

## **Investigating the Notion of Translation within Arabimalayalam: *Tarjama* Tradition and Mappila Literary Formation**

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### **Astract:**

This paper is an attempt to highlight the multiplicity of translation practices and engagements that took place among the Muslims in Kerala. This paper aims to form a theoretical base for the multiple activities of translation particularly the *tarjama* tradition, a prevalent and customary way of writing/composition among the Muslims in Malabar. The attempt through the present paper is to investigate what is meant by *tarjama* practices in Arabimalayalam. By making an attempt to contextualize them historically and culturally, the paper negotiates with what did the term *tarjama* meant in the literary culture of Malabar during the period between the seventeenth century and early twentieth century and how that helped in the literary formation of Mappila Muslims in Malabar.

Even though Arabimalayalam literature is replete with numerous works that were trans-created/translated from many other languages, most of these texts in general do not highlight the fact that they are translations. In many cases, these texts are written or published afterwards leaving out important details such as the name of translator, her/his intentions, the source language, and the year and place of translation. At this juncture, it would be interesting to explore the reasons behind the aspects that made these texts devoid of details regarding its textual production. If any person makes an attempt of

locating the reasons behind this omissions the possibilities are not much far in front of her/him to get a hold of the meanings of translation in Arabimalayalam. A close reading of the term *tarjama*, the local terminology utilized by the authors in Arabimalayalam for their compositions in prose would help her/him in this venture.<sup>1</sup>

Though Arabimalayalam<sup>2</sup> originated as a literary and linguistic venture that was formed in the southern part of Kerala as variety of language similar to the prevailing *Manipravalam*, it spread and flourished with variety of genres in both prose and poetry. Unsurprisingly, the focus of the researchers in the field of linguistic has always met multiple dialects of particular languages within the framework of the discourses involving their evolution and development. In that sense, a few works have been done based on this aspect in Arabimalayalam. This kind of research intends to demonstrate the close bond between various aspects such as diffusion, language contact and other associated linguistic engagements of Muslims in Kerala particularly those in the region of Malabar. As a continuation of this, looking to Arabimalayalam texts requires further investigations that attempt to trace out the tradition of writing, rewriting, composing, translating, and other related activities that constitute the total textuality of the Arabimalayalam literary tradition.

Throwing light on multiple varieties of translational practices and their relevance in the contemporary Translation Studies, the recent translation theorists Rita Kothari and Judy Wakabayashi express their views in this way. According to them, it can be argued that the process of relocation of “constructs and practices” (Kothari and Wakabayashi 4) which are frequently supposed to be universal, necessitates an examination on “a case-by-case basis and, conversely, that some local phenomena might have productive implications for other contexts – and not just as data to confirm universally valid models” (Kothari and Wakabayashi 5).

A cursory look into varied occurrences of translation coming out of a micro-narrative prompts us to realise that the construction of some common ideational grounds for translation was formulated by the west without paying ample attention to the multiple ways of

translational practices in different parts of the world. In this juncture, underlining the inevitability of developing a new theory of translation and freeing the concepts around translation from the clutches of the west-oriented and single-sided theoretical underpinnings, Judy Wakabayashi and Rita Kothari in their introduction to the book titled *Decentering Translation Studies India and Beyond* propose that it is this decentralization that needs to be highlighted in such a way that would convince us of that the present “putative sense of collective identification” is a mere construct based on the western thoughts or western ideological hegemony (Kothari and Wakabayashi 5).

