



READING BETWEEN THE LINES: AN APPRAISAL OF *CHEMMEEN* THROUGH THE LENS OF TRANSLATION

Aparna Ajith

Dept of English, PhD Research Scholar, Central University of Rajasthan, Kishangarh

Abstract

*Translation studies have become the need of the hour and its development will take place as programmes in world literature expand and the vital role of translation in the propagation of world literature will continue to be highlighted. The etymology of the word 'translation' suggests that meaning is picked up bodily from one culture, transported across a frontier, expresses it across the chasm which separates a language from the other and deposited unaltered on the other side. Edward Sapir has rightly said that different languages represent different world views, that it is not simply a question of rephrasing when one moves into another language. The paper will begin by evaluating the Sahitya Academy award winning novel *Chemmeen* of the Jnanpith winner and Malayalam literary stalwart Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai with a kaleidoscopic view of linguistic provenances. Languages develop over time and words accrue significance. The main challenge faced by the translators is how far they are able to convey the same meaning without causing any damage to the subtle linguistic nuances and cultural flavor to a target language. The intended study likes to throw light upon the role of translation in the field of comparative literature and how it enables us to "read between the lines". Albeit the medium of expression remains same in translation, it undergoes a tremendous change vis-a-vis contexts when there arises the need of precision, elaboration, addition of facts for the clarity of facts, etc. in a target language from the source language.*

Keywords – Translation studies, fisherman community, cultural nuances, linguistic subtleties, comparative literature



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The etymology of the word 'translation' suggests that meaning is picked up bodily from one culture, transported across a frontier, expresses it across the chasm which separates a language from the other and deposited unaltered on the other side. The main challenge faced by the translators is how far they are able to convey the same meaning without causing any damage to the subtle linguistic nuances and cultural flavor to a target language. Susan Basnett and Andrew Lefevre hold the view that translation as an activity is always doubly contextualized since text has a position in two cultures. The paper endeavours to assess the Sahitya Academy award winning novel *Chemmeen* of the Jnanpith winner and Malayalam literary stalwart Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai with a kaleidoscopic view of translation modes

comprising word for word, literal, faithful, semantic, adaptive, free, communicative and idiomatic. The romantic tragic comedy novel that portrays the diatribe and the lives of the fishermen folk entails the usage of colloquialism, riddles, folk elements and myths as the benchmark. The intended study attempts to vouchsafe the role of translation in the field of comparative literature and how it enables us to “read between the lines”. Albeit the medium of expression remains same in translation, it undergoes a tremendous change vis- a -vis contexts when there arises the need of precision, elaboration, addition of facts for the clarity of facts, etc. in a target language from the source language.

Languages develop over time and words accrue significance. Writers and storytellers bring phrases and new ways of seeing into language and into the minds of people who use that language. Translation studies unite many nations; it is because when a text is translated, people can find similarities between their languages and the translated text. In fact, translation shows that how language is universal rather than being regional or national. Through translation, ‘othering’ disappears. Though *Chemmmen* is not the masterpiece of Thakazhi, it bears a stamp of its own because of the usage and heart touching verbatim of the fishermen folk. The language used is not the original Malayalam and is not even familiar to the Malayali community. The artistic blend of the myth and folk elements and above all its structural simplicity makes the novel transcend all cultural realms. The country had so much of diversity that it was necessary to emphasize the unity in spite of the diversity. The linguistic and cultural divides among the people were downplayed and there were institutional endeavours to promote unity through translations. The film *Chemmeen* directed by Ramu Kariat, needless to say, firmly delivers and has subsequently gained a cult status in the history of Malayalam cinema besides being the film that put Malayalam cinema on the National map as it was the first South Indian film to win the coveted President’s Gold Medal for Best film. Malayalam celluloid has never looked back since. It is a common statement that translation is a shadow of the original and matches it exactly. According to Octavio Paz “no text can be completely original because language itself in its very essence is already a translation”. When a shadow can differ from the object depending on the intensity and angle of light falling on it, the translation can also differ depending on the translator and his/her interpretation of it. Let’s have an analysis of *Chemmeen* based on these aspects and how it transcends all manmade barriers of culture, region, language and culture.

