Problems in Translating Historical Novels:
A Study of Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*

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Abstract

Language is an essential aspect required for communication. There are about 4000 languages in the world and one cannot restrict oneself to his/her native language or his/her mother tongue alone. Each person develops a natural tendency to learn more than one language, other than his/her mother tongue. Especially, in India people in general are well versed in more than one language. In order to understand a country in its entirety, it is essential to read the literary works of that country. Indian Literature reflects the growth of diverse ages, religions, and races of different cultural levels. In a multilingual country like India, Translation plays a vital role in interlacing and connecting two or more languages. The objective of this paper titled "Problems in Translating Historical Novels: A Study of Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*" analyses some of the challenges and problems faced by the translator in the process of handling two different languages that have completely different style, culture and vocabulary. Kalki R Krishnamurthy was the first Tamil writer, who used the ancient history of the famous Tamil dynasties and regions for the plot and background of his stories.

The study focuses on identifying problems that arise at the semantic, syntactic and stylistic levels and the translator's efforts in addressing these issues. The translator's problems in identifying the equivalence in the target language, the significance of the contextual meaning, the style and form in the functional value of a word are discussed in the study. The nuances of translation and the methods adopted by the translator to handle the problems posed by the dialects and registers, idioms and phrases, pun, metaphors and similes are also analysed.

The culture and the ethos of a nation or country can be understood through its corpus of literary works which not only expresses the nation's language at its best but also reflects the subtle nuances and vibrant aspects of its culture. But in a multilingual nation like India, it, then becomes a challenge to know and communicate in all its languages. It is in such a situation that translation helps— it helps to reveal the richness of a particular region and its culture, crystallized in a language (Source Language), specific to that region, in a language that the non-native reader is familiar with (The Target Language.)

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In order to understand and appreciate India, one has to read the literatures of her complex and diverse regions, which is possible only through translation. In a multilingual and multicultural India, most people are unaware of the history, literature or anthropology of a linguistic group that is different from their own. In such a case, translation comes to their rescue. It is through translation that the classics and religious scriptures of various countries have become available to the whole world. Though the study of translation as an academic discipline has come into practice only in the last fifty years, history has a record of the act or process of translation in both spoken and written forms. The growth of Translation Studies as an independent discipline emerged in the 1980s, and the subject developed in various parts of the world and continues to have immense significance in the 21st century.

The objective of the study is to analyse the challenges and problems faced by the translator in the process of handling two different languages that have completely different style, culture and vocabulary. This study is an assessment of the English translation of Kalki R. Krishnamurthy's historical novel *Ponniyin Selvan* by Karthik Narayanan based on select aspects of translation along the parameters of semantics, syntactics, and stylistics.

India could be called a rich or potential area for translation for two reasons firstly as two or three languages are used simultaneously in some situations; secondly, as the nuances of language, spoken and written, have always differed from one caste to another and from one stratum to another even within the precincts of the same community and the same language. As Indra Nath Choudhury says, translation has become an effective tool "for negotiating social tensions, language - conflicts, social transitions and for identifying a plurality of linguistic expressions and cultural experience as also for understanding the remarkable unity underlying them" (32).

Theoreticians of translation Studies have enumerated the qualities expected of a translator. To quote Susan Basnett and Harish Trivedi, "a translator is expected to cater to the needs of the reader by adhering to textual fidelity, aesthetic satisfaction and pedagogic utility." (Bassnett & Trivedi 121). It could be stated that a substantial corpus of translation studies focuses on identifying the difficulties and problems involved in translation. The translator might come across problems for finding equivalence for synonyms, proper names, metaphors, cultural terms, institutional terms, quotations, idiolect, neologisms, jargons and clichés. The translator may face challenges while handling ambiguities at the lexical, referential and grammatical level. It is difficult to assess Naryanan's translation using any one theoretical frame as purported by Translation Studies theoreticians, for his work is many a times close to the original, at times removed and at times reads like another creative work, in some places it is only an interpretation of Kalki's original and in some places it negotiates and recreates in order to maintain the structural quality and aesthetic satisfaction of a historical romance.

