

Bridging Cultures Through Words: A Study of Arabic Translation History and Malayalam Literary Exchange

**Muhammad Kunhi M.P.P.
Nizar Koolikkool**

Translation is more than a linguistic act; it is a powerful cultural bridge that fosters mutual understanding between diverse societies. The Arabic translation tradition, with roots stretching back to the pre-Islamic era and flourishing during the Abbasid Golden Age - particularly under Caliph al-Ma'mun's patronage - preserved and transmitted global knowledge that later fueled the European Renaissance. This paper explores the historic depth and modern evolution of Arabic translation activities, focusing on the growing field of Malayalam-Arabic literary translation. While Arabic-to-Malayalam translations have long contributed to Kerala's religious and intellectual landscape, the more recent wave of Malayalam works rendered into Arabic reveals a dynamic shift, showcasing how Malayalam literature is increasingly being introduced to the Arab world. The paper also examines the challenges of preserving regional nuance and cultural essence in translation and emphasizes the importance of this literary exchange in fostering intercultural dialogue between Kerala and the Arab world.

Keywords: Intercultural Dialogue, Arabic-Malayalam Exchange, Cultural Preservation, Translation Challenges, Cross-Cultural Understanding.

Translation into Arabic Historical Context:

Translation surpasses the simple act of converting words between languages; it functions as an art form that bridges cultural gaps, enabling people from diverse backgrounds to understand and appreciate each other. Literary translation, in particular, overcomes language barriers, allowing a wide range of intellectual ideas to reach new readers. Since ancient times, human journeys—whether for religious pilgrimage or commercial exchange—have been driven by a desire to learn local languages, and translation has served as the essential catalyst for this pursuit.

The practice of translating works from various languages into Arabic dates back centuries, potentially beginning as early as the pre-Islamic period, during which Arabs frequently travelled between regions during winter and summer for trade. They used a variety of languages such as Syriac and Aramaic. They learned these languages to communicate during their travels. (Mehawesh, 2014). However, translation activity gained remarkable momentum during the Golden Age of Arabic literature— a period marked by intellectual flourishing and widespread knowledge dissemination. This was especially prominent during the early Abbasid Caliphate, notably with the founding of Bayt al-Hikma, the House of Wisdom, in Baghdad by Caliph Harun al-Rashid and its subsequent enhancement by Caliph al-Ma'mun into a premier centre for translation and learning in the early ninth century CE.

Under the patronage of Bayt al-Hikma, the Arab world emerged as a global centre of learning, particularly in the fields of science, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and literature. This state-sponsored translation movement led to the systematic rendering of hundreds of texts—drawing primarily from Greek, alongside significant Persian and Sanskrit sources—into Arabic. Scholars undertook the monumental task of translating diverse works covering astronomy, astrology, history, and more, using methods ranging from literal translations to conceptual adaptations and paraphrasing. Notable examples include the '*Panchatantra*' stories, translated as '*Kalila wa Dimna*' by Ibn al-Muqaffa, and portions of the '*Mahabharata*'. These efforts not only preserved ancient knowledge from extinction

but also laid the intellectual foundation of Islamic civilization, and later played a crucial role in fueling the European Renaissance when subsequently translated into Latin (Zaydan, 2013).

Translation enjoyed considerable acceptance in the Arab society of that era. Those who sought knowledge and brought books written in other languages from different countries were well-rewarded. Furthermore, for excellent translations that accurately reflected the substance of the original text, a system of substantial compensation was established. “One of the most outstanding translators during this period is Hunayn Ibn Ishâq (809–873), known as Joannitius in the Western tradition, who was paid by al-Ma’mun in gold, matching the weight of the books he translated” (Baker, 2009). Historical evidence indicates that Europe relied significantly on these Arabic intellectual treasures from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. (Prince, 2002).

With the decline of the Arab empires, translation activities also slowed down. However, following the rise of Muhammad Ali Pasha’s rule in Egypt in 1805, Arabic translation experienced a revival. This resurgence was further invigorated with the establishment of the ‘Madrasat al-Asun’, the School of Languages, in 1835, which revitalized translation efforts. Today, leveraging the possibilities of modern technology, Arabic translation continues to progress significantly.

