

Literary Texts of Diverse Ethnicities: Is Translation a Blessing or a Curse?

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Abstract

Post-colonial literature is a new term for Commonwealth literature which could be divided into two major categories: Literature in English and Literature in other languages. Under Literature in English, there could be two major divisions, namely, English Literature by writers who are native speakers of English and Literature in English by non-native writers. Under the banner Literature in English, there could be two major divisions, namely, those originally written in English and those translated from other languages of diverse ethnicities into English. Critics have spoken of an innovative idiom to express native experience in English but intelligibility is a further problem faced by international readers. Two factors need to be considered. One is that native and traditional metaphors may not be able to express modern life. On the other hand, the range of experiences and problems faced by all natives could not be expressed by the English educated 'elite'. As found in literary pieces from other commonwealth countries like India and Nigeria, Sri Lankan Tamil poetry in English, too deals with many a theme. The poets have raised their voice on themes like nature, love, nationalism, war, ethnic crisis, terrorism and other problems like unemployment, poverty, alienation, personal grievance, and caste discrimination. There have been tension and differences of opinion among critics and linguists on the use of language, idiom, imagery and the themes used by the writers. The translations of literary texts have created a space for the new generation of readers to realize the plurality and diversity of local traditions. In addition to exposing our culture, traditions and our day to day problems to the international readership, translation has become a medium through which one can understand the life of fellow countrymen speaking a different language. This paper attempts to look into the possibilities of taking it as a blessing to express the voice of the people or a curse to lose the meaning and identity of the very same people.

Key words: *Literature in English, innovative medium, meaning and identity*

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Introduction

Post-colonial literature is a new term for Commonwealth literature which could be divided into two major categories: Literature in English and Literature in other languages. Under Literature in English, there could be two major divisions, namely, English Literature by native writers of English and Literature in English by non- native writers. Under the banner Literature in English, there could be two major divisions, namely, those originally written in English by writers from the commonwealth countries and those translated from other languages of diverse ethnicities into English. Critics have spoken of an innovative idiom to express native experience in English but intelligibility is a further problem faced by international readers. Two factors that need to be considered. One is that native and traditional metaphors may not be able to express modern life. On the other hand, the range of experiences and problems faced by all natives could not be expressed by the English educated “elite”. As found in literary pieces from other commonwealth countries like India and Nigeria, Sri Lankan Tamil poetry in English, too deals with many a theme. This paper confines itself to Poetry in English from Sri Lanka.

Indian Poetry in English

Many Indian and Diaspora writers deal with various themes in their works. Indian writing in English has developed as an Independent discipline. The entrenchment of English as the official language, Westernized educational system in India, the influx of Western thoughts and the influence of Western culture are some of the important factors which have brought about a revolutionary change in Indian writing in English. Social and political problems of a colonized country have become the themes of the pieces. From the titles like Anglo-Indian Literature, Indo-Anglican literature or Indo English literature has emerged the name Global literature in English because of the themes, techniques of language and the characters from the wider world. Further, the writers too, are also spread out almost all over the world. Modern Indian poetry in English with some of its authentic voices in English accommodates the styles of the oral culture present in the mother tongues. It has been developed in three phases; the imitative, the assimilative and the experimental (King, 1987).

The imitative phase from 1850 to 1900 includes the poets namely Henry Derozio, Kasiprasad Ghose, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Manmohan Ghose who were inspired by the British Romantic poets. The poets celebrated India and her heritage by putting into verse a large number of Indian legends. During the second phase titled the assimilative period (from 1900 to 1947) the Indian poets continued writing romantic poems but tried

to assimilate the romanticism of the early nineteenth century British poets and the 'new' romantics of the decadent period for expressing the consciousness of the Indian renaissance between nationalism and the political changes which led to Independence in 1947. Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose and Haridranath Chattopadhyaya are some of the important poets who are categorized under this period. The Poetry written during the colonial period reflects an outburst of emotions; nationalistic, philosophical, spiritual or mystical.