A historical novel could be considered great when it has the following features: when a writer attempts to write a historical fiction s/he has to understand the compelling characters, the tight intricate

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plot which is character centred. The writer assimilates the streamlined plot, in which one event leads irresistibly to the next leaving even the writer not knowing how the story would end. A distinctive narrative style and a well - researched background is expected of a historical fiction writer. As Kalki's historical works fit into these expectations, his historical romances could be called outstanding. Beginning to compose a historical novel is a huge undertaking which requires wide and in depth research, particularly if accuracy is intended. Kalki's work belongs to a unique category as it is a blend of history and fiction. He has reconstructed history and enriched it with his lively imagination and distinct narrative style, in the course of which, he might have violated chronology, invented situations and re-written history itself. *Ponniyin Selvan* is the last of the trilogy, set in the Chola background, the other two being, *Parthiban Kanavu* and *Sivakamiyin Sabadam*, which are set in the Pallava background of the seventh century A.D. These novels are known for the literary richness as well as for the minute attention given to detail which had gone into making them as classics. He brings out the multiplicity, the affluence and depth of Tamil tradition, art, culture and religion. Kalki's miraculous working of language is an important tool in his success as a novelist. His style is unique and intelligible. The translator of a historical fiction is expected to fulfil the double responsibility of importing the essence of the original by bridging the wide gap between the material available and the actually generated fictional product . A historical novel need not talk about wars and battles alone but can present historical personages and the social and political life that existed in their times.

A novel which is based on historical events and characters would be a source of enjoyment and fulfilment to the reader, if s/he is well-informed of the background of the content, concept and context. When Pazhuvettarayar warns Parthibendran saying, "Don't die with a wound in your back. Yours is a brave heritage!"(*The Killer Sword* 13) may sound plain to a foreign reader. But dying with a wound on one's back has cultural backing, as it means a coward. Ancient Tamil men were known for their bravery and they deemed it a great insult to die so, as a wound on the chest shows the chivalry of ancient Tamil men which may not make sense even to a modern reader. This is one of the difficulties faced by the translator of historical fiction, as to the contemporary reader, swords; spear, etc may not imply any connotation, as the modern weapons used are different from those of the older times. There is a reference to *pallipadai* and *nadukarkoil* (Kalki 157) in the novel. The *pallipadai* temples were built to perpetuate the glory of the rulers. It is a place where a hero of war is worshipped after his death in that war, whereas "nadukarkoil" is a place where a hero of war (after his death in war) is worshipped along with other gods and goddesses. The titles bestowed on the kings like "*Ko*, *Raja Kesari Varmar Paranthaka Sundara Chozhar*" (*The First Floods* 88) and "*The Koppara Kesari who beheaded Veerapandiyan*" (*The First Floods* 275) show the ancient conception that royalty is next to Divinity by the usage of the terms *Ko* and *Kon* are used to refer to God and the King. These are some of the areas where the translator would have encountered problems.

Not only the meaning, but also the form and style should be taken into account in the functional value of a word. While translating a text, the translator needs to take into account these important semantic areas:

i. Connotation, Denotation, Implication: Very often the connotative and implied meaning of a word is lost in translation. The suggestive value of words, especially in a literary context, is vital. The translator chooses to transliterate a few words, in some instances, he translates them and captures only the denotative meaning . For example: The word, *Kootan choru,* (Kalki 6) not only denotes the specific type of food preparation, it also connotes people gathering to eat together. But the translation as "different kinds of rice mixed with coconut, lime or tamarind" (*The First Floods* 3), is inadequate to evoke this connotative meaning. If the translator had transliterated the term, the connotative cultural meaning would have been implied to a certain extent, provided the readers are curious enough to look at the glossary.

