

THE ELVES AND THE ETHOS OF TRANSLATION WITH REFERENCE TO RAJAM KRISHNAN'S TAMIL NOVEL

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Abstract

"Without translation, I would be limited to the borders of my own country" said Italo

Calvino, Italian novelist, and short story writer. To enter the literary landscape of thoughts & imagination of another land, language, culture, and history, "Translation" is the only bridge.

Translations evolved and impacted the society differently in different eras. Carrying across the values and communicating through literary translations broaden our own thought process and understanding. There are many literary ethos hidden in every work of writing for us to find and translate. The treasure troves of literary creativity will find light only through translation. But to enjoy and avoid the loss of literary moments in translation, we need to identify the elves that hinder the flow. The local myths, beliefs, sound patterns, significance of words, dialects, use of idioms and phrases, nuances, rituals, and the likes would alter the very essence of the original work. So, in the process of re- drawing the boundaries, interpreting, and localization, the translator is a holding pin. The translator should understand the impact of his translating responsibility and the repercussions his faulty understanding can bring about. The role of a translator is critical to bring out an authentic closeness to the source work. This paper gives an insight into the new world that opened because of translation, the challenges to translate the absolute meaning of the source work with reference to Rajam Krishnan's novel *Lamps in the Whirlpool* translated from Tamil into English.

Key words: Translation, interpretation, translator, cultural nuances

Introduction

From history we observe that translation was initially carried out to disseminate religious text. Mesopotamians and Egyptians initially were translating only religious, cultural, and judicial texts, until the Romans began to translate literary text. Livius Andronicus translation of Homer's *Odyssey* into Latin in 240 B.C. was historical because it enhanced and enriched the Latin literary culture by giving access to the Greek works. Another turn

of history in the Western world was the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in the 3rd century BCE. Most Jews had forgotten Hebrew, their ancestral language, and needed the Bible to be available in Greek. Arabs took to large-scale translation to offer Arabic versions of all the major Greek philosophical and scientific works after they conquered the Greek Empire.

Objectives of the Study

1. **To explore the concept of “elves” and “ethos” in translation** — identifying the linguistic, cultural, and contextual challenges that hinder faithful rendering of meaning from the source text to the target text.
2. **To examine the cultural and feminist ethos** in Rajam Krishnan’s Tamil novel *Suzhalil Mithakkum Deepangal* and how effectively these values are retained or altered in its English translation *Lamps in the Whirlpool*.
3. **To analyze the translator’s role as a cultural mediator** — evaluating how translators bridge differences in traditions, idioms, and social structures between Tamil and English.
4. **To identify elements of linguistic and cultural loss** (untranslatable expressions, idioms, or rituals) that occur during the translation process and discuss their impact on readers’ understanding of the original ethos.
5. **To highlight translation as an empowering tool** for disseminating feminist thought and regional cultural identity beyond linguistic boundaries.
6. **To assess the aesthetic and ethical responsibilities of translators** in preserving the authenticity, emotion, and intent of the source work while adapting it to a global readership.

Translation theories have oscillated between word-for-word and sense-for-sense approaches since antiquity. Roman translators, for instance, adapted Greek texts to suit Roman sensibilities, often altering meanings. This raises questions about fidelity and creativity in translation. Scholars such as Bijay Kumar Das (*A Handbook of Translation Studies*, 2021) and Sharada Thallam (*Rajam Krishnan and Indian Feminist Hermeneutics*, 2016) emphasize that translation involves interpretation, negotiation, and cultural transference. Examples from *Beowulf*, Homer, Kafka, and Turkish folklore reveal that cultural specificity often resists translation — words like *Ungeziefer* (Kafka) or *Yakamoz* (Turkish) demonstrate the untranslatable depth of linguistic and cultural contexts.

With the flow of the centuries, translation became a huge gateway to explore the realms of the world’s mind that included fields beyond literature. In this discovering journey of translation, the translator became an important companion. The translators throughout the 18th century omitted what they did not understand or thought that it would bore the readers as the watchword for them was the ease of reading. In the 19th century there were new standards for accuracy and style. Though a debate is on for centuries if we should apply a sense-for-sense translation or a word-for-word translation most agree that a clear and straightforward translation focused on conveying the meaning than the precise literal rendering is a good approach. Some believe “Faithfulness” and “transparency” are the dual ideals in translation. Yet in spite of all the techniques, theories, ideas and guidelines, we note that the translated works cannot match the original. This is because of the numerous Elves that pull out the wires of understanding the artistic quality of the original.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative analytical approach. It involves a comparative textual analysis of the Tamil source text *Suzhalil Mithakkum Deepangal* and its English translation *Lamps in the Whirlpool*. The focus lies on identifying culturally embedded elements such as idioms, customs, and gendered expressions that lose or change meaning in translation. The study also engages with secondary sources — theoretical frameworks and critical essays on translation studies — to contextualize these observations within broader translation theory. Phrases unacceptable by Romans had to be changed to please them and hence the original got lost in translation from Greek to Latin. The first English epic, *Beowulf* is a story about Scandinavians facing off against hideous, nightmarish creatures. While it's possible to preserve the poem's rhythm in modern English, the same can't be said for the characters' names. In the original, they add a whole new level of meaning to the story. The name "Beowulf" alone is significant. Literally, the name means "wolf of the bee" — a sentence that makes little sense until you realize "wolf" also means "foe." "Bee-foe" was a northern European nickname for bears, thanks to their habit of raiding hives for honey. The name Beowulf is meant to conjure both images of wolves and bears, indicating that our hero is the manliest man in a book about some very manly men. Unlike modern English, ancient Greek had multiple words for expressing love. Greeks could express their feelings using *Eros* (sexual love), *Philia* (friendship), or *Agape* (selfless love). The challenge of getting these double and triple meanings across in a different language frequently drives translators mad. Repeated use of adjectives is a significant trait for Russian readers while for the English it is a bore. Specific words that belong to the source text cannot be translated. Like for example, in Kafka's "Metamorphosis" 'Ungeziefer' meant an creature unfit for sacrifice while in English it just meant unwelcome in the house. A Turkish word 'Yakamoz' meant reflection of moon in water and no translation can render the meaning of the original. So, it is very necessary for a translator, to not just familiarise but delve deeply to absorb the local colour before he paints a translated work closer to the original.

