

SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE AND THE POLITICS OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

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The topic I have chosen for this occasion is *South Asian Literature and the Politics of Literary Translation*. Translation is essential to understand our commonalities and to respect our differences. We come to know each other mainly through the available translations, and we are also denied access to each other because of the politics of translation.

I am a poet and a critic in Tamil language. Tamil is the only medium of my literary expression. I am more comfortable in Tamil than any other language that I know. But I have to choose English to address you because it is the only language we all understand at this conference. But, ironically it is not mine and not yours either. It came from outside with our colonial rulers only 200 years ago as a language of power and authority over us. However, in the course of time, it was nativized and has become the only language for literary expression for some of our writers like Mulraj Anand, R. K. Narayanan and Raja Rao. For many of us it has become a common language for our literary and non-literary communication. It takes us beyond the borders of our native languages through translation.

We, the SAARC writers who write in our own local languages, dream to be translated. We dream that at least some of our writings will be translated into English, because of the increasing political dominance and privilege that English language enjoys. We think that, we can reach a wider reading public and the outside world if we are translated into English. It may be true and I am not against this line of thinking. English has the political advantage globally and locally, than any of our languages. But, the question is that, how many of our people in the SAARC region can read and understand English? I think it is less than 5% in the whole region. The vast majorities of our literates are illiterate in English.

Heritage

English could not replace our native languages as it did with French and Spanish in Africa and Latin America. Unlike the African and Latin American languages, most of our major South Asian languages had a long literary history and heritage before colonization; they were deeply rooted in our cultures and they were the primary tools for our socio-cultural existence. This does not mean that I underestimate the African and Latin American languages and cultures. We know well that they had a strong oral tradition and rich cultures. But, the native people were denied literacy in their own languages for a long time due to political and cultural imperialism. Only in the post-colonial context have some of the African and Latin American writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o been determined to write and promote writing in their native languages. Ngugi wrote his celebrated novel *Devil on the Cross* in his own language Kikuyu in 1978 when he was in jail, and published it 1979.

English could not uproot our South Asian languages during colonial rule, and I hope it won't be able to uproot or undermine our languages in the future, although there is an increasing tendency to globalization in our societies. The ruling upper class in our societies is still under the influence of cultural imperialism and tries to promote their anglicizing policy with their globalization agenda. I think the writers and their writing in our native languages have a vital role to play in this context.

The vast majority of our people are still monolinguals. They speak and understand only their mother tongue. Most of our SAARC writers too write only in their mother tongue. Very little of their writings have been translated into the other regional languages or into English. We are living in literary islands. Translation is the only bridge to cross over the linguistic borders and boundaries. However, we have not given adequate importance to translation between our regional languages. Instead we dream to be translated into English.

Regional Language

I think, South Asian literatures should be translated and read first in our own regional languages. I have reasons for this. Firstly, we can enrich our understanding of ourselves through the understanding of our neighbours through their literature than any other means. Secondly, true regional cooperation should emerge from the socio-political needs of our people instead of the superficial political link between our governments and states. Literary translation will be one of the effective mechanisms to build up people-to-people contact and relations. Thirdly, we feel at home when we read literature in our own language than in a second language. I have read U. R. Anandamoorthi's famous Kannada novel *Samskara* in English translation by one of our brilliant translators A. K. Ramanujan. I also read it in Tamil translation. I felt more at home in the Tamil than in the English. Since our socio-cultural conditions are similar, our languages are fully equipped to describe the other regional cultures effectively and more meaningfully to us.

However, the politics behind translation activities prevent us from translating extensively between our regional languages. Translation mostly depends on the socio-cultural and political needs of a given society, the operating political ideology and the political economy of the publishing industry. The dominant culture and ideology always dominate translation activities. I will give you a few examples from Tamil, one of the major languages of South Asia which is also my own language. I hope our experiences may be similar.

The history of translation is also a history of socio-cultural contact. When two different linguistic communities are engaged in cultural transaction, the necessity for translation automatically arises. If one of the communities is culturally or politically dominant, the language of the dominant community will be the main source language for translation. Some times both can be the source as well as target languages. The history of literary translation in Tamil illustrates this fact clearly.

