

Resuscitating Culture through Translation: A Metalinguistic Reading of *Valli* in Malayalam and English

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Translation is often perceived as a mode of adaptation or transcreation from a source text to another, pertaining to its essence and facilitating cultural acclimation and hybridity. It is not a simple paraphrasing or rewording of the original text into a target language, but rather a creative reconstruction and a re-interpretation, embracing the dynamic nature of language as well as the human experience. It is a process where the translator enjoys the privilege of assimilating or rejecting whatever content he/she finds culturally, socially, linguistically and politically inappropriate. Translation thus becomes a creative adaptation and cultural re-contextualization, where the translator becomes a linguistic mediator as well as a creator of a metalanguage during the process. Literary translation plays a significant role in cross-cultural understanding and the transmission of cultural narratives, myths, and histories, keeping in mind a global audience. In the multilingual, multicultural landscape of India, translation has an evolutionary potential to integrate local ecologies and cultural contexts that can promote multiethnic exchanges and metalinguistic awareness. This paper intends to explore how translation becomes a transformative process of meaning-making, negotiation and cultural innovation in

contemporary Malayalam fiction translated into English. This study attempts to throw light on the translation strategies adopted by Jayasree Kalathil in her English translation of the Malayalam novel *Valli* authored by Sheela Tomy, in encapsulating the tribal culture as well as the language, enabling visibility, adaptability and inclusiveness from a global perspective.

Keywords: Translation, cultural transmission, trans-creation, inclusiveness, metalanguage

Translation is an act of interpretation which involves a reflective analysis of the linguistic, cultural and stylistic features of the source language and its various possibilities in the target language. It is a form of rewriting by decoding the meaning and cultural context of the source text and reinterpreting in a heterogeneous perspective acceptable and accessible to the target readers. Such varied and unique interpretations are inherently subjective, which reflects the language proficiency, cultural understanding and discretion of the translator. It is the translator's liberty and privilege to decide how to adapt and assimilate the cultural norms, values and contexts for a new audience with an entirely distinct cultural framework. He/she holds the authority in what to be discarded, what to be preserved and what to be shared. It is his/her task to judiciously find suitable equivalents to the expressions that can justify the author's intent and can help preserve the cultural elements as well. In the process, translation becomes a creative adaptation and cultural re-contextualization, where the translator becomes a linguistic mediator as well as a creator of a metalanguage.

In semantics and philosophy, metalanguage "may be thought of as a language about another language" (*Britannica*, n.d.). The prefix 'meta' has Greek roots and it means 'about' or 'beyond'. Translation is a complex, dynamic process that analyses and synthesizes multiple systems of meaning. It is a tool to connect two different worlds, facilitating a pathway between two languages where the exquisite features of languages are communicated, shared, amplified and resuscitated. It is a meaning-making process that involves innovative interpretations and creative judgement of a language. It is a collaborative process where the translator and the author join hands together to create a new language and a new narration that can be

culturally appropriate and socially acceptable. The task of the translator is to extract the quintessence of the language, incorporating the translator's subjectivity and linguistic capability, without hampering the intention of the original author. It is a genuine exploration of how language can shape our understanding of the world and the interconnected nature of human experience. In this context, the translated works often function as metalanguage, which discusses the pragmatics and semantic relationships of languages, in a non-identical socio-cultural context. Translators use it as an intra-textual strategy in the translation of fiction to enable code-switching, while preserving narrative authenticity.

In the article titled "The Metalinguistic Dimension of Literary Multilingualism: Linguistic Biographies in Italian Fiction," the author Riikka Ala-Risku comments: "The tendency of multilingual and trans lingual authors to use metalinguistic comments on various linguistic phenomena on the page has been noted in numerous studies about literary code-switching, but often the role of metalanguage is treated marginally, or its position insufficiently theorized" (p. 141). A deep and wide interdisciplinary approach is needed for a better understanding of metalanguage and the sociolinguistic process in literary writing. Translators use metalinguistic comments to bridge the gap for the reader when the characters use native dialects in the narration. This paper intends to explore how the linguistic specificities of a language can be incorporated, ingrained and integrated into another language, with reference to the translation of the Malayalam novel *Valli* into English.

