Should the Translator Ask: Woman, What have I to do with You?

LEVIN MARY JACOB

Abstract

This study problematizes the translating of the Bible into Malayalam by engaging in a comparative analysis of three Malayalam translations of select passages from the Gospel according to John. Surveying these texts from the subject position of woman and an informed reader, the study tries to understand the gender nuances embedded with translated texts. The attempt is to voice the silences within the texts by intervening the text using grammar, vocabulary and meaning as indicators of patriarchal traces and gender asymmetries.

Keywords: Translation, Translator, the Bible, Gender, Woman, Patriarchy, Lexicon

Introduction

Considered as one of the widely translated text, the *Bible* exists in many languages as translations of translations. Translation becomes the most distinctive mode through which the Bible is made available for those who are not the speakers of Hebrew or Greek (the two languages in which the text has originally been written). Thus, in many languages, translated versions of the *Bible* attain prominence over the original, making it a prospective area of research in Translation Studies.

This paper is part of an investigation to understand the gender issues involved in the Malayalam translations of the *Bible*. Mary Phil Korsak, in her study of the gender issues involved in translation of the Bible posits that, "… the history of the Bible itself is the history of texts created and revised in patriarchal settings, promoting male images and values and demoting female images and values" (Korsak 2002: 132). Here, I engage in a comparative analysis through a textual reading of the three Malayalam translations of the Bible to understand how different versions "accentuate or mitigate an androcentric bias which is characteristic of the source text" (ibid.). Among the four gospels, Gospel According to John has the most number of passages which involve women or speak about them. Through a close reading of the female images and values used in the translation of Gospel according to John, the paper attempts to understand the attitude of the translated texts towards women.

Methodology

In this study, I will present a few ideas on how gender differences and power relations are produced in the translation of the *Bible* into Malayalam. Four events are selected from Gospel according to John for the analysis. The criteria for the selection of the events and the passages that narrate these events (in the Bible) are as follows:

    i. Conversation between Jesus (man) and woman (John 2: 1-10 the wedding at Cana; John 20: 11-18 Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection from the dead).

   ii. Conversation on woman by man (John 4: 1-41 Jesus and the Samaritan woman).

    iii. Conversation implying gendered positions.
(John 12: 1-11 Mary anoints Jesus at Bethany).

The translations selected for the discussion are Gundert's Bible (G), Sathyvedapusthakam (S) and Puthiya Niyaman: Aadhunika Vivarthanam (P).

Originally published between 1841 and 1886, Gundert's Bible is translated in the dialect of Northern Malabar region of Kerala. With the objective of proselytization of the indigenous people, the text was translated by Herman Gundert of the Basal Evangelical Lutheran Mission of Tellicherry, Kerala. Gundert's Bible translation is commented for its contribution to the growth of Malayalam language as it was also an attempt to rescue the target text from the influence of Sanskrit that dominated the written Malayalam. I use Gundert's Bible, republished in 1992 for the study.

Published by the Bible Society of India, *Sathyavedapusthakam* has neither a preface and nor any information on the date of publication. However, this text is one of the oldest publications of the Malayalam Bible still in wide circulation. In the preface to Gundert's Bible, Sacriah Zacariah notes that Sathyavedapusthakam was published in the beginning of the twentieth century and Gundert's Bible was one of the texts used as a model for the translation.

Puthiya Niyamam: Aadhunika Vivarthanam (New Testament: The Modern Translation) published around 1980, is prepared for "modern" readers of the Bible. It sets a target oriented approach to the Bible privileging "meaning" over "word" and attempts to prepare a modern Bible for the contemporary readers.

In this paper, I will look into those gender specificities involved in the translation of the *Bible* that give rise to gender asymmetries, creates hierarchies, binaries and power relations within the Target Text (TT). Based on Korsak's view, the study is executed through the analysis and comparison of the lexical choices of the translators "that reveals significant consequences for gender issues" (Korsak 2002: 139). I use Malayalam – English Dictionary published by DC Books in order to provide meaning of words from Malayalam to English. I also refer to King James Version (KJV) to give the English translation of the select verses. Also note that all the three versions were translated under evangelical mission and therefore impact the analysis.

A Note on the Prefaces of the Selected Texts

The prefaces to the three versions accept translation as a means through which Word reaches the reader and the believer. In order to attain the equivalence with the original Bible, these prefaces claim a faithful rendering of the Source Text (ST) so that the Word (of God) is not lost in translation. Thus, these versions accept the authority of God through their attempt to be faithful to their original. This acceptance of the authority of God and authorial original attributes sacrality to the text- raising the text as morally authorial.

