

Embracing the Unembraced: Being one with the Translated Thooppukkaari



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Thooppukkaari is a Tamil novel by Malarvathi the young woman writer who bagged the Sahitya Akademi's Yuva Puraskar Award in 2013. Mary Flora, whose pen name is Malarvathi, is a young budding writer, who hails from Vellicode of Kanniyakumari district, Tamil Nadu. It is the simple and plain style of the language used with the mishmash of the colloquial dialect of Vilanvancode taluk of Kanniyakumari district, Tamil Nadu that won her the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar National Award. The tactics that Malarvathi employs through the dialectal words is a sincere revelation of her feelings. The novel helps the reader to comprehend the exploitation, the discrimination, the trauma, the forced labour, the unimpressive appearance and the neglected hunger of the sweeper community in line with the varied layers of the story.

It is highly doubtful if anyone outside Kanyakumari district would be able to read and digest the Tamil novel. The local dialect in which the novel is written was indeed a barrier for people to accept and embrace the book for translation. The golden chance of translating the work was finally given to me and that was accepted happily thanks to my dear friend, Dr. Susan Roy. Hand in hand we thus embraced the unembraced work and worked together with great interest and fun in discovering the unknown words and finding equivalent terms. Sinking deep into the ocean of words in the sea of translation for nearly a year and a half we finally ended up in the shore when our book was published and placed in the Chennai book fair 2020. Looking back with joy the challenges faced while sailing with the translation can never be forgotten.

The novel is not just a mere narration of events. Malarvathi has decked her book with poems in between which are indeed like sweet and juicy grapes in a vine. The fascinating fact is the way how words, sentences, phrases and proverbs that are 'untranslatable' is scattered throughout the book. It took quite a long time to bring out the meaning of the source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text. Most of the problems are related to slang, typical colloquial usages, dialects, proverbs, artistic expressions, intonations, gestures, exclamations and the like. It is through various strategies like compensation, description, equivalence, literal translation and linguistic-paralinguistic methods the text has been translated. A few of such difficulties encountered are elucidated here.

FINDING EQUIVALENT WORDS: A FIGHT WITH TIME

Finding exact words or specific words in the target language was one of the obstacles that was overcome because such words were either unavailable or unknown. Words that may lose its texture and also that would lose the original feel were not translated but retained as it is in the original. Such words are written in italics. To make it easy for the readers, a glossary of such terms with transliteration and phonetic transcription are given at the end of the book. The title "*Thooppukkaari*" is the first word which was found very difficult to translate because an exact word in English language could not be found. Thooppukkaari is a word used to address a sweeper who does all sorts of manual scavenging at hospitals and at public places. The protagonist in the novel is addressed so based on the work she does. As no words would replace the exact meaning as revealed in the novel, the word was retained as such. Other words used to address people in different contexts like *akka* [akkā]/akka:/- elder sister, *Ediyae*, [ediye] /ediye:/- a term used to address woman; *periyavarae* [periyavarā] /peɾijAVARɛ:/, a term used to address an elderly person and other words like *payasam* [pāyācam] /pa:ja:sam/ - an integral part of traditional South Indian meals which is a dessert; *ketti melam* [keṭṭi mēlam] /keṭṭime:lɐm/- a special tune played at the exact moment the bridegroom ties the *thali* on the bride; names of Tamil months like *Maasi* [māci] /ma:si/, *Purattasi* [purattāci] /puɾɛṭa:si/ and the like are not translated. There are some words that will lose its originality if translated in English. Hence such words are retained as such. Thus the technique of borrowing was used. Such borrowed expressions are also mentioned in italics.

WORD TO WORD TRANSLATION: A FIGHT WITH WORDS

Literal translation is followed when the words are culture-specific and context specific. Say for example, 'pick the leaves' (a word to word translation or linguistic equivalence) which was found impossible to translate, is made clear through a footnote. Anyone who is not aware of the context of the word 'leaves' might think the protagonist of the story is just speaking about some leaves. But

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here it refers to the plantain leaves that are used to serve meals and that ought to be gathered after the feast is over. Yet another instance where literal translation is followed is "... she would fall even if a grass knocks her down." In order to reveal that the character is very weak this hyperbolic statement is used and hence the phrase is literally translated.

REFORMULATION: PUZZLING WITH FORMATIONS

The technique of reformulation is used when similar or like expressions are absent in the target language. In such places, completely different expressions are used to transmit the same reality. Through this technique, names of institutions, interjections, idioms or proverbs can be translated. For example the phrase "a small grain of food remains..." is reformulated from the phrase which in the source language is given as "remains of food like sesame seeds"; "He was crushed beyond measure" is the reformulated one of "he became useless as salt". The context here is where a character called Maari is crushed under a tempo to death; to express this it is mentioned he "became useless as salt." Also, certain onomatopoeic words are also substituted using different expressions and care is taken that the same feel of the original text is brought in the translated version. Example, [vaav] is translated into "blargh" which is the sound of vomiting. It is to be noted that the onomatopoeic word of the source language is substituted with another onomatopoeic word of the target language. Another instance is where the sound [chada chada] is translated to 'plopping.' In addition to this, there are also a number of words in the source language text that are repeated twice for emphasis. Such words are not retained as such in the translation version. For instance, instead of literally translating 'small small shops' it is reformulated into 'petty shops'; [karmam karmam] is changed into 'Oh my god!' Here the word repeated twice is reformulated into an exclaiming expression; [oodi oodi] which is literally 'run run' is reformulated to 'run errands to' which perfectly fits the context.

