

Interventions



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Analyzing Linguistic Hybridity: Translation of *Ponniyin Selvan* from Tamil

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Abstract

In the post-independent India, it is a painful fact that the translations of those who are not anglophiles have been seldom received and rewarded well and despite their literary superiority they have for sure missed the much-deserved recognition. With the advent of literary translation and cultural translation, the field of translation has evolved thus playing a major role in popularizing world literature through translation. When the writer and the translator belong to different cultures, there is room for a comparison; however, it would be an interesting study to analyze a work when they both belong to the same socio-cultural milieu. This paper probes into the English translation of a Tamil historical novel-Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*. It is a critique based on a few parameters like translation of terminology, techniques adopted in story-telling, retention and transference of cultural aspects, the degree of authenticity that is brought out in the translation, and the level of success in reaching out to the English readers. The study focuses mainly on the linguistic hybridity and tries to suggest that the translator uses a pidgin variety to suit the work chosen. Even though the text demands such authentic presentation, the question of appealing to an international reader is left to be answered.

Keywords: migrancy, hybridity, terminology, transcreation

In the post-independent India, it is a painful fact that the translations of those who are not anglophiles have been seldom received and rewarded well and despite their literary superiority they have for sure missed the much-deserved recognition. Bassnett and Trivedi in the Introduction to their book *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* mention that “the translations from various Indian languages into English, whether done by foreigners or by

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Indians themselves, have attained a hegemonic ascendancy.”(10) Yet, they also point out that when “literature especially with a postcolonial thrust is being written equally or even more abundantly in languages other than English, especially in countries such as India where only a small elite (variously estimated to constitute between 2 and 10 per cent of the population) knows any English, the usual skeptical western retort is: But show us – in English translation!” (ibid) While a writer such as Tolstoy, Gunter Grass, Marquez, Haruki Murakami or Orhan Pamuk, is almost a household name among the English reading Indians, a name like Mohammed Basheer, Girish Karnad or Ashokamitran may not ring a bell. Meenakshi Mukherjee raises the very same question as early as 2006 in her article *Mapping an Elusive Terrain: literature* thus, “If we can read and enjoy Marquez, Borges, Kundera, Orhan Pamuk, and Paulo Coelho in English translation, why does a South African or an Australian reader not have access to the best of our Hindi, Bangla or Malayalam writers?” (91, 2006) Extending it a little further, how many of us read Bhasha literature in translation, either in our own languages or at least in English? It would be an understatement to say that translations have played a crucial role in popularizing and promoting world literature, and along with it to a considerable extent, impacted comparative and cultural studies too. Having said that, it is also important to note the fact that in the Indian context translations have always had a different meaning and position because they were not considered the same as that of the translations elsewhere. Satchidanandan in his article *Reflections: Rethinking Translation* explains thus:

For us translation has been a revitalization of the original through the imagination of a writer of another space and another time. Translation to us has been a version of intertextuality. Original has never been specially privileged, it can never be absolutely repeated The translator’s position has never been secondary in India. (7)

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Contrary to the above statement, the reality in the postcolonial India is that translations are no longer an activity of re-creation or re-telling. To put it in Satchidanandan's words, "Only the intervention of colonialism created inhibitions and a sense of sin about deviation from the so-called original text." (8) Therefore, it can be stated that the postcolonial Indians, as citizens of the world, have resorted to translations - rather than transcreations – much like their western counterparts.

While the Indian scenario had been undergoing the above change, literary translation started emerging as a field in its own right, freeing itself from the clutches of literal translation. This became a reality due to the shift from mere linguistic elements to the deeply embedded cultural elements that brought out human lives set in their real environment. It is common knowledge that in the course of such a transition, the term 'Cultural Translation' has been proposed, accepted, and has also been contested. Harish Trivedi in his famous essay *Translating Culture Vs. Cultural Translation* defines the term in the post-colonial, postmodernist context and suggests that there is an urgent need to preserve the newness entering through cultural translation and that the term itself should not be confused in place of terms like migrancy, exile or diaspora. He further suggests that translation should rather help us 'encounter and experience other cultures' and it should not erode the bilingual and the bicultural ground by making it monolingual and monocultural. (2005)

