

Translation, Memory, and Dalit Feminist Aesthetics in Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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Abstract

This paper examines the politics of translation, memory, and Dalit feminist aesthetics in Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Originally composed in Tamil and Marathi respectively, both texts have achieved national and international visibility through English translation, entering broader conversations on subalternity, feminist resistance, and literary contemporaneity. The paper argues that these works are not merely autobiographical narratives but acts of cultural reclamation that destabilize dominant literary conventions through oral rhythms, fragmented memory structures, community-centred narration, and embodied language. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Meenakshi Mukherjee, among others, the study explores how translation functions simultaneously as ethical encounter and political act. It analyses the tensions involved in translating caste-specific experience into English – a language historically associated with colonial modernity and upper-caste privilege – while recognising that translation also enables subaltern narratives to acquire transnational resonance without entirely surrendering local specificity. Ultimately, the paper contends that *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* redefine contemporary Indian literary aesthetics through their insistence on memory, voice, and resistance, demonstrating that translation is not merely the movement of words across languages but the movement of histories, wounds, and silenced identities into public consciousness.

Keywords: *Dalit Feminism, Translation, Dalit Autobiography, Subaltern Studies, Caste*

Introduction:

The emergence of Dalit literature marks one of the most consequential transformations in contemporary Indian literary history. By centering the lived experiences of caste oppression, humiliation, labour, gendered violence, and social exclusion, Dalit writing fundamentally reorders the moral and aesthetic coordinates of Indian letters. Dalit women's writing presses further still – confronting the double marginalization inscribed by both caste and patriarchy, and producing literary testimonies that refuse the twin imperatives of silence and invisibility that dominant culture has imposed upon them.

Two foundational texts of this tradition are Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Originally composed in Tamil and Marathi respectively, these autobiographical narratives have become indispensable to Dalit feminist discourse. Their English translations allowed these deeply regional experiences to enter national and global literary conversations, thereby reshaping how Indian literature imagines itself and its subjects.

Translation occupies a profoundly paradoxical position in this context. On one hand, it renders marginalized voices legible across linguistic boundaries, enabling subaltern narratives to circulate beyond the communities that first produced them. On the other hand, it carries the ever-present risk of flattening culturally specific experience into consumable form for elite readerships. This tension is especially charged in Dalit women's autobiography, for language itself – in its textures, idioms, and silences – bears the historic marks of caste hierarchy.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation that "translation is the most intimate act of reading" (Spivak 180) acquires particular urgency here. To translate caste experience is not merely to transfer meaning across tongues; it is to enter into ethical relation with histories of violence, exclusion, and survival. Translation is an encounter with social suffering as much as it is a linguistic act. Sharmila Rege deepens this understanding by insisting that Dalit women's testimonies are not simply autobiographical records but "counter-public narratives" that actively challenge dominant historical accounts (Rege 13). Sara Suleri's observation that postcolonial life-writing is characterized by "an obsessive attempt to narrate the body into history" (Suleri 758) finds pointed resonance here, where the body is the site upon which caste inscribes its most brutal meanings – and upon which resistance is articulated.

This paper argues that *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* redefine contemporary Indian literary aesthetics through their resistant narrative strategies and complex negotiations with translation, examining how Dalit feminist texts do not merely enter literary discourse – they transform it.

Dalit Literature, Feminist Resistance, and the Aesthetics of Testimony

Dalit literature emerged as simultaneously a literary movement and a political intervention, rooted in sustained resistance against caste oppression. Inspired profoundly by the thought of B. R. Ambedkar, it sought not merely representation within mainstream literary culture but a wholesale restructuring of its values, hierarchies, and silences. Ambedkar diagnosed caste as a system of graded inequality that dehumanized its victims at the most fundamental registers of social life. His rallying call to "educate, agitate, organize" became the animating principle of Dalit political consciousness, and literary production was understood as inseparable from that larger emancipatory project – a form of testimony and protest at once.

Arjun Dangle locates the literature within this horizon of aspiration, defining it as writing "associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who have been subjected to untouchability and humiliation for thousands of years" (Dangle xiv). What distinguished Dalit writing from upper-caste literary traditions – which frequently aestheticized suffering, sublimating it into metaphor or spiritual resignation – was its insistence on foregrounding raw experiential reality. The suffering in Dalit literature is not ornament; it is evidence.

