

Challenges in Translating Abdul Rahman's *Urankum Alaki* from Tamil into English

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Abdul Rahman

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Abstract

Abdul Rahman, a great modern Tamil poet, is greatly admired among the Tamils all over the world, but his works are not yet available to the literary world of the different countries. His major work poses great challenge to the translator in terms of linguistic, cultural, social, religious and racial ethos. His provocative and thought-provoking literary creation, *urankum alaki* is tough to translate. The translator would succeed only by invoking and utilizing his own literary and aesthetic sense to rise to the level and expectations of literary demands of Abdul Rahman's literary output.

This paper, while outlining some of the translation difficulties currently encountered in Abdul Rahman's work *urankum alaki*, presents a summary of the book as prelude to detailed translation.

Defining Translation

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Translation is a phenomenon that has a huge effect on everyday life. The Dictionary of Translation Studies of Shuttleworth and Cowie 1997: 181 describes that Translation is an incredible work of art which can be understood in many different ways. Translation is one of the means to trace the essential human spirit that underlies all literatures. In a land of linguistic and cultural diversity, translation plays the role of a unifier. Though translation is very difficult, it is not quite impossible. What is not possible is accurate translation.

Abdul Rahman: Mystic-cum-Symbolist Poet

Translating a mystic cum symbolist cum Haiku modern poet requires extraordinary skill and a versatile knowledge. In order to understand Abdul Rahman, one must have a comprehensive idea about various fields. In fact, he led a band of modern Tamil poets and revolutionized Tamil poetry with symbolism, mysticism and surrealism. He perceived beauty and abundant treasure even in common things which are unnoticed by others. Though his ideas are very deep and philosophical, encompassing all living religions, he garbed them in a very simple day to day language. For an ordinary reader, it is very difficult to understand what actually he says through his simple language.

A Profile of the Poet

In order to understand the great poet Abdul Rahman's poems and his philosophical treatises, a biographical approach will help us a great deal. Rahman was born on 9th November 1937 in Madurai. After completing his school final in 1954, he studied Tamil Literature in Thiagarajar College, Madurai for six years. After his post graduation, he had registered as a Ph.D. research scholar in the Madras University on the topic *putukkavitaivil kuriyitu* (Symbolism in Modern Poetry) and got his doctorate in 1985. He worked as a Lecturer in Islamiya College, Vaniyambadi and became the Head of the Department of Tamil in course of time. To listen to his awe-inspiring lectures, the students from other branches of studies flooded into his classrooms with great admiration and observed the poetic terminology administered ingeniously by the poet.

urankum alaki

Abdul Rahman's *urankum alaki* is widely read and appreciated. It has the tone and tenor of a philosophical treatise, with pieces of advice for a righteous and dynamic life in this modern world. It is the second part of *itu cirakukalin neram* which was published in the

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Tamil periodical 'Junior Vikatan' for about 10 months from 16.04.2000 to 21.02.2001. This work/series highlighted the revolutionary ideas projected by the poet in his poems which create social changes in the society.



In order to unravel Rahman's wonderful ideas of humanism, egalitarianism, fraternal feeling among all communities, a translator's work becomes indispensable. His way of telling things will make one not only wonder at his communicative skill, but also will make his ideas work in day to day life. The poet succeeds in his attempts to communicate his ideas of reform of the society at the grass root level through his poems. His works, if translated and interpreted properly, would also educate the future generation to live in peace and amity.

Kavikko – King of Poets and His Message

Fondly called by one and all as 'kavikko', Abdul Rahman writes poems and articles in an inimitable style which looks both very simple and at the same time thought provoking. His way of looking at things is completely different from others. What is not important or less important becomes a wonderful thing by the masterly strokes of Abdul Rahman. After reading his poems one cannot simply forget them; his images and symbols penetrate our hearts and keep reverberating in our ear drums for a long time.

