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Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

**Kalyani Thakur Charal, *Poems of Chandalini*
(Birujatio Sahitya Sammilani, 2024)**

Reviewed by Monami Nag

Bridging the barriers: Translating resistance, transforming social order

With time Wordsworth's definition of poetry being "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" reunites his readers more than ever before. Poetry is like an endless tradition that gives birth to subsequent patterns or canons which diversify into more such new patterns. One such pattern demanding undivided attention thereby making room for literary negotiations is Dalit Poetry. Dalit Poetry evasive and 'spontaneous' on one hand and as rebellious on the other is slowly paving its way to form a canon in future times. Since most of the poetry are a part of indigenous dalit poets, translation makes an important intereference in collaborating between two languages. The task of translation is an attempt of resistance on one hand and appropriation on the other as Dr Sukanta Chaudhury points out in his 'Translation and Understanding'. And Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi, Principal of Alipur College, Kolkata has been deploying this craft with books like 'The Untouchable and Other Poems' where he translates the poems of Shyamal Kumar Pramanick with Arunima Chanda. Now he collaborates with Dr. Zinia Mitra to translate the poems of Kalyani Thakur Charal, a Bengali Dalit poet. The efforts come out as 'Poems of Chandalini', poems by a Bengali Dalit Womanist Kalyani Thakur Charal.

Dalit poetry has been making its presence felt with the rise of activism of Dalit Panthers, Chaturtha Duniya apart from the Telegu Dalit poets etc. Kalyani Thakur Charal has been a poet of prominence writing Dalit poems in Bengali. Sarangi himself has lauded the poet as 'fiery', 'magical'. He emphasizes that she herself wanted to be called as a womanist like her fellow poet Bama. On the other hand, Mitra believes that the poems



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have written from her 'lived experiences'. She adds that the cover page of the book has the design of Indian saree white with red border which marks a sign of resistance to the dominant sections of the society calling for inclusion.

Translation is like a double-edged sword which on one hand enhances the outreach of the language and can also be a resistance to the target language. The poet herself has admitted that the translators have done a commendable job as it was not an easy task to translate her poems. The inclusion of certain words from the Motua dialect into Bengali scheduled to be translated into English posed challenges to the translators. But Kalyanidi expressed her heartfelt gratitude towards the honesty of the translators in bringing the spirit of the poems alive. She expressed her opinion in a webinar 'The Hearth Within' organized by the publisher Birujatio Sahitya Sammilani along with the translators Sarangi and Mitra.

As one takes a candid glance at the poems they appear in myriad forms. Notwithstanding the popular theme of social oppression coupled with the factor of caste as a major spade the poems are also about love, loss, humour all laid perfectly in the Dalit fabric. While reviewing it will be easier to deploy the different issues.

On Hypocrisy and Selfhood

Most of the regional Dalit poems are being translated by non-Dalits. Whether it is the autobiographies or the poems the question of selfhood sparks in the minds of the readers doubting the honesty of the portrayal of the state of the Dalit woman. While reading these poems severed selves of the poet resurfaces as a 'woman', 'dalit', and 'dalit woman' – who triumphs over whom?

In poem no. 1 she is vocal about this divide when she says: "Dalit sympathisers rise to / Exploit the Dalits". Or in poem no. 33 where she strips off the *bhadrolok* society: "My genteel colleagues enjoy / Using abusive terms--- / *Chamar*, *Charal* and *dom*---daily!".

The underlying hypocrisy of the society to make negotiations with the existence of the Dalits show how even today the higher dominant class fails to accept the dalit women



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typically shedding herself from the torn and tattered clothes to become a fierce and resistant speaker. Therefore in defining the cause of dalit woman feminism fails to address their cause. So Barbara Smith, as Anandita Pan in her book 'Mapping Dalit Feminism' points out, has expressed doubts whether existing theories can comprehend black women's writing whose needs go close by the Indian Dalits. The urge for a new birth and a fervent appeal for a new birth is clear in poem no. 32:

I am looking for a crematorium friend
Amongst dhuno and aguru perfume.
....or else I alone
Will jump into the burning pyre arranged
On my own.

This image of a Hindu woman poised as a symbol of sacrifice takes the readers to Sita of the celebrated epic Ramayana with a haunting question about the selfhood of Indian woman: who is Dalit? Is the Indian uppercaste woman trapped in a hallucinating maze of being an uppercaste?

