Not Lost in Translation: *Chemmeen* on Alien Shores

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Abstract

The process of translation as it is generally understood often implies loss of subtle linguistic nuances and cultural flavour in the target language. Are there components that survive translation and appeal to 'other' cultures and languages? This paper attempts to answer this question by foregrounding the Malayalam writer Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Chemmeen, which is one of the most translated works in Malayalam. The success of Chemmeen in translation is a surprise, given the fact that it is about a very specific culture, which is of the fisher folk in the coastal region of Alappuzha and that it is written in an almost untranslatable colloquial Malayalam. Obviously there are factors that have surmounted the obstacles of language and cultural difference.The paper focuses on the components that survive the process of translation, like the structural simplicity of the story that can be reduced to an archetype or the elements of folklore that resonate even on culturally alien shores.

The notion of loss is implicit in the process of translation; the assumption is that complete equivalence between two languages is impossible and that meaning slips through the interstices of disparate cultures. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis underlines this aspect: "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached: (Bassnett 13). Thus the premise is that the wider the cultural divide between the SL and TL, the more difficult it is to translate. Keeping in tune with cultural differences, the linguistic nuances are also thought to pose a problem for the translator. Are there factors that bridge this divide, and make

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easier the process of interlingual and intercultural communication, which translation is? If so, would these factors determine the translatability of a text across linguistic and cultural divides? The goal of this exposition is to attempt an answer to this question by foregrounding the English translation of a Malayalam novel, *Chemmeen*, written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai.

Chemmeen (translated as 'Shrimp') was published in 1956, and became the first Malayalam novel to win the Sahitya Akademi prize. It sold well in Malayalam and was translated into numerous languages in India and abroad. The first foreign language translation was into the Czech language by Kamil Selabil. According to D. C. Kizhakkemuri, the publisher of *Chemmeen* in Kerala, the novel sold 44,000 copies upto its 19th edition in Malayalam and 57,000 copies in the Czech language. DC reminds us: "You must not forget that the number of Czech speakers is not even half the number of Malayalis" (Preface to the First edition of *Chemmeen*). The intersemiotic translation into the cinematic medium was equally successful. It won the President's Gold Medal for Best Film in 1964, and is considered a classic, noted for its acting, cinematography and music. So *Chemmeen,* in its original language and its interlingual and intersemiotic translated forms, can be considered an artistic and commercial success.

What is surprising about this success is that *Chemmeen* is not the finest of Thakazhi's (as Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai is popularly known) works. He is one of the best novelists of Kerala, perhaps even of India and won the Jnanpith award in 1984. He has written numerous short stories besides novels like *Randidangazhi, Thottiyude Makan, Enippadikal* and his masterpiece *Kayar.* Thakazhi himself has confessed that *Chemmeen* is a bit of a 'painkili', which means mushy or sentimental love story. It does not have the social issues that he discusses in *Randidangazhi* or *Thottiyude makan* or the thematic complexity of *Enippadikal* or *Kayar.* Moreover, it is a linguistic nightmare as far as the translator is concerned, because the characters speak the colloquial idiom of a particularly small fishing community that lives only in a few villages of Alappuzha. The Malayalam that they speak contains words that are unintelligible to the rest of the Malayalam-speaking people in Kerala.

Capturing nuances of dialect in English translation is a major challenge for any translator. R.E. Asher, well known for his English translation of another major Malayalam writer Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, has written about the difficulty of capturing the evanescent dialect in a foreign language like English. (Incidentally, Asher has also translated Thakazhi's works). When confronted with the "Islamic terminology that is no more familiar to the non-Muslim Malayali reader than it would be to the average non-Muslim speaker of English," Asher says he had no option but to sacrifice such dialectical variations completely because there was no English substitute for a vernacular dialect (xiv-xv). The form of Malayalam that Thakazhi uses in *Chemmeen* is also unfamiliar to a majority of Malayalam speakers. Interestingly, Narayana Menon the English translator of *Chemmeen,* does not make any comment on the equally vexing task of translating the colloquial idiom of coastal Alappuzha. Perhaps, translation as a self-conscious activity was not that well developed in 1962 when the translation was first undertaken. Or perhaps, as A.J. Thomas argues: "Making the translation eminently readable and racy, Narayana Menon got away with it – at the cost of the narrative marvel of the original, through deletions, suppressions, and mutilations,…" (Thomas 2005:45). Thomas points out that Menon unabashedly foreignized the original to cater to western readers, and the commercial success of the translated version indicates the triumph of the translator. However, the translator's interventions seem to be in the domain of the cultural ethos. As Thomas (2005) illustrates, Menon edits out portions which he thinks would be meaningless for a culturally foreign readership; rarely does he leave out a sentence because it is too colloquial to be captured in a foreign tongue. *This strengthens my argument that there is an element, the dynamics of which we will do well to study* *and understand, in* Chemmeen *that makes you forget language and the related problematics when it comes to translation, which encourages a look at the factors that are extrinsic to the language of the novel to account for its, or any text's, translatability, and its appeal despite the apparent untransaltability.*