Suzhalil Mithakkum Deepangal was originally written in Tamil by Rajam Krishnan and translated into English as *Lamps in the Whirlpool* by Uma Narayan and Prema Seetharaman. The writer Rajam Krishnan has expressed anguish against the status of women in the society and family. It was no different from each of the states and the culture they came from. In the name of religion and tradition, customs were created to subordinate woman in all walks of life. She is refused identity and is reduced to be a tool in the hands of man, family, and society to fulfil the traditional Indian values of dharma, artha, karma and moksha.

Writing to express is itself empowerment and translation further disseminates the seeds of empowerment beyond the boundaries. The translated works are a sense-to-sense translation in most chapters and in some word to word in the novels. In the process, what we find lost is the literary aesthetics of the language though the content is brought out well. This is because some words like "madi", "antharjanam", "tharawad", "upanayanas" cannot be translated. The Tamil novel by Rajam Krishnan translated into English as "Lamps in the Whirlpool" speaks about the problems and the shackles of an archaic "madi" and "aacharam" traditions that are followed in Tamil Nādu. The debilitating impact and the insidious exploitation on women are brought about through the protagonist Girija. In spite of the good translation from Tamil to English, the

translators cannot bring out the pathos and the pain these two words evoke. The extent of cultural ethos that is choking and clipping women's independence and dignity certainly cannot be translated even with fine words of translation. The title in the original work in Tamil is "Suzhalil Mithakum Deepangal". It has a deeper impact than the one in English "The Lamps in the Whirlpool". In this novel, the translation is only a fraction of what the words signify in the original work.

Findings

The analysis reveals that while the translation effectively communicates the plot and thematic content, it struggles to convey cultural essence and emotional intensity. Tamil words like *madi*, *aacharam*, *tharawad*, and *upanayanam* resist direct translation, resulting in loss of cultural resonance. The Tamil title *Suzhalil Mithakkum Deepangal* carries metaphorical depth compared to its English version *Lamps in the Whirlpool*, which, though accurate, lacks the same poetic intensity. The translation also flattens certain emotional and cultural dimensions tied to Tamil ritual practices and women's subjugation. At a time when feminist ideas were propagated and was only a topic for discussion, Rajam Krishnan through her protagonist Aruna presented the issues to highlight that they are real and the victims of subjugation are also the educated and the employed women. How would a reader understand the rigid belief system and the patriarchal dominance in family and outside unless he understands the cultural fabric of the writer, her environment that seeps into her writing? Liberty, Equality and Freedom were the slogan of many women not just in Andhra but across the Indian states and around the globe. The translator must take on the responsibility to bring out the message of the novel correctly in the translation into English. Aruna's struggle for social and political emancipation against the chains of tradition that bind her can be felt only when we realise the weight of the chain that fetters. For the readers to understand the rules of the 'madi' and its implications the translator must immerse into the history of the customs, traditions, and habits of the culture and how the practices are enforced upon women. Translation is an art in itself and the translators play the key in opening up the vast arsenal of literary and creative paraphrases to readers around the world. With translation readers and people get access to the accumulated wisdom and ancient knowledge of other cultures.

Discussion

Rajam Krishnan's novel exposes patriarchal oppression and the restricted role of women in traditional Indian society. The translation by Narayan and Seetharaman, while linguistically sound, cannot fully replicate the emotional gravity of these experiences. Cultural "elves" such as idiomatic expressions, social hierarchies, and gendered rituals disrupt the translation's fidelity. The translator's task, therefore, is not just linguistic reproduction but cultural mediation — understanding and reinterpreting ethos for a new readership. The paper metaphorically equates these hindrances to "elves" — mischievous cultural entities that interfere with meaning — while "ethos" represents the moral and aesthetic core of the original culture that must be preserved.

In this paper presentation *Elves and Ethos* are used metaphorically. *Elves* are mischievous little beings from mountain regions who are capricious and often interfere in human affairs. *Elves* are often depicted in folklores. While *ethos* is the essence of the practices and values that reflect a culture. It was used Aristotle first to define the rhetorical appeal. Cultural differences, local traditions, laws, social standing of women, use of words and

phrases that carry meaning beyond, are a few Elves that impede translation as much as language does. The role of the Ethos is simple; to protect the creative treasure but the role of a translator to face the elves and recreate is tough. The breadth and depth of creative expressions and expansions are not fully explored. They are still hidden and protected by the literary Ethos for translation so that the newer perspectives and approaches can be spread afar. Let us equip and continue to translate.

Conclusion

Translation is both an art and an ethical act. It requires deep engagement with the cultural, emotional, and ideological contexts of the source text. In translating Rajam Krishnan's feminist narrative, one encounters untranslatable realities rooted in Tamil culture. While translators act as bridges between worlds, they must also confront and interpret the "elves" that distort meaning. Recognizing and respecting the ethos of the original work is essential to maintaining its authenticity. Translation thus becomes a dynamic act of cultural empowerment and intellectual exchange.

References

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Web Links

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