After accounting its plurality with numerous linguistic variations and cultural discrepancies, the literacy traditions in different parts of the world with different cultural backgrounds are often backed up by multiple practices of translation. A serious investigation into the history of translation from the traditional Indian literary culture that emerged in different socio-political situations in India will convince us that the major literary engagements in the mainstream literary arena have prevented extension into micro fields of literature by keeping the discipline constrained within holds of some major elite “literate” class. The illiterate class whether in Kerala or any part of the world made their presence in the literature only through spoken vernacular dialects? These vernaculars varied a great deal and in most cases did not have standardized written scripts of their own before the tenth century (Kaviraj 2010).<sup>3</sup>

This composite condition with infinite translational combination and prospects along with contrasting historical circumstances and miscellaneous approaches towards language and literature embedded with multiple socio-cultural implications has no doubt made this situation more complex. About this particular context Trivedi (2006) writes,

The characteristically Western assumption that India’s linguistic diversity makes it one of the richest and most productive areas in the world for translation activity overlooks the fact that widespread bilingualism and multilingualism obviate much of the need for translation felt by monolinguals. (103)

In this way, the reorientation of Translation Studies is in some ways to integrate diverse understandings of translation which incorporate the scrutiny of the evolution and interrelationships of translation-related terms in various language and “how the underlying concepts might differ from the semantic scope of English – language concepts, as well as exploring any potential insights these terms might provide into local views on translation” (Kothari and Wakabayashi 9).

Maria Tymoczko (2007) raises intriguing question of how the discipline of Translation Studies differs if it were based not on the Western European notion; that is, translation as a vehicle of rendering meanings for the readers. Tymoczko poses questions regarding the scope of the discipline if it were based on non-Western theoretical underpinnings. Tymoczko draws our attention to a range of words such as *rupantar* (change of form) which is Bengali, *anuvad* (following) in Hindi, *tarjama* (biography) and *fanyi* (turning over) in China. Each one of these terms interprets the practice of translation in different way and almost all of them present an idea about how the target text undergoes difference from the source text (68-77). With this back drop, it would be interesting to look what the term *tarjama* stands for among Muslims in Malabar and how does it differs from the generally conceived notion of ‘translation’.

Translation of many texts in Kerala among Muslims in Malabar was done with the purpose of religion; teaching of religious values, dispersal and propagation. The universal character of many religions, especially Islam in the context of Malabar, their followers made their religious texts an impetus and a vehicle for disseminating knowledge and at times, brought about a curiosity in texts though they were written in different languages. The Muslims of Kerala followed the model of their predecessors in other places by trying to introduce the maximum number of texts on their religious rituals and practices to make the believers acquainted with Islamic ideologies and teachings by *tarjamising* them. Tschacher, who has extensively scrutinized the literary and cultural lives of the Muslims in Tamil Nadu, having analysed the vast prolific literary tradition and translational engagements of Arwi (Hybrid form of Tamil and Arabic) expresses his view in this way.

Given the importance that translation had for making ideas, notions and precepts available to diverse populations, an understanding of the processes involved in translating texts in Muslim cultures has significant implications for our understanding of historical, religious, and literary developments in these cultures. (27)

The large oeuvre of Arabimalayalam compositions that grab our attention since the beginning of the seventeenth century evidently illustrates that Arabimalayalam entails relevance as the literary language utilized by Mappila Muslims at least from a period of early decades of the seventeenth century to the first half of the twentieth century<sup>4</sup>. In Malabar, many translations were embedded with activities of confrontation against overriding Sanskritized Malayalam of that time and Tamil traditions and were deeply evolved simultaneously to various endeavours in favour of asserting Muslim identities. In this way the concept of translation in the sense of cultural representation or negotiation also underlies the translation activities developed by the Muslims of Malabar. The texts produced during the periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries exhibit how translation was the overarching figure standing for the spectrum of cultural mediation activities initiated by the Muslims in Malabar in relation to Arabic, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Persian.

It is a well-acknowledged fact that translation always entails a power, which possesses wider range of cultural and social dimensions and propositions. Translation quite often plays the role of shaping, enlivening and giving birth to literature and language of certain cultures in certain societies and communities. One of the basic enquiries in this regard is to explore how translation acts as an influential medium for bringing in new genres within the existing literature and how the translated texts have been received in the target language. A cursory look into the collections of *tarjama* compositions would help to locate these texts as how the Mappila community in Malabar received them. In reading the history of literary tradition, it is important to investigate not only “who read and what they read but when they read, where they read, why they read, and, above all, how they read” (Raven 269). Mappila Muslims read the texts not only on various subjects related to the Islamic teachings, but also on medicine, astronomy,

history, and other important disciplines. The vast collection of such texts would be helpful in understanding how they were composed, read, and responded.

