Preface

Autobiography is a narrative of the self. It is a space where the self is constructed as well as represented. When the self in question is that of the marginalized, the ideological co-ordinates attain crucial dimensions. Subaltern women’s autobiographies offer a textual space that is untrodden, multidimensional, subversive, problematic and exceptionally dynamic. This study, *Engaging the Subaltern Woman: The Politics of Translating Resistance in Mother Forest and The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, emanates from an increasing awareness of the intersecting political spaces that transform the meta-autobiographies of two subaltern women in oral Malayalam narrative to written English narrative. The theoretical framework of the study has evolved from the overlapping spaces of feminist politics, autobiography, Cultural Studies, Subaltern Studies, Translation Studies and Poststructuralist theories. It is interesting to see how these theories help to evolve the Malayalam phonocentric texts to English graphocentric texts: how the texts undergo mediations at different levels like logocentrism, graphocentrism, phallocentrism and translation.

Cultural Studies, Translation Studies and Gender Studies are nascent disciplines, the potential, scope, necessity and range of which are recognized only recently. They offer powerful tools to unravel the hidden interiority of a text. This is especially so when they are applied to the autobiographies of subaltern women. They aid in interrogating the problematic of the ideological representation of female subalternity. The texts *Mother Forest* and
The Autobiography of a Sex Worker occupy a unique space. They are oral autobiographies transliterated into Malayalam and then translated into English. They fall into the category of dictated or collaborative autobiographies. No in-depth investigation has been done in the field of oral autobiographies of subaltern women mediated through transliteration and translation. Though a considerable volume of work has been done in the theoretical arenas of cultural, feminist and translational studies, no full-fledged, comprehensive attempt has been made to study the translated editions of oral autobiographies of subaltern women in the light of these theories.

Mother Forest and The Autobiography of a Sex Worker offer novel ways of dialoguing with subaltern texts. They demand sensitive strategies to read and comprehend. They tempt the reader to explore a new discourse, a new pattern of constructing the self. They challenge the reader to arrive at the hidden intricacies of the text. They appeal for an honest identification of the soul and spirit of the text. They mandate the necessity to unveil the elements of mediation inherent in the process of their construction and reception. The thesis is an attempt to respond to these demands. It is an attempt to listen to the voice of the unvoiced, to tread untrodden paths, to investigate the uninvestigated. It is an enterprise to retrieve the voids and silences in the texts mediated twice through transliteration and translation.

The thesis focuses on two texts. One is Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K Janu. C.K Janu, though an eloquent and potent tribal leader, is an illiterate woman. Her autobiography is transliterated into Malayalam by Bhaskaran as C.K Januvinte Jeevitha Katha. This is further translated into
English by Ravi Shanker. The other text under consideration is the autobiography of Nalini Jameela, a sex worker, entitled *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*. The first version of the autobiography is transliterated into Malayalam by I. Gopinath. The second revised edition in Malayalam is translated into English by J. Devika. The two autobiographies under consideration are by women belonging to the margins of society. They are the twice marginalized, the gendered subaltern. They boldly attempt to break the silence imposed on them, an attempt that clearly needs to be lauded. Theirs is an attempt to construct a new identity and voice for themselves and their community. They refuse to be mere ciphers who dumbly play as puppets to patriarchal tones and notes. The thesis explores the texts as bold specimens of cultural resistance. These subaltern voices, however, undergo the complex web of interventions and arbitrations ultimately problematising the very essence of their existence. C.K Janu and Nalini Jameela, being illiterate or semi literate, depend on mediators for literary expression and their voices when they reach the readers as printed pages in Malayalam and then in English go through a series of mediations and appropriations.

The first chapter of the thesis, *Writing the Gendered Subaltern*, attempts to interrogate the cultural construct called “woman.” It attempts to situate the text within the overlapping space of feminist politics and Subaltern Studies. As the narratives of subaltern women, with the essence of women, their plight, their subordination written into them, the texts come under the theoretical coordinates of feminist politics conditioned by the restrictive parameters of Subaltern Studies. The concept of woman is problematised in the
texts, as they do not owe clear and solid affinity with either the mainstream feminism or with the image of ideal womanhood. The chapter traces how different agencies including media, culture and literature construct the category called woman and how they overtly or covertly colour our perception of women. Both the texts, especially Nalini Jameela’s autobiography, offer immense scope for a gender-based analysis as they subvert the popular, ideological and political construction of women.

The second chapter of the thesis, The Politics of Constructing the Self, treats the texts as ideological constructs. Both the texts, C.K Janu’s Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K Janu and Nalini Jameela’s The Autobiography of a Sex Worker, come under the literary genre of autobiography. But on a close analysis they differ significantly from the popular notion of autobiography. As constructions of subaltern consciousness, they necessarily deviate from the mainstream perceptions of autobiography. The chapter focuses on an interrogation of these two texts as fragmented or ruptured autobiographies. As narratives they make an ideological construction of the self. These texts are rather meta-autobiographical narratives, explicitly concerned with the autobiographical process and the question of representation. They point to the process of performativity of the self in writing. They posit disturbing questions regarding the significations of the self. The narrative strategies employed, the problematic of the narrative voice, the authenticity of articulation and so on attain ideological significance at different levels.

The third chapter of the thesis, The Politics of Cultural Resistance, delves deep into the theoretical configurations of Cultural Studies. The two
texts are constructs of oppression. They represent the dialectics of the relationship between the mainstream society and the marginalized communities. The selected texts are interrogated using the tenets of Cultural Studies so as to bring to light the hidden equations of power and ideology, domination and subordination, the Self and the Other. The texts are seen as specimens of cultural resistance. They represent the predicament of multiple marginalization as an interlocking system of reinforced oppression: racism, sexism and classism overlap to create a problematic space. The chapter deals with the ideological representation of cultural resistance in this overlapping space of multiple oppression.

The fourth chapter of the thesis, The Politics of Translation, is an attempt to unveil the politics of translation involved in the transformation of texts from oral narratives in Malayalam to written narratives in English. It analyses the various ways in which translation and gender, translation and ideology, translation and power interact and intertwine. The question of language and the power it inheres to construct and define reality, attain manipulative magnitudes when employed in the context of subaltern writings. This is especially so when such texts are translated into a language synonymous with power and hierarchy, domination and hegemony. The politics, in this context, constitutes the different types of mediation the texts undergo. As resistance texts, the two autobiographical narratives are exemplary initiatives towards the formulation of a set of alternative and counter hegemonic discourses. This chapter examines how the inherent politics of cultural resistance is affected when the texts are translated into mainstream, hegemonic
linguistic medium. Resistance and “self” become mediated spaces problematising the very rationale of the subaltern texts.

The last chapter, **Conclusion: Mediating Resistance and the Self**, sums up the findings of the thesis. Any attempt to theorise the subaltern is a political attempt. Transliteration and translation are acts of homogenization. Any form of homogenization is paramount to cutting at the roots of the specificity of subaltern experience. Subaltern consciousness cannot be circumscribed within the four walls of theoretical concerns. Any attempt to theorise the subaltern is a debilitating effort, for it evades the limiting frameworks of theoretical or critical strategies. Even this thesis is open to such an accusation, and it cannot claim to capture or unveil the dynamic terrains of the text, which only the native self or the subaltern self with all the specificity attached to it can comprehend fully. Notwithstanding this handicap, the thesis does make an attempt to open a desire to evolve new theoretical and pedagogical reading strategies toward subaltern autobiographies, especially that of women.

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