ADAPTATION: A FIGHT WITH CULTURE

Adaptation, also called cultural substitution or cultural equivalent, is a cultural element which replaces the original text with one that is better suited to the culture of the target language. This achieves a more familiar and comprehensive text. For example, [periya doctor] which is found in the source language meaning "big doctor" does not suit the cultural element in the target language and hence translated as 'chief doctor.' Also, addressal terms like Subha Doctor, Suganthi madam where the names are mentioned first, are reversed in the target language and thus referred to as Dr. Subha or Madam Suganthi. Another instance is where 'thyroid doctor' which refers to the doctor who cures thyroid is substituted with the term 'endocrinologist'. Phrases like [kirrukku nayae] which plainly means 'mad dog' is adapted to "crazy woman"; [kalla amma] which literally means 'false mother' is changed to 'stealthily she sits'; [pathuu paise] which means 'ten paise' is adapted to the context as 'helpless state.'

WORD ORDER: JUMBLING WITH WORDS

The order of words in the source language varies from the target language. In order to bring in elegance and logic translation, literal word to word order was not followed. The word order in English is fixed with the pattern S-V-O whereas in the Tamil language it is flexible and not fixed. The standard pattern of English language was followed ignoring the nuances of Tamil pattern. Difficulty was encountered in long and winding sentences sometimes with no subject at all. Such lines were read amble number of times to discover the hidden subject.

TYPICAL COLLOQUIAL USAGES, SLANGS AND PROVERBS

Problems in translation are also related to slang, typical colloquial usages, dialects, proverbs and the like. Proverbs are wise sayings that are designed specific to the particular culture. As G.K. Chesterton mentions in his prose, "On the pleasures of no longer being young" only the one who has owned a dog will understand all the proverbs related to dog. Along these lines, the proverbs, the phrases, and idioms created by the ancestors for the specific culture were indeed a difficult thing to translate. Hence literal translation was followed as equivalents found were not suitable. For example the lines "Only if the needle gives room the thread can enter" "living a life with a corpse" "... the relation is just like pure water and sewage" were translated carefully that the essence is not lost. Colloquial expressions are used only in informal spoken language. They are mostly used within a particular community or among friends and the familiar. *Thoopukkarri* written in the local dialect is clad with lots of colloquial usages and slangs that were new to the translators. It was indeed a tough job to find them out and to translate them because most of the equivalents are not available in the target language at all. Now and then guidance was sought from the author in this regard.

TRANSLATING POEMS: PUZZLING WITH AESTHETIC BEAUTY

Translating the poems that are found amidst the prose was indeed like "take a break" on one side but cracked the brain on the other side. Here the source text had to be read and re-read to transform and at the same time to transfer its essence to the target language. The aesthetic sense, the beauty in the words, the expressive values were neatly carried to the English language. Literal translation was not used as the beauty of the original text would be lost. Taking the readers also into account the poems were translated beautifully that it reproduced the contextual meaning with appropriate choice of words in the target language revealing both the denotative and connotative meaning. Given below is an instance of poetic lines translated:

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வாழ்க்கை என்னும் பயணத்தில்
சரிந்து விழும் போது
தனியே தடுக்கி விழும் போது
சாய்ந்துகொள்ள
ஒரு துளி காதல் தேவை

The translated one:

In the journey of life - When -
One slips off and
Staggers down - -
There need to be a drop of love
To quench the thirst of life!

The concept in the poem is brought in and is decked with figures of speech too. One can find the repetitive device being used as in “the journey of life” and in “the thirst of life.” The dominant sibilant sound /s/ as in ‘slips’, ‘staggers’, and ‘thirst’ reveals the sad tone of the poem. The harsh /d/ sound in ‘down’ and ‘drop’ tells how life is harsh without love or when the lover deliberately forgets and ignores the lady love,

In spite of all the hurdles faced the thought of the debut translated novel still brings joy just as the dictum of Aristotle says, “Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work.” Any task even if it is menial cannot be done wonderfully well unless we fall in love with it. The love for translation helped and is helping to embrace the novel then and even now. The theme of the novel which is about getting rid of manual scavenging forever which Malarvathi, the author wanted to take across the globe is thus taken to. Hope the main objective of the work being translated is being achieved as the book has already began to put down roots in many places and has began branching optimistic thoughts in many souls.