Dalit women's writing complicated this discourse further by exposing patriarchal structures operating not only within caste society but within male-dominated Dalit movements themselves – spaces where gender was often subordinated to caste solidarity. As Gopal Guru influentially argues, Dalit women speak from a position of "difference within difference" (Guru 2548), occupying a site of compounded marginalization that neither mainstream feminist nor Dalit male discourse could adequately account for. Their narratives reveal that caste violence is

always already gendered, experienced on and through the female body in ways that demand their own literary and theoretical vocabulary.

Karukku and *The Prisons We Broke* exemplify this intersectional resistance with particular force, foregrounding collective suffering while asserting fierce female subjectivity through markedly different formal strategies. Bama's *Karukku* is intensely fragmented, lyrical, and emotionally charged – its title drawn from the serrated palm leaf, encoding pain and spiritual conflict from the outset. The narrative moves through memory associatively, shaped by oral storytelling cadences rather than linear realist convention. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* adopts a wider collective lens, repeatedly expanding outward into communal narration across generations of Mahar women, refusing the individualism autobiography typically presupposes.

What unites both texts is a thoroughgoing rejection of conventional literary decorum. Their language is direct, corporeal, and politically deliberate – exposing hunger, humiliation, and bodily suffering without euphemism. This stylistic refusal is itself resistance. Dalit feminist aesthetics decline upper-caste literary refinement because such refinement has historically depended upon the suppression of subaltern realities. To write with polish about caste violence would be to reproduce, at the level of form, the very erasure the content seeks to undo.

Translation, Power, and the Politics of Linguistic Alterity

The translation of Dalit literature into English occupies a position that is at once controversial and necessary within Indian literary studies. English carries an undeniable historical burden – it remains the language of colonial administration and upper-caste cultural prestige – yet it simultaneously functions as a language of mobility, wider circulation, and access to audiences that regional languages cannot always reach. This doubleness makes translation not merely a literary question but a profoundly political one.

The English translations of *Karukku* by Lakshmi Holmstrom and *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit carried these texts into international academic and literary spaces, transforming them from regional testimonies into texts of global significance. Yet this passage across languages was not without cost, and the translations brought with them urgent questions regarding cultural specificity, linguistic texture, and the irreducible losses that accompany any act of inter-lingual transfer.

Spivak's critique remains the sharpest theoretical instrument for examining this problem. She warns that translation frequently becomes complicit in the global commodification of marginalized narratives – that in striving for transparent readability for dominant audiences, translators risk erasing the very linguistic grain that makes a text irreducible. Ethical translation, she insists, demands that the translator surrender herself to the “rhetoricity of the original” (Spivak 188), attending to its rhetorical and formal texture rather than subordinating it to the expectations of a target readership. This demand is nowhere more pressing than in Dalit literature, where caste is not incidental to language but embedded within it. Dialects, idioms, terms of abuse, proverbs, and patterns of speech carry layered social histories – histories of humiliation and survival – that resist clean equivalence.

In *Karukku*, Bama writes in a colloquial Tamil deeply rooted in Dalit Christian community life. The rhythms of her prose reflect intimacy, shared labour, and the textures of collective survival; they are inseparable from the social world the text inhabits. Lakshmi Holmstrom's translation navigates this challenge with considerable care, retaining certain Tamil words and syntactic structures that preserve something of the oral grain of the original, even as the translated text necessarily opens itself to readers who have no prior acquaintance with Tamil cultural contexts. The result is a translation that is neither fully domesticated nor entirely opaque – one that holds its foreignness in productive tension.

Maya Pandit's translation of *The Prisons We Broke* confronts an analogous challenge. Kamble's Marathi is dense with idiomatic structures rooted in Mahar social experience, and to render such expressions into English is to risk severing the meaning from the communal life that produced it. Pandit's approach similarly seeks to honour the specificity of the source while acknowledging the inevitability of negotiation.

Tejaswini Niranjana provides a useful theoretical frame for understanding what is at stake in these choices. Arguing that translation is always implicated in relations of power because it fundamentally shapes how cultures are represented (Niranjana 2), she reminds us that translation is never politically neutral – it either reproduces prevailing hierarchies of cultural value or creates conditions for more ethical forms of cross-cultural encounter. This argument resonates powerfully in the context of Dalit translation, where the stakes of representation are inseparable from histories of violence and erasure.