Unbiased Poet

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Abdul Rahman never feels satisfied with one simile or one metaphor or one figure of speech. His poems contain a chain of thought bedecked in beautiful jewel-like form. The unbiased handling of religious, spiritual, social, political, ethical, virtuous and secular topics by Abdul Rahman attracts one and all very much and persuades them to analyze a thread-bare critical analysis of his works. Even after a reading of the artistic beauty and craftsmanship, one is tempted to read the same work again and again and wonder at the creator. Translation is therefore indispensable for the benefit of mankind.

Translation of *urankum alaki*

Abdul Rahman's *urankum alaki* has been translated from Tamil into English. The cultural and linguistic problems have been meticulously classified separately. The problems in finding equivalents for the Source Language (SL) words and the basic principles applicable to the adjustments required to produce equivalent expressions are dealt with for ecological culture, religious culture, spiritual culture, social culture, historical culture and material culture.

Source Language to Target Language

Abdul Rahman's philosophical treatises pose a very big linguistic challenge to the translator because some usages, syntax, semantics and style differ vastly from SL (Source Language) to TL (Target Language). Under such circumstances the translator feels helpless and tries to be creative as far as possible. This is because the work abounds in figure of speech such as similes, metaphors, irony, paradox etc. and unprecedented phonological, syntactic and semantic patterns such as rhyming alliteration, versification, morphological parallelism, syntactic parallelism and above all syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between words. The translator sincerely traces the problems in translating grammatical items such as lexical, syntactical, semantics and stylistics by analyzing the words in both the SL and the TL.

***Urankum Alaki* – A View**

Though *urankum alaki* is a prose work, the style is poetic because the author is a poet. Abdul Rahman's poetry is marked by its highly individualistic style. His style is unambiguously his own. This is in keeping with his peerless style which lays great emphasis on individuality and creativity.

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According to Abdul Rahman ‘differences in creations’ may persist in the world. As far as the creator is concerned, they are not actual differences. Sources of light may be different but the light sheds only brightness all around it. Wise people enjoy the light whereas the ordinary man discriminates between them and unreasonably claims one source is superior to the other. The world governed by the ignoramus and unreasonable people becomes a hell. Even though the world has hundreds and thousands of invaluable philosophical books, their main source of wisdom is God and Truth.

A Critical Analysis of *Urankum Alaki*

Abdul Rahman is a multifaceted modern poet who adopts symbolism, surrealism, mysticism and realism in his creations. As a voracious reader he assimilated many theories, myths, legends. Many of his contributions to literature have resulted from the author's reaction to social conditions. The writings of Abdul Rahman influenced so many young budding modern Tamil writers.

In some countries, writers have been imprisoned, tortured, and killed for daring to express their beliefs and speak out against oppression. But in India, poets like Abdul Rahman audaciously express their social, moral and reformative views to enlighten their fellow beings through his incomparable poetic genre.

Search for Identity and Communion with God

Abdul Rahman reveals his poetic genius, his vast and extensive range of erudition through the pages of the philosophical treatises he has written under varied titles in the book entitled *urankum alaki*. The core theme that lies at the bottom of his literary creation, or the thread of argument that runs through the entire body of the feat is search for identity and communion with God, the infinite, the Eternal and the Almighty.

First Half of *Urankum Alaki*

The poet calls the first chapter or treatise *marma elu* (*The Mysterious Seven*) that has religious significance as it symbolizes seven stages of man in his continuous and consistent search for attainment of salvation and also discusses with so many sevens which are

fundamental to human life. He lists out the seven days of the week, holy saints, mountains, seas, races, pyramids and the rainbow that bear the number.

In the second treatise entitled *alukku cumappavarkal (Dirt Bearers)* the poet chastises parochial, divisive tendencies that discriminate men on the basis of caste, colour, birth, untouchability and soiled and blurred thinking of man.

