

Contemporary Women's Writing in India

Culture, Language and Translator's Challenge: A Reading on the Malayalam Translation of *The God of Small Things*, Kunju Karyangalude Odeythampuran

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Giving priority to the aim of cultural translation, there is no relevance to the question whether a work of literature is translatable or not. Discussions regarding the Malayalam translation of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* initiated as early as the time of its publication itself. The culture of the language of the original i.e. English and that of Malayalam, the culture of

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which is the content of the former poses a series of challenge to the Third world bilingual feminist translator. The two prominent views emerged about this include the uncertainties the architecture of the novel celebrates and the untranslatability of the linguistic innovations of the novel. The Malayalam translation of *The God of Small Things*, titled as *Kunju Karyangalude Odeythampuran*, written by Priya. A.S addresses the skeptical reader in the midst of the untranslatability discourse. The present study aims at exploring the domains where the cultural and linguistic factors of the Source and Target texts conjoin, ramble or wither on the cultural front of the culture in, to which the culture of the original English version is translated. The relevance of it lies in exploring the degree of fidelity to the culture of the text, the writer maintained with an aim to describe the third world cultural translation

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The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human, as I am human, don't
You see? (Thieme, 717)

The God of Small things, the magnum opus of Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize winning novel, has depicted the landscape and mindscape of the South Indian State, Kerala. The place has not only been presented in the novel as a background, but also put depicted with its imprints through the unique language of the text, an amalgam of Malayalam and English. The novel, in many respects, deviated from the conventionalities: the theme

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of confrontation between 'Laltain and Mombatti', the architectonics, the postcolonial mimicry, the forbidden relationship between a touchable and untouchable, the political drama underlying the pseudo-secular policies etc. These are a few among the many that made the text remarkably distinctive. But the most striking part of the novel for an analyst is the narrative, which is made through the eyes of the dizygotic twins Rahel and Estha, and the linguistic play. The entire story is swinging between 1960s and early 1990s. The exact location of the happenings is Ayemenem, a village in Kottayam District in Kerala. The native language of the locale is Malayalam. The language, generally, is a space to locate the individual speakers as a member of a group, a social community, and as separate from other living beings belonged to other spheres of cultural negotiations. It marks the cultural and historical inscription of the region. Hence the language plays the role of a vehicle traveling from past to present.

Malayalam, though spoken and limited its scope in a comparatively small geographical territory- the narrow strip of land between Western Ghats and Arabian Sea and Lakshadweep and used by a limited population, counts its relevance due to the presence of Malayalees worldwide. Originated from proto- Dravidian family of languages, Malayalam is closely linked to Sanskrit and Tamil. In due course, the exchanges through commerce and colonization the language boundaries are expanded, since the interferences of English, French etc. are not considered as invasion, but as cultural and linguistic enrichment. At the same time regional languages such as Malayalam lost their charm, due to the subaltern status assigned to the speakers of the once colonized territory.

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There existed some imperialist agenda behind this degradation as John McLeod rightly remarked, "...it (colonialism) operates by persuading people to internalize its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonizers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world." (McLeod 18) Recently, contrary to the past the notion about Malayalam as an eternal receiver of loan words at the micro level, and the existence of the binaries of high/low, governing/governed, colonizer/colonized, global/regional with regard to this language is subverted by the attempts from within and from outside and Malayalam has been included in the list of the givers. The attempts made by the post colonial writers are remarkable in bringing forth the transition.

In the postcolonial India translation studies have focused on two main, sometimes contrasting approaches. On the one hand, there was a linguistic approach to translation and on the other a cultural approach accountable for translation phenomena which placed translation, a once marginalized activity as an inevitable component in the ongoing globalization process. Recently, the renewal of interests in the cultural roots spread to the west is attempted to bring back with translation. In her essay "Politics of translation" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak stated that surrendering oneself before the western translation strategies producing an immediately accessible text disregarding the context of origin, the stylistic innovations, the target audience who are keen on reading a twin of the original and the author is a betrayal from the part of the translator(Spivak 372).

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Tejaswini Niranjana has pointed out that the danger imminent in translating anti-colonial narratives is the complicity of the translation with the master narrative of imperialism. Even after overcoming this crisis, the myths of nationalism and secularism will come to conquer heterogeneity (Niranjana 167). Gender inscribed in the text and the gender of the translator is yet another issue that has a potential to make mistranslations. In order to avoid trivial patriarchal reading and to safeguard a text translation is vital. The current study analyses the possibility of the Malayalam translation *Kunju Karyangalude Odethampuram* to convey *The God of Small Things* in all its subtleties to the Malayalam readers. The focus lies in estimating the challenges of the translator to translate the culture conveyed through a second language.