Lawrence Venuti's distinction between domesticating and foreignizing translation is equally illuminating here. Venuti argues that domestication, by producing fluent and transparent target texts, risks rendering "the foreign work recognizable and therefore consumes it" – absorbing difference into the familiar rather than preserving its resistance (Venuti 5). A foreignizing practice, by contrast, registers the linguistic and cultural otherness of the source, making the reader aware that they are in the presence of a world not wholly translatable into their own.

By this measure, the translations of *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* achieve something significant. They preserve the emotional intensity and political urgency of their source texts, declining the fully domesticated form that would make them more palatable but less honest. Traces of linguistic alterity remain – and these traces matter, because Dalit narratives resist assimilation into dominant literary frameworks by design. Their stylistic abrasiveness is not incidental but constitutive: it is the formal signature of historical violence, and to smooth it away in translation would be to perform, at the level of aesthetics, the very erasure these texts exist to oppose. Translation, then, is both enabling and incomplete. It permits Dalit women's testimonies to enter broader literary and political conversations while simultaneously marking the limits of what language can carry across the borders of caste, community, and tongue.

Memory, Fragmentation, and Narrative Form in *Karukku*

Bama's *Karukku* occupies a unique position within contemporary Indian literature because it combines autobiography, spiritual reflection, social critique, and collective memory within a radically fragmented narrative structure. The text does not follow linear chronology.

Instead, memories emerge through associative movement, mirroring the psychological experience of trauma. This fragmented structure reflects what Cathy Caruth identifies as the disruptive temporality of traumatic memory (Caruth 4). The opening sections of *Karukku* foreground bodily humiliation and social exclusion. Bama recalls moments of caste discrimination from childhood with painful immediacy. One of the most memorable incidents involves an elder from her community carrying food packets by their strings to avoid “polluting” upper-caste recipients. The scene becomes transformative because it reveals the internalized violence of caste hierarchy. Bama writes:

“I saw that the elder went meekly to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand holding the string with his other hand” (Bama 15).

The visual image of bodily bending becomes symbolic of caste oppression itself. The scene also illustrates how memory operates in *Karukku* not as private recollection but as political awakening. Bama’s narrative style is deeply oral. Repetition, anecdotal shifts, conversational rhythms, and direct address create a sense of communal storytelling. The text frequently moves between personal experience and collective commentary. This stylistic strategy challenges dominant autobiographical conventions that privilege individualism and linear self-development. Dalit autobiographical writing often foregrounds collective identity because caste oppression itself is communal.

Sharmila Rege argues that Dalit women’s autobiographies should be read as “testimonios” rather than purely individual memoirs because they speak for collective histories (Rege 18). *Karukku* exemplifies this collective orientation. The body occupies central importance in Bama’s narrative aesthetics. Hunger, exhaustion, labour, and physical humiliation recur throughout the text. The body becomes a site where caste power is violently inscribed. Yet the body also becomes a site of resistance. Bama’s refusal to conceal bodily realities challenges upper-caste literary notions of purity and refinement.

Religion further complicates the text. As a Dalit Christian woman, Bama exposes the persistence of caste discrimination within Christian institutions. Her eventual disillusionment with convent life reveals how caste structures survive even within supposedly egalitarian spaces. The title *Karukku* itself symbolizes double-edged experience. Bama explains that the serrated leaves “cut both ways” (Bama 2), suggesting pain as well as resistance. The fragmented form of the text thus becomes aesthetically significant. Fragmentation reflects not literary inadequacy but the fractured realities of Dalit existence.

Collective Memory and Community in *The Prisons We Broke*

Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* differs from *Karukku* in tone and narrative structure, yet both texts share a commitment to exposing caste violence through memory. Originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha*, the text combines autobiography with social history. Kamble repeatedly shifts from personal memories to broader reflections on Mahar community life. The collective orientation of the text is evident from its opening passages. Kamble does not foreground herself as an isolated protagonist; instead, she situates her experiences within communal suffering. This collectivism reflects Dalit feminist epistemology. Individual identity cannot be separated from caste structures because oppression itself is systemic. Kamble’s

narrative style is stark and unsentimental. She documents poverty, hunger, child marriage, domestic violence, and caste humiliation with directness. One of the most powerful aspects of the text is its portrayal of Dalit women's labour. Women emerge as the primary sustainers of community survival despite enduring extreme deprivation.

