

# An Interview with Author Sethu as a Self-translator

By AMMU MARIA ASHOK

**Sethumadhavan** (hereafter **SM**) is popularly known as Sethu. A banker by profession and writer by passion, he rose to become the Chairman and CEO of the South Indian Bank and later served as Chairman of the National Book Trust, New Delhi. For over five decades, Sethu has been a leading voice in Malayalam literature, credited with transforming the sensibility of modern fiction. Since publishing his first short story in 1967, he has written more than 40 books, including celebrated novels like *Pandavapuram* (1979), *Niyogam* (1988), *Adayalangal* (2006), and *Marupiravi* (2011). Blending realism with myth and magic, Sethu's narratives continue to captivate readers, ensuring his place as a master craftsman of modern Indian literature.

**Ammu Maria Ashok** (hereafter **AMA**) holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and TESOL. A poet, translator, and academic, she has taught at several universities, sharing her expertise in language and literature. Her poetry and translations of short stories and poems have been featured in numerous anthologies, books, and digital platforms, including the prestigious Kerala Sahitya Akademi. Her creative and scholarly pursuits reflect a deep engagement with language, culture, and the nuanced art of literary expression.

**AMA:** Why did you choose the novel *Aramathe Penkutty* (2017) to translate into English, titled *Kadambari: The Flower Girl* (2021)? What ideological factors in translation motivated you as a translator to take up this translation work?

**SM:** I chose to translate *Aramathe Penkutty* (2017) not because of any fixed ideology but as a way of re-engaging with my own text in another language. Translation gave me the chance to test whether the story could be retold differently and perhaps even more effectively in English. *Kadambari*, the central character, has always been close to my heart, and translating her story allowed me to reconnect with her on a deeper level. It was less about a theoretical motivation and

more about personal attachment to the narrative. This emotional pull gave me the courage to take up the task.

**AMA:** To what extent can the emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual effects of the original text be fully conveyed in its translated version?

**SM:** Transferring the complete effect of the original into a translation is never easy. Translation is an intricate and demanding task. At the same time, it is also a creative process where the author and translator must meet at a common plane of understanding. The translator must be able to enter into the soul of the text and re-create its spirit in a way that resonates with new readers. This requires both empathy and compassion, especially toward the main characters, so that their experiences are authentically carried across languages.

**AMA:** A literary book has its own dialect, tone and ambience. How far is it possible for a translator to preserve the tone, mood, and overall impact envisioned by the author while adapting the work for readers from a different linguistic and cultural background?

**SM:** All three -dialect, tone, and ambience are important, but it is often the dialect that is hardest to preserve in translation. Dialects carry cultural and social markers that may not exist in the target language. While the exact rhythm of speech cannot always be recreated, I tried to ensure that the overall tone and ambience of the text carried the same intensity. By doing so, the spirit of the characters and setting remained alive in English. Thus, tone and ambience often became the bridge where dialect could not fully survive.

**AMA:** Tamil culture inevitably appears in this book. Did you find any difficulty in translating words and sentences associated with this culture into English?

**SM:** Not particularly. I am already quite familiar with the geographical terrain, social milieu, and distinct cultural landscape of Tamil Nadu. This familiarity proved to be an invaluable advantage during the translation process. Having lived within or closely observed the rhythms of Tamil life- the idioms, festivals, social hierarchies, and emotional nuances embedded in everyday interactions, I could approach the text with an insider's sensitivity. This enabled me to

render culturally rooted expressions and region-specific references into English without losing their original resonance or emotional depth. Rather than perceiving Tamil culture as a barrier to translation, I viewed it as a rich resource that enhanced my interpretive choices. The cultural context informed the tone, imagery, and cadence of my translation, allowing me to preserve the authenticity of the source text while making it accessible and meaningful to readers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

**AMA:** There are many words associated with Kerala and Tamil caste, region-specific words, and phrases associated with these cultures in the source text. If omitted, what is the reason?

**SM:** Yes, this was indeed a major challenge, because shifting culturally loaded expressions from one language to another always risks loss of meaning. I personally avoided excessive use of footnotes or italicised insertions, as I did not want to burden the reader. Instead, I tried to weave the meanings into the flow of the narrative. I am not a professional translator, but I felt it was worthwhile to attempt this task. I was fortunate that my editor, publisher, and several readers responded positively to these choices. This gave me confidence in my approach. Incidentally, I had already ventured into writing directly in English with *The Cuckoo's Nest*, which also gave me some experience in bridging cultural gaps.