Thakazhi is widely recognized as the writer who gave voice to the peasant life of Travancore. He was influenced by the Marxian ideology and Freudian theory and actively participated in the Writer’s Movement and the literary circle led by Kesari Balakrishnapillai. He entered into

the Malayalam literary field shocking the refined attitude of the elite class. He announced to the outer world of India that there exists such a language known as Malayalam and its literature. Along with him, P.Keshava Dev, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, S.K.Pottekkat and P.C.Kuttikrishnan constituted the pentagon that created the mighty verbal edifice which is known as the Renaissance novel in Malayalam. Like William Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha" or R.K.Narayan's "Malgudi", Kuttanad is the locale of Thakazhi and thirty six of his novels are centered on Kuttanad and its contingency. Being a member of agrarian family, it aroused his spirit to know the life of farmers and depict as it is in raw form with flesh and blood characters. He belongs to the Thakazhi village of Kuttanad Thaluk and his domain is the complex world comprising the miseries and hardships of the coolie workers, scavengers, and middle class multitudes of the region of Kuttanad. It is an amazing geographical region on the banks of river Pamba manifesting the natural beauty of Kerala.

Chemmeen narrates the story of star-crossed lovers set in the back drop of a fishing hamlet in Kerala's Alappuzha district. The theme of the novel is a myth among the fisherman communities along the coastal Kerala state in the Southern India. The myth is about chastity. If the married fisher woman was infidel when her husband was in the sea, the sea Goddess (Kadamma literally means Mother Sea) would consume him. The women on seashore must be uncontaminated and uncorrupted to assure the protection of their men on Kadamma's dangerous waters. *Chemmeen* expresses the aspirations, struggle and grief in the lives of the fisherman of Kerala. The novel mentions of the traditions of the fishing village stressing the fact that when we are adhered to certain traditions and customs, peace as well as harmony status quo is maintained. When these traditional laws are overstepped and breached, there occurs discord and discourse. The novel validates this by depicting the tragedy that has happened to the characters who transgressed these steps. The language used is not even familiar to the ordinary Malayalam speakers. Anita Nair, an acclaimed English novelist and translator of *Chemmeen* opined "Like many Malayalees, I too saw only the movie based on the novel and not read the book. It was a great challenge for me as a translator to understand the dialect spoken by characters in it. I always tried to think from the point of view of the author when translating the work. It was also a challenging task to retain the beauty of the language and ideas conveyed by Thakazhi in the original text". Hailing from the northern part of Kerala, she found very hard to comprehend the fisherman dialect spoken with the blend of colloquial usages spoken in south Kerala. As far as the translator is concerned, it is a linguistic nightmare because the characters speak the colloquial idiom of a particular locale for which translation is very tough.

Anita Nair edited many portions from the original text to cater to the foreign readers as it is too colloquial to be captured in a foreign tongue. Despite the apparent untranslatability, there are certain factors that are extrinsic to the language of the novel taken into consideration which can root out all the problems related to the source and target language. The word for word translation is very difficult as we cannot trace apt words in English for many colloquial words. Communicative and faithful translation methods are widely used here. The very opening sentence of the novel is translated in such a way that we are able to grasp the sense in an acceptable and comprehensive manner.

“That father of mine talks of buying a boat and nets”.

‘What a lucky girl you are, Karuthamma!’

Karuthamma- Pareekutty relationship is very much a love story like Laila- Majnu, Heer-Ranjha of the east and Romeo – Juliet of the West. The story of the star- crossed lovers that ends in death is very familiar irrespective of cultural disparities. Patrick Colm Hogan underscores this point in his study by saying that every tradition tells tales of conflict in two areas- love and political power. He points out “perhaps the most cross- culturally widespread version of the love plot is a particular variation on the comic love story. This variation, ‘romantic tragic- comedy’, in effect incorporates the tragic love story, where the lovers are separated, typically by death, often with a suggestion of literal or metaphorical reunion after death”. These ‘prototypical narratives’ that appeal to our emotions have the capability to transcend cultural fissures. *Chemmeen* comes under this category. Here the myth is woven with elements of the folktale. In typical folk tale fashion, it is Karuthamma’s mother Chakki who reiterates Kadalamma’s contradictory qualities:

“Do you know why sea goes dark sometimes? Chakki narrates the story to her daughter evoking mythical impression saying “there is gold in the sea child, gold”.

Edward Sapir has rightly said that different languages represent different world views, that it is not simply a question of rephrasing when one move into another language .There are times and instances where translation fails to articulate the real sense of the source language.