Kamble writes:

"The women toiled endlessly. Their stomachs were empty, but they continued to work as though they were made of iron" (Kamble 42).

The imagery of iron suggests resilience forged through suffering. Yet Kamble refuses romanticization. Labour appears exhausting rather than heroic. The text also critiques patriarchal structures within Dalit communities. Kamble exposes alcoholism, domestic abuse, and gender discrimination while remaining committed to anti-caste politics. This dual critique distinguishes Dalit feminism from mainstream upper-caste feminism, which often ignored caste realities. The influence of Ambedkar remains central throughout the text. Kamble portrays Ambedkar as a transformative figure who enabled Dalit self-respect and political consciousness. Education emerges repeatedly as a symbol of liberation. Literacy becomes an act of resistance against caste-imposed ignorance. The title *The Prisons We Broke* itself carries profound metaphorical significance. The "prisons" refer not only to caste structures but also to internalized oppression.

Translation plays an important role in shaping the reception of Kamble's work. Maya Pandit's English translation preserves much of the original's directness while enabling wider readership. Yet the text's emotional force depends significantly upon culturally specific expressions and oral rhythms that resist complete translation. The translated narrative therefore exists within productive tension between accessibility and linguistic loss.

Dalit Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Style

Dalit feminist writing has effected a profound transformation in contemporary Indian literary aesthetics, challenging dominant assumptions about what literature is, what it should look like, and whose experience it exists to articulate. At stake is not merely a widening of the canon but a fundamental questioning of the values — beauty, refinement, universality, aesthetic distance — upon which it was built. Traditional upper-caste literary criticism privileged abstraction, symbolism, and cultivated detachment, an aesthetic never ideologically innocent: it depended upon the suppression of bodies, voices, and experiences that refused sublimation. Dalit literature rejects this distancing precisely because it emerges from conditions of immediate social violence that cannot be aestheticized without betrayal.

Sharankumar Limbale provides the most rigorous theoretical articulation of this counter-aesthetic. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, he argues that Dalit aesthetics are grounded in lived experience rather than detached artistic pleasure (Limbale 23). Suffering, in this framework, is not transformed into tragic beauty for the contemplation of disinterested readers; it is rendered as politically significant testimony — evidence of a social order that demands not appreciation but accountability.

Karukku and *The Prisons We Broke* embody this alternative aesthetic with particular clarity. Their language is deliberately unornamented. Everyday speech, colloquial idioms, and the structures of oral storytelling displace the conventions of elite literary prose, and this displacement is not stylistic naivety but ideological intention. By privileging the speech forms of marginalized communities, Dalit feminist writers directly contest Brahmanical authority over literary language – the long-standing assumption that certain kinds of expression are inherently more literary than others.

Meenakshi Mukherjee's observation that Indian literature cannot be understood through homogenizing frameworks, because linguistic plurality so fundamentally shapes literary experience (Mukherjee 14), is pertinent here. Dalit feminist texts press this plurality to its most consequential extreme, foregrounding subaltern linguistic worlds that mainstream Indian literary culture had systematically rendered inaudible. In doing so, they do not merely diversify the literary landscape; they expose the exclusions upon which its apparent coherence depended.

The body functions as a central aesthetic and political category within this framework. Where upper-caste literary traditions frequently spiritualized suffering – sublimating material pain into metaphysical resignation or transcendence – Dalit feminist narratives insist on corporeal specificity. Food and its absence, labour and its exhaustion, menstruation, childbirth, sexuality, and physical degradation recur across both texts with an insistence that refuses euphemism. This corporeality is not gratuitous; it is principled – disrupting received notions of literary purity by asserting that aesthetics cannot be meaningfully separated from material conditions of life. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue that such texts enact a "re-scripting of the real" – forcing literary culture to confront the embodied histories it had consigned to silence (Tharu and Lalita 37). This formulation captures precisely what is at stake: not shock for its own sake, but the insistence that the real cannot be edited out of literature without consequence.

Orality, too, constitutes a significant aesthetic resource. Repetition, conversational narration, communal anecdote, and performative storytelling structures reflect oral cultural traditions systemically marginalized within elite literary discourse. These are not residual features but formal choices that carry the memory and solidarity of communities whose knowledge was transmitted through speech rather than sanctioned through script.