**AMA:** How did you translate caste, culture, idioms, and proverbs into English?

**SM:** This was one of the greatest challenges of the work. Regional idioms, caste-specific terms, and proverbs do not always have neat equivalents in English. I avoided heavy use of footnotes or italicised insertions because they might distract the reader from the flow. Instead, I tried to make the meaning clear through context while keeping the flavour intact and adding the meaning of those words in brackets. Translation in such cases is about striking a balance between clarity and authenticity. The positive feedback I received from readers and editors reassured me that this approach worked.

**AMA:** What are your notions on translating Indian tradition, including the boundary of translation terminologies used in both traditions and cultures?

**SM:** The challenge of translating Indian tradition is comparable to translating between Western languages. Yet, modern readers are increasingly open to experiencing unfamiliar cultural contexts. For instance, Latin American literature has found wide acceptance in Kerala, despite its very different traditions. Interestingly, while working on translations, one sometimes discovers unexpected commonalities between myths and beliefs in seemingly distant cultures. This makes translation not just a linguistic task but also a bridge for cultural recognition.

**AMA:** Nowadays, most translators have interpreted translation as a site of knowledge creation and determination. How would you reflect upon this view?

**SM:** I fully agree with this perspective. In contemporary translation studies, translation is increasingly understood not as a secondary or derivative act, but as a vibrant site of knowledge creation and cultural negotiation. It is far more than the transfer of words or meanings between languages; it is an interpretive and intellectual process through which new ideas, perspectives, and identities are continually shaped. Every act of translation involves linguistic, cultural, and ideological factors that inevitably produce new meanings. When translators engage with texts, they reinterpret them through the lens of their own cultural and historical contexts, thereby generating fresh understandings that did not exist in the original. In this sense, translation participates in the construction and circulation of knowledge, expanding the boundaries of thought across languages and societies.

**AMA:** What are the cultural and linguistic gaps you find in your translation process?

**SM:** There are always numerous cultural and linguistic gaps that emerge during the translation process. Every language carries within it a unique worldview, shaped by history, geography, and social experience. No two cultures or linguistic systems ever align perfectly; there are always expressions, idioms, cultural references,

and emotional undertones that resist direct equivalence. These gaps remind us that translation is not a mechanical act of substitution, but an interpretive and creative negotiation between worlds. For instance, certain words or metaphors may carry deep cultural resonance in the source language but may not evoke the same emotional or symbolic response in the target language. Similarly, cultural practices, humour, or social hierarchies embedded in a text may require sensitive adaptation to ensure they remain meaningful to readers from another context. In these moments, the translator must act as both mediator and creator, seeking not to erase difference, but to make it intelligible and aesthetically effective. To me, these gaps are not failures or limitations, but opportunities for discovery. They challenge the translator to think deeply about meaning, context, and the power of language to convey shared human experiences despite cultural distance.

**AMA:** In your opinion, should translators possess a deeper cultural competence and understanding of social, historical, and contextual nuances than mere linguistic proficiency? How important is cultural literacy in comparison to linguistic skill in ensuring that a translation authentically represents the essence and intention of the original text?

**SM:** Both cultural and linguistic competence are equally vital. Without a sound grasp of language, the translator cannot write effectively. At the same time, without cultural understanding, the words may fail to carry their intended resonance. A balance between the two is necessary. Linguistic precision provides the technical foundation of translation, but cultural insight breathes life into it, allowing meanings, idioms, and emotions to flow naturally across languages. A translator who is attuned to cultural nuances can interpret symbols, traditions, and references that might otherwise be lost or misunderstood. In essence, language forms the structure, but culture gives the translation its soul together; they ensure that the translated work remains authentic, expressive, and meaningful to readers from another linguistic world.

**AMA:** Every translation has problems of its own, and a good translation depends on the correct understanding of the subject matter. Do you agree with this statement?

**SM:** Absolutely. A translator must, first and foremost, take genuine pleasure in the act of translation and cultivate a deep emotional and intellectual engagement with the original work. Translation is not merely a technical exercise in linguistic substitution; it is an act of creative empathy and interpretive artistry. To render a text effectively, the translator must internalise its spirit—its rhythm, tone, and emotional undercurrents until the words begin to resonate from within. Without absorbing the full flavour of the original, it becomes impossible to capture its subtleties, its silences, and its soul. A purely mechanical approach, driven by accuracy alone, can result in a lifeless version that fails to evoke the author's intended impact. True translation demands immersion in the subject matter, an intimate understanding of both the surface meaning and the cultural and psychological layers that shape it. Only through such immersion can the translator recreate in another language not just the meaning of the text, but its music, mood, and inner vitality.

**AMA:** To what extent do you believe translators possess the creative license to *transcreate*, that is, to move beyond literal translation and reimagine or recreate the source text in a way that preserves its spirit, emotions, and cultural nuances for the target audience?