Valli is the debut Malayalam novel of Sheela Tomy, published in 2019, and received the Cherukad Award for Malayalam Literature in 2020. The novel has been translated into English by the writer/ translator Jayasree Kalathil in the year 2022. Kalathil is the recipient of the Crossword Book Award for *The Diary of a Malayali Madman* as well as the JCB Prize for Literature for *Moustache*, and both are acclaimed as remarkable pieces of translation work from Malayalam to English. Her translation of *Valli, A Novel* was among the works shortlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature in 2022, the Alagalatta BLF Book Prize in 2022 and the Green LitFest Honour Books Award

in 2023. She received the prestigious V Abdulla Memorial Translation Prize in 2023. *Valli, a novel*, received the Muse India Fiction Jury Award, the Book of the Year Award by FICCI and was short-listed for the National Translation Award from the American Literary Translators' Association in 2023.

The novel is set in Wayanad, a rural district in Northern Kerala, in the Western Ghats region. The place stands out from other states in Kerala on account of its cultural heritage, environment, rich biodiversity and ecosystem, migration history and geographical distinctiveness. It is a multilayered tale of four generations, woven together using diary entries, letters, Bible quotes, folklore, tribal songs, myths, popular film songs and many such narrative devices. Wayanad has a rich tribal history, as it has the highest population of the indigenous people—*Adivasis* of Kerala. The story unfolds the biopolitics of the land through the everyday life of the migrant communities, enslavement, exploitation and marginalization of the aboriginals, environmental degradation and references to political movements and social injustice.

The title itself holds great significance in the novel as it represents a wide spectrum of meanings. The term “valli,” in Sanskrit, means “vine,” a creeper plant, while it also means “earth.” It also represents a young woman, whereas its mythological connection is to the Goddess Valli, who is the better half of Lord Murugan, a widely worshipped deity in Hindu mythology. The title connects thematically with the novel when the term “valli” means “wages” given to the labourers, which comprise a meagre measure of paddy given by the feudal lords to the indigenous *Adivasi* people. When the novel becomes a saga of exploitation, suppression and oppression of the marginalized inhabitants of the land, the title becomes politically significant and meaningful. It is well explained in the words of the character Padmanabhan, when he says:

Landowning farmers and jenmis take Adivasi people on lease as labourers and make them work on their lands. It's called 'vallippani'—labouring in return for valli, a share in the crop. Bonded labour, that's what it is. Slavery has been abolished, and there are laws about minimum wages, but here this happens even now. (Tomy, 2022, p. 31)

The political, social and cultural undertones in the title are carried over throughout the novel by subtle remarks on the resistance and resilience of the natives of the region in a dominant societal framework based on class and caste. The former name of *Wayanad* was *Bayalnad*, which means the land of paddy fields, and that explains the agrarian history where “harvesting and threshing the paddy, and preparing the bounty of tapioca became the festivals of the land” (Tomy, 2022, p. 2). The multifaceted symbolism of *Valli* arises from the semantic plurality of its title and setting. Wayanad is represented not merely as a picturesque forest region but as a layered historical landscape marked by ecological richness, settler migration, Adivasi dispossession, gendered vulnerability, and exploitative agrarian labour. The word valli — signifying vine, earth, young woman, and wages — brings these strands together, making the novel an ecological, feminist, and socio-economic critique of the structures that govern land and life. The geographical distinctiveness of Wayanad, with Nilgiri hills in the east, Mysore plateau in the north-east and Kodagu hills in the north-west, essentially makes it a place where man has to fight with, as well as live a sustainable life with nature. This ecological sustainability was well maintained when the land belonged to *Adivasis*, who lived harmoniously with nature. Since the migrants from South Kerala set foot on the soil of this forest-land for habitation and settlement, this ecological balance was muddled. This transgression is clearly depicted in the grandfather's letter to Tessa, his grandchild: See, our indigenous people, the *Adivasis*, were also nature's guards.

They never poisoned the waterways to catch fish, and yet their bamboo

baskets brimmed with vaala, kuruva, snakehead, catfish and whitespot.