Translation introduces particular pressures upon these stylistic elements. The rhythmic and affective force of oral prose is notoriously difficult to carry across languages. Yet even in translation, Dalit feminist texts continue to reshape literary expectations – introducing narrative forms and syntactic textures that contemporary Indian literature had not previously accommodated. Their entry into translated form is less an arrival than a disruption, and it is precisely as disruptions that these texts do their most important work.

Religion, Conversion, and Spiritual Resistance

Religion occupies a position of profound ambivalence in both *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke*. Neither straightforwardly oppressive nor simply redemptive, it functions in these texts as a contested terrain – a space where the structures of caste domination are simultaneously reproduced and, at moments of extraordinary ethical courage, refused and reimaged.

In *Karukku*, Bama's engagement with Christianity traces an arc from expectation to disillusionment to a more hard-won and complex spiritual reckoning. The convent initially presents itself as a space of refuge — offering educational mobility, spiritual community, and implicit distance from the degradations of caste life outside its walls. Yet Bama gradually comes to recognize that caste hierarchies do not dissolve at the threshold of religious institutions; they persist within them, reorganized and at times made more insidious by their contradiction with Christianity's own egalitarian professions. The gap between theological ideals of human equality and the lived social practices of those who profess them becomes, for Bama, a source of both profound disillusionment and political clarity.

Yet *Karukku* does not resolve into a simple rejection of faith. Bama's quarrel is with institutional religion — with the Church as a social structure complicit in caste — rather than with spirituality as such. What she seeks, and tentatively locates, are alternative forms of ethical community grounded in compassion and justice rather than hierarchy and ritual propriety. This spiritual dimension sets *Karukku* apart from purely secular Dalit autobiographical narratives. Suffering in the text is not only a social and political fact; it is entangled with questions of faith, theodicy, and the possibility of redemption — questions that Bama refuses to surrender even as she dismantles the institutional frameworks that claimed to answer them. Eleanor Zelliot's observation that Dalit engagement with religion has consistently involved "a search for a faith that affirms human dignity rather than denies it" (Zelliot 16) illuminates precisely this dimension of *Karukku*. Bama's spiritual restlessness is not a retreat from politics but an extension of it — a refusal to accept any framework, sacred or secular, that does not begin from the full humanity of Dalit persons.

In *The Prisons We Broke*, religion operates with a different but equally transformative force. Here it is Ambedkarite Buddhism that emerges as the central vehicle of liberation — and Kamble's account of conversion is among the most politically charged dimensions of the text. Ambedkar's own conversion to Buddhism in 1956, undertaken alongside hundreds of thousands of followers, was an act of radical rejection: a formal repudiation of the Hindu caste order and an assertion of human dignity on terms that Hinduism, as Ambedkar understood it, was structurally incapable of providing. Kamble renders this collective act of conversion not as mere religious change but as psychological liberation — a reorganization of consciousness that enabled Dalits to imagine and inhabit identities no longer defined by caste degradation and its attendant shame.

Religious transformation in *The Prisons We Broke* is thus inseparable from linguistic and cultural transformation. To convert is not only to change one's metaphysical affiliations but to step into a different relationship with oneself, one's community, and the language through which one narrates both. Translation, in this light, extends the transformative logic already at work within the text itself — carrying these local histories of spiritual struggle and collective reimagining into wider intellectual spaces, where they press against and disturb the settled assumptions of dominant literary and religious discourse alike.

Together, these two texts suggest that for Dalit women writers, religion is neither simply a consolation nor simply a target of critique. It is, rather, one of the most charged arenas in which

the struggle for dignity — personal, communal, and political — is continuously fought and reimagined.

Translation, Global Readership, and the Politics of Literary Visibility

The English translations of *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* fundamentally shaped the trajectories of these texts beyond their originary linguistic and cultural contexts. By making these narratives accessible to readers outside Tamil and Marathi literary worlds, translation enabled them to enter university curricula, feminist scholarship, postcolonial studies, and transnational conversations about systemic oppression — spaces in which they have since become indispensable reference points. Yet this expanded visibility is not an uncomplicated good, and the questions it raises are as important as the opportunities it creates.

Who, precisely, reads translated Dalit literature? How are caste narratives interpreted — and potentially misinterpreted — within global academic spaces that lack the cultural and historical intimacy that shaped them? Does the passage of political testimony into international literary circulation risk transforming urgent witness into consumable cultural commodity, palatable to elite readerships precisely because its most abrasive edges have been softened in translation? These are the constitutive tensions of Dalit literature's global life.

