

EVOLVING A NEW IDIOM TO EXPRESS TAMIL LIFE THROUGH TRANSLATIONS: AN ACHIEVABLE TASK OR IMPOSSIBILITY?

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ABSTRACT: Critics have spoken of an innovative idiom to express Sri Lankan experience in English but intelligibility is a further problem faced by international readers. There are 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 Sri Lankans could not be expressed by the English educated elite. Therefore 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. They would be able to express their variety of experiences fusing modern, western and local imagery in the new idiom understandable to an international audience. Having stated the focal point, the present paper makes an attempt to look into the poems translated into English from Tamil selected from the writings of the poets living in Sri Lanka, though there are Tamil poems translated into English from India, Singapore, Malaysia and the Diaspora in Europe, Canada and Australia. The study focuses on the possibility of evolving a new idiom to express Sri Lankan Tamil life in English.

Keywords: Intelligible Idiom, Tamil Experience, Spoken Rhythm, Effective Medium

1. INTRODUCTION

When 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 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)*:

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 backdrop 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)

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 a 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 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.

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)

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.

2. METHODOLOGY

Literature review is made in the mode of critical analysis which refer to the discussion made by critics who have commented on the role of poets as historians and cultural theorists. In Sri Lanka, the politics of the time served as a catalyst to inspire more native Tamil poets 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. Wijesinghe (2013) comments 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 and 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.

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.

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 *Maranthul 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).

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 whether 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.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The themes of the poems selected for translations are discussed to see whether the poets are able to evolve a new idiom to express Tamil life. 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 aspirations 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. 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.

During the Eelam War which showed its terrible face to the people in the war-torn area from the early part of eighties of the Twentieth Century to the first decade of the Millennium topics like terrorism, displacement, alienation, arrest and murder of youths without any cause, oppression by the militants were the themes for the poets. In Sri Lanka, terrorism had many faces: militant terrorism, State terrorism, inter-factional terrorism etc. They showed their ugly faces to the public. Using a simple logic as a sarcastic-tone Alari is able to record his impression on terrorism very effectively. 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. With a traditional symbol for the authority the poet provides a familiar imagery to point out the aspect of authority and its horrible face when the village is abandoned. Ahilan speaks about the situation in his poem *Song about an Abandoned Village*:

On festival streets,

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, with the imagery of uprooted trees Vilvaratnam speaks of the war that caused the alienation of his land and his helplessness 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 pathetic 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)

Oorvasi creates the imagery powerfully which could touch the readers' hearts. Karunakaran on the other hand is able to portray that death is a kiss. 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. The poet uses an olfactory image through which the tensed situation is brought out:

No prayer,/no eulogy,/no hero/no speech

not even the smell of lamp

melting in the wet air. (p.51)

In *War and Resolution* Sivasegaram says 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 of unemployment, poverty, alienation etc. In *My Life in Books*, Chandrabose Suthakar expresses his attachment to the books though they alone never sustain him. Rishan Shareef brings out the pathetic situation created by floods 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 discourse philosophically 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 may suggest a deeper issue. With a simple logic and familiar diction the imagery is created with local experience.

4. 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 Tamil language in the target language, English. All are in free-verse unlike the poems written before 70s in the traditional mode. 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.

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