



RENDERING THE VERNACULAR: TRANSLATING CASTE CULTURE AND SUBALTERN VOICE IN ANNABHAU SATHE'S WORKS

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Abstract

*Annabhau Sathe is one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century Marathi Dalit literature. His writings articulate the lived experiences of caste oppression, poverty, hunger, and resistance, drawing heavily on vernacular language, folk traditions, and collective memory. Translating Sathe's literature into English is crucial for extending Dalit narratives to national and global audiences; however, this process involves complex linguistic, cultural, and ethical challenges. This paper examines the translation of Sathe's works—particularly *Fakira*, *Aag* (Fire), and *Vaishakh Vanva* (Forest Fire of Vaishakh)—into English, focusing on the difficulties of rendering vernacular speech, caste-embedded meanings, and oral aesthetics. Drawing on translation theory and Dalit literary criticism, the study analyses translation strategies such as selective foreignization, dynamic equivalence, paratextual framing, and ethical collaboration. The paper further evaluates the cultural impact of these translations, demonstrating how they globalize Dalit voices, challenge dominant literary canons, and foster cross-cultural understanding of caste-based injustice. It argues that translating Annabhau Sathe is not merely a linguistic task but an ethical and political act that contributes to literary inclusivity and social justice.*

Keywords

Annabhau Sathe, Dalit Literature, Translation Studies, Cultural Mediation, Marathi–English Translation, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Translation is central to the circulation of literary voices across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In the Indian context, where multiple languages coexist alongside deep social hierarchies, translation acquires particular ethical significance. Regional literatures often remain confined to linguistic communities, limiting their participation in national and global discourse. Dalit literature, which documents histories of oppression and resistance, demands translation precisely because it challenges dominant narratives and aesthetic norms.

Annabhau Sathe's literature exemplifies this urgency. His writings portray the everyday struggles of marginalized communities in Maharashtra and articulate a politics of resistance grounded in lived experience. The English translation of his works—especially *Fakira*—has enabled Dalit narratives to enter global literary and academic spaces. At the same time, these translations expose the limitations of English in conveying the cultural density, emotional intensity, and political urgency of Sathe's Marathi prose. This paper explores how such tensions shape the translation of Sathe's literature into English.



Annabhau Sathe: Literary Vision and Social Commitment:

Annabhau Sathe emerged from extreme poverty and social exclusion. Largely self-educated, he rejected elite literary aesthetics and viewed writing as a form of social intervention. Influenced by Ambedkarite thought and Marxist ideology, Sathe believed that literature should serve the oppressed. His works focus on laborers, nomads, Dalits, and women—figures historically marginalized in mainstream literature.

Sathe's language is inseparable from this social vision. Rooted in colloquial Marathi, oral traditions, and folk culture, his prose resists refinement and embraces rawness. Eleanor Zelliot observes that Sathe's writing transforms literature into "a collective weapon of protest" (Zelliot, 148). Translating such politically charged writing into English therefore demands sensitivity not only to language but also to ideological intent.

Translation Theory and Dalit Literature:

Modern translation studies emphasize that translation is never neutral. As Susan Bassnett argues, translation involves cultural rewriting shaped by power relations (Bassnett, 45). When Dalit literature is translated into English—a language historically associated with colonial authority—the risk of cultural dilution becomes significant.

Lawrence Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignization is particularly relevant. Excessive domestication may erase cultural specificity, while foreignization preserves difference at the cost of reader comfort. In translating Sathe, this balance becomes ethically charged. Sharankumar Limbale notes that Dalit literature derives its aesthetics from lived suffering rather than formal beauty (Limbale, 19), making it resistant to elite literary English.

Linguistic Challenges: Evidence from Translated Texts:

One of the most persistent challenges in translating Sathe's literature is his use of vernacular Marathi. In *Fakira*, translated by Baliram Gaikwad, the protagonist's speech is shaped by caste-marked idioms and compressed expressions of anger and dignity. When *Fakira* confronts village authority, his rage is described as rising "like fire in the belly" (Sathe, *Fakira*, 46). Although the metaphor is retained, the layered bodily and cultural resonance of the original Marathi idiom cannot be fully reproduced in English.

