Translating *Ulysses* into Malayalam: Theorising a Practice

Chitra Panikkar

Abstract

This paper recalls my experience of translating sections of Joyce's epic novel, Ulysses into Malayalam and attempts a theorization of that practice. Seven chapters of this novel have already been published by the Malayalam journal, Keralakavita, in its annual numbers. A preliminary theorization of that translation practice seemed inevitable even before further translation could be carried out. This think-and-research method applied to the work in hand has helped clarify my own position as critic-translator. It has also helped me raise certain vital issues and questions that periodically surface in the realm of Translation Theory and Practice. The piece that emerged as a result of a translation practice that went self-reflexive is incorporated in this paper. It may be noted that the spade-work towards the writing of any theoretical piece will also involve much reading of critical material and the constant updating of knowledge produced on particular texts. This paper is a sample piece cast in that mould.

James Joyce (1882-1941), the Irish catholic writer, was for a long time, projected as a difficult writer, a formidable stylist/aesthete, apolitical in views, European in temperament, and therefore clearly high-modernist in terms of literary location. Times have re-written Joyce. Today, in critical circles, he is a feminist writer, an anti-imperialist, Irish in sensibility, political to the core - his style, a mask to fight the English, and thereby, in terms of location, a postcolonial writer. This formulation is an attempt to bring home this point of the relocation or dislocation of Joyce through a discussion of my own experience of translating *Ulysses* into Malayalam.

Translation Today Vol. 4 No. 1 & 2 2007 © CIIL 2007

As a translator, the lesser known side of Joyce had always held my fascination. My critical engagement with Joyce's writings which began more than a decade ago, ultimately led to a translation experiment. Even in the initial pieces that I tried out, it was the relatively unknown Joyce that caught my interest: at first, the children's story, *The Cat and the Devil*, which he wrote for his four-year-old grandson, Stephen, and then, *Chamber Music*, a young musician-poet's first collection of love poems. The only story which I attempted to translate from the collection, *Dubliners*, was 'Eveline' – again, an obscure piece. *Portrait*, at that time, was a prescribed text at the English M.A level (more popular than any of the other Joyce texts), and therefore, according to me, it could be easily bypassed. *Ulysses* was well-known but was reverentially treated – touched, but not read. It was during the fag-end of my Ph.D work on *Ulysses* that I started translating extracts from *Ulysses* as a means of "know"ing the author.

The last chapter, 'Penelope', was the first long piece from *Ulysses* that I translated into Malayalam. I was then curious to find out what a no-punctuation, no-capital-I, a woman's narrative voice – colloquial in rhythm, unconventional in matter and tone – would sound like in Malayalam. Very soon, I could discover that the stylistic/linguistic nuances in English pertaining to the use of limited punctuation and small letter i (first person pronoun) went unnoticed in Malayalam which anyway does not have much use for either punctuation or capital letters (may be this is bound to happen in other Indian languages also). The colloquial rhythm had to be worked at, but the "shock-effect" the piece produced in Malayalam was the result of a middle-class woman character's unconventional musings on her sexuality, along anti-patriarchal lines. The Malayalam *Penelope* thus emerges more as a feminist text than as an author's experiment with the "interior-monologue (female)" narrative technique. Joyce thus was already falling off his secure pedestal in the modernist canon – whoever heard of an anti-patriarchal male voice within modernism?

Though no close reader of *Ulysses* can miss out on the subversive quality of its writing or the rich political overtones implicit in the narration, I would still say that these became specifically clear to me only after the experience of translating *Penelope*. I began to read *Ulysses* not in its European context anymore but in its Irish context, more precisely in its Dublin context. Dublin as the Irish capital-city, and Ireland with its history of years of subjugation under colonial rule took precedence over other considerations. A few questions hit me hard, and they are

> *Why are Irish writers denied their particular histories in the English Literature curriculum in India?*
>
> *Why are Shaw, Wilde, Goldsmith, O'Casey, Synge, Swift, Joyce, Beckett, etc., still part of the British Literature classes?*
>
> *How can the coloniser's history be mixed up with the history of the colonised? Is this then another instance of colonial appropriation which went unquestioned?*
>
> *Why is this glossing over of specific histories a norm only in the English Departments in India, whereas in both England and Ireland, Irish authors are discussed under a special slot called Irish Literature even within the English Department?*

These questions were uppermost in my mind when after a gap, I sat to translate *Ulysses* (this time from the first chapter onwards, chronologically). The agenda behind the translation was the interpretation and understanding of Joyce as an Irish writer, and *Ulysses* as a postcolonial text. I found the support for my reading in two critical texts released while the translation was on – Vincent Cheng's *Joyce, Race and the Empire* and Maria Tymoczko's *The Irish Ulysses*.