This brings us to the fact that generally translators are bilingual writers who are quite familiar with the social and cultural milieus of both their own and those of the authors' whom they choose to translate. When a translator belongs to a different culture, he / she will naturally understand the cultural differences that exist between the readers of the original texts and the translated ones, and therefore will introduce the latter to an entirely different and new world

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through certain strategies and devices. Here, there is room to weigh one against the other, as the writer and the translator are two different entities with entirely different linguistic and social backgrounds. In such a case, there arises a typical opportunity to study the comparative and contrastive elements of a given translated work. On the other hand, it would be interesting to imagine a study based on a scenario in which the original writer and the translator belong to the same linguistic and socio-cultural milieu, but the translation is done in English with an eye on the multi-cultural, multi-lingual readers who may or may not belong to the Indian sub-continent.

With this thought lurking behind, my study begins with the intention of analyzing an English translation of a Tamil historical novel- Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*. It is a critique based on a few parameters like translation of terminology, techniques adopted in story-telling, retention and transference of cultural aspects, the degree of authenticity that is brought out in the translation, and the level of success in reaching out to the English readers. The discussion at hand is basically situated on the above premise put forth by Trivedi, and it is also an attempt that hinges upon the question of 'authenticity' and 'worthiness' of a translated work from a fresh perspective.

Before beginning the analysis, a very short introduction to the history of Tamil Literature, the beginnings of its translation, and the place that the author Kalki holds among the 20th century Tamil writers would be necessary to serve as a preamble to the study. Even though the literature in the language has had a two thousand year old existence, efforts to bring out the richness of this ancient language began only during the colonial era and has continued well into the 21st Century – thanks to the interest of a few people like Purnalingam Pillai, Ramachandra Dikshitar, Vaiyapuri Pillai, T. P. Meenakshisundaram etc., whose recording and translation of a few works of Tamil literature immensely helped in consolidating the history of Tamil and bringing it to the outside world. The political goodwill has brought in a classical status to the language and the

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public interest evinced by a group of Tamils settled in the US is expected to culminate in establishing a Tamil chair at Harvard University. In the recent times, a new creed of translators (from Tamil to English) have come up in a big way and in their midst, the contribution of A. K. Ramanujan in translating Tamil classics has been received well by the academic community both inside and outside India.

While fiction was a new genre to the 19th and 20th century Tamils, the historical fiction that sprang up during this time gave new dimensions to the new-found nationalism of the Indians who felt pride in their rich history and culture. The pioneer and the most important writer of historical fiction in Tamil, even to date, is Kalki Krishnamurthy who has authored three historical novels- all based on the historical facts of Chozha and Pallava rulers who were at the pinnacle of glory in the beginning of the millennium. My interest in Kalki's five volume novel *Ponniyin Selvan* is the same as that of millions of Tamil readers across the world spanning different age groups and backgrounds. Living in a globalized world amidst a potpourri of cultures, one cannot but study people and their culture without the aid of translation. And so, studying different cultures through literatures have come to stay and often studies have been taken up on translations from one language to another involving two different cultures.

My analysis of the translated version of the five part novel *Ponniyin Selvanis* an attempt based on the English translation of the novel by C. V. Karthik Narayanan published as an e-book by Pustaka Digital Media Private Limited in 1999, the centenary year of the author Kalki himself. Even though there are a few Print versions available, this edition was chosen for an analysis based on the presumption that being an e book its reach would be much wider; and, this is the only translation in English that is complete with all the five volumes. The other e-book translations available are by Indra Neelamegham (brought out in the year 1990 by Project

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Madurai, an electronic database to archive Tamil classics), by Pavithra Srinivasan (published as an e book by Tranquebar Press in 2014), and one more by Sumeetha Manikandan (e-book brought out by Indireads Inc. in 2017). Even though they are good quality translations, they are all not complete in the sense that the first two translators have brought out only the first two parts and the last one has published only the first part and hence the only complete work, i.e., Karthik Narayanan's has been considered for the present study. Nevertheless, to juxtapose and highlight the techniques used by Narayanan in translating certain terms or contexts, his version will be occasionally compared with Indira Neelameggham's, the first ever translation of the classic and, it will be confined to the first three parts alone for the afore-mentioned reason. Comparison is being used as a tool in a very restricted way to reinforce the observations and not to make it a thorough comparative study.