Sathe's syntax poses additional difficulty. In scenes of hunger and violence, his Marathi sentences are abrupt and fragmented. Gaikwad's translation necessarily smooths these structures for readability, producing longer sentences that slightly soften the narrative's urgency (Sathe, *Fakira*, 58–59). A similar pattern appears in *Aag (Fire)*, translated by Maya Pandit, where short clauses depicting starvation are expanded into reflective prose (Sathe, *Fire*, 28–30). These examples illustrate how structural differences between Marathi and English affect emotional intensity.

Cultural and Contextual Challenges:

Cultural meaning in Sathe's literature is often embedded rather than explained. In *Vaishakh Vanva (Forest Fire of Vaishakh)*, translated by Maya Pandit, caste oppression is conveyed through routine acts such as denial of water and spatial exclusion. One scene quietly notes that Dalit characters "knew their place" (Sathe, *Forest Fire*, 62). Without knowledge of caste hierarchies, global readers may overlook the violence inherent in such moments.

Gaikwad's translation of *Fakira* adopts a similar approach, allowing context to accumulate gradually rather than inserting overt explanation. While this preserves narrative integrity, it also highlights the cultural gap between source and target audiences. As G. N. Devy warns, translation



into English risks “cultural amnesia” if readers fail to grasp the social structures shaping the text (Devy, 87).

Folk Culture and Oral Aesthetics:

Sathe’s reliance on folk culture intensifies translation challenges. Songs, chants, and oral performances function as political tools in *Fakira*. Gaikwad translates these passages literally, preserving semantic meaning but losing rhythm and performative force. A protest chant rendered in plain English prose lacks the repetition and cadence of its Marathi original (Sathe, *Fakira*, 91–92).

Similar limitations appear in English translations of Sathe’s short stories such as “Gold from the Grave,” included in *Poisoned Bread*. The metaphor of scavenging as caste economy remains intact, yet the visceral immediacy of the original Marathi is diminished (Sathe, 112). These examples underscore the difficulty of translating oral traditions into written English.

Translation Strategies in Practice:

Selective Foreignization:

Gaikwad consistently retains Marathi terms such as *jati*, *gaon*, and *mela*, allowing them to stand without forced equivalence. Their repeated appearance emphasizes caste as lived reality rather than abstract concept (Sathe, *Fakira*, 34). This aligns with Venuti’s advocacy of foreignization as resistance to cultural invisibility (Venuti, 20).

Dynamic Equivalence:

Dynamic equivalence is evident in emotionally charged scenes. In *Fire*, Pandit restructures sentences to preserve affective force rather than literal syntax (*Fire* 31–33). Similarly, Gaikwad renders *Fakira*’s defiance as a declaration of dignity, even when phrasing diverges from the original (Sathe, *Fakira*, 109–10).

Para textual Framing:

Introductions and notes play a crucial mediating role. Gaikwad’s introduction situates *Fakira* within Dalit and Ambedkarite traditions, framing the novel as resistance rather than victimhood (Sathe, *Fakira*, ix–xi). Such paratextual framing prepares readers to engage ethically with the text.

Ethical Dimensions of Translation:

Translating Dalit literature carries ethical responsibility. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions that translating the subaltern without intimacy with language and history can result in epistemic violence (Spivak, 182). Gaikwad’s translation avoids this by foregrounding agency. *Fakira* is repeatedly described as standing “unbroken” despite humiliation (Sathe, *Fakira*, 121), emphasizing resistance rather than passive suffering.

Cultural Impact of English Translations:

English translations of Sathe’s works have significantly expanded the reach of Dalit literature. *Fakira* is now taught in courses on Dalit studies, postcolonial literature, and comparative oppression narratives. Passages such as *Fakira*’s realization that “hunger teaches rebellion” (Sathe, *Fakira*, 64) resonate with students studying global injustice.

The translation of *Vaishakh Vanva* further challenges canonical boundaries by foregrounding nomadic and laboring communities often excluded from Indian English literature. Together, these translations position Sathe within global discussions of subaltern resistance.

Conclusion:

The translation of Annabhau Sathe's literature into English reveals translation as an ideologically charged act. Linguistic compression, cultural specificity, and oral aesthetics pose persistent challenges, yet strategies such as foreignization, dynamic equivalence, and paratextual framing help preserve the political force of the original texts. Through translations of *Fakira*, *Aag*, and *Vaishakh Vanva*, Sathe's voice now participates in global literary discourse. Translation, in this context, functions as cultural justice—enabling marginalized histories to claim visibility and authority in world literature.

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