Similarly, the proliferation of fictional writings in Arabimalayalam had a monumental role in the literature of translation (a general term encompassing adaptation / transcription and other similar notions). Although numerous studies are at hand on the well-developed trade networks established by Malabar traders with different parts of both the country and the world, consequent effects of these networks coupled with literary tradition and translation are yet to be investigated. In this juncture an investigation on translation attempts in Arabimalayalam from Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Tamil and Sanskrit sources would open new avenues of possibilities in the area of Translation Studies. Moreover, these translations help us to re-read the history of Muslims in Malabar in a different dimension that is varied from a version of history in which Muslims are imprinted as “fanatics.”

The prose writings in Arabimalayalam largely consist of translations and commentaries of the *Qur'an* and *Hadeeth*, accounts of Islamic history, biographical narratives of the prophets of Islam, treatises on Jurisprudence, instruction manuals on medicines, Sufi literatures, fictional narratives, magazines and newspapers, and works on grammar and lexicons. To a large extent, these writings in Arabimalayalam are translated, though not completely, from Arabic, and from Persian, Sanskrit, Tamil and Urdu in less portion. The total body of the prose collections in Arabimalayalam is also known as *tarjamakal*<sup>5</sup> (Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Kunhi 1982). The works in Arabimalayalam began to be written and circulated on a comparatively larger scale with the huge enhancement in the number of Mappila printing press in different parts of Kerala.

Most of these printed Arabimalayalam works hardly present an idea about the details of the books. The primary details such as the name of author and year of composition are rarely mentioned in the texts even though they provide the complete details of printing such as the name of the press and owner, and place and date of printing.

Before arrival of Arabimalayalam press, many professional scribes (copyists) were hired as part of composing texts. These scribes would sit and copy numerous texts and produce several manuscript forms of a text. These groups of scribes were active in Malabar even after printing press was introduced in Kerala. Many texts exhibit the name of the scribe instead of name of the author. The ending of many texts would be like this: This book was copied by the polite and poor servant the Almighty Allah by the immeasurable blessing from part of the Almighty. The vibrant tradition of producing books in Arabimalayalam was a total result of such multifarious activities of “composing, copying, publishing, illustrating, binding, selling, and storing” and printing (Aramkuzhiyan 102).

Most of the prose writings available today in Arabimalayalam carry the tag of *tarjama*. Even though the word *tarjama* (a word Arabic in origin) stands for translation in English, its implications exceed beyond what we generally understand by translation. This phenomenon of labelling the prose writings in Arabimalayalam as *tarjma* directs an observer into two possibilities. The first of these two possibilities emerges from approaching *tarjama* as representing the common understanding; that is, rendering the meaning of the source text in the target text. According to this, the very name of *tarjama* indicates to the genuineness/authenticity of Malabar Muslims towards their habit of translating books from other languages. The very naming of whatever they authored/composed as *tarjama* could be observed as a token of complete acknowledgement from the part of the authors in Arabimalayalam that the texts they authored are translated from other texts and the ideas in the texts are not directly from their part but taken from others.

Along with the implications of authorship that the term conveys, what *tarjama* enlightens is related to book writing tradition of Mappila Muslims and their faithfulness to the ethics of writing. The *tarjama* attests that they were never ready to relate whatever they wrote directly to themselves. They expressed honesty to acknowledge the fact that the pieces of the information they shared through their writings belonged to someone else and they were only *tarjamizing* them. This possibility cannot be ruled out particularly when we approach

translation as an umbrella term for adaptation, interpretation, abridgement and other similar activities. Thus, *Tarjama* in other words can be defined as translation of texts into the local context of Mappila Muslims. Moreover, the term *tarjama* is an index that in almost all cases refers to its root text(s). The reader of a *tarjama* would know well that the text being read is not the original text. Instead, it is an explanatory composition of an original text which lays out of the reach of the reader who is not proficient in Arabic.

