of literary production must be scrutinized to ensure that they do not silence or distort the Dalit narrator's voice. This entails a deep understanding of the power dynamics and cultural context of the narrative, as well as an awareness of the ways in which editorial decisions can subjugate or marginalize the narrator. Moreover, transcribers, editors, and publishers involved in the translation of Dalit experiences into written form must exercise ethical discretion. As these narratives serve as vital historical docu-



ments of the lives of the Dalit community, the transcribers, editors, and publishers bear the responsibility of guarding against any biases that may compromise the integrity of the narrative. Mediators involved in the process of translating Dalit experiences into written form must be informed by a deep reverence for the Dalit narrator's autonomy and dignity by/through recognizing and respecting the agency of the Dalit narrator over their experiences. The Dalit narrator's perspective must be upheld as the definitive account of their lived experiences than any editorial intervention.

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