They only took just enough honey and left the rest for the bees, just enough fruits and jungle roots to survive. They lived in bamboo huts. Then the migrants arrived from the lowlands, and everything changed. (Tomy, 2022, pp. 7–8)

The conscientious approach of the translator to encompass the land's geographical, ecological, indigenous, migration history and culture in the layered narrative, retaining the essence, is what makes the translated work a meta-narrative. Kalathil, the translator, reveals that what challenged her the most is “the innate poetry of her (the author's) writing, rich in imagery that invokes, again and again, the sights, smells, sounds and sensations of the forest and the emotions of its people” (Tomy, 2022, p. 404). The most striking feature of the translator's discretion becomes apparent in the way she retains and recreates the *gothrabhasha*, the language spoken by the indigenous communities, in the body of the text. The Paniyar community in Wayanad speak a language that has no script, and in the original, the author uses footnotes to explain the connotation. It was a conscious, political choice of the translator to hold fast to the ethnic script and give voice to the voiceless. In the Translator's note suffixed to the text, Kalathil says:

In translating the book, it would have been possible to simply render them into English alongside the Malayalam. However, I felt that doing so

would perpetuate the silencing of the language that the novel is actively resisting.

So, what I have done is to retain the phrases, dialogue and songs in the

Paniya language by rendering them politically into English and immediately

following them with a translation. My hope is that this would allow the reader

who takes the time to read these to get a sense of the language.
(Tomy, 2022, p. 404)

Kalathil believes that this strategy can function as “holes in the text so the original can show through” (Tomy, 2022, p. 404), as quoted by the American writer Diane Glancy, who, in her novel, writes about the compelled, authoritative expulsion of the Cherokee tribal people from their land. This justifies the translator’s use of both languages back-to-back in the body of the text, without any footnotes or glossary. In the source text (ST), the leader of the tribal clan asks the whereabouts of a stranger thus: “*Naan Kelumooppa. Ooru Kalluvayaalu. Neenka yethu naattilinta?*” (Tomy, 2019, p. 37). For this, the translator elaborates the dialogue by splitting it into two parts, thus enabling a smooth reading where the reader gets acquainted with the inner beauty of the unscripted language, thus: “*Naan Kelumooppa, oru Kalluvayaal.*” Kelumooppa from Kalluvayaal, he introduced himself, tucking the beedi back into his waist-fold and sitting on a piece of gunny sack with his legs extended before him. “*Neenga ethu naattilinda?*” Where are you from? (Tomy, 2022, p. 21). There are numerous instances of this bilingual flow such as, “*Injanthikku ponda,*” “he said. Don’t go in the night” (Tomy, 2022, p. 20), “*Thoru niranchulo . . . puye niranchulo . . . meenu niranchulo . . .*’ The stream is full, the river is full, full of fish . . .’ *Puye puye naanu vanche . . . Naaru kaama vanche . . .*’ River, river, I’m coming too, coming to see the world (Tomy, 2022, p. 47). The polyphonic interweaving of mainstream Malayalam, Paniya, and English within the text enacts what Mikhail Bakhtin terms heteroglossia — the coexistence of multiple social languages, each carrying its own worldview, within a single literary work. The musical dialogues between Basavan and Rukku are apt examples of this multivocality:

“*Pakkichikalu vainnera entheneya parayibey?*” Basavan asked.

What are the birds saying this evening?

“*Ingu baa...Ingu baannu!*” Rukku laughed. Come here, come here . . .

“*Ninaakku chembakamana ponne,*” Basavan said, kissing her. You smell like chempakam.