Translation is not merely a linguistic conversion; rather, it is a subtle process of reflecting the essence of one culture’s symbols into another language. It involves presenting ideas expressed in the source language in a way that aligns with the expressive style of the target language, ideally with minimal loss of meaning. Linguistic styles should strive for maximum equivalence in meaning. A translator must possess a deep understanding of both the source and target languages, as well as relevant subject matter expertise. The translator should avoid adding or omitting content from the original text or distorting its meaning. A translator who does not demonstrate fidelity to the original author’s text and intent fails to meet the responsibilities inherent in this process. The success of both creative and scientific works often depends on the translator’s sense of appropriateness. Style and usage should be

chosen based on the intended audience. Phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax all hold significant importance in the translation process.

The Kerala-Arabic Linguistic Connection

Kerala has a centuries-old connection with the Arabic language. Driven by trade interests, Arabs who arrived on the shores of Kerala began to familiarize themselves with the local language for business transactions. Conversely, traders of Kerala used Arabic to explain the special features of local products to the Arabs. This interaction marked the beginning of a strong relationship.

Although the connection between Malayalam and Arabic is quite old, literary exchange gained considerable momentum in the latter half of the 20th century. Arguably, the Gulf migration of a significant portion of Malayalis, especially those from the Malabar region, during this period served as a vibrant catalyst for strengthening literary exchange between the two languages.

Extensive translation work has brought numerous texts from Arabic into Malayalam, covering a wide range of significant writings. The subjects include diverse areas such as the Quran, Hadith, Islamic history, Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh), theology (Aqeedah), Tasawwuf (Sufism), and ethics/moral science (Adab/Akhlaq), as well as fields like biographies (Sirah), philosophy, and language studies. The earliest Malayalam translations of Arabic texts date back centuries. These were very useful in the academic world and helped the Malayalam reader form an understanding of the socio-cultural life of the Arabs in the pre-modern era.

From the late 20th century onwards, modern Arabic literary works began to be translated into Malayalam. Works by prominent figures in the Arabic literary world, such as Khalil Gibran, Najib Mahfouz, and Taha Hussein, found Malayalam translations.

Currently, significant efforts are underway to translate major literary works from Arabic into Malayalam. It is a positive sign that Arabic-Malayalam translation activity is sufficiently active to ensure that many Arabic works creating interest in the literary world reach the Malayalam reader without excessive delay.

Translation from Malayalam into Arabic

Despite being fewer in number compared to the Arabic-to-Malayalam efforts, Malayalam-Arabic translations of excellent works also constitute a rich field. Considering the long-standing relationship between Kerala and the Arab countries, the significant contributions made by Kerala in Arabic language studies since the 18th century, the extensive learning facilities from schools to universities, and the influence of the Gulf region, it is perhaps surprising that Malayalam novels, stories, and plays—pathways for the Arabic reader into Kerala’s socio-cultural life—were not readily available in Arabic until the latter half of the 20th century.

Chemmeen, a notable novel by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai published in 1956, gained wide recognition with its poignant portrayal of life. The work, which received the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award in 1957, was translated into Arabic as *Shammeen* by the prominent Arabic linguist, journalist, and writer Dr. Muhyiddin Alwaye. The Arabic translation was popularized through the publication efforts of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, a body of the central government.

The novel, which meticulously portrays the social strata of the fishing community in Kerala—including their beliefs, customs, lifestyles, joys, and sorrows—and offers the reader a deeply moving experience of love and poetic beauty, presented considerable challenges for translation into Arabic. However, Muhyiddin Alwaye endeavoured to realize his objective effectively. Although the translator faced significant difficulties in fully conveying the novel’s strong regional flavour into Arabic, he succeeded to a large extent in remaining faithful to the original narrative.

Aadujeevitham is a novel narrating the story of Najeeb, a young Malayali man who sought work in Saudi Arabia, became stranded and endured extremely difficult circumstances on a desert camel farm. First published in 2008, *Aadujeevitham* won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best Malayalam novel in 2009. The Arabic translation, titled *Ayyaamu al-Maa’iz* was published in 2015 by Maktaba Afaq in Kuwait. Following its publication, the enthusiastic responses from Arab readers and critics alike attested to the artistic merit that attracted the Arab reading world. The poignant narrative of

the novel reverberated in the Arabic world through the dedicated work of linguist and translator Suhail Abdul Hakim Wafi, who skillfully brought this story to a new readership. Notably, in this translation from Malayalam, although many Arabic loanwords appear in the original text, the translator largely preserved Malayalee cultural concepts without modification or direct Arabic rendering, subsequently clarifying intricate meanings in an addendum.