ii. Symbol and Referent: A symbol is a thing like any object or a picture or a word used to represent another thing. The palmyra insignia refers to the Pazhuvettarayars, the fish insignia symbolises the Pandyas and the tiger insignia stands for the Cholas. Though Narayanan has not explained the significance of the symbols used by Kalki, he has given a description of the flags and insignias.

iii. Ambiguity: Linguistic ambiguity is one of the problems encountered by a translator. This ambiguity could be of grammatical or lexical nature. The lexical ambiguity arises because of the homonymy or polysemy. In such instances, the translator has to locate equivalence, in the target language by using "corresponding idiomatic expressions" (Bassnett 31). Ambiguity may result from the "overlapping of grammatical structures" (1964: 101) which could be comprehended only by the context. For example, in *Ponniyin Selvan*, the ambiguity of the word '*madham'* is not because of "grammatical duplicity" but is purely based on the meaning of the word "*madham*", which means both religion and robust or violent, uncontrollable, nature of a rogue elephant. Though the context clearly expresses that it refers to the elephant, a native reader will not miss the pun on the word, *madham.* Here, the context takes on the role of giving an additional meaning to the word in the SLT, which is not possible for the translator to present in the TLT as there is no English equivalent for the word *madham* with two different meanings. The beauty of the art of punning is lost in translation.

Borrowing is when the translator uses a word or expression from the source text in the target text without modifying it. Narayanan has used this procedure of borrowing in numerous places but the names of specific trees like *karuvelu, punnai, Kadambam* and the names of flowers like *kanthal* and *kuvalai* and eatables *athirasam* and *idiyappams* are retained in the TL.

Calque is also a type of borrowing where the structure or words taken from the SL are made into a literal translation by taking an expression and breaking it into individual elements and translating each of these elements word for word into the target language. For instance, Narayanan has used this technique when he talks about the traditional delicacies like "*Pulikkari and chola ma paniyaram*" (Kalki 199) as "tamarind sauce" and "snacks made of corn flour" respectively, where the translation is rather out of place and obstructs the flow of the text.

Compensation is yet another strategy employed by the translator to solve the problem of those aspects of the source text that cannot take the same form in the target language by replacing these aspects with other elements or forms in the source text. For instance, '*sevvarali'* flower is

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translated by replacing it with hibiscus which is of the same colour (red), and which people all over are familiar with.

Paraphrase, sometimes called periphrases, is a translation procedure whereby the translator replaces a word in the source text by a group of words or an expression in the target text. For example: When the ship is caught in the cyclone, Vandiyathevan raves at the magician Ravidasan and Soman Sambhavan as they desert him but consoles himself that it is better to be alone than with those "lowborn devils" (*The Cyclone*, 309), which in the source text is "*Chandalakolaigarargal*" (Kalki 941). Here, the translator has used the adjective low born to indicate the strata occupied by the "*chandalas*" and the translator has provided the reference in the glossary as "the caste or community of tanners" (329). Poonkuzhali uses the same term to curse Pinakkapani when he betrays Vandiyathevan. She abuses him and calls him "*drohi, chandalan*! ..." (Kalki 522). Kalki has used the same word to mention the Pandiya conspirators and Pinakkapani, but the translator has translated the same word into "lowborn devils" while referring to the conspirators and "The miserable wretch!" (*The Cyclone* 31), when he talks about Pinakapani. Probably the translator has used two different synonyms for the word to show the degree of sins they have committed. While the translator has used some of these techniques in most places, he has also omitted translating a few words, which the theoreticians call Omission.

Syntax is the system of rules that govern the structure of a sentence in a language. The knowledge of the syntax of both the source and target language is essential for the translator. There are several instances in the translation when a misplaced emphasis due to mismatched syntactical use has either snatched the flavour of the original or conveyed a contradictory message.