To introduce R. Krishnamurthy (1899-1954) who is well known as 'Kalki' is by no way an easy task as he was an exceptional man with a multidimensional personality - a journalist, short story writer, novelist, translator, Tamil enthusiast, social activist, and a freedom fighter. His genuine interest in the country's freedom struggle and his strong views on the social evils that existed in his days, made him write seven social novels, of which the novel *Alai Osa i* (Sound of the Waves) won him the Sahitya Akademi award in 1950. Some of his works like *Parthiban Kanavu*, *Kalvanin Kathali*, *Solaimalai Ilavarasi* have got translated into Hindi and the award-winning *Alai Osai* into Hindi, Gujarati, and Russian. His historical fiction has often been compared to Walter Scott's and the romance, the mystery, and the freshness of his prose style earned him diehard fans who literally used to wait for the weekly editions of magazines *Ananda Vikatan* and *Kalki* in which his novels were serialized. The novel under study was serialized for almost three and a half years from October 1950 to May 1954 in his own Tamil Weekly named

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Kalki, the sales of which went up to a staggering number of 70,000 copies at that time. The reason for choosing the translated version of this particular book is that the readership that has been ever increasing - proved by the fact that the original one is still being serialized in the same Tamil weekly (even after six decades of its publication) and several editions have been brought out till now. It is a work of art that has survived through generations due to the powerful writing that has remained unsurpassed till date.

When a work is magnificent in several ways, it naturally calls for a translation, and the translator's task becomes both exciting and challenging. The craft of Narayanan depends on various strategies and techniques that he diligently uses throughout this mighty work. The first striking point about Karthik Narayanan's translation is that he has chosen to retain the Tamil title *Ponniyin Selvan* itself, instead of naming it as 'Son of Ponni' or more aptly 'Ponni's Son'. The translator himself does not cite any explanation for this decision; however, it may be presumed that for non-Tamil readers the name may kindle curiosity as the name *Les Misérables* does and it would eventually lead them to the reading of the book. The reason is, perhaps, best left to one's own conjecture!

The next feature that helps a non -Tamil reader is the arrangement of relevant information in a well thought out and elaborate manner. The theme of the novel is thrice removed from reality - the time the story is situated, the ground on which the characters tread and events take place, and the style of language through which the story unfurls. In order to familiarize the reader with the complex theme, horde of characters and their socio-political circles, action in the form of intrigues and conspiracies, the work is structured in such a way that it begins with detailed Notes and Introductions: 1) Editorial Note by Mini Krishnan (2) Introduction to the Translator (3) A Note on the Sponsors (4) Introduction to the Novel (5) Introduction to the Author, and lastly (6)

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an excellent critique on the original book in the form of Introduction by Prof. T. Sreeraman of CIEFL, Hyderabad. Preparing a reader thus, the book moves on to the Table of Contents followed by introduction of the characters. In fact, each part begins with an Introduction of characters and ends with a glossary of terms. Besides this, there is a separate section narrating the ‘Story so far’ at the beginning of Part III, IV, and V. Thus, the structural arrangement takes care of the non-Tamil readers in terms of their understanding of the socio-cultural background, the characters and all the important Tamil terms used. In addition to that, in Part IV and V, the translator further familiarizes the readers with certain kinship terms that at times double as forms of address, thus taking care of this peculiar trait of the language.

A detailed analysis on three levels will bring out the salient features of this translated work: (i) terminology, (ii) style, and (iii) strategies used by the translator to aid and introduce the non-native reader in familiarizing an alien culture. According to Peina Zhuang and Huan Pi who trace the ‘Rebirth’ of Comparative Literature in China, terminology translation is an important part in inter-cultural dialogue. (2017) When two different languages that are completely alien to each other (like Tamil and English) are at play, the first difficulty arises at the basic terminology level. Suppose a Tamil text is translated into Kannada or vice versa, the resultant text could be much closer to the original, because the concepts and terms have a lot of commonalities due to the similarities in cultural aspects. For instance, the Tamil *Vanakkam* can be translated into the Kannada *Namaskara* and the reader easily understands the term as a salutation. However, if the term is translated into English as ‘Hello’, ‘Hi’ or ‘Good Morning’, the meaning does not get conveyed in the same spirit. And this is where the difficulty begins for translating an Indian text into English. More so, when the text is far removed in time and place as it is seen in historical fiction such as *Ponniyin Selvan*.