Oru Sankeerthanam Pole, the notable novel by Perumbadavam Sreedharan, masterfully portrays a significant episode from the life of the globally renowned Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. The novel, which garnered numerous awards, including the Vayalar Award, and sold over 100,000 copies within a short period, was translated into Arabic under the title *Misla Tarneemah*. The translation was undertaken by Mohamed Eid Ibrahim, a renowned Egyptian writer, poet, and prominent translator. He was honoured at the Malayalam-Arabic Literature Seminar organized by the Kerala Sahitya Akademi in 2014.

Kaalam, M.T. Vasudevan Nair's novel that won the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award in 1970, was translated into Arabic in 2016, nearly half a century after its initial publication. The Arabic translation from English was done by Sahar Tawfik, an Egyptian writer, storyteller, and translator. It was brought to the Arab readership by Kalima, an ambitious initiative launched in 2007 and affiliated with the Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Centre (ALC).

Naalukettu, M.T. Vasudevan Nair's debut novel published in 1958 and winner of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1959, became a bestseller and has been translated into various world languages. Described as a poignant literary creation with characters drawn from life's realities, it was jointly translated into Arabic by Musthafa Wafy and Anas Wafy under the title *Naalukettu (Bayt al-Ajdad)*. This Arabic translation was published by Dar Madarik in 2019.

Balyakalaskhi, a novel by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer—known for his unique expressive style—offers a compelling reading experience narrating the sincere love story of Majeed and Suhra. Written before India's independence, the novel's appeal remains

undimmed. It was translated from Malayalam into Arabic by Suhail Abdul Hakeem Wafy under the title *Rafeeqatu as-Swiba*. The Arabic edition was published by Arab Scientific Publishers in 2019. Additionally, Basheer's short story '*Nirasha*' has been translated into Arabic as '*Al Ya's*'.

'*Shabdikunna Kalappa*' is a deeply poignant short story by Ponkunnam Varkey, who is regarded as a humanist and a revolutionary figure in Malayalam Renaissance literature. The story, centring on a farmer and exploring the theme of interdependence between nature and humans, has been translated into over twenty languages. The Indian Sahitya Akademi published the Arabic translation.

B.M. Suhara – the short story writer and novelist known for translating works like Naguib Mahfouz's *Bayn al Qasrain* (*Kottaratheruvu*) and Tayeb Salih's *Urs al Zayn* (*Zayninte Kalyanam*), into Malayalam – also had her novels translated into Arabic. Her works *Nilaavu*, themed on the national consciousness, and *Mozhi*, telling the story of a woman bearing family burdens, were translated from English into Arabic by Samar Mahmoud Shishkali, a Syrian poet, writer, and literary translator with the Qatar Ministry of Culture. These translations were published as *Dhaw'u al-Qamar* and *At-Talaaq* respectively, by the Sheikh Zayed Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi in 2015.

Furthermore, exploring the suffering of women in a conservative society, B.M. Suhara's Malayalam novel *Iruttu* reached the Arabic readership through Suhail Abdul Hakeem Al-Wafi's translation, *Tahta as-Sama al-Muzlimah*, which was published in 2020 by Dar Al-Watad, Qatar.

Even if the narrative thread does not get obscured, it cannot be ignored that the aesthetic qualities and nuances of colloquial language are often lost in translation. Particularly when the subject matter concerns specific communities- such as Malabar Muslims in some cited examples-translating works composed in language rich in regional flavour and containing subtle cultural references into another language, without losing their originality, emotional depth or intensity, and inherent beauty, present a significant challenge.

The writer, journalist, and translator V.A. Kabeer translated creative works by several authors, publishing them in Arab magazines. For instance, he translated three mini-stories by P.K. Parakkadavu (published in *Nawafid Magazine*, Issue 17, September 2001), Kamala Surayya's story 'Unni' (*Nawafid Magazine*, Issue 26, December 2003), and N.P. Muhammed's work 'Vellam' (*Nawafid Magazine*, Issue 26, December 2003). As Kabeer is equally proficient in both Malayalam and Arabic, his translations possess considerable elegance and finesse.

Kerala Mappila Paithrukam, a collection of essays by Dr. K. K. N. Kurup exploring the religious, cultural, and historical dimensions of Kerala's Mappila Muslims, was rendered into Arabic through the joint efforts of Prof. Zuhrahi Mattummal and Prof. K. T. Muhammed Kalangattodi. The Arabic version, released under the title *Thurasu Muslimee Malabar*, was introduced by Al Huda Bookstall, Kozhikode, in 1999.