Inflexion of verbs: The Indicative mood of a verb declares or asserts something or asks a question. All variations regarding the gender, tense, voice, number and person are brought out only in this mood. The distinction of gender in the verb is unique to Tamil and the other Dravidian languages only. For example, in the novel, Poonkuzhali promises the Prime Minister Anirudha Brahmmarayar and Kundavai that she would bring her aunt Mandakini. But when she fails to bring her, the Prime minister asks her, "*Neengal povadharkulleyae kānoma? Allathu varuvadharkku marutthu vittala*? (Kalki 1654) Here, the gender distinction is brought out in the verb *maruthuvittala,* "*maruthuvittu*" is the verb here, which means "to refuse" and the case ending of the verb "*la*" expresses the gender.

There are certain miscellaneous rules that govern the Tamil language. For example, adjectives are often repeated in a colloquial style of the language in order to bring out the intensity of the term or message. As seen in the novel, When Poonkuzhali takes an elephant ride with the Prince; she is very excited when the elephant reaches the place where they have to take rest. She blushes thinking about the ride with the Prince, which Kalki explains thus:

"*... Yānaiyin ottathinālum achamayam nerntha ullakilarchiyinalum aval mugam chekka chevelenru āgi chengazhuneer poovudan pottiyittathu*" (Kalki 869).

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Her face turns red as a result of the elephant ride and her excitement arising from her journey with the Prince. The translator has not translated "*chekka chevel*", rather he has used the term "flushed" to emphasize the intensity of her shyness.

Whenever the translator finds it difficult to translate technical or critical terms, which are difficult to be translated, s/he has to transliterate those terms. As both semantics and syntactics culminate in pragmatics, the translator has to bring in the signification considering all the patterns of language use. Narayanan has tried different methods like adapting, borrowing, paraphrasing and using the technique of calque and semantic shifts.

The stylistic components like communicative aspect, thematic prominence, word order and literary cohesion always pose problems in translation. *Ponniyin Selvan* is rich in registers and dialects, where the style of language spoken by the royal personages differs from the language spoken by people from ordinary backgrounds making it a challenge as the registers of English will not be suitable equivalents. Verbal repartee, which is a stamp of Kalki's prowess, and hierarchal differences in speech are rendered impossible in the act of translation. Considering that the *Ponniyin Selvan* is a historical narrative, an aesthetically constructed text, a stylistic analysis of it in translation is essential.

In his essay on 'Language and Social Change', A.K.Ramanujan talks about 'Diglossia', the Context - Related Code, where he talks about the speech style,
quoting Ferguson

> … in the oral medium, two clear codes or dialects coexisted in Tamil
> from antiquity: a formal high style and an informal colloquial style.
> This coexistence within the same speaker, often called 'diglossia', is
> characteristic of many traditional societies. (Ferguson 1959). Certain
> speech settings like the platform, or addressees like the king, or topics
> like philosophy called for the high style. Certain other speech events
> like domestic conversation, addressees like children or servants, and
> topics like gossip or abuse called for the colloquial style. A great
> majority of people probably had only the colloquial; in learned
> discourse, the texts read out would be in the high style and the oral exposition could be in colloquial
> 'low' style. (107)

Foregrounding, which serves as an attention calling device, includes lexical repetition, syntactic repetition, parallelism, shifts in a variety of language use, registers, long running syntactical structures, semantic deviances, topical structures, mimetic functions and rhetorical questions which are analyzed for precision in the interpretation of literary effects. The writer's ingenuity in his creative art is judged by the effective use of these stylistic devices. As an artistic magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan* is fortified with these stylistic devices throughout the text.

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Lexical Repetition: The repetition of a word, phrase or sentence in the literary text intensifies the thematic effect with greater prominence. When Vandiyathevan takes the scroll to the Emperor Sundara Chozhar, he warns the Emperor that danger surrounds him and alerts him saying *"Abaayam! Abaayam! ..."* (Kalki 221). When the Chinna Pazhuvettarayar comes there, he says he had actually asked for 'abayam' which means security. But the translation reads, "Your Majesty, please listen to my appeal. You must leave Thanjavur. Abaayam, danger, surrounds you here. Abaayam! Abaayam!" (*The First Floods* 144). The difference between *abayam* and a*baayam* by the shortening of the vowel sound changes the meaning of the word, but this is not easy to be carried out in the translation.