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A discussion on terminology begins even with the title of the very first chapter in Part I of the book named 'The First Floods' meaning the fresh floods that arrive in the river Cauvery (also known as Ponni as the title goes) after the monsoon in the month of Adi (July- August) 'The Adi Festival'. The translator starts his journey in a difficult terrain right from the beginning of the novel. Is the phrase "First Floods" the most appropriate translation for the Tamil 'Pudu Vellam'? In Indra Neelameggham we find the term translated as 'New Floods'. It could even be 'fresh floods' elsewhere.

As mentioned above, the author begins the story on an auspicious note of the Adi festival that gives him ample scope to describe the prosperity of the people and the joyful atmosphere that prevails in the lives of common men and women during the Chola rule. It is quite interesting to note the astuteness of the translator in describing the scene, as it involves the description of people of a particular region, their food items, and fun activities that are culture-specific and seen through the eyes of Vandiyathevan, an outsider from Kanchi. A comparative observation would be quite useful to understand the terminology translation strategy applied by the translator. Neelameggham depicts the colours of the festive scene brought out by women gathered in the banks of the river, by writing, "Bunches of fragrant flowers, such as the hearts of country cactus, chrysanthemum, jasmine, gardenia, champaka and iruvatchi decorated the braids of women" (3) And Narayanan describes the same scene in the following terms: "The women had adorned their hair with strings of thazambu, chembarathi, malli, iruvakshi and shenbagam flowers" (n.p) In the first text, we find the literal translation of the names of flowers like 'thazambu' (country cactus), 'chembarathi' (chrysanthemum), 'malli' (jasmine) etc. translated into English while the second translator retains the Tamil names. Since these flowers are specific to the region, a

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foreign reader may find the terms slightly difficult to read and comprehend at the first reading. However, while the former may reach such a reader easily, it must be admitted that the latter's strategy of retaining the original terms adds regional flavor to the reading experience.

The richness of Tamil affords the original writer Kalki to express exclamations, interjections, and feelings in several different ways and it becomes a responsibility of the translator to find similar and equivalent terms in English. Narayanan overcomes this problem most of the time by retaining the original terms that may not have an equally appropriate substitute. To be specific, in his translated version, we find a few categories of Tamil terms that are constantly retained: - (i) exclamatory terms (ii) kinship terms (iii) culinary terms (iv) measurements of time and distance (v) musical instruments (vi) names of Tamil months etc. Therefore, we find at least six different terms to express exclamation – *Aha! Ade appa! Appappa! Adada! Aiyo! Oho!* - of which the term *aiyo* has even entered the recent edition of Oxford dictionary. The terms *Chi Chi!* And *Che Che!* express disdain that do not have English equivalents. Similarly, we find at least six terms used as salutations – *Ammani, appane, thaaye, anna, thambi, amma, akka, Swami* etc. A few of these terms mentioned above can also indicate kinship, and so the translator has thoughtfully categorized them as 'Kinship terms/ Forms of address' and explained all of them in detail in the fourth and fifth Parts of the novel. Nonetheless, it would have been more appropriate if such a help would have been provided to the readers in the first part itself.

An interesting point regarding the use of names of characters came up in Indra Neelameggham's version where she refers to characters like Lord of Pazluvoor, the Elder and the Younger, or her characters address the royal personages as Sir, My Lady, Madam etc. We find that these terms are

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thoroughly anglicized and they have been used in order to reach the non-Tamil readers. Here, it is appreciable that the translator has taken efforts to give the Tamil names a detailed phonetic precision thus in order to help the Anglophones. In fact, she has given a separate ‘Guidance to Pronunciation’ in the beginning part itself, and it is undoubtedly very useful to readers who are totally new to the language. On the other hand, Narayanan has comfortably adopted the same names as given in Tamil- Periya Pazhuvettarayar and Chinna Pazhuvettarayar referring to the Elder and the Younger duo respectively. Between the names Kundavai Devi and Lady Kundavai there lies a sea of difference!