The third treatise *ankankalin cankam (The Parts of the Whole)* focuses on man as being a part of the social and collective living. He asserts that man cannot live alone completely cut off from the main stream of social life. In the fourth treatise *cettup pirakkinra teyvam (The Death and Rebirth of Deity)*, the poet distinguishes between the words 'iraivan' and 'teyvam' which people take to mean one and the same. However, the poet with his profound sense of clarity establishes that 'iraivan' certainly refers to the Almighty and the term 'teyvam' almost always refers to those people who have been honest, righteous in their life. The fifth treatise *mekattaip pola (As Uncertain as a Cloud)* portrays that like the drifting cloud which is being led by the violent wind on its chosen and charted route, man's life is determined and driven by the uncanny and mysterious destiny as it pleases. Man's aim of life should be subservient to the larger aim of life.

Abdul Rahman universalizes the theory of creation. Though the religions propound various theories and dogmas regarding the origin of the universe, science exemplifies a different theory of evolution. The poet tenaciously explains the functioning of the natural objects which perform automatically without any human control.

In the sixth treatise *untum illaiyum (Ayes and Nays)* the poet states that the continuity of life on earth consists in the combination and use of the simple, but powerful words 'Yes' or 'No'. For instance, a shirt, he argues, is made of both cloth used and the cloth cut and thrown off. Abdul Rahman meticulously consecrates a wonderful theme in the seventh treatise *arputa nilal (The Darker side of Miracle/Wondrous Shadow)*. Any occurrence/event that defies the normal law of nature is considered a phenomenon or a miracle. Anything that is performed by a holy man and creates awe and surprise is called a miracle. The natural tendency witnessed in the people is that they tend to forget the doer of the miracle and they start worshipping his creations.

The universal outlook of the poet is visualized in the eighth treatise *ulakam parvaiyal anatu* (*Perspectives Be, the World Be*). The mental outlook both positive and negative together makes up the world of an individual. If a person inclines to look at the world with a positive attitude, his world becomes positive and cheerful. On the contrary, if he looks at the world with a negative attitude, his world becomes negative in everything. So it is the mind that makes a hell of a heaven, heaven of a hell.

The ninth treatise *iraivan tarakana?* (*Prayers, Offerings, Bribes?*) vividly exhibits the deceptive devotees who try to deceive God by presenting offerings and bribes. Most devotees look upon God as a broker whom, they think, can be bribed, to be pleased with the offerings they promise to make for the fulfillment of their avaricious needs and greed. The truly god fearing, or the true devotees never aspire for riches that come their way without their self-effort.

The poet elucidates the philosophy of life in the tenth treatise *katikara manam* (*The Ticking Mind*). The poetic sensibility of the poet is further enlarged and enhanced to encompass and visualize and compare the tick, tick of the clock to the sound of the advancing feet of death.

Second Half of *Urakum Alaki*

An analysis of the ancient religious beliefs which mortify the worshipper even by chiding or beating the so called figures of gods in various races have been thoroughly scrutinized by the poet in the eleventh treatise *pavam iraivan* (*Pity Him! Fix Him Not!*) Moreover the poet is enraged at the portrayal of God as someone endowed with the negative attributes of hatred, treachery and vengeance.

The poet with his wide knowledge of the world religions energetically investigates the origin of beliefs and its growth and its deviation in the twelfth treatise *arrup patai* (*Wills and Ways*). Every religion is based on the concept of inner self (*akam*) and outer self (*puram*). The inner self concurs with the philosophy of a religion whereas the outer self dwells on the varied forms of worship. The true nature of every religion is marred and soiled by the unfounded, irrational and superstitious beliefs of the people just as the sewage comes and mixes with the pure free flowing river water and dirties it.

Abdul Rahman expects that the human beings must have ego which has been perceptibly determined in the thirteenth treatise *manitan oru rakkat (Human Being: A Rocket)*. Although all the books of wisdom stress the need for suppressing and quelling the evil of ego in a person, it is again this rare sense of individuality that helps and guides man to achieve things in life.

In the fourteenth treatise *avataramum parinamamum (Avatar and its Dimensions)* the poet elaborately discusses the origin of creation in two different dimensions, one is scientific and the other is religious. He quotes examples from the theory of evolution and from the *tacavatara* myth. The poet also explains the origin of universe and its recent changes.