Reading the Idea of Woman: An Analysis of the Rendering of the Word Γυναίκα as *sthree*

In this section, I will analyse how the idea of woman is formed within the various translations. In all the three versions of Gospel according to John, woman is referred as *sthree*. The first instance where the word *sthree* is used is in John 2: 1-10. The portion narrates the story of Jesus turning water into wine.

Turning water into wine is the first miracle Jesus performs during the wedding at Cana and it marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth. In John 2: 4-5, Jesus' mother Mary informs him that the wine is over and he answers: "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come" (KJV). Given below is the translation of the verse into Malayalam:

1) S: Yeshu avalode: Sthreeye ennikkum ninakkum thammil enthu? Ente nazhika ithuvare vannittilla ennu parnju.

   Sthree = woman, nee = You, thammil = between each other; Jesus said unto her, Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour has not yet come. [my translation]

   G: Sthreeye, enikkum ninakkum enthe? Ente nazhika vannittilla ennu paranju.

   Sthree = woman, nee = You; Jesus said unto her: Woman, what have you and I have to do? My hour has not yet come. [my translation]

   P: Amme, ithil enikkkum ammakkum enthu karyam? Enthe samayam ithuvareyum aayittila." amme = mother; ennikkum = me; Mother, what do you and I have to do with this? My time has not yet come [my translation]

The word Γυναίκα (woman) from the (Greek) ST is rendered *sthree* in the first two versions (*Sathyavedapusthakam* and Gundert's Bible. *Sthree* signifies a woman/wife/the female of the human species. The usage of the word *sthree* in the first two versions is due to the literal rendering of Γυναίκα

(woman) from the (Greek) ST. The sentence is further intensified with the usage of the pronoun *nee* (you). Etiquettes of the target culture do not permit mother to be addressed as *sthree*. It is considered as impolite and immodest. The context of the conversation also nullifies the possibility of a hostile comment that might have led Jesus address his mother as nee. The selection of words *sthree* and nee allow the connotative meaning to surface in TT: that Jesus is now released from the bondage of his mortal mother Mary, reducing her to the status of a female among the human species and raises Jesus up the divine pedestal.

The usage of the preposition *thammil* (between each other, among) in the first version (*Sathyavedapusthakam*) further modifies the question allowing the reader of the translation to reconsider the relationship itself. Intensifying the distance between the mother and the son, the rendering of the word *thammil* in the sentence can be read as a moment where the mother becomes an agency for the son to enter the world; in other words, motherhood becomes a mere instrument for the divine power to enter the world.

On the contrary, *Puthiya Niyamam* (the third version) translates Γυναίκα as *amma* (one of the variants for the word 'mother') thereby addressing Mary as mother. This sentence is indicative of the respect the son has for his mother. However, it does not suggest the divine power of the Son. It is possible that the translator delays the information regarding the divine power of Jesus until the next sentence. This translation can be assumed to be oriented towards the target culture by following the etiquettes in the target culture unlike other two translations.

In John 4: 27, *sthree* is used again. Disciples were surprised to see Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman: "And

upon this came his disciples, and marvelled that he talked with the woman: yet no man said, What seekest thou? or, Why talkest thou with her?" (KJV).

   2) S: Sthriyode samsaarikayaal aashchariyapettu
    Talking to (a) woman astonished them [my translation]

    G: Sthriyode samsaarikayaal aashchariyapettu
    Talking to (a) woman astonished them [my translation]

    P: Oru sthriyode samsaarikayaal aashchariyapettu
    Oru = a/one; Talking to a woman astonished them
    [my translation]

Jesus meets the Samaritan woman during a halt in Sychar, Samaria. His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. On their return, they were surprised to find him talking to the Samaritan woman. The texts do not substantiate the reason for their surprise. In the first two versions, the noun *sthree* (woman) is rendered without a determiner (*aa/oru* – the/that) attaching an arbitrariness to the identity of the woman. It is likely to imply that Jesus talking to any woman surprised the disciple.

On the other hand, the third version uses the determiner *oru* (a) indicative of particularity to the woman's identity: that the disciples were not surprised because Jesus was not talking to any woman, but a Samaritan woman who was considered to be inferior to a Jew. Communication between the two are restricted by the societal norms. Samaritan woman herself expresses this as a concern to Jesus in the preceding verse – John 4: 9: "Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans" (KJV). In the third version, the third version is suggestive of the caste intricacies involved in the source

culture with use of the determiner. On the contrary, the first and the second version do not clarify whether it is the gender of the individual (whom Jesus was talking to) or any other reasons that caused wonder among disciples.

Lexical Choices and the Creation of Binaries and Hierarchies

This section reflects on how choice of words can lead to the creation of gender differences through creating binaries and hierarchies in the TT. It is also a reflection on how lexical choices create differences in meaning and thus give rise to varied readings/interpretations.