Structurally, the novel is extremely simple probably because Thakazhi's characteristic narrative style is simple and linear. The central characters are Karuthamma and Pareekutty, who are childhood friends and now lovers. They belong to two different communities, she to the Marackan (which is Hindu fisherfolk) community and he to the Muslim community, and marriages between the two are strictly forbidden. Despite this they are drawn to each other in a love that is not destined to end in marriage. The story is complicated further as he is *Kochumuthalali*, or the owner of the tanning yards on the seashore whereas she belongs to a poor fisherman's family. Karuthamma's parents sense the budding love between their daughter and the young and handsome Pareekutty, but turn a blind eye to it temporarily as he lends money to her father to buy a new boat and fishing net. Chembankunju, Karuthamma's father, grows rich on Pareekutty's money while Pareekutty falls deeper and deeper into debt. Karuthamma is a mute witness to his downfall. The nouveau riche Chembankunju arranges Karuthamma's marriage with Palani, an energetic and hardworking fisherman from another village. Karuthamma bids farewell to Pareekutty and starts her marital life with Palani. Life is good for them and a daughter is born. Meanwhile, Chembankunju's life becomes a misery as his wife dies and he remarries. The ill-gotten wealth soon dissipates and he is financially ruined. The relationship between Karuthamma and Palani is marred now and then by Pareekutty's shadow as Palani accuses her, without any basis whatsoever, of infidelity. Karuthamma's resistance gives way one stormy night when Palani is out at sea, and she goes off with Pareekutty. The next morning, both lovers are washed up on the beach and Palani dies at sea, fighting a shark.

The story can be reduced to the Karuthamma-Pareekutty-Palani love triangle which is set against the myth of the Kadalamma (‘goddess of the sea’) who is Preserver and Destroyer. She is beneficent to the fisherman who leads a life of moral purity; even on the stormiest seas, she guards the fisherman whose wife remains chaste and prays for his safe return while he is at sea. It is not only the man’s life, but the life of the community as well that hangs upon the moral purity of the woman. The land, or in this context, the seashore, is identified with the woman’s body because local lore depicts a chaste woman who succeeds in bringing her man back from the jaws of impending death.

Shorn of its cultural and linguistic trappings, the Karuthamma-Pareekutty relationship is very much a love story like Laila-Manju, Farhad-Shirin or Heer-Ranjha of the East and Romeo and Juliet of the West. The story of the star-crossed lovers that ends in death is very familiar and cuts across cultural and geographical barriers. Patrick Colm Hogan underscores this point in his study of literary universals by saying that “… every tradition tells tales of conflict in two areas – love and political power” (23). He points out: “Perhaps the most cross-culturally widespread version of the love plot is a particular variation on the comic love story. This variation, “romantic tragic-comedy”, in effect includes the tragic love story, where the lovers are separated, typically by death, often with a suggestion of literal or metaphorical reunion after death…” (24). These ‘prototypical narratives’ that appeal to our emotions (Hogan 6) have the capability to transcend cultural divides.