The practice of using original terminology is an accepted norm in translations world over; even so, a translator has to use them deftly and minimally to give the reader an easy reading experience. On the flip side, the absence of such a technique or Anglicizing at the cost of nativity will certainly lead to a world of letters being monolingual and monocultural as rightly warned by Trivedi. Therefore, the translator has to employ original terminology limiting / depending on the demand that the text places before him/her.

Further, the level of difficulty intensifies as the translator tries to present the story with the same life and spirit of the original writer by following a style that suits the tone and tenor of the story. It would be apt to bring in the thoughts of G.J.V. Prasad on the problem of translator’s dilemma. In his article ‘The Strange Case of the Indian Novel’, he interprets Braj Kachru’s views on Indian English thus: “In other words the writers do not write in an Indian English or even in their own English but in an English intended to approximate the thought-structures and speech patterns of their characters and not to betray the Indian text and context by an easy assimilation

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into the linguistic and cultural matrices of British English.”(*Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, 43) In the translated version of *Ponniyin Selvan* too we find the English used by Narayanan to be a variety that is more hybrid in nature – a ‘Tanglish’ (Tamil+ English), variety that is a natural mix of both the languages.

This kind of writing is, in fact, needed to retain the cultural nuances and authenticity and so, it does not appear contrived or outlandish. The evidence to this argument lies in a contrastive study of a sample sequence from Narayanan and Neelameggham. Out of the two translators, Indra Neelameggham undoubtedly uses English that is much closer to the native variety. To prove this point, a very small instance could be seen. In the opening scene itself, when Vandiyathevan is watching the festivities, all of a sudden there is a flurry because of the entry of a few large boats on the river and he does not understand what is going on. Narayanan writes:

“Who were in the boats behind? Where were they from? Perhaps they belonged to a royal family. He went up to an old man who held a stick in his hand and asked, “Ayya! Whose warriors are these? And whose boats? Why are the warriors driving the people away? Why are the people rushing away?” (*The First Floods PonniyinSelvan - Part I*, n.p.)

The same scene is translated by Neelameggham thus:

VallavarayanVandiyadevan approached an elderly man leaning upon his cane by the bank, “Sir, whose men are these? And whose boats are those coming behind like a school of swans? Why are these footmen chasing away the people? And why are the people hurrying away?” came his questions, one upon the other. (5)

A linguistic analysis clearly brings out the stylistic differences between Tamil and English as seen in the following table:

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Linguistic Elements	IndraNeelameggham	Karthik Narayanan
Salutation	Sir	Ayya (a respectful salutation to a man of position or an elderly man)
General terms and phrases	Elderly man, Leaning upon his cane Chasing away, hurrying away	Old man Held a stick Driving away, rushing away
MilitaryTerms	Footmen	Warrior
Linguistic strength of the Target Language	Very strong	Strong
Source Lang. influence	---	Fragmentary sentence 'Whose warriors?'

Based on the above sample analysis, it may be inferred that Neelameggham's version is much friendlier towards a non-Tamil reader while Karthik Narayanan's is a kind of hybrid variety that strives to preserve the nativity of the region as presented in the original. This does not undermine the linguistic capabilities of the latter because as rightly pointed out by Prasad in the aforementioned statement. Narayanan tries to present his characters with their own unique speech patterns.

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Therefore, the retention of the original terms in the English translation need not necessarily indicate the translator's lack of knowledge in the target language. Such a point of view arises because of the linguistic hegemony of English, the Colonizer's language, and as Mini Chandran aptly comments, "The English translator in India faces a predicament of having a target language with no cohesive target readership." (359). S(h)e is not quite sure if the readership is intralingual (languages within the same cultural framework) or interlingual (languages from different cultures) and to balance his work between these two extremes is a blindfolded task.