On the other hand, *tarjama* indicates that the major portions of translations were from Arabic and the manner they had appropriated their translation processes was to that of Arabic. The borrowing of the term *tarjama* instead of *vivarthanam* or *bhashantaram*, the terminologies utilized in the contemporary Malayalam for translation, could be considered as part of this appropriation. On both possibilities, there is a vast collection of texts in Arabimalayalam with the label *tarjama* in different subjects. Qur'anic Exegesis, *Hadeeth* (Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), *Aqeeda* (Creed), *tasawwuf* (Sufism), *Tariq* (History), Islamic Jurisprudence, Medical Science, Astronomy, Mathematics, Physiognomy and Palmistry are some of the fields on which many *tarjama* texts have been composed.

Another significant feature that can be observed in *tarjama* tradition is associated with the resistance and opposition that the Mappilas expressed against the rulers who ruthlessly treated and mercilessly tortured them. The Mappilas adopted *tarjama* compositions to instigate against their enemies. Since *tarjama* compositions were in Arabic script, the colonizers whether the Portuguese, British, or the native landlords were helpless to understand their language. This way, *tarjama* texts can be seen as a secret medium for the Mappilas to communicate among them. Numerous texts in this way had been confiscated and banned by the administrators for they instigated the people against the government.

*Tarjama* also allowed the native sensibility to resist the dominant cultural influences of any language of Arabic, Sanskrit or Tamil or Malayalam that had a strong hold among some sections of the society or the other in terms of region or religion. Despite Arabic occupying a



strong hold among them particularly in the religious domain, the Muslims were not ready to surrender completely for a language that is not the language of their land. Instead, they adapted a way of the middle stand by choosing a special script without being in complete encounter with Malayalam. In this way, *tarjama* can be counted as “means of assimilating the alien into the literary matrix of the local society” (Ramakrishnan 31). The words of Jennifer Rayman (1999)<sup>6</sup> in her comparison of American Sign Language and English storytelling would be contextual to borrow here while looking into how the *tarjama* compositions were embedded with the literary history that underlies them and what became instrumental in shaping the linguistic identity of Muslims in Malabar. Rayman notes,

Though the linguistic resources may not directly determine thought, they remain an intricate thread in the complex web of cultural and social practices. This thread wends and weaves its way into shaping how we think and live through language. (81)

The dispersal and dissemination of various texts in Arabimalayalam can be contrasted to many texts prevalent in many parts of India. In one sense, certain similarities could be noticed with the manner in which great epics are narrated and renarrated in the Indian Intellectual tradition as Paniker indicates to various Indian traditions of translation prevalent in India. Panicker (1998) in his essay titled “Towards an Indian Theory of Literary Translation,” adds that they were not limited to “literal paraphrase” (Panicker 36). Panicker, throwing light on how various retellings of Indian classic texts were rendered in different Indian languages adds that “Most of the translation activities were concerned with Sanskrit texts on the one hand and their retellings in other Indian languages which began to mark a phenomenal growth in the Middle Ages” (ibid).

Most of the *tarjama* compositions by the Muslims in Malabar retained the themes from Arabic, Persian, Tamil and Sanskrit literature and have used the indigenous narratives. Most of the *pattu* compositions in Arabimalayalam were produced as retellings of various texts written in different languages. The song *Badarul Muneer Husnul Jamal* (1870) was written by Moinkutty Vaidyar being inspired from a Persian<sup>7</sup>

story by Quaja Nizamudheen Shah Shirazi. Vaidyar, being the court poet of the Shah family in Kondotty and well versed in Persian, amalgamated the Persian surroundings with the backdrop of Malabar. It was a scholar named Nizamudheen who was proficient in the oriental languages who translated for Vaidyar the story of Badrul Muneer and Husnul Jamal from Persia. As a token of tribute, Vaidyar has paid his regards and gratitude for Nizamudheen in the song (Kareem 2014: 82). Similarly, his song called *Salaseel* is also based on a fable from Persia set in Qurasan. The song revolves around the tricks that a cat and a dog express and story of a *Jinnu* who disguised as rat and mongoose.