Malayalam Poetry in Arabic Translation

The recognition and influence received by Malayalam poetry from the Arabic language appear greater in scope and impact than the contributions made by Arabic scholars to Malayalam prose literature during certain periods.

'*Veena Poovu*', the first major poetic work by the great poet Kumaran Asan, was published in 1907. The poem vividly inscribes life's meaning and impermanence through the poignant imagery of a fallen flower. Eighty years later, this significant work was rendered into Arabic by Nanmanda Aboobacker Moulavi—an accomplished Arabic language scholar, poet, and teacher—under the title '*Az-zahrah as-saqitah*'. Notably, since the translation was published within Kerala itself, the work failed to gain wider attention in the Arab world then.

Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon wrote '*Mambazham*' in 1936. The poem, reflecting the greatness of motherhood and the innocence of childhood, was later translated into Arabic by the writer and translator Sibghatullah Hudawi.

Kamala Suraiyya's '*Ya Allah*', an embodiment of courage and integrity, was translated into Arabic by the orator, writer, and poet

K. Moythu Moulavi. This translation, published by IPH, the Islamic Publishing House, Kozhikode, was released in 2010. Subsequently, the poem was translated by the poet and translator Dr. Shihab Ghanem under the title ‘*Raneenu Surayya*’ and published in 2011 by Kalima.

Sree Narayana Guru’s *Daivadasakam* was translated into Arabic by Dr. Shihab Ghanem. Because Dr. Shihab Ghanem is a well-known poet himself, his translation is remarkable for its linguistic fidelity.

In recent years, numerous literary works have been translated into Arabic. Dr. Shihab Ghanem translated poems by various poets such as Sugathakumari, Sachidanandan, Balachandran Chullikkad, and Balamaniamma into Arabic. Sugathakumari’s ‘*Rathrimazha*’ was included in the translated anthology *Matar-ul-Lail*, also known as *Qasa'id min ash-Sharq wal-Gharb*, published by Dar as-Sada in Dubai in 2014. He has translated Sachidanandan’s poems for the poetry collection titled *Kaifa Intahara Mayakovsky*. Dr. Shihab Ghanem has also translated selected poems by poets such as Edasseri Govindan Nair, Edappally Raghavan Pillai, Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, Ayyappa Paniker, O. N. V. Kurup, Attoor Ravi Varma, Yusufali Kechery, Kadammanitta, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, and Chemmanam Chacko into Arabic, working from their existing English translations.

Works by Asmo Puthenchira, Ram Mohan Paliyath, Sarju Chathannoor, Shihabuddin Poythumkadavu, Kamaruddin Amayam, Anil Kumar T. P., and Kuzhoor Wilson were also translated into Arabic by Dr. Shihab Ghanem himself, who keenly understands the socio-cultural literary landscape of the country and has gained recognition in Malayalam literature. These translations have been included in poetry anthologies published in the UAE, such as ‘*Qasa'id min Kairala*’ (Poems from Kerala) and ‘*Qasa'id min al Hind*’ (Poems from India).

The pace of literary translation from Malayalam to Arabic has clearly accelerated in recent times. Encouragingly, significant efforts are being made by contemporary writers and translators to make the diverse facets of the socio-cultural life of Malayalis accessible to Arab readers in their own language.

Conclusion

The Malayalam-Arabic literary translation reflects an evolving intercultural dialogue, recently accelerating significantly from Malayalam into Arabic and shifting the historical pattern of flow primarily from Arabic. Dedicated translators now make diverse Malayalam novels, stories, and poetry increasingly accessible to Arab readers, navigating inherent cultural and linguistic challenges to bridge understanding between Kerala and the Arab world. This vital, mutually enriching exchange requires sustained support to ensure its continued growth and impact in strengthening intercultural connections in our increasingly interconnected world.

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Muhammad Kunhi M.P.P

Assistant Professor

Department of Arabic

K.M.M. Govt. Women’s College

Kannur, Kerala, India

Pin: 670004

Ph: +91 9598171181

Email: muhammadmpp@gmail.com

&

Nizar Koolikkool

Assistant Professor

Department of Arabic

Government College Mokeri

Pin: 673507

India

Ph: +91 9495049363

Email: nizarkoolikkool@gmail.com