The greatest challenge of the translator of *The God of Small Things* is the apparent untranslatability of the text. *The God of Small Things*, to a certain extent, shows resistance to translation. Through the metaphors, similes and the graphical representations of capital letters and small letters, their fractions and multiplications, a fantastic world in English was built within the text. This world is subtly suitable to a signifying system of representation say English language and hence no translation can replace the text. Secondly, and paradoxically, *God of Small things* is a translation in its essence: it being a part and parcel of postcolonial literature and culture, it translated the native culture in bits and pieces to the outsider. So every Malayalam translation of *The God of Small Things* is a kind of back translation.

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A third issue is the translation of the once transliterated words and the fourth, the style, tone and feel of the novel that is to be conveyed in addition to the content.

The vision of *The God of Small Things* is indeed kaleidoscopic. It projects the native culture through the language of the text irrespective of the actual language used as the medium of communication. It is a bilingual text. Without understanding Malayalam, the understanding of *The God of Small Things* is difficult. But it was a text that made English language less rigid in grammar, vocabulary and unfastened in structure. So in order to translate the text the translator surrendered before the text to bring *Kunju Karyangalude Odeythampuran* into being.

Odeythampuran is a cultural term for God, as it was used among certain cultural groups alone. The word God is a secular word, culturally neutral, but *Odeythampuran* was conceived to be a cultural expression for God. It appears to be a free translation and after reading the novel, the translation is appreciable as it conveys the rhetoric of the God in the novel. It catalysed the reading as it placed the text in a particular cultural, social and linguistic plain. Among the chapters, the names of six of them are reproduced in the Malayalam letters out of which five are the names to designate a pickle factory, a train, a harbor, an anglicized individual and talkies. Only one among them i.e. "Kochuthomban" was retained under the allowance of a name which is originated from Kerala. In the title *Wisdom Exercise Notebooks*, "wisdom exercise" remained untouched. The only title which translated considerably was the crossing with the

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substitute “Akareyku”. But while doing this, extreme care has been taken to use a word that was extensively used in the original text.

The play of language makes the text translation strenuous. The hybrid language of the children constructs a puzzle to be tackled with intelligently. The hard decision the translator made was that she did not try demonstrating the adamant loyalty to the target language. Creatively retaining the English language of the source text, she triumphed over the loss of the rhetoric before the ease of reading. She even ventured to use the English script in Malayalam Translation. This is evident in several instances:

- Mostly the rhyming lines of Rahel and Estha are presented in English script:

1. While in the theatre, they three, Rahel, Ammu and Babykochamma shared the comfort of a urinal together, Rahel sang:

Rubdub dub (Rahel Thought)

Three women in a Tub

Tarry a while said slow . (114)

2. In the presence of orange drink lemon drink man Estha sang:

How do you keep a wave upon the sand?

How do you solve a problem like mare..yah?(119)

3. The song accompanying the sexual exploitation of the man was retained in

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English in order to maintain the intensity of helplessness of the child:

Fast faster fest

Never let it rest

Until the fast is faster,

and the faster's fest.(121)

- In several situations the English words such as “Alright”, (163), “thank you, you are welcome” (159), “how do you do?” (162) are reproduced with the help of Malayalam script.
- Again in the passage of the car song they sung, in order to indicate stress, capitalization was used. In the translation the passage is copied without any changes. But in the next line the word pronunciation is reproduced in Malayalam script as “prar nun see ei shan”.(171)
- In some passages the translation is given in brackets as original along with the text: I hate Miss Mitten and I think her knickers are TORN.
(*Enikk Miss Mittane Veruppanu. Avarcku Keeriya Nikkarukal Aanu Ullathennanu Thonnunnath*) (220)
- The home work passage, the quotes from Julius Caesar (290) and the reverse reading passages (287) are given in English letters.

But when coming to the Malayalam cultural texts and poems such as kookoo koo koo theevandi and the song from Chemmeen, she presented them in the way that these songs were a part of the harmonious development of the story in Malayalam. Certain expressions such as

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“stoppited” is used as to bring the humour and mockery of the original.

The Malayalam words in the original presented in the transliterated format are presented without many innovations. So at this point the difficulty to retranslate Malayalam into the Malayalam translation obstructs the technique, translating the style. The words such as: enda(196), Nale(340), Aiyo Kashtam(172), valare (70), orkunnundo(134) etc. served the special purpose of introducing a particular culture to the foreign audience are represented naturally when the same text is introduced to the natives. The two levels of translation linguistic and cultural made the translation an ‘Estha’ to the original resembling ‘Rahel’, the dizygotic twins. The linguistic play of the text made the translation difficult and the cultural detachment of the original made it painless. Since the translation shared the linguistic freedom of the original, it produced a translation meant for bilingual readers capable of understanding English. The linguistic ingenuity of the original text liberated the translation by proposing the freedom one can enjoy with the text. As in the way the original was a book of love and pain, the third world postcolonial translation was a book of pain and love, and the gendered reading made the translation privileged with more joints and less hurdles making it as a twin of the original in every sense.

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