Chemmeen follows this ‘accepted’ pattern of the tragic love story. The central characters of Karuthamma and Pareekutty are types, not rounded characters. Pareekutty is the typical romantic lover living in the dreamland of his love. Palani is the antithesis of Pareekutty in every way – he is a solid realist, a counterpoint to Pareekutty’s romantic dreamer and lover, sparse with words where Pareekutty is eloquent in love. Karuthamma is thus caught between romantic love and the realistic man-woman relationship in wedlock. The moonlight and song that are associated with Pareekutty is a clear indication of this dichotomy between romantic aspiration and harsh reality: “One moonlit night when the sea was calm, Karuthamma heard a song which seemed to mingle with the moonlight. Pareekutty was singing. It wasn’t as Pareekutty’s song that the music sounded in her ears. Pareekutty’s entity was no longer there. She felt as if she was being called to a world of joy and happiness, the call of the seashore bathed in moonlight, the music of the seashore she was bidding farewell to.” (*Chemmeen* 76) After Karuthamma gets married and goes away to her husband’s house, the love-lorn Pareekutty wanders on the seashore singing his heart out, like Majnu, of the Laila Majnu story, made majnu (mad) by his love for Laila.

This love story is framed by the Kadalamma narrative and this mythical frame defines the relationships in the novel. The myth of the sea goddess is common to most sea-faring countries. The Inuit myth of Sedna, the Chinese myth of Mazu, the Greek myths of Thetis and Leucothea are a few instances. There is even a goddess of the sea named Bavers in Santharia, a cyber realm based on the Tolkien myths. Myths are bound to evolve especially in a community that lives in close proximity to the sea, dependent on its vagaries for a livelihood. In *Chemmeen,* this myth is woven with elements of the folktale. In typical folktale fashion, it is Karuthamma’s mother Chakki who reiterates Kadalamma’s contradictory qualities: “Do you know why sea goes dark sometimes? That is when the anger of the goddess of the sea is roused. Then she would destroy everything. At other times she would give her children everything. There is gold in the sea, child, gold” (7).

The world of undisplaced myth, according to Northrop Fyre, is a world “with gods or demons, and which takes the form of two contrasting worlds of total metaphorical identification, one desirable and the other undesirable” (139). We discern this mythical aspect in the description of Kadalamma’s fury when she drags fishermen to the unplumbed depths of the ocean:

> "The waves rose high on the sea. The whales approached him with their mouths gaping. The sharks charged the boat with their tails. The current dragged the boat into a terrible whirlpool" (6).

When the benevolence of the goddess is transformed to fury, the desirable world of the life-bestowing sea gives way to the undesirable to oceanic depths that offer death to the human. The contrast between the upper world and the Stygian depths of the underworld are clearly brought out again in the scene of Palani's death when his boat is caught in a whirlpool: "The palace of the goddess of the sea was at the bottom of the deep sea. There the sea goddess was enshrined. Palani had heard descriptions of that palace. He had to get there through a whirlpool, a whirlpool which made the whole sea churn round in circles, knocking at the gates of the sea goddess's abode" (171).

The sea, as a huge water body, also teems with symbolic associations. Water, according to Jung, is "the commonest symbol for the unconscious" (18). He points out that drowning in water is the prelude to the attainment of wisdom: "… the way of the soul in search of its lost father … leads to the water, to the dark mirror that reposes at its bottom (17). Frye also discusses the symbol of the sea at length, where the sea is home to the leviathan, the monster which devours, but is also a source of life-giving waters (191-192). But the huge water body of the sea in *Chemmeen* does not regenerate; it merely spews death and destruction. Karuthamma and Pareekutty decide to merge their lives with the sea, and Palani's boat is towed by the shark, like Captain Ahab's by the white whale, to definite death. Palani is the scapegoat that has to be sacrificed so that the fishing community of the seashore is saved from the fury of Kadalamma, and the lovers united in death. This would fall into the 'sacrificial tragic-comedy' prototype outlined by Hogan, where the "…physical, rather than a personal, social, or transcendental goal – prototypically, food, plenty of the primary means for maintaining life…" are taken care of by the sacrifice of a person (181-182). Palani has to die to ward off the curse of famine and starvation which was bound to stalk the shore because of his wife Karuthamma's sexual transgression. It is significant that after his death, the lovers are united – literally and metaphorically, for when their dead bodies are washed up or returned by an appeased Kadalamma, they are in each other's arms. Moreover, there is promise of life hereafter as we see Karuthamma's and Palani's girl child who can be the mother of the progeny to come.

The archetypal mother figure can also be located in the Kadalamma myth. Jung stresses the infinite variety of the mother archetype. He points out that many things that arouse devotion or awe can be mother symbols, like the earth, the woods, sea or moon (81). It is also associated with places that symbolize fertility. Kadalamma in her benign form is the Bountiful Giver, the mother who tenderly looks after her straying children, but she can also be the terrible Destroyer. As Jung points out, "On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (82). The cross-cultural examples that are cited by Jung range from the Indian notion of Kali and Mary who is not only the Lord's mother but in some medieval allegories his cross.