The third phase which emerged during the Post-independent period touches many a different theme reflecting socio, political and economic struggles faced by the Indian population and the problems of identity of the Diaspora who migrated to other western countries. Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, P.Lal, Adil Jussawalla, A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Gieve Patel, Aravind Mehrotta, Pritish Nandy, Kamala Das, K.N.Daruwalla, Shiv Kumar, Jayantha Mahapatra, Dilip Chitrethouh, Saleem Peerdina, Santan Rodrigues, Eunice de Zouza, Silgado, Meena Alexander, Agha Sahid Ali, Vikram Seth and Manohar Shetty are some of the major Indian poets who reflect a cosmopolitan culture. Post-independent poetic themes which are secular, introspective and contemplative range from search for people's self-identity to search for their cultural roots (Kalaivani, 2017).

At present, Commonwealth literature is renamed as postcolonial literature and Post-independent English poetry is treated with a new name as Postcolonial Indian English poetry which is different from colonial English poetry in its themes, choice of imagery and creation of new idioms. Reacting against the colonial Indian English poets the post colonial poets who followed the contemporary British and American poets gradually gave up that practice and opened a new path of responding to the social crisis of the Indian populace; thus, becoming more realistic to the Indian way of life.

A study on the translations of Indian English poetry from various Indian languages would provide a bigger opening to see the reality. Literary texts of diverse ethnicities would provide a chance for the researcher to look into the issues expressed in the texts and they could also check whether the idiom is kept in those pieces as they got translated into English or lose the meaning and identity of the very same people. A study with a wider perspective accommodating translations of literature from various languages of different ethnicities would be useful to see how translations are able to retain the local imagery and the idiom in the texts. The limitation of this paper is acknowledged as it is confined to the Sri Lankan Tamil Poetry in English.

Literature in English in Sri Lanka

Literature has been written in English in Sri Lanka for many years since the advent of British Colonial rule but it has made much impact only after it recorded the youth unrest of 1971 and the ethnic violence of July 1983. Many changes have occurred in the social, economic and political fields since then. Literature records these changes in English, too. This leads to the growth of literature in English in Sri Lanka. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke has stated that Sri Lankan literature in English has now come of age (1998: xi).

Among the genres, Sri Lankan poetry in English has achieved a certain standard. It tackles many themes and experiments have been made to evolve a Sri Lankan idiom unlike in the short story, the novel and the play. With regard to poetry, Rajiva Wijesinha states that poetry has reached a maturity that enables it to express Sri Lankan problems (1991:36).

It is interesting to note that the contribution of Sri Lankan English poets has been recognized in terms of language as well as the subject of the poems. Many writers have written poems which speak about many contemporary Lankan problems, such as ethnic crisis, riots, youth unrest, poverty and cultural clashes. As Ashley Halpe points out, the eyes, the hearts and minds of the writers focus on the present to capture truly nation, authentically Sri Lankan experiences (Wijesinha, 1993:160). However, Arjuna Parakrama argues that the poetry written in English by Sri Lankan writers is poor in its quality and sub-standard in the use of language. He says that, except for Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, writers are escapist and trivial, while when they hybridize the 'Western' and 'Lankan' literary traditions. The living idiom and content have been overlooked in favour of classical, elite, erudite Lankan sources which are equally irrelevant to the present realities (1993).

When the English medium education ceased to exist in Sri Lanka in the 1960s Godfrey ,Goonetilleke surveyed negatively the possibility of writing creatively in English (Jayasuriya 1994:36). Kamal de Abrew also points out the inability to create a vital metaphor due to the fact that the English language has not been used for all experiences of Sri Lankan life (Wijesinha, 1993:136). Unless the Sri Lankan English speaking community uses the English language in the whole range of its activities, it will not be able to create its own expressive medium with local flavour and idiom accommodating Sri Lankan imagery. Therefore, the only available way to find a solution is to select better poems written originally in Sinhala and Tamil by different authors who would have undergone a variety of experiences and sincerely expressed their feeling in the language of their own using appropriate imagery. Achieving our goal of writing good poetry which expresses a truly Sri Lankan experience in an internationally understandable and effective medium may

be made practicable through translations (Shriganeshan, 2001: 64). They would be able to express their variety of experiences fusing modern, western and local imagery in the new idiom understood by an international audience. Kanaganayakam (2013) observes in his introduction to the new anthology of poems titled *In our Translated World - (Contemporary Global Tamil Poetry)* as follows:

Translations are never a value-neutral activity. Although the translations in this anthology were undertaken by several scholars, a common expectation was to make the Tamil experience intelligible to a non-Tamil speaking audience. A conversation between cultures is not possible unless the host audience is met at least half way. Many poems are deeply coded, and the cultural backdrops they draw from are not always available to non-Tamil reader. As far as possible, the translations have tried to capture the essence of the original without compromising the tone and texture of the original translated version. The translated poems are intended to be self-sufficient artifacts that speak to all (p 12).