Similarly, his *Badar Padappattu* (*Badar War Song*) which was composed in 1875 that vividly presents a description of the battle 'Badr' one of seminal incident of resistance in the Islamic history is also a retelling through a song. The abundant knowledge of the poet coupled with his skill in composing song multiplied with the requirement of the context in which he lived made Vaidyar one of the best talented literary figures in the Mappila literary history. This *Badar Padappattu* was composed when Vaidyar was twenty-five years old. Many other *pattu* compositions on the theme of *Badr* were also produced after Vaidyar's song. There are more than twenty songs in Arabimalayalam on the theme of the battle of *Badr*. *Akhbarul Badr* by Kaipattu Muhyadheen Musliyar, *Badar* by M.M Moulavi, *Badar Pattu* by K.C. Avaran, *Asbabu Badar* by Tirurangadi Bappu Musliyar, *Badar Oppanapattu* by Vazhappullikkal Abdullakkutty, *Badar Thirippukal* by Kammukutty Marakkar are some of the other compositions on the same theme of the struggle of *Badr* (Razak 91; Karassery 2014: 233). *Gazvathu Badr al Kubra* 1876 (The Great Battle of Badr) of Chakeeri Moideen Kutty<sup>8</sup> is among this long list of songs written on the battle of *Badr*. This version is also known as *Chakeeri Badr* in order to distinguish it from various compositions by other writers.

Along with the transcreations in the form of *mala*, the major part of the *tarjama* was in prose. The *tarjama* compositions were instrumental in introducing new literary genres into Arabimalayalam. It would be contextual to revisit some of the important genres in *tarjama* compositions that emanated Arabimalayalam literary tradition.

We have to note that many of the texts circulated among the Mappila Muslims were largely of oral tradition. The songs on different themes were in one sense translations of different narratives associated with various subjects. It is because of this, I would like to identify them as trans-creation<sup>9</sup> rather than just translation<sup>10</sup>. These trans-creations have to do several things than just rendering the meanings of the source text. A serious look into these literary pieces will convince us of the features of “continuous life-giving” and “creative process” embedded in them.

What is of pivotal significance regarding the function of *Pattu* is that it simplifies highly sophisticated ideas pertaining to Sufism or Mystical aspects of the Sufi life while translating for the common people who are deprived of any formal education. Various details of miracles were translated to the rustic people through verses in Arabimalayalam. A cursory look into the *mala* compositions whether it is *Muhyadheen Mala*, *Rifae Mala* or *Nafeesath Mala*, would help to understand how easily the complex ideas have been conveyed through *mala* compositions. In this way, the *mala* compositions, as mentioned before, formed the genres of panegyrics and hagiography abundantly available in Arabimalayalam. The proliferation of *Qissa*<sup>11</sup> songs, a major subgenre of *Mappilappattu* also can be observed in this way. In this way this tradition of *tarjama* has paved way for emergence of various genres of texts related to various fields such as exegeses of the *Qur'an*, *Hadeeth*<sup>12</sup>, fictional narratives, *Tasawwuf* (Mysticism), *Seera* (History), *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) medical treatment and other Miscellaneous Compositions.

*Char Darvesh*, *Alif Laila*, *Alauddin*, *Qamarsthan*, *Shamsussaman*, *Omerayyar*, *Ameer Hamza* and *Gul Sanobar* are some of the familiar titles in Arabimalayalam that can be seen in the genres of fiction. *Kitabu Twibbu Val Adwiya* (*Vaidyasaram Enna Tarjama*) (1890) by Konganam Veetil Bava Musliyar Ponnani is a text written on medical treatment in Arabimalayalam. The page following the cover page introduces the book entirely in Arabic, read, as “This is a book of medicine and medication *tarjmaized* in Malabari language” (Musliyar 4). *Ashtanga Hridayam*, *Chikilsa Saram*, *Yokamritam*, *Pancheekaranam*, *Yokasaram*, *Marma Vibhagam*,