“Chakki continued, ‘In this vast sea, there is much to fear, my daughter, my magale. All of which determines whether a man who goes out to sea will return. All the only thing we can do as women is keep them safe with true minds and bodies. Otherwise, they and their boats will be swallowed up by the undertow. The life of the man who goes out to sea rests in the hands of his woman on the shore”.

“Chakki imparted a great truth to her daughter then. ‘virtue is the most important thing, my daughter. Purity of the body and mind! A fisherman’s wealth is his fisherwoman’s virtue”.

“Magale, you shouldn’t be the reason why this shore turns barren or be the reason why the mouths of its people are filled with mud!”

Here Anita Nair has made use of the word ‘*magale*’ instead of daughter in the translation. Albeit the word daughter is apt, the usage of ‘*magale*’ conveys the intensity of Chakki’s concern for her daughter Karuthamma in a very serious matter. Some other words are also not replaced by the foreign tongue in this novel in order to give the typical flair and flavor of Kuttanad lifestyle. These include “*Accha, Ammachi, Arayan, Chakara, Chedathi, Chettan, Ichechi, Kambavala, Kasavu, Mannarshala Ayilyam, Marakkan, Muhurtham, Mukkuvan, Mundu, Neriyaathu, Para, Podava, Pottey, Pottu, Theeyal, Uruli, Valakkaran, Vaapa* and so on. The instance given below carries the anticipation and apprehensions of the writer as well as the readers when Karuthamma bids farewell to her sea shore as her father has given her hand to a sturdy and workaholic man Palani.

Grinding his teeth, Chembankunju roared, ‘she isn’t my daughter!’”

A sobbing Panchami called out, ‘chechi’.

Nallapennu and Kalikunju stayed with Chakki.

Karuthamma walked into her future. Who knew what it would be like? Had she really escaped danger and temptation?

No one prayed for her.

And so Karuthamma left her familiar shores.

Would that song echo on that shore again? Who knows? But there wouldn’t be anyone to hear it”

Chemmeen with the real life blood and flesh of the fisher folk reverberates in the alien shores just like Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. The fish as a symbol of the very entity typifies man’s struggle with nature. Palani baits a shark and he puts all his strength to control it amidst the sea. He struggles until his death into the whirlpool. He speaks to the shark and he becomes mad on the catch. Similar concatenation is visible in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago, the old man also goes alone into the sea and catches Marlin, a big fish and struggles with it. Santiago speaks with the fish in order to motivate himself. Likewise Palani in *Chemmeen* speaks with the shark when it draws him into the whirlpool. Palani shouts; “Stop it! It isn’t time yet for you to take me to the sea mother’s palace! Ha... that is the way, my boy!”(235). But this speech is the outcome of the fear on death. Hemingway says through the character of Santiago that man is not made for defeat; a man can be destroyed but not defeated. In the same way even though Palani dies in the whirlpool, he is not defeated by the shark but his bait kills the shark at the end of the novel. The boat and the net symbolize pride.

Translation studies have become the need of the hour and its development will take place as programmes in world literature expand and the vital role of translation in the propagation of world literature will continue to be highlighted. They are essential in comparative literature, it is because through translations, literatures influence each other, and people understand others better. It unites two or more literature in the form of comparative literature. Foreignisation doesn't mean translate a text word for word rather it means giving the message of the original text by using its cultural and linguistic elements. Translation studies contribute to the future of comparative literature. Translation into English can certainly foster the growth of a holistic view of Indian literature and the techniques in *Chemmeen* surmount all cultural, linguistic and national disparities. According to Walter Benjamin, "the mark of the translatability of a text is its ability to be 'identical with truth and dogma, where it is supposed to be the 'true language' in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning'. He supports the necessity of translation in comparative literature. He believes that translation makes literary works alive. As long as they are translated, they will survive. The use of pure language has made this a translator friendly novel. The golden beaches, the swaying green palms, and in the background the rich and poignant serenity of the enigmatic ocean offer a symbolically lush landscape to the agonies and ecstasies of the romantic hearts on the shore. Hence it can be concluded without giving space for any kind of suspicion that *Chemmeen* is reverberating in alien shores too and not lost in translation. Hence no age and no custom can stale the infinite variety of this renowned novel.

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