Having acquired varied practical experiences, the poet strongly emphasizes that none in the world has owned a house permanently and also establishes the philosophy how human beings who aspire to build a house in which they can't survive is elucidated in the fifteenth treatise *etu nam mukavari (Own a Home? Where?)*

The philosopher poet asserts and affirms in the sixteenth treatise *cuntara cattiyam (Beauty of Truth)* that the Indian Books of Wisdom lay stress on three highest values of life - *catyam* - embodiment and personification of Truth, *civam* - that symbolizes the good and *cuntaram* - that represents the beauty - that help and guide man to realize God.

The seventeenth treatise *urankum alaki (The Beautiful Damsel Who Sleeps)* has the honour of having the title of this book. The poet has cited a story from the western fairy tales. He sturdily confirms that love is the only way to achieve anything and it's like a key to open all closed doors. He makes an appeal to all to love. The unequal treatment of women, irrespective of religions, has been daringly discussed in the eighteenth treatise *pen nanam (Feminine Par Excellence)* by the unbiased poet. The spiritual attainment of seeing a vision of God can be attained and achieved even by women devotees although male chauvinists create obstacles and bar women from the bliss of salvation. The steps that the women spiritualists undertake to overcome all the trials and tribulations have been expounded by the poet.

In the nineteenth treatise *poy vilacam (Fake Identity)*, Abdul Rahman wonders how the people of our country discriminate between one section and another even during the twenty first century and that too in the computer era of scientific and technological advancement. He also points out the discriminatory attitude of those who divide the society on the basis of some people being the highest and some others the lowest in the caste hierarchy in the society.

In the twentieth treatise *muti turappu (Renouncing the Samsonian Crown)*, Abdul Rahman placidly focuses on the custom of Hindus in tonsuring their heads. He also points out that most of the religions in the world have this ritual. While Muslims perform hajj pilgrimage, it is a ritual to shave their head. Some Christians tonsure their head for priesthood. The poet touches upon the noteworthy subject of giving punishment to the culprits even now in Indian villages. He sensitizes the readers with things which signify the outstanding upright postures.

Last Part of *Urankum Alaki*

In the twenty-first treatise *akak kuliyal (Cleansing the Self)*, the poet tidily exhilarates the momentous subject matter by facilitating the readers to resuscitate the custom of cleansing the self. The striking idea encodes the righteous sovereignty of genuine human beings to move forward to embrace new thoughts. Here the poet has given a very appealing as well as thought provoking thematic expression.

In the twenty-second treatise *katalai ariyumo muttu? (Can the Pearl name its Ocean?)*, the poet ascertains that the purity of thought in the heart is fundamental to the real worship of God. As long as man who is like a pearl remains hidden in the shell, he is deprived of the purity of the vision of God. His ego remains as the real barrier that stands in the way of his attaining spiritual salvation.

In the twenty-third treatise *aatiyum antamum (The Beginning and the End)*, Abdul Rahman expressively reports an incidence which forms the subsidiary fuzzy experience understood to be inexplicable but predictable. The dubious germination of a novel accomplishment emerges to be unpredictable resulting in genuine culmination. The poet calls upon the general public repetitively to refurbish their image by relegating the old depleted

foolish customs and by embarking upon the cogent modern social mores. He cherishes the rare books and their significance.

Further Areas for Study

When we translate Abdul Rahman's other works, rich treasures will be unearthed. If other works of Abdul Rahman are translated into English, there will be an opportunity for the international community to know about the modern Tamil universal poet Abdul Rahman who is a visionary. Translation field has an abundant scope now. The analysis of problems in translating linguistic aspects will have to be widened adopting various translation theories that enhance future researchers to probe more linguistic problems to be solved through further research.

Regarding cultural problems, the researcher has attempted to locate many problems and has successfully solved and furnished proper solutions enabling future researchers to identify the problems in translating cultural aspects. In a country like India translation promotes national integration which is the need of the hour.

As a modern poet, Abdul Rahman has added a new vigour to Tamil Literature. All the new experiments made by western writers have been understood and beautifully made use of by the poet in his writings. Thus we get not only old and traditional themes but also new thoughts and style in his verses.

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