Translations of regional poems

From a look at the history of translations from Indian languages into English we could see Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* marks the beginning of the modern phase of translation of Indian poetry into English in a wider sense, Asian poetry in English. Although Tagore tried to appeal to the English readership with his spiritual flavor to his feelings of the erotic and immediate in his poetry he did not contribute towards defining a new tradition as far as the craft of translation of Indian poetry is concerned ((Ramakrishnan. E.V., 2011: 194). Tagore emphasizes the spiritual and the devotional at the expense of the sensuous and the physical. The differences are observed in Tagore's translation; *'Thou hast made my heart captive in the endless/ meshes of thy music, my master!* reads in literal translation, *'What is the trap you have caught me in?/ I wear the net of music all around me (Sengupta 1996, 159-74)'* (quoted in Ramkrishnan 2011, 194). The question here is that whether we are to create our own idiom to express our feelings based on our sensibility and cultural symbols and linguistic elements or to imitate the English linguistic and cultural symbols and sensibilities. It is noteworthy to turn our attention to what Cour (2010) declares about translation of regional poems related to our discussion:

In translation, which is trans-cultural trans-creation, the translator faces the hardest of challenges to transform the elements of the target language, to induce and evoke the emotional response in the reader just as the words in the source language do. (p.14)

Since the Indian scenario is almost a parallel to the Sri Lankan scene what Ramakrishnan (2011) states is almost relevant to my stand:

The impact of colonialism on Indian literary traditions, Indian responses to Western poetry, shifts in poetic sensibility and the changing social contexts of Indian poetry are some of the

factors that need to be considered in any discussion of Indian poetry into English (Ramakrishnan. E. V., 2011: 192).

The translations have created a space for the new generations of readers to realize the plurality and diversity of local traditions. In addition to exposing our culture, traditions and our day to day problems to the international world, it has become a medium through which one can understand the life of fellow countrymen speaking a different language. It is at this point the same question is emphasized whether we are able to create our own native idiom to express our feelings in English or to evolve from our local idiom appearing as it allows the international reader to understand the meaning from the context created by the poem itself.

Themes of the poems selected for translations

Cour Ajeet and Vajpeyi Ashok (2004) state in the introduction to *An Anthology of SAARC poems* with regard to the themes of poetry as follows:

The task of poetry was to map the anguish and yearnings of the individual on the one hand and to express the social turmoil and aspiration on the other. Poetry started to take many stances; those of protest, resistance, struggle, hope and excitement. It also had to carry on the eternal talk of poetry, i.e. addressing themes of existential angst, mortality, eternity, nature and love. Obviously, this necessitated a wide range of poetic devices, formal strategies and modes of reflection and exploration. (p.16/17)

Sri Lankan Tamil poetry in English, too deals with many a theme. The poets have raised their voice on themes like nationalism, war, ethnic crisis, terrorism and the other problems like unemployment, poverty, alienation, love, personal grievances, and caste discrimination. In Sri Lanka, the politics of the time served as a catalyst to inspire more native poets writing in Tamil to get involved in writing poetry in favour of nationalism which was found in many pieces of local writing during the colonial period. It became an important topic after independence as the politics of discrimination gradually gathered momentum. It led to gradual drift towards extremism in Tamil politics in the 70s. Wijesinha (2013) records on the Sri Lankan scene of poetry as follows:

Following the fermentation of the independence period, the next flurry of creativity is associated with the youth insurrection of 1971. Both the violent events and the social traumas that preceded it could not be ignored afterwards.

A similar catalyst for Tamil poetry was provided by the ethnic tensions that burst out into violence in the seventies and, more destructively in the eighties. (p. xvii).

On the contrary, the Tamil literary scene is full of social conflicts recorded in the form of traditional and modern poems after Independence. A post-Independence renaissance in

Tamil poetry from Sri Lanka is marked with the poetry of Mahakavi, R.Murugian, and Neelavanan. With the introduction of the Sinhala-only Act, the first ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils occurred in 1958. The subsequent cry for Tamil nationalism took a vigorous and violent mode which led to the pogrom of 1983. All these contributed to a change of lives which is reflected in the poetry that emerged in the eighties and the nineties with a variety of themes like caste differences, dowry system, Tamil nationalism, women's freedom. Sri Lankan Tamil poetry in translation found accommodated in Kanaganayagam (2001) and (2013), Samarasinghe (2012), Wijesinha (2013), (Kannan et al 2014) and Kanaganayakam (2016).