**SM:** This is indeed a debatable issue and one that lies at the heart of translation studies. While some degree of creativity is both necessary and inevitable, excessive liberty in transcreation risks distorting or even overshadowing the author's original vision. A translator operates within an ethical and aesthetic responsibility to remain faithful to the source while ensuring that the translation resonates meaningfully with readers from another linguistic and cultural context. Complete adherence to literalism can drain a work of its vitality, reducing it to a lifeless rendering of words. Yet, unrestrained creativity may lead to a re-authored version that reflects more of the translator's imagination than the author's intent. Therefore, the translator's task is to strike a delicate balance, faithful yet imaginative, respectful yet expressive. True translation lies not in mechanical equivalence but in the recreation of tone, rhythm, and emotional texture that preserves the spirit of the original. The translator must interpret rather than merely transfer, ensuring that the translated text lives and breathes in its new linguistic space without

losing its essential identity. In this sense, creative license becomes not an act of freedom for its own sake, but a necessary instrument for fidelity to the soul, rather than the letter, of the work.

**AMA:** Do you think there were alternative ways in which you could have approached the translation of this book, perhaps through different stylistic choices, linguistic strategies, or interpretive frameworks that might have produced a distinct version of the same text?

**SM:** Certainly. I believe no author or translator ever feels entirely satisfied with their work. The act of writing or translating is, by nature, an ongoing process, one that never truly reaches completion. I often feel that my works, especially my translations, remain open-ended and are completed only through the interpretation and imagination of discerning readers. Each reader brings their own experiences, emotions, and cultural sensibilities to the text, and in doing so, they reshape its meaning in ways the translator may not have anticipated. A translation, much like an original creation, is not a fixed or final entity; it is fluid and dynamic. Its form and resonance evolve with time, context, and the shifting sensibilities of its audience. What feels accurate or evocative in one era may appear limited or differently nuanced in another. Thus, every translation is a momentary realisation of possibilities, a version among many that could have been. In this sense, the translator's work is never truly finished; it continues to live, transform, and find new meanings in the minds of its readers.

**AMA:** Would you agree that the act of translation functions as a dynamic site of knowledge creation, where new meanings, interpretations, and cultural understandings emerge through the interaction between languages, contexts, and worldviews?

**SM:** Yes, I fully agree with this view. Translation is not merely a process of transferring words or meanings from one language to another; it is an active and dynamic site of knowledge creation. Through translation, cultures, histories, and ideologies are placed in dialogue, allowing the emergence of new meanings, interpretations, and perspectives. When a text moves across linguistic and cultural boundaries, it undergoes a process of transformation that reflects

both the translator's interpretive choices and the receiving culture's worldview. In this way, translation does not simply reproduce the original text but re-creates it in a new context, generating fresh understandings and intellectual possibilities. For instance, when literary works, philosophical ideas, or religious texts are translated, they often acquire new layers of significance shaped by the translator's cultural sensibilities and the target audience's expectations. This process fosters intercultural communication and expands the boundaries of human knowledge by allowing ideas to circulate across different linguistic and epistemic systems. Therefore, translation can be seen as a creative and interpretive act that both transmits and produces knowledge. It challenges fixed meanings and opens a space for dialogue between languages, traditions, and worldviews. In doing so, translation becomes a powerful site of intellectual negotiation, one where meaning is constantly being redefined, reshaped, and renewed.

**AMA:** Could you share any particular experience or memorable instance from your own translation practice that you believe would offer valuable insight or inspiration to students of translation studies, especially in understanding the practical, emotional, or ethical dimensions of the translator's craft?

**SM:** I may not recall a single, specific instance that stands out as particularly dramatic, but for me, the entire process of translation has been a profound and memorable journey, a continuous act of rediscovery of my own work and my relationship with language. Each time I engage with a text, I find myself revisiting not only the words and meanings but also the emotions, contexts, and silences that lie between them. Translation becomes a mirror through which I see both the source text and myself anew.

**AMA:** What suggestions would you like to give to future translators?

**SM:** The role of the translator is never passive; rather, it is inherently participatory, demanding a deep engagement with the text at every level. A translator is not merely a conduit transferring words from one language to another, but an active partner in the entire creative process, shaping meaning, tone, and rhythm with as much



sensitivity as the original author. There are instances when the translator's artistry and interpretive insight may even surpass that of the writer, offering readers a work that resonates with greater clarity, elegance, or accessibility in the target language. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine the global reception of García Márquez without acknowledging the immense contribution of Edith Grossman, whose translations played a pivotal role in carrying his literary voice across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

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