Due to the above, the difficulty level becomes manifold when it comes to the transmission of the subtleties of a culture that is almost one thousand years old, and yet youthful and ever growing even today. The grand narrative of Kalki is a depiction of life that is steeped in traditional practices, beliefs, and customs. There is almost everything - religion (Hindu and Buddhist practices), food, art, architecture, medicine, political conspiracy, diplomacy, deceit, romance, adventure, sacrifice, filial bonding, military strategies, war and peace etc. To put everything in a language that is far removed in imagination is quite a challenge and it must be said that all the translators of this great novel have taken upon the experiment in a daring way and of course, Karthik Narayanan is no exception. His style is at times astonishingly simple, sometimes even naïve and straight forward, depending upon the context and mood of the subjects. When Vandiyathevan feels intoxicated by the beauty of Nandini, the Pazhuvor Rani, and concocts a story to speak to her, she finds him shaken and so mockingly provides a traditional solution: "Ask the priest from the Durga temple to sweep you with neem branches. Your fever will vanish." (Ch. 22, Part I, n.p.) It is a common belief in the southern part of India that a temple priest exorcises and drives away evil with the help of neem leaves. Since such a practice does not

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exist in the English-speaking parts of the world, an exact equivalence will not be possible and hence Narayanan has perhaps resorted to literal translation.

Translating proverbs is always an arbitrary proposition. A typical example will be the following one: “Don’t you know one can never trust horses made of mud in a river?” (Ch.4, Part V) This proverb in Tamil implies that one cannot venture into something new without a reliable support; the translated statement, though closer to the words in the original text, sounds a little simplistic as the non-Tamil reader does not comprehend the pun intended by the author.

In another instance, Vanthiyathevan, in an adventurous escapade, inadvertently enters the anthapuram (harem) of Manimekalai and when caught in the act he manages to tell a lie that he was escaping from a gang of assassins looking like (black) magicians who offer human sacrifice. She sees through the lie and replies sharply, “Perhaps, they have chosen a perfect prince like you for their purpose.” (Ch.9, Part IV) The plain meaning that anybody might get is that Vandiyathevan is a prince and that he is perfect. If that be so, the question that naturally comes to the reader’s mind is, since he is not in power how he can be called ‘perfect’. The confusion arises due to the adjectival phrase ‘perfect prince’ that may be understood as referring to a royal personage who is perfect in his princely duties or even a prince who is perfect in all respects. However, here it refers to a traditional tribal practice in which a person of higher rank possessing a perfect physical condition will be offered as a sacrifice in the altar of a deity. Since an English reader from a different socio-cultural background will not be able to grasp the underlying meaning, the translation sounds inadequate.

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While the above two instances are samples of pun and word play through simple terms and their usage - in the regular and metaphorical sense as well- a typical social taboo is brought out in an interesting piece of conversation. When Manimekalai secretly confides to Nandini about her love for Vandiyathevan the conversation goes on in the following manner:

“What will you do now? The man who has stolen your heart has become your brother’s enemy.” “But, you know, what this person says.” “Whom do you mean, this person?” “He. The person, whose name you mentioned some time ago. He swears he never stabbed KandanMaran. It seems somebody else stabbed my brother and threw his body near the fort wall and that it was this person, who picked him up and saved him”. (Ch. 14, Part IV)

A reader who is familiar with Indian customs and traditions will not find it intriguing as to why the girl is not willing to utter the name of her lover, but the ones who are totally alien will find it strange or even amusing. Since the translator’s responsibility is to just transmit the original, he presents the text without changing the course of action to make it culture neutral.

Even though the novel is 2400 page long and has a plethora of instances that can be taken up as samples to demonstrate the translation quality, the purpose of the analysis is to find out the typical areas of difficulty that the translator faces and how he handles them. To sum up, it may be said that the translator Karthik Narayanan has succeeded in replicating the spirit and tone of the original work by using a language that is more appropriate for his subject. Yet, his strategy of using Tamil terms in abundance, and resorting to literal translation in a few places results in a pidgin variety. In a postcolonial world this perhaps is inevitable, but it leaves us with a question - Will such a translation will be appealing to a reader who is from a different part of the ‘other’ world? In addition to this, we are also left with the following questions: (a) How are Indian regional language translations into English different from the translations of other languages? (b)

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Do we as the ‘Other’ culture need to include an elaborate introduction in our translations in order to familiarize a reader from the English speaking western parts of the world? (c) Do we really have a lot of readership for our translations outside our own country? (d) How does India popularize her own writers to the outside world? These questions are, at the moment, not addressed and we need a different forum for the purpose. If only the Indian academia woke up to this reality and patronized our own literature in translation, the rest of the world will follow.

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