Spivak's warning against the "sanctioned ignorance" through which privileged readers consume subaltern narratives without confronting the structural inequalities that produced them (Spivak 172) remains acutely relevant here. There is a real risk that global readership, however well-intentioned, encounters caste as an exotic or historically remote injustice rather than as a living system with structural analogues in their own social worlds. The consumption of Dalit testimony can, under such conditions, become a form of liberal self-congratulation rather than genuine ethical reckoning. Yet the alternative — refusing translation and thereby confining Dalit narratives within linguistic boundaries — would be its own form of injustice, trading the risks of visibility for the certainty of silence. Translation remains necessary despite its limitations, and the task is not to resolve this tension but to remain rigorously attentive to it.

Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" of enunciation is instructive here. He argues that cultural translation opens a space where meanings are neither simply source nor target but something produced in the encounter between them — a space that can "displace the histories that constitute it" and open new possibilities of cultural negotiation (Bhabha 55). Applied to Dalit feminist texts, this suggests that translation need not be only loss or compromise; it can generate new forms of political and literary meaning that neither the source nor the target culture could have produced alone.

This generative possibility is borne out in the expanding comparative frameworks within which Dalit feminist literature now circulates. The international recognition of these texts has extended conversations about caste well beyond India's borders, enabling scholars to examine structural connections between caste, race, indigeneity, and other global systems of hierarchical oppression. *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* increasingly appear alongside African American, Indigenous, and postcolonial feminist writings within transnational academic discourse — a comparative proximity that illuminates both the specificity of caste experience and its resonances with other histories of marginalization. Sara Ahmed's argument that feminist

scholarship must remain committed to “making connections across different forms of oppression without dissolving their specificities” (Ahmed 6) captures precisely the ethical imperative governing this comparative project. Global solidarity that effaces difference is not solidarity at all; it is another form of erasure.

It is by this measure that the translations of Bama and Kamble must ultimately be assessed. Their relative success lies not in producing seamless readability for global audiences but in preserving traces of linguistic and cultural resistance that resist full assimilation. The foreignness that remains — the idioms that do not quite domesticate, the rhythms that carry the memory of another tongue — is not a failure of craft but its most significant achievement, ensuring these texts continue to make demands upon their readers rather than simply rewarding them.

Contemporary Relevance and Literary Contemporaneity

The enduring significance of *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* within contemporary Indian literary studies is not merely a matter of historical recognition. These texts remain urgently, uncomfortably present — not as monuments to a struggle safely concluded but as testimonies whose referents continue to define the lived realities of millions. Despite decades of legal reform and constitutional protections, caste discrimination persists with striking tenacity — operating through educational exclusion, labour exploitation, sexual violence, and entrenched social segregation, not as aberration but as structure. Dalit students continue to encounter institutional discrimination within universities; incidents of caste-based violence surface with a regularity that belies any narrative of steady social progress. These are not archives of a past injustice; they are diagnoses of a present one.

The literary contemporaneity of these texts extends beyond their political urgency. Their formal strategies — fragmentation, testimonial narration, hybrid structures, oral aesthetics — align with broader trends in contemporary global literature that have moved decisively away from linear narration and unified subjectivity. Yet this alignment demands careful qualification, because the resemblance conceals a fundamental difference of origin and intent. Where postmodern literary experimentation adopted fragmentation as aesthetic philosophy — a self-conscious interrogation of form undertaken from positions of relative security — Dalit feminist writing developed these same strategies as responses to historical violence. The fractured, non-linear structures of *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* do not reflect a theoretical position on the instability of narrative; they reflect the actual conditions under which Dalit women’s lives were lived and remembered. This distinction is decisive, because it foregrounds the material conditions that shape literary form and resists the absorption of Dalit aesthetics into a postmodern framework that would aestheticize what is, at its core, a record of suffering and survival.