*Chintarmani* , *Sarvaroga Nidanam*, *Manchari* are some of the texts from which Musliyar composed his work. The text concludes with an elegy written as a tribute for the author by an unnamed poet. *Ilajul Atfal Bi Dava il Iyal* (1891) (Shishu Chikilsa)<sup>13</sup> by Paloli Abdullah Musliyar, *Valiyabalachikilsa* (1897) by Pudiyakath Bava Musliyar Ponnani are some of the texts written in the field of medicine in Arabimalayalam. The enormous collection of medical texts in Arabimalayalam could retain *nattuvaidyam* (country treatment / local treatment) and Ayurveda, which were sidelined by arrival of Western medical practices as a result of colonial influence in Kerala.

Apart from the works mentioned above under the category of certain genres, there are a number of works on various subjects which at times we cannot include under one genre. Out of all these *tarjama* compositions, it can be edeciphedr that the Mappila authors in Arabimalayalam wrote according to the taste of the target readers. If some texts are translation based on equivalence some of them are nowhere in adhering to equivalence. If some source texts are from Arabic, some are from Persian. If some are from Tamil some are from Sanskrit. In the case of texts pertaining to Medical treatment, many texts are based on texts such as *Ashtanga Hridaya*. This aspect helps us to understand how the mutual / reciprocal exchange of knowledge through *tarjama* as a medium took place in different parts of Malabar among Muslims in such a way that became instrumental in their literary formation.

## End Notes

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2 a hybrid linguistic variety, which flourished in the Malabar region of Kerala, India during the early seventeenth century up to the first decades of the twentieth century, and its engagement with the socio-political as well as literary and cultural life of Muslims in Kerala. Through Arabimalayalam, the Muslims in Kerala (Mappila) could form a counter and alternative communication system to the language of the colonial invaders. Although the term ‘Arabimalayalam’ is utilized to refer to the script Muslims in Kerala are known to have developed at some point of time in history, it is sometimes referred as a language variety evolved by fusing words into Malayalam from many languages particularly Arabic, Tamil, Sanskrit and Kannada. Whether we approach Arabimalayalam as a script or language variation of Muslims from Malabar, the literary and cultural assets that they produced are remarkable.

3 Kaviraj, Sudipta. The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

- 4 This is based only on Muhyadheen Mala, the first literary text found in Arabimalayalam.
- 5 In Tarjamakal, kal is utilized as one of the suffixes used to indicate the plural form in Malayalam such as Valakal (bangles), pakshikal (birds) and Ilakal (leaves).
- 6 Even though the contexts are utterly different in America and Kerala, this quotation was mentioned here in order to prove how the literary resources written in Arabimalayalam influence the thoughts of a Mappila.
- 7 From the moment Islam reached and dominated the Persian lands, the Iranian territories began to be influenced by Islamic values and markers in the socio-political and cultural fields. This influence reached its peak from during the Abbasid period and as a result, the hybrid tradition of the Persian-Islamic got momentum. This synthesis form of Islamic and Persian tradition was taken into the various parts of the world by the messengers of Islam. That is how this tradition got into Malabar also through the commercial links.
- 8 Chakeeri is known for his dictionary in Malayalam, Arabic and Sanskrit.
- 9 Transcreation is retelling of the source text in such a way that he is not controlled by any factors like patronage and nationalism; instead, he is free of his imaginative power to assert himself. In translation, the translator is supposed to abide by the original work and move in its shadow.
- 10 Of course in the entire study, the researcher uses 'translation' as an umbrella term that includes Transcreation, retelling, commentary and other related terms. Here Transcreation is emphasized since the term indicates to the creativity that the authors exhibit.
- 11 Qissa is an Arabic word in origin. Qissa means story.
- 12 The term 'hadeeth' is a word Arabic in origin utilized to mean report, narrative or something new. Hadeeth is regarded among Muslims as the second important text after the Qur'an. A statement, action, or approval attributed to the Prophet Muhammad is generally identified as hadeeth among the Muslims.
- 13 Pediatrics

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