John 20: 11-18 narrates the first incident that takes place after his resurrection. On the third day after crucifixion, Jesus resurrects from death. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene who visited his tomb early in the morning. She becomes the first one to know that Jesus rose from death. Mary in disbelief tries to touch Jesus. But, Jesus does not let her 'touch' her and says in John 20: 17a: "Touch me not…" (KJV). The following are the response of Jesus to Mary as presented in the three versions:

3) S: Enne thodaruthu
   thoduka = touch; Do not touch me [my translation]

   G: Enne pidichukollala
   pidikkuka = hold/grasp; Do not hold me [my translation]

   P: Enne thadanju nirthathirukkuka
   Thadanju nirthathirukkuka = not to obstruct/not to stop; Do not obstruct me [my translation]

Note that debates on the notion of 'touch' are a matter of debate in the ST also. The debate is further intensified as the conversation takes place between Jesus and a woman. Therefore, it is interesting to note how the 'notion of touch' is being translated in the TTs and how it attains meaning in the target language and culture. All the three versions use three distinct verbs in them to indicate the action of Mary Magdalene towards Jesus. In the first version, the verb *thoduka* (touch) imply that Mary Magdalene tried to touch Jesus while second version uses the verb *pididkkuka* (hold/grasp) to indicate that it was an act of holding. The third version takes a different stand by choosing the phrase pidchu nirthuka (to stop/obstruct). These verbal distinctions give rise to three kinds of meanings.

In the first version, Mary Magdalene tries to touch Jesus which is stopped by Jesus through his response to her: "Do not touch." The second version uses the word *pidichukollalla* (not to hold/grasp). *Pidikkuka* also implies an act of a person coming into contact with another body. However, it is suggestive of grasping somebody by force or to merely hold somebody. Both the version is suggestive of the possibility that Mary Magdalene might have tried to feel Jesus' body out of disbelief or in a shock of seeing what is unexpected. The third version, using the word *thadanju nithathirikkuka* not to obstruct/not to stop) deviates from the first two versions. It does not indicate an act- touching/holding. On the contrary, in this version, Jesus asks Mary Magdalene not to stop or obstruct him from what he intends to do – to complete his mission on earth before Jesus' ascension to heaven. While the first two versions refer to Mary's action as touch, third version gives an impression of an obstruction to Jesus' intentions.

It is important to note that the first two versions have significant consequences on the target language and culture. *Thouduka* (touch) as translated in the first version is a loaded term. It does not exist in the target culture as a mere action of touch. Touch attains its significance in the context of target culture where touchable-untouchable binary leads to the social stratification. It signifies pollution of a body and its surroundings if it comes into contact with an 'inferior' body. In this context, translator's choice of the word becomes challenging. The query is on the translator's choice of the word *thodaruthu* (not to touch) to voice Jesus' response to Mary. An interpretation of the first version is likely to imply a binary notion of sacred (Jesus) and profane (woman). A profane cannot touch the sacred. The resurrected Jesus Christ is above all mortals that a profane woman cannot touch him. Her touch will pollute him. A possible explanation that connects well with the sentence that follows verse in analysis: John 20: 17b – "for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (KJV). Although, *pidichukollala* is not used with the same level of intensity of the first, it still implies that Mary Magdalene tries to feel the body of the Jesus.

The third version avoids the confusion that exists in the first two by bringing in a different concept to refer to the situation. The translator diverts the attention (of the reader) from Mary Magdalene's action of touch to Jesus' action. Translator voices Mary Magdalene's action through Jesus as 'obstructing'. The differences of the lexical choices give rise to differences in meanings. This portion of John 20:17 is a fine example of how translator's voice is heard in a translated text – how s/he intervenes through her reading/interpretation of the original.

John 12: 2, provides another instance of varied translations, a result of translators' choices of words. Jesus attends a dinner that is arranged for him and his disciples at Lazarus' house at Bethany six days before the Passover. Lazarus was raised from death by Jesus, another miracle that Jesus performs. John 12:2 explains the role of Martha, sister of Lazarus, at the dinner: "There they made him a supper; and Martha served: Lazarus was one of them who sat at the table with him (KJV).