Translations of Sri Lankan Tamil poetry

The problems of Sri Lankan poetry with regard to quality and standard of language and the maturity of its expression could be solved through translations. The translations of Tamil poetry found in many a volume try to establish through translations that Sri Lankan poetry has come of age. This could be re-inforced once again with the accommodation of poems in the latest publication of *Uprooting the Pumpkin* edited by Chelva Kanaganayakam (2016). Further, translations are able to provide the true spirit of the sensibilities of the communities as the writers from the first language are able to speak out very well of their lives (Shriganeshan, 2001).

Historians and cultural theorists

Poets are our historians and cultural theorists. They took the role of celebrating, critiquing political decisions of the militant leaders, recording the individual and collective grief of the people caught in the violence of the political war between the government and the militants. Important collections of poetry which appeared in Tamil reflect the lives of the people in general and the political violence in the country in particular. The first of this kind is *Pathinoru Eelathu Kavignarkal - Eleven Eelam poets* (Nuhuman and Jesurasa, 1984) and *Maranathul Valvom - Living within deaths* (Cheran, et al. eds., 1985) marks the turning point in contemporary Tamil poetry. While the first anthology includes a variety of themes like caste discrimination, Tamil nationalism, social consciousness, economic difficulties, ethnic issues, political crisis, the latter mostly deals with political and social oppression which developed and continued in the aftermath of pogrom of 1983. Kanaganayakan (2009) states the nature of the poetic idioms in Tamil as follows:

“In moments of upheaval affecting an entire community, literature renews itself and responds to its new role by accommodating and employing the oral and the local. With all its energy

and artistic skill, the poetry of the previous decades held firmly to convention, not only in poetic forms, but also in the way it accessed social concerns. The poet as witness still stood apart, aware of social oppression no doubt, but still faithful to an idiom that was shaped by convention” (p.xiii).

This trend of voicing political issues through oral tradition accommodating folk idioms and dialects of the various regions with their spoken rhythm still continues with the poets living in the country and in the Diaspora. This dimension of making use of the ordinary vocabulary and speech rhythm in their expression makes Sri Lankan Tamil poetry different from the poetry written in Tamilnadu, Malaysia and Singapore (Kanaganayakam, 2013:12/13).

Many poets felt the need to participate in this nationalistic and resistance poetry. The tradition of revolutionary poetry in Tamil literature which ended with the revolutionary poet Bharathi of Tamilnadu reappears with the work of Cheran from Sri Lanka who emerged in the early eighties as the cultural voice of the Tamils (quoted in Kanganayakam, 2013). Some more names could be added to mark this tradition.

The Sri Lankan Tamils who live in the country or in the Diaspora continue to maintain the kind of idiom based on the oral tradition when they speak of the social realities caused by the economic, political, spatial, and spiritual changes. Here, “spatial” means the locale in which they happen to live in whether in the hot or wet climates which correspond to the imagery they have to develop. The geographical differences are taken on record by critics since the Sangam period (100BC-200 AD). Cheran theorizes the diaspora as the sixth *thinai*, the biome of snow, along with the five-fold division called *thinai*, in Tamil poetics (quoted in Kanganayakam, 2013). With this analysis of the idiom that evolved in the native tradition a look at the translations of the poems that appeared during the War and post-war scenario would be beneficial to see how the translations express the lives of the people through an evolved idiom in English intelligible to an international audience.