Judith Butler’s argument that “precarious life” generates its own modes of narrative and representation — that those whose lives are rendered structurally vulnerable develop distinctive ways of bearing witness to that vulnerability (Butler 20) — illuminates precisely this dimension of Dalit feminist writing. The formal innovations of these texts are not chosen from an open menu of stylistic possibilities; they are necessitated by the specific histories of dispossession and erasure the texts seek to articulate. Neil Lazarus similarly cautions against readings that celebrate formal hybridity and fragmentation in postcolonial and subaltern literatures without

attending to the historical conditions that produced them, arguing that such readings risk “aestheticizing what are in fact the scars of a very specific social violence” (Lazarus 44). His warning applies with particular force to the reception of Dalit literature within global academic spaces, where the temptation to assimilate these texts into familiar theoretical frameworks – postmodernism, post colonialism, world literature – can efface the caste-specific histories that give them their distinctive character and political urgency.

Contemporary Indian literary studies has increasingly recognised that aesthetics and politics are inseparable – that how a text is written cannot be divorced from the social conditions within which it was produced. *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* have been central to this reorientation, pressing critics to rethink literary value itself – to ask not only whether a text is formally accomplished but what work it performs in the world, whose realities it renders visible, and what demands it places upon its readers. Translation amplifies this challenge by carrying caste realities into intellectual conversations far beyond the communities that first articulated them, extending the ethical imperative of these texts outward – insisting that the discomfort they produce is not incidental but necessary, and that literature’s most important work is sometimes precisely its refusal to comfort.

Conclusion

Bama’s *Karukku* and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* occupy transformative positions within contemporary Indian literary studies not because they expanded an existing canon but because they exposed the exclusions upon which that canon depended and demanded, in doing so, a fundamental rethinking of what literature is for. These are texts that redefine the relationship between literature and memory, between testimony and aesthetics, between translation and political responsibility – and their significance only deepens as the conditions that produced them persist.

Formally, both texts mount a sustained challenge to dominant literary aesthetics. Through fragmented narration, oral storytelling structures, corporeal imagery, collective memory, and language that carries the grain of caste-marked social worlds, *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* refuse the conventions of detachment, refinement, and universality that upper-caste literary culture had naturalized as the very definition of literary value. Their English translations carried these formal and political provocations across linguistic and national boundaries, enabling Dalit feminist narratives to enter global conversations about caste, subalternity, and the politics of representation – conversations these texts have not merely joined but transformed.

Yet translation remains ethically complex terrain. Caste-specific experience – embedded in dialect, idiom, bodily knowledge, and communal memory – resists complete linguistic equivalence. The translations of Holmstrom and Pandit succeed not by resolving this resistance but by preserving it, allowing traces of linguistic and cultural alterity to remain within the translated text. In doing so, they demonstrate that translation is not the neutral transfer of meaning across languages but an encounter with cultural histories and embodied suffering – an act carrying its own political and ethical stakes.

Dalit feminist aesthetics, as these texts make luminously clear, reject abstraction and aesthetic distance in favour of experiential immediacy. By foregrounding hunger, labour, humiliation, spirituality, violence, and resistance without euphemism, *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* insist that literature cannot be meaningfully separated from the material conditions that produce it. They challenge mainstream feminist discourse by demonstrating that gender cannot be analytically or politically isolated from caste – that the specificities of Dalit women’s experience demand frameworks capacious enough to hold both oppressions simultaneously, without subordinating one to the other.

bell hooks’s insistence that margin and centre are not fixed positions but sites of ongoing political negotiation – that “the margin is the space of radical openness” from which transformative cultural work becomes possible (hooks 149) – finds its literary correlative precisely here. *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* were produced at what dominant culture designated as the margins of literary life; yet it is from that position that they have generated their most consequential challenges to the centre. Michel Foucault’s observation that “discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault 52) resonates equally here. Dalit feminist writing enacts this seizure with full political consciousness – appropriating the authority of literary form, autobiography, and published testimony, turning it toward ends the dominant literary order had neither anticipated nor sanctioned. To write, to publish, to be translated, and to be read across the world is itself an intervention in the distribution of discursive power.

Ultimately, Bama and Baby Kamble transform literature into testimony, memory into resistance, and translation into cultural intervention. Their works remind readers – and demand that literary critics reckon with the reminder – that literary language is never innocent of the social orders within which it moves. It carries histories of oppression, but it also holds the possibility of articulating what has been suppressed and imagining what has not yet been made possible. In contemporary Indian literary studies, Dalit feminist writing has emerged not at the margins of debates concerning style, ethics, contemporaneity, and representation but at their very centre. To engage seriously with *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* is to engage seriously with what literature can do when it refuses to look away – and with what literary criticism must become if it is to meet that refusal with the seriousness it deserves.

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