While translating the first Chapter, 'Telemachus', I could see this interpretational grounding affecting my approach. Unlike in

the translation of *Penelope*, I allowed bilingual elements to prevail, words like *Sassenach* and *Strangers* (words used by the Irish to designate the English) were explained by means of foot-notes, and the anti-imperialist, anti-church statements mouthed by Stephen, I realized, carried an added punch in Malayalam. When the draft was read out to a group of Malayalam speaking English Department students who had not read *Ulysses* in English, they responded most to the political implications of Joyce's text. The response amounted to this: "Are you sure you haven't changed it much, because he was always talked about in our Department either as a formidable modernist or as a stinking aesthete". Reading out the translated versions of the next two chapters, 'Nestor' and 'Proteus', to the student group made this even more obvious. They suggested the incorporation of more of Irish history in my foot-notes (to assist the reader's understanding) and they were quick to respond to issues of betrayal and usurpation in the text.

Let us note that *Ulysses* is full of themes and moments related to the idea of betrayal and usurpation. I'll give a quick review of these and my own inferences as connected with the review. I may first supply specific instances from *Ulysses* that would help the reader in India strike a colonial transaction with Ireland:

Ch.1. Telemachus - Stephen, the Irish intellectual, constantly snubs the English Haines and rejects Mulligan's subservience to Haines. Stephen understands himself as the server of a servant and describes himself as the servant of two masters. The milk-woman becomes for Stephen the symbol of poor old Ireland, and he thinks of Mulligan as "Usurper". The first chapter ends with the slow ponderous delivery of the word, "usurper".

Ch.2. Nestor - Stephen's history lesson in School is on

Pyrrhus who suffered usurpation. He understands Pyrrhus as someone broken by his own victory and sees himself as an Irish jester in the court of his English master. He pauses on a line from Lycidas to sense the shadow of Christ on the lives of believers and non-believers and feels the challenge posed by divided loyalties which has its significance for the Irish. Stephen observes symbols of the Establishment (civil and ecclesiastical) in headmaster Deasy's room - Stuart coins ("base treasure of England won from the Irish bog") and twelve apostle spoons encased in purple plush. Deasy is one who is in awe of the success and power of the English. There is mention of Parnell (Ireland's pet story of betrayal) and attempts to stir Stephen to a political argument. The chapter shows how Ireland has had more than its share of colonial history.

Ch.3. Proteus - Brings Kevin Egan into the picture – his bright left-wing atheistic chatter is alluded to at intervals. Stephen's Paris memories are full of Kevin Egan - the Irish conspirator in exile who tries to evoke Stephen's interest in the cause; he's full of the tales of Irish revolutionaries, their plots, disguises, and escapes. Stephen looks in the direction of the Martello tower and notices how it has been usurped by the Panthersahib and his pointer. Stephen, walking the strand, cannot escape his past or Ireland's past - the coming of invaders to possess the land, the whales

hacked and eaten by his ancestors, his understanding of the Pretenders as men claiming thrones denied to them.

Ch.7. Aeolus - The theme of frustration particularly frustration experienced just at the moment when the goal is in sight recurs throughout. There is Ned Lambert's reading of the flowery patriotic speech, delivered by Dan Dawson. Cranford's use of the word, 'history' reminds Stephen of his own aphorism, "History is the nightmare from which you'll never awake". McHugh describes how the College Historical society debated a paper advocating the revival of the Irish tongue, Fitzgibbon throwing scorn on it, and Taylor's bright analogy of Moses being compelled to submit to the authority of Egypt. The red-tin letter box and the statue of Nelson figure as symbols of British imperium and Stephen's parable of the plums comes to be called, the Pisgah Sight.

Ch.9. Scylla and Charybdis : The focus is on the consubstantiality of father and son and the issue of betrayal. It records Stephen's efforts to oust the English Shakespeare and establish his own position as son and rival. The chapter sees the total dismissal of the Englishman Haines and his admirer, Deasy.

Ch.10. Wandering Rocks : Kernan pauses at the site of Robert Emmet's execution and thinks about the arrest of Lord Edward Fitzgerald.

Ch.11. Sirens : Dwells on the theme of betrayal and the song,

	"The croppy Boy" tells the story of a betrayal.
Ch.12. Cyclops :	The nationalist's one-eyed fanatical view is seen to be as dangerous as what Nelson represents - he is critical of anything and everything that doesn't fall into his narrow shallow slot. It is proved by the riotous list he prepares, his criticism of the national dailies, and his curses on England. He accuses England for everything that went wrong - depopulating the land, destroying her arts and industries, reducing the land to a treeless swamp, and inveighs against England's use of sanctimony as a cover-up for self-enrichment.
Ch.13. Nausicaa :	The cuckoo clock announces a betrayal.
Ch.14. Oxen of the Sun :	Molly Bloom is seen on a par with Ireland, engaged in adulterous betrayal.
Ch.15. Circe :	Images of betrayal and usurpation abound. Stephen annoys the King's soldiers. Kevin Egan showers abuses on Queen Victoria. The citizen materializes to revile the English; Stephen sees the absurdity of the nationalistic and revolutionary poses, those of the British imperium as well. The last bit on Rudy and the Home rule Son is indicative of Home Rule in Ireland.
Ch.16. Eumacus :	Skin-the-Goat sees the conspiratorial hand of the British in everything. There is a detailed

reference to Parnell and with it thoughts of betrayal, national and personal.