A look at the Sri Lankan Tamil poems accommodated in the anthology titled “In our translated world’ edited by Kanaganayakam (2013) serves our purpose of achieving the possibility of intelligible idiom through translations. In Sri Lanka, terrorism had many faces: militant terrorism, State terrorism, inter-factional terrorism etc. They showed their ugly faces to the public. Alari’s impression on terrorism is very effective. The terrorism which threatens the whole life is reflected in Alari’s poem, *When Someone is Killed*:

*Other than these
when someone is killed
what’s the big deal?*

*Apart from the fact that
someone else will be murdered. (p. 19)*

When State terrorism threatens the whole village people have to move and they get displaced. The village is abandoned. Ahilan speaks about the situation in his poem *Song about an Abandoned Village*:

*Songs of the ancestors
Wrestling with the wind;
Did we really lose this life
At the edge of the sword? (p.23)*

Uma Varatharajan talks about alienation in Alien City. On the other hand, Vilvaratnam speaks of the war that caused the alienation of his land in *The Alienated Land*:

*With the coming of outsiders
That night
Rooted lives were plucked.
.....
I am standing in this emptied land
Staring with vacant eyes; (p.79)*

Ottamavadi Arafath moans for the mothers who live in fear of their sons' safety as the war threatens to swallow their lives. He narrates the hard life of the people without proclaiming much detail. He simply states how the lives of mothers move through all the agonies and records the life effectively in *Darkness*:

*In the beautiful twilight
The sound of boots;
Stamping and stamping
They arrived at home;
a war will begin, they yelled,
announcing the death of my sons
wandering in the terrible forest.(p.29)*

In the same way, Oorvasi pictures another horrendous scene of arrest: how youngsters were arrested during the heat of the war in *Their Night*:

*With pointed guns
Prodding his back
He walked with them*

*That night.
The hands that held fifty guns
Pressed deep scars
Into my heart. (p.55)*

Karunakaran who was in the war zone in the Vanni has this to say about death in Beauty:

Death is a kiss/ It has a taste (p.39).

Nilanthan's *Early Night in November* captures the state of affairs in the aftermath of War narrating how people are oppressed with the iron hand of authority. They are denied the right to pay homage to their kith and kin:

*No prayer,/no eulogy,/no hero/no speech
not even the smell of lamp
melting in the wet air. (p.51)*

Sivasegaram says in *War and Resolution* that it is ironic that the war is unable to solve anything. Solaikili satirizes how war invades so deeply in the lives of the people in *A Baby in Caps and Boots*:

*"There will be a time when babies will leap
Out of wombs wearing everything:
Military caps, trousers, boots. Moustaches
A knife at the hips. (p.71)*

Other than the effects of war and the ethnic crisis, there are other problems : unemployment, poverty, alienation etc. In *My Life in Books*, Chandrabose Suthakar expresses his attachment to books though they alone never sustain him. Rishan Shareef brings out the pathetic situation created by the flood and how a farmer is driven to the extent of committing suicide due to the helpless state of affairs like debts and poverty in *A House That Cannot Sleep*. Shanmugam Sivalingam records the nature of life and its causes in *Life and Death*. Sathyapalan yearns for the lost days wasted on petty quarrels in *Three Dolls*. Siththanthan confirms his survival amidst all odds and ends in his poem *My arrival from Ancient times*. Nafeel, Mu Ponnampalam, Majeed Kurshith raise their voices and discourses philosophically and practically in the first person narrative and develop a kind of interaction based on the conflicts in their day to day affairs. Faheema Jahaan illustrates an accident of a chick's death with a symbolic twist to life. At another level the poem suggests a deeper theme.

Conclusion

Thus, the poets from Sri Lanka are able to focus their themes in a poetic diction and imagery that could be understood by the international readers. One can agree with the editor's and the translators' politics which might have played a big role in the selection of poems for translation. However, it is obvious that the neutral stand of the editor and the translators of *In Our Translated World* (Kanaganayakam, 2013) has given the volume a complete picture. The accommodation of a variety of themes itself is an evidence for the genuine attempt of the editor in introducing a real Sri Lankan Tamil sensibility and ethos to the international audience. In that sense, by attempting to translate the poems without losing their original flavour the translators have tried to capture the spoken rhythm and structural patterns of the Tamil language in the target language, English. All are in free-verse unlike the poems written before 70s in the traditional mode of verse with rhyme and meter. But the translators never lose their grip with the English syntactic structures which is the main reason for the intelligibility of the poems to a foreign reader. This is the argument put forward in the beginning of the paper that the native writers are able to express the real problems and feelings in their own idiom and that could be captured by the translators without compromising the intelligibility of the poems through the idiom evolved in translation. Therefore, achieving our goal of writing good poetry which expresses a truly Sri Lankan experience in an internationally understandable and effective medium is achievable and practicable through translations. Thus, translation of literary texts of diverse ethnicities has become a blessing to express the voice of the people to the international readers.

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