Semantic Deviances: Semantic deviances are part of stylistics which results in the foregrounding of a message. While English does not have any differentiation in the proper noun used as a vocative, Tamil has inflexions, especially with the names of men. The names of women do not undergo any change in the vocative case. For example, when the names ending with suffix like 'an' Karikalan, Vandiyathevan, Arulmozhivarman, Amuthan, Chozhan, Parthibendran are used in vocatives, the suffix 'an' will be changed as Karikala, Vandiyatheva, Arulmozhivarma, Amutha, Chozha and Parthibendra respectively. To overcome this hurdle, the translator has to invent a technique, but if this would distort the meaning, then transliteration would be the best method. The translator, Karthik Narayanan has made use of the technique of transliteration.

Mimetic Function of the Language: The mimetic function of a language is peculiar to the sound system of that specific language and hence the translator faces the problem of Phonological patterning such as onomatopoeia which has to be carried out in the translated text without discretion, for, it imitates meanings. Thus the stylistic analysis of the original text enables the focus on literary devices and to assess whether the translated text has done justice by its literal consciousness. One finds that Karthik Narayanan has identified the stylistic features and conveyed the intended effect in the translation.

Though Narayanan has taken utmost care in presenting all details from the original, without omitting much, the native reader still prefers to read the text in Tamil. Whatever be its drawbacks, translation has been with us throughout the history of civilization and it remains a powerful force in effectively and efficiently bridging the gulf between human being's natural desire for gaining knowledge of all subjects and the practical inability to acquire mastery over nearly 3000 languages of the world. Translation is an important instrument that disseminates the culture of a tribe and promotes the language of the same with external inspirations.

According to Catford, a translation is not completely translatable or completely untranslatable. As every language has a specific way in the organization of the phonetic symbols and has its own sound system, the evaluation of the comparison of the source and target texts is always subjective. A perfect translation, it has been said, conveys the spirit of the original author by giving us the words that he would have used, had his language been that into which his writings are about to be translated. "Translation may always start with the clearest situations", claims Bassnett, "the most

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concrete messages, the most elementary universals," however, the communication through it can "never be completely finished" (Bassnett 42).

Rather than sidelining translation as an unsatisfactory and inadequate practice, it is wise to create an awareness to develop and widen the scope of translation studies, which is quite essential in a globalised context. The translator is expected to strike a proper balance in maintaining closer fidelity to the original and to be free from it. The translator's job is considered more difficult than a creative writer.

In a multilingual country like India, where two or three languages are spoken by a person, translation studies is a field that is relevant and much sought after. Karthik Narayanan's intention of translating the magnum opus *Ponniyin Selvan* into English expresses his passionate inclination towards Tamil literature. This labour of love attempts to offer to the foreign readers, a true chronicle of political, social and cultural heritage of the Tamils. Further, this historical narrative embellishes a fine work of art fulfilling aesthetic judgments. A translator does not only compare but also creates a text. S/He does the role of a writer, comparatist and also a critic. The translator's task is always difficult and unrewarding. S/He is adversely criticised if there are mistakes in the work and very rarely appreciated when a successful work is done. The analysis of Narayanan's translation has been a stimulating and rewarding exercise in the area of translation. The intellectual ingenuity and the emotional subtlety of Tamil culture have been brought out in a remarkable manner as seen in his translation. Narayanan's intuitive insight has carried the cultural sensibility of the Tamils into the translation. In this, Narayanan has more than succeeded in recreating for his readers the native flavour of the culture, history, linguistic idiosyncrasies and poetic utterances of a bygone Tamil era. The fragrance and glory of Ponniyin Selvan, a great epic in prose, would not have spread beyond the boundaries of Tamil Nadu, had it not been for Narayanan's great attempt.

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Abbreviations used:

SL	Source Language
TL	Target Language
SLT	Source Language Text
TLT	Target language Text

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