4) S: Martha shushrusha cheythu
   Shushrusha = serve; Martha served [my translation]

   G: Martha shushrusha cheythu
   Shushrusha = serve; Martha served [my translation]

   P: Martha atithikale paricharichu
   Atithikale = the guests, paricharichu = attended on;
   Martha attended (on) the guest. [my translation]

While the first two versions use *shushrusha* (to serve), the third version uses *paricharanam* (to attend) to translate Martha's participation in hosting a feast for Jesus and his disciple at her house in John 12: 2. The word *shushrusha* is derived from two words – *shrotham* and *iccha*. It signifies the desire to listen. The desire to listen is central to the act of *shushrusha*. The two versions hint the eagerness of Martha to serve Jesus and other guests. On the other hand, *paricharanam* stands for service which is provided willingly or unwillingly. It can be imposed on the subject. It is more of a duty than a service. Therefore, Puthiya Niyamam suggests the duty endowed on Martha. This implies the possibility of merely reducing Martha's role to a duty/norm, the translator fails to bring in the idea of a female host who chose to serve Jesus and other guests at her home.

Significance in differences of the words *paricharanam* and *shushrusha* (the verb forms) can further be explained with two other instances from the John's Gospel. After Jesus' mother Mary informs Jesus that house has run out of wine at the wedding at Cana, she instructs the servants to follow Jesus' instruction. John 2: 5 records the conversation between Mary and the aids/servants at the wedding. She asks the servants to follow Jesus' instructions: "His mother saith unto the servants, whatsoever he saith unto you, do it" (KJV).

5) S: Avante amma shushrushakarode: avan ningalodu parayunnathu cheyvin.

shushrushakar = the one who serves/helpers/ servants, parayunnatu = tell; His mother to the servants: Do what he tells you to do. [my translation]

G: Avante amma shushrushakarode: avan ningalodu enthu kalppichaalum athu cheyuvin.

shushrushakar = the one who serves/helpers/ servants, kalppichaal = order; His mother to the servants: Do what he orders to you. [my translation]

P: Yeshuvinte amma paricharakarode: "yeshu parayunnathu enthayalum athu ningal cheyuka" ennu paranju.

Paricharakar = servants, parayunnathu = tell; Jesus' mother Mary to the servants: "Do whatever he orders you to do" [my translation]

Servants have been translated as *shushrushakar* (helpers/servants) and *paricharakar* (servants). If *shushrusha* largely depends on one's willingness to serve, *paricharanam* is more of a duty. Thus, *paricharakar* and *bhruthyanmar* are servants while *shushrushakar* can be servants or anybody who is willing to serve the guests at the wedding. In the target culture, a work of a Christian priest is represented as *shushrusha*. Though *shushrushakar* and *paricharakar* signify work, the latter creates a group of people whose duty is to serve while the former does not.

Likewise, *parayunnathu* and *kalppichaal* are word used in the versions to indicate Jesus' instructions. But two words connote two different meanings. If *parayunnathu* is to say, *kalppichaal* is to order. Gundert's Bible uses *kalppichaal* while the other two versions use the word *parayuka*. The word parayuka can be used to indicate one to one interaction between individuals. Contrary to that, *kalpikkuka* is indicative of assymetrical power relations between individuals. Perhaps, the translator could have used *nirdeshangal* (directions/ instruction) as an equivalent. Dissecting the usage of the word *kalppichaal* in the sentence reveals translator attributes authority to Jesus which is voiced through Mary.

Conclusion

With gender as the focus of the paper, I have presented the possible consequences of the translated text on the target language and culture. The primary concern of my study is to understand how the *Bible*, a text that formed within a patriarchal setting performs within the target culture which is yet another case of a patriarchal setting. In other words, the study was to understand the effect of the Bible as a target text on the language and the socio-cultural space of Kerala.

The study seeks to create awareness on gendered nature of the translated texts. The investigation based on three Malayalam translations of the Bible puts language under test by surveying the lexical choices of the translators of the select texts and investigates how a word and the meaning it creates within the TT give rise to gender differences within the text. The first section of the analysis has attempted to study the construction of 'woman' as an idea within the text by problematizing the word *sthree*. The second section looks into the problem of lexical choices that have created binaries and hierarchies. Here, I have demonstrated how lexical choices are capable of creating binaries and hierarchical positions.

It also looks into the role of a translator as an interpreter. It is already understood that a perfect equivalence is impossible. The differences in translations of the select verses in the three versions are to be seen as a case to understand translation as a space that allows modifications, mutations and/or the transformation of the original. Therefore, such a space can also allow the possibility of modification of biblical texts in Malayalam to meet the changing perspectives of and on the women in the society.

References

Gundert, Herman. 1992. Bible. Kottayam: D. C. Books.

Puthiya Niyamam: Aadhunika Vivarthanam 1980, Bangalore: Bible Society of India.

Sathyavedapusthakam (nd), Bangalore: Bible Society of India.

Korsak, Mary Phil. 2002. Translating the Bible: Bible Translation and Gender Issues. Bible on the Threshold of Twenty-First Century: Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion, ed. by Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten. New York: Sheffield Academic Press.

***