The Kadalamma myth is dexterously woven with the fisherman community's belief that the safety of the man at sea is in the hands of his woman who, remaining chaste, prays for his safe return. In the folktale of the seashore, the first fisherman who fought with the waves came back safely "Because, on the shore, a chaste and pure woman was praying steadfastly for the safety of her husband at sea. The daughters of the sea knew the power of that prayer and the meaning of that way of life" (6). However, it is not only the husband's personal safety that is at stake, but the survival of the community as a whole. It is the purity of the seashore itself that is in the hands of the womenfolk, and any transgression could invite Kadalamma's wrath. "Because a woman strayed off the path of virtue, the waves rose as high as a mountain and the water engulfed the seashore. The seashore was infested with poisonous sea snakes. Other monsters of the sea with mouths as large as caves darted after the boats" (75) this notion of chastity at first appears to be very culture-specific, or Indian, but the identification of the honour/safety of the land with the female body transcends geographical barriers. The universal phenomenon of the plunder and pillage of the land by an invading and conquering army is parallelled by the rape of its womenfolk. This "land-as-woman" symbol (as Annette Kolodny terms it in her book *The Lay of the Land* ix) has been explored by feminist theoreticians and more recently, by ecocritics alike and we can safely assume that this is a symbol that would be read and comprehended almost universally.

The power of the chaste woman is a recurring theme in many other myths, like Penelope waiting at home for her husband Ulysses while he is on his voyages. In India, we have the Satyavan – Savitri story, where Savitri's devotion to her husband persuades Yama to do the unthinkable, which is, return Satyavan from the land of the dead. Kannaki's righteous anger reduces the mighty Pandya capital to mere ashes and dust. Sati's immolation marks the destruction of her father Daksha, at the hands of her husband Siva.

Besides these very indirect echoes of myth and legend, *Chemmeen* is imbued with the spirit of traditions and customs that seem to pre-date the community. At the time of Karuthamma's marriage, the neighbouring women come together to give her advice on the responsibilities of a wife, because it was "an age-old custom", and "if she [Karuthamma] went wrong, the community would blame the neighbours" (74). Karuthamma's decision to part with Pareekutty is to uphold the time-honoured tradition of the seashore, but she imagines that she is "reliving a story in a strange language she could hardly follow. There must have been grandmothers who suffered like this. The sea breeze murmured the same kind of sad tale. In the sound of the waves, too, one could hear the same story" (75). Tradition is continued through generations, and Karuthamma's blighted love story is but a link in this chain. This notion of continuity elevates the story from the local and the specific and places it on the level of universality that answers to some deep, primeval aspect of human nature.

In his essay “The Task of the Translator” Walter Benjamin discusses the translatability of literary works. He agrees with the popular conception that in all literary and linguistic creation there remains an element that cannot be communicated –“it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized” (22). However, his argument is that if the translator is able to get to the “pure” language, “which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative word, that which is meant in all languages”, then the translator’s task has succeeded (22). The mark of the translatability of a text is its ability to be “identical with truth and dogma, where it is supposed to be the “true language” in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning” (23).

It is perhaps the pure language of myth and folktales that transcends linguistic and cultural divides that makes Thakazhi’s *Chemmeen* a translator-friendly novel. Its structural simplicity makes it a prototypical narrative with symbols that can easily communicate to a reader in culturally alien realms. This aspect of the novel is highlighted in the blurb on the dust jacket of the English version:

> “This is a book that deals with eternal values, and its immemorial rhythms of sea and sky stir out hearts with their haunting sweetness. The result is that *Chemmeen* has the quality of a fable in which the lives, the superstitions, the inner beliefs, the traditions and the sufferings of the community of fishermen are portrayed as a way of life with a deep and significant moral.”

This reductivity, which becomes an advantage in the process of translation, also has the potential disadvantage of making a novel an artistic failure. Somehow, *Chemmeen* manages to walk this artistic tightrope fairly well, and hugely successfully. Its appeal, not just to Malayali readers, but to readers in other languages as well as in other media, is ample testimony to this.

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