Translation is one of the oldest intellectual and cultural activities in Tamil. The Tamil term *molipeyarppu* for translation is found in Tolkaappiyam, the earliest Tamil grammatical work written around 3rd century AD. Tolkaappiyam classifies texts into two major categories, namely primary (*muthalnool*) and secondary (*valinool*). The primary texts are written by geniuses who possess perfect knowledge and who are beyond any criticism. The secondary

texts are derived from the primary. Tolkaappiyam further classifies the secondary texts into four subgroups, namely, abridged version (*thokuththal*), enlarged version (*viriththal*), abridged and enlarged version (*thokai viri*), and translation (*molipeyarppu*).

Although, Tolkaappiyam provides a clear evidence for the existence of translation activities in Tamil during the classical period, no works of translation belonging to the period are now available. However, some monumental works of translation produced during the medieval period are still available to us. The sources for such works were the Ramayana and Mahabarada, both of Sanskrit origin, which were evidently adapted in Tamil by several poets from 6th 14th century AD., among which the greatest is *Kamparamayanam* written at the end of 12th century.

During the classical and medieval periods, Tamil had a close cultural contact only with Sanskrit and most of the works were translated from Sanskrit because Sanskrit was the language of the dominant culture in the Indian sub-continent during those periods and the Sanskrit influence was widening in Tamilnadu till the end of the medieval period. There is no evidence for translation from Tamil to Sanskrit during these periods. By translation here, I mean only the transaction between the written varieties of literary languages. However, at the people-to-people level the folk literature travelled from language to language smoothly without any hindrance.

English

After the arrival of the Europeans, especially the British, the scope for translation into Tamil was widened during the late 19th century and after. There was a significant shift in the source language from Sanskrit to English. English had also become a new target language for translation from Tamil. For instance G.U. Pope translated several classical and medieval Tamil literary works into English.

English had become the major source language for literary translation into Tamil in the early 20th century. A number of literary works – poetry, fictions and plays-from English were translated or adapted into Tamil. Shakespeare was one of the major sources for such translation.

During the 1930s and 1940s hundreds of English popular fictions were adapted or translated into Tamil to fulfill the increasing commercial demands of the printing media of that time. These were the formative years of popular readership

in Tamil. A number of popular and commercial writers were responsible for this type of commercial literary production in Tamil.

Apart from this popular commercial trend, there were two socio-political movements that made tremendous impact on serious literary translation into Tamil during the 1940s and after. The first was the Indian freedom movement and the second was the Marxist left movement. Both these movements brought different Indian societies and languages into close contact and created a need for cultural and political communication between these societies and languages. As a result, literary works from various Indian languages were translated into Tamil; especially from the major North Indian languages like Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Marati and also from the South Indian languages like Malayalam, Kannada and Telugu. Many of the major Indian authors have been translated into Tamil. Comparatively more literary works from Bengali and Malayalam have been translated into Tamil. The state-sponsored institutions like Indian Sahitya Academy and the National Book Trust, and several private publishers and individuals were involved in these translation activities in Tamil after the Indian independence.

Another development since the 1940s is the inflow of extensive translation of world literary works into Tamil. Apart from the British or English literature which was the main source for translation till the early 20th century, the field was opened to the whole world, from Russian to Spanish and from Japanese to Norwegian. Many of the major world authors have been translated into Tamil through English. English has become an intermediate source language for translation. Apart from the nationalist and Marxist movements, activists from feminist, modernist, post-modernist and Dalith movements are involved in translating various world literary works relevant to their ideologies into Tamil.

Sinhala-Tamil Translations

At this point I wish to give you some details of translation activities between Tamil and Sinhala, the two national languages of Sri Lanka. In spite of the present political conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, both the languages are mutually used by these communities for their day-to-day communication, at least in certain bilingual areas in this country.

Tamil and Sinhala have coexisted in Sri Lanka for more than a thousand years, and have a long literary history of their

own. However, only Tamil literature has greatly influenced Sinhala literature during the middle ages. Several Sinhala scholars have pointed out the impact of Tamil on Sinhala literature. There are some instances of translation from Tamil to Sinhala during the late medieval period. For example, translation of several verses from *Thirukkural* and *Naaladiyaar*, the two famous texts of the late classical period, are found in the Sinhala texts *Subashita* and *Lookoopakaaraya*, which were produced in the late medieval period, in the 17th and 18th centuries respectively. Tamil literature, however, did not in return get anything from Sinhala until very recently; this may be because of the political and literary dominance of the Tamil language in the South Indian region during the ancient and medieval periods.