“*Ninaakku bayiluchelina mana, Basava.*” And you smell like the wet earth of the fields, Rukku said. (Tomy, 2022, p. 151)

This strategy of familiarizing and internalizing an ethnic language that has no scripts, thereby sharing it with universal receptors and conserving it for the future, is a commendable deed that is essentially political and radical. The translator rebuilds the language and makes it a meta-narrative by completely avoiding explanations in footnotes and balancing fidelity and adaptation creatively, resulting in beautiful cultural amalgamation and assimilation. Retaining the musicality of the ST is a greater challenge for the translator, where Kalathil succeeds to a greater extent. The translation of the harvest song of Paniyar, the aboriginal tribe of the forest, is an explicit example:

Peyyuru peyyurumaaye
Adechukuthiyum peyyuru
Aanekkulippanum vollam kaani
Kuthirekkulippanum vollam kaani
Aacham aaraaripeyyuru
Poomi poraripeyyuru
Pappe kulippanum vollam kani
Pappathi kulippanum vollam kaani'
 Rain, come, come, rain
 Like never before rain
 No water for the elephant's bath
 No water for the horse's bath
 Shake the skies and rain
 Drown the earth and rain
 No water for the master's bath
 No water for the mistress's bath. (Tomy, 2022, p. 21)

Condensation is another strategy employed by the translator in order not to get the context over-translated. Language is essentially embedded in cultural, social, historical, linguistic and situational contexts, and it evolves from time to time. When a translator considers words, he/she should cogitate the situational context to get the crux of what is intended by the original author. The intonation, body language, gestures and expressions also must be considered in the meaning-making process. No word in any language has a permanent, fixed

connotation, and the reader must assume the intended meaning, considering the cultural and nonverbal contexts as well. The mood, tone and register, cultural nuances, idioms and figurative language, nonverbal cues, multiplicity of meaning, cultural gaps—all need to be considered in the process of translation. It should also align with the reader's cultural and linguistic expectations. A skilled translator can do justice to the subtleties of language and maintain the balance between the language and culture of both the source and target languages. In the process, the translator can take the privilege of condensing and expanding the subject matter as per the needs of the situation. Kalathil, in her translation of a *Paniya* song, employs a similar approach of condensation, as follows:

Vathama kanjeerey

Povam vathama kanjeerey

Annem ilama vulikkinjom

Kanjeerey...kanajeerey...

A song for his sweetheart, calling her to him, to be with him. (Tomy, 2022, p. 191)

The author has originally given a word to word Malayalam translation of the folk song in the aboriginal language in the source text, while the translator has given a condensed meaning of the text. Such liberties taken and executed by the translator make the narration transformative in nature, which can resonate with the aesthetic sensibility of readers from a different cultural background.

Fiction is essentially a type of narrative that depicts both the lived and imaginary human experiences, using the vehicle of language to convey meaning and expression. Language is intimately connected with fiction as it is the primary tool of word building for enabling the narrative structure. A language, along with its linguistic elements, carries with it a wide array of cultural memories and correlated concepts and values. Translation of fiction from one language to another involves a great expanse of cultural empathy, language proficiency and creative authenticity on the part of a translator. He/she plays the role of a cultural mediator, who can bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps between two languages, enabling intercultural communication and breathing new life into the narrative, enabling greater visibility and

credibility in a global arena. According to Ala-Risku (2024), “Metalinguage as an umbrella term covers other tools used by authors to flag multilingualism and to address their readers: intratextual translations, peritextual elements such as glossaries or notes and the use of visual cues such as italics. As a result, metalinguage should be analyzed together with these elements” (p. 130). The dynamics of translation enable a work of fiction to traverse borders, enriching the language and ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage. Literary multilingualism can revive, renew, rediscover and recreate the voice of the past and the present, and give voice to the voiceless and marginalized contexts. It carries the collective memory, linguistic specificity and cultural identity to another language, thereby drawing global attention and recognition. Thus, literary translation becomes an act of linguistic and cultural resuscitation, thereby reviving, revitalizing and recontextualizing the fictional work into a new perspective, fostering cross-cultural understanding. Ala-Risku (2024) further observes that “the act of translating is by nature a metalinguistic operation and therefore all types of intratextual translations should be analyzed as part of the metalinguistic dimension of literary texts, regardless of their salience to readers” (p. 136). The translator becomes a co-creator and collaborator—a creative contributor who navigates between the source and target cultures, carefully considering the ethical, emotional and aesthetic elements, striking a fine balance between all the nuances in a way that it can resonate beyond time and space.

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