On Love

The poet possesses a love-sick heart which yearns for a partner who can rise above all divides of caste, creed, religion and accept her with her trials and tribulations. This yearning seems to be timeless in poem no. 3: "Yet I leave behind this river, this / Sky is my ageless intimate evening". Here lies the magic of translation which enables the poet to go beyond her regional limits with such ace translators who can handle the nuances of translation: "তবুও আমি ছেড়ে যেতে চাই এই নদী, / এই আকাশ আমার কালাতীত ঘনিষ্ঠ সন্ধ্যা |".

Or in poem no. 8 where the poet has expressed her lonesome dream of love:

All sorrows are bridled, many imaginative dream
if she comes, she walks in love.
The poet's heart bleeds for her beau for she reserves her wishes in poem no 23
I'll flood you with sms and calls
Between my sleepless nights and dreams
Standing like a pendulum
The life you gave me-my dearest man.



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This relentless quest for a partner resurfaces with a sense of loss and void in poem no. 44 where she uses the illusion of mirror image:

Looking like
An old lover is
Meeting his
Beloved after
A long time
In a new flair
Of mirror.

The lone struggles of the poet seemed to have taken a toll on her psyche. So, she takes a desperate fancy to return to her love-lorn past:

I was eighteen
[...]
We have spent an eternity together
Water flows incessant. (Poem no. 40)

Her ability to deal with the void for love renders a metaphysical aura: "I'm your night's bed" (poem no. 25). The final section will climactically handle the political negotiations including the factor of caste which looms large on her works of the poet.

On Caste and Politics

When you are a Dalit you are a caste in yourself. Says Arjun Dangle "Dalit is not a caste but a realization". India is a country steeped in ramifications of caste. The Chaturvarna system of Caste has placed the Shudras or Dalits at the last rung of the ladder. This surfaces with a double-edged meaning as the caste itself acts as the signifier of exploitation and exploited. In poem no. 5 - "Titphuti and Chadra are caught" - the readers encounter these names of fishes which represent lower caste. In a significant manner the poet represents the Dalits as Rahu in poem no. 14: "Rahu desired for a total eclipse / But he couldn't succeed, would be".

Rahu always fails to gulp down the moon during lunar eclipses. This is very similar to the Dalits who are ever hungry for food and suffer from diseases due to malnutrition. Again, we have the same resonance in poem no. 34: "We don't call the moon our home".

The exploitative cry reaches a climactic pitch in poem no. 33:



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Dalits are everywhere in the world
Not here!
[...]
Train us to say –
We are all equal, no caste stratification here.

Caste is big weapon for the ballot influencers. It takes up different colours for different causes. In poem no. 24 the voice of different colours surface:

Oh what a terrible game!
Lalgarh Lalgarh
[...]
Between the green and the red.

These political negotiations usurp and utilize the rights of the Dalits in heaping up their ballot boxes. Then there is displacement due to political deploys: “We’ve got Bonbibi / We have got Dakhinray” (poem no. 39).

These are deities who are worshipped to appease the wrath of the man-eaters of Sundarbans. Then comes the horrible plight of political and geographical barriers:

I am a Bashkaata Chitmohol girl
I live in this fractured Bengal border
[...]
I have no voting rights. (poem no. 45)

The collection comes to a closure as the poet gives a clarion call to all who are reeling under the clutches of dominance and exploitation: “Wake up black men and women! / Thousand -years-asleep-men and women / Wake up!” (Poem no. 53).

This translated work will turn out to be a milestone for the academia as it will leave room for further ruminations on subjects like caste, displacement, uppercaste dominance. Moreover, as the work has not been translated by the poet herself a sensible literary distance is maintained eliminating the possibility of any bias. Says Jhumpa Lahiri in her work *Translating Myself and Others*: “Self-translation means prolonging your relationship to the book you-have written. It affords a second act for a book, but in my opinion this second act pertains less to the translated version to the original...”. So, this translated collection under the able aegis of Mitra and Sarangi will be treasured as a significant watermark adding immense value to the corpus of Indian poetry.



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Bio-bibliographical note

Monami Nag is presently serving as a Headmistress in a govt higher secondary school. She has a NET and an Mphil with academic publications in Routledge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Books Clinic, on-line journal "The Infinite Sky". She has worked with NGOS like CFAR, backed by Ford Foundation, Turning Point in creating awareness about child marriage and child trafficking. She is a poet and translator too. She has a teaching experience of 20 years apart from being Head-Examiner of English (Higher Secondary Council). She has worked in Unicef funded state project for syllabus framing. She has read papers at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, Calcutta University, Benaras Hindu University, Commonwealth Conferences.

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