The situation changed during the post-independence period in Sri Lanka. Despite the ethnic tension and violence which occurred from time to time in the recent past, the Tamil-speaking communities in Sri Lanka have shown their interest in learning Sinhala, in reading Sinhala literature and also in translating some into Tamil. They learned Sinhala mainly because it was made the only official language in the late 1950s and had become socially dominant, so that they were compelled to learn it for their official existence. Whatever their reasons for learning Sinhala, this opened the windows to the culture of the majority community.

A number of Tamil and Muslim writers who learned Sinhala have translated some of the contemporary creative pieces into Tamil. Most of these translations were done with the purpose of promoting inter-communal dialogue through literature in order to create an understanding between communities, and to create communal harmony in this country. This was a one-way effort until very recently. Only a few contemporary Tamil writings had been translated into Sinhala till the late 1970s. This means that, unlike in the medieval period, Tamil had lost its social and political importance in this country. Sinhala writers, intellectuals and the educated middle class did not have any motivation to learn Tamil as a second language.

Ethnic Conflict

However, from the late 1970s the situation has changed a little. Because of the intensification of ethnic conflict after the 1983 communal violence, the emergence of Tamil militancy, and the escalation of civil war some of the progressive Sinhala writers, journalists and intellectuals took positive steps to have a dialogue with the minority

communities through literature and started to translate contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil writings, mainly poetry, into Sinhala. Some Muslim and Tamil writers willingly collaborated with them in their meaningful efforts. Some of the progressive Sinhala tabloids made conscious efforts to promote the translating of Tamil literature into Sinhala during the last two decades. These are initial steps and we have far to go.

Motivating Factors

If we look back into the history of literary translation in Tamil, we can identify at least three main motivating factors behind this scene. One is religion. Hindus, Christians and Muslims were engaged in translating religious literary works into Tamil till the early modern period. The major portion of the literary works produced in adaptation or translation from Sanskrit, English and Arabic during this period is of this nature.

The second factor is literary modernism. The impact of literary modernism in Tamil can be seen from the mid-1930s till the end of 1960s or even in the 1970s. The modern Tamil writers who were actively involved in literary production till the end of the 1940s paved the way for translating modern European writers into Tamil.

The third motivating factor of literary translation in Tamil, as I mentioned earlier, was the various socio-political ideologies and movements such as Nationalism, Marxism, and Feminism. These ideologies are still motivating literary translation in Tamil. The ideology of the translators determines the selection for the translation.

From this brief account of literary translation in Tamil, you may think that, good work has been done in Tamil and the Tamil reader is fortunate to read a wide range of literary works from other languages in his/her own language. But this picture

is only partially true. It is true that a good variety of literary works have been translated into Tamil, but it is restrictively selective. It is selective, according to the popularity and marketability and the politics behind it. Among South Asian countries Indian literature of a few major languages dominates the Tamil translation; with very few from Pakistan and nothing from Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. Tamil and Sinhala have coexisted for more than a thousand years in Sri Lanka. But a few novels, not more than ten, a little over a hundred short stories and the same number of poems have been translated from Sinhala into Tamil, and even less than that from Tamil into Sinhala. Most of the writers translated from South Asian languages are from the older generation. We know very little of the younger generation and contemporary writings from these and other South Asian languages.

On the other hand, although Tamil has a rich literary tradition, it has been mainly a receiving language in the South Asian context for a long time. I think, a very insignificant amount of literary works have been translated from Tamil into other South Asian languages. How many Tamil writers and poets have been translated into Hindi, Urdu, Bengali or Punjabi? To my knowledge very few.

The literary translation in our languages largely depends on individual efforts. Some interested individuals take personal initiatives and translate out of interest, and struggle to find their publishers. Without collective efforts we can't make any progress in meaningful literary transaction between our languages. Therefore in this conference I would like to appeal to the South Asian writers who are gathered here and the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature to take the initiative to setup a Bureau of Literary Translation within South Asian Languages. It should be able to widen and enhance the translation activities between South Asian languages and should be able to create meaningful socio-cultural interaction between our people. ■

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