Ch.17. Ithaca : Carries the comparison between ancient Hebrew and ancient Irish languages and the correspondences between two rejected peoples. There is mention of dispersal, persecution, oppression, and the prospects of national revival.

Ch.18. Penelope : It is ironical that Molly Bloom who says she has no use for politics or war has in the text been linked up with themes of political betrayal.

It is my reading that Stephen handles these issues at an intellectual level and problematises it. Leopold Bloom faces it at a personal level. Incidentally, being a Jew, he also functions as an international representative of the subjugated - forever marginalized, and persecuted for no fault of his.

If these themes and issues in *Ulysses* get foregrounded in the translation, what is likely to emerge in the target-language is an awareness of *Ulysses* as a predominantly Irish text, and Joyce as a political writer. The concerns that so far lay hidden under the cover of "style" and experiments with the English language would consequently stand exposed. (The use of a self-conscious style and language itself, in my reading, is this writer's ceaseless pre-occupation with an inherited language which he wants to re-fashion for purposes to fight the given, the imposed, etc.). The translation thus disrupts a critical continuum which treated Joyce as stylist-modernist, and offers active resistance to that reading of *Ulysses*.

To make my point, I give a few examples from *Telemachus*, *Nestor*, and *Proteus*, which are already translated. There is a subtle

way in which the following bits from "Telemachus" stand highlighted in the translation.

(1) Mulligan to Stephen (about Haines): "A ponderous Saxon….God, these bloody English. Bursting with money and indigestion."

(2) Stephen on the old Irish milk-woman: "A wandering crone, lowly form of an immortal serving her conqueror and her gay betrayer."

(3) Haines (to Stephen): "I intend to make a collection of your sayings if you'll let me" and Stephen's bitter reply, "Would I make money by it?"

(4) "I'm the servant of two masters, Stephen said, an English and an Italian…the imperial British state and the holy Roman Catholic and apostolic Church".

(5) Haines: An Irishman must think like that, I daresay. We feel in England that we have treated you rather unfairly. It seems history is to blame…of course I'm a Britisher and I feel like one. I don't want to see my country fall in the hands of German Jews either.

(6) Stephen's observation on the smiling Haines: "Horn of a bull, hoof of a horse, smile of a Saxon."

In my translation, I have also used foot-notes as a strategy to highlight these thematic concerns. For example,

In "Nestor": (1) A foot-note I've incorporated would read this way, if back-translated, "If we were to link up the conversations between Deasy and Stephen, we'll get from it, the history of Ireland's centuries' long struggle to win freedom

from the English".

(2) Foot-note to "Ulster" – Northern Ireland is now called Ulster. The protestant community in Northern Ireland did not join the Home Rule Movement.

In "Proteus" : (1) My footnote to "Feefawfum. I zmellz de bloodz oz an Iridzman" – "reminds us of the lines from an Irish nursery rhyme:

Fee Fee Faw Fum
I smell the blood of an English man
Be he alive or be he dead
I'll grind his bones to make my bread"

At the close of this session, I am tempted to quote Vincent Cheng's observation:

> "The elevation of an Irish-catholic colonial writer like Joyce into the pantheon of the Modernist greats – is hardly innocent but rather insidious for it shifts attention away from the manifestly political contents and ideological discourse of Joyce's works into his unarguably potent role in stylistic revolution… The net effect is to neutralize the ideological potency of Joyce's texts, to defang the bite of Joyce's politics. Perhaps only in this way could an Irishman whose works bristle with bitter resentment against the imperiums of Church, State, and Academy be appropriated and rendered acceptable, even revered, as a High-modernist icon of the Great English literary canon" (Cheng 1995:2).

I also wish to draw upon Maria Tymoczko's (1994) arguments that previous criticism has distorted our understanding of *Ulysses* by focusing on Joyce's English and continental literary sources alone. Her argument is supported by extensive research and Joyce emerges between the English and' Irish literary traditions, as

one, who like later postcolonial writers, remakes English language literature with his own country's literary lineage.

Having discussed in detail, through specific examples, the role translations could play in the rewriting of literary traditions, and in offering active resistance to stereotypical readings, I also wish to draw attention to an inevitable subsequent formulation. In a translation where the agenda is clear to the translator, the linguistic/stylistic choices play second-fiddle to the primary interpretation itself. There was a time when editions of translations could be brought out without the required attaché of a Translator's Note, but now in the field of Translation Studies, this is counted as an unwelcome habit of shirking responsibility and therefore the translator-creator has the added responsibility of playing the translator-critic, the translator-theorist, etc. In short, if I engage in the project of translating *Ulysses* into Malayalam, will the critical community spare me the question, "Why do it at all?"

NOTES

1. Cheng, Vincent l995 *Joyce, Race, and Empire* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, p.2.
2. Tymoczko, Maria l994 *The Irish 'Ulysses'* Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.