

## On Englishing Basheer: The Problems Of Cultural Untranslatability

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### Abstract

Translation is a form of oblique politics inscribed with cultural and linguistic connotations. It is an activity that is inseparable from culture. It is often a transcultural or cross-cultural act; a process of building cultural bridge. In Indian English literature and Indian literature in translations, these cultural differences play an important role. India is multi-cultural society which is quite different from Britain which is largely monochromatic. Culturally specific Indian languages like Malayalam are not easy to translate.

The present work deals with the problems of translation in the text *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life* which includes three novels of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, translated by R. E. Asher. The three novels in the text are *Childhood friend*, *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant* and *Pathumma's Goat*. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, one of the greatest Malayalam fiction writers, is the one who developed an inimitable writing style in Malayalam. Both the Basheerian style and the culture specific words make the translation more difficult. This article particularly discusses the problems of cultural untranslatability based on the mentioned text.

**Keywords:** translation, problems in translation, culture, equivalence, cultural untranslatability.

Translation is a linguistic and cultural act that can be practiced in manifold ways. J. C Catford defines translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by the equivalent textual material in another language (TL)” (20). According to Nida and Taber, “Translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and second in terms of style” (12). Peter Newmark makes a distinction between semantic translation that focuses on

meaning and communicative translation that focuses on the effect: “Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. Semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original” (39) Hatim and Mason considers translation as a “communicative process which takes place within a social context” (3). Thus, translation involves many factors from meaning and style to communication and social context.

The different definitions of translation are leading to various strategies. Theodore Savory considers translation as an art whereas Eric Jacobson considers it as a craft while Eugene Nida describes it as a science. Translation is a creative art as well as an imitative art. It is a linguistic act as well as a literary act. In short, it is an intermediate between all these. Language cannot be viewed in isolation from its context. Words appearing in a language may be associated with historical, social or cultural contexts. Since language is culture oriented, translation of a language of certain culture to a language of different culture becomes difficult. There comes the untranslatability of words, phrases and sentences that are unique to a culture. Sometimes the change or loss of meaning occurs even after the use of nearest possible substitute or transliteration and interpretation.

This article is an attempt to discuss the problems of cultural untranslatability in the text *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life*. R. E. Asher's trilogy *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant: Three Stories of Muslim Life* consists of *Childhood Friend*, *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant* and *Pathumma's Goat*, which are the English translations of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's Malayalam novels *Balyakalasakhi*, *Ntuppoppakku Oraanandaarunu* and *Pathummayude Aadu*. Translating Malayalam fiction to English is a great challenge as the two languages are culturally dissimilar. Malayalam is a language rich in culture-oriented words. These Malayalam culture specific words lack equivalents in English as it belongs to a very different culture. Cultural words related to blood relations, pronouns, genitives and similar categories are some of the challenges that translators encounter while translating Malayalam fiction to English. Pronouns in Malayalam and English are not equivalents. While English pronouns generally create ambiguity of gender and number, Malayalam pronouns create contextual ambiguity.

Simplicity is the speciality of Basheerian writings. It seems to be easy to translate his novel. The primary thing that is noted in Basheerian writings is his use of simple conversational language even in the narrative parts. But it is the same simplicity that makes it difficult to translate Basheer. Beneath the surface structure of the simple language he used, there is a complex deep structure in every story or novel, which contains the synthesised emotions and actions of characters. So mere translations of words, sentences or paragraphs remain inadequate in translation of Basheerian writings. In such contexts, the emotive actions are to be translated. Obviously, emotions get distilled over during translation. If the evaporated emotions are not made good by the translator, the translation becomes lifeless.

It is commonly accepted that the fictions are easier to translate when compared to poetry. But the Basheerian fictions restrict the translations as they contain diversity of speech types from various cultural contexts. Titles of novels themselves resist translation as in the case of *Childhood Friend* and *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant*. Original works in Malayalam are entitled as *Balyakalasakhi* and *Ntuppooppakku Oraanandaarannu*. There is no equivalent for the word “sakhi” in English. The “girlfriend” would generate another meaning. The word “minion” would create a different sense. Unlike the title in Malayalam, the title *Childhood Friend* does not give any indication that the friend is a girl; the English title is gender ambiguous. In the title *Ntuppooppakku Oraanandarannu*, there is a Muslim slang and humour which get lost when translated to *Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant*. Basheerian writings are saturated with cultural contexts which are hard to retain in translation. R. E. Asher explain this difficulty as follows:

Cultural items, in the realms of dress and food, for example, do not always have a ready English equivalent. In some cases, we have made do with an approximate equivalent; in others we have seen no alternative to using a transliterated form.  
(xiii)

The translation of cultural items that are specific to a culture from the SL to a TL of another culture necessarily involves the loss or change in the meaning. Perhaps, the problem remains the same even after the use of approximate equivalent or transliteration.

As the titles indicates, the Muslim context is a very specified surrounding in this trilogy. In Malayalam, this cultural milieu of the religious community is constructed through Arabic words absorbed into Malayalam. But while translating to English, it is difficult to

make the same effect. Words like *Hajj*, *halal*, *thowba* and *kyamath* are a few examples. Like other religions in Kerala, Muslims also have special terms that indicate relationships. Though the word “ikkakka” can be translated as elder brother, there are occasions in which it cannot be used. For instance, “*Ikkakka!* Why this *Kafir* calling her brother *Ikkakka*.” (Page No: 91) This indicates that the term “ikkakka” is only used by Muslims. Using the term brother is not fit there and it needs further explanation. Using the terms “Bappa” and “Umma” in Malayalam gives the Malayali readers the idea that the narrator is Muslim. But in English the usage of mother and father does not give this idea. The only possible way is to transcribe these words. R. E. Asher explains:

There is a little overlap in Malayalam between the set of kinship terms used by Muslims and those used by other communities. Part of the special flavour of Basheer’s stories for a Malayali reader lies in his use of “Bappa”. As a term of address and reference for father and “Umma” for mother. It has seemed to us best to keep this in almost all cases. We have been rather more sparing in the use of “upoppa” for grandfather and have used English equivalence for all other terms but one, and this only in one story. (xiv)

‘The words translated as “silly minny” for “kallabubdhoos” also does not contain the humour and affection. The word “kuyyana” cannot be translated to English. Only “kuzhiyana” can be translated to “ant elephant” though there is no such word.

In Basheerian writings there are also words that do not exist in Malayalam language. The sounds of boys that ridicule Kunjupathumma’s umma like “njulu njulu”, “pepppeepee” and Aysha’s song “Huttini halitta littappo” are some examples. These are the verbal images in Baheerian writings which are not in practice in Malayalam language. Beyond the Muslim life in Kerala his works also express some universal emotions. These aspects attract and encourage the translators to Basheerian writings and to overcome all problems in translation. The cultural and religious milieus of Basheer’s writings never shadow the universality of their appeal. Rather, it has an inherent upholding of such emotional values.

*Childhood Friend* is a novel which depicts a tragic love story. It is a very slender novel and remains as one of the best loved novels in Malayalam. There are many culturally specific and linguistically peculiar words and contexts in this novel which make the

translation difficult. When Majid was scratched by Suhra he is crying “Entummo!” which is translated as “Help!” in the English (3). Instead of “Po cherukka!” that Suhra says with immense pleasure and love, the phrase used in the translated text is “You are joking.” Majid replies to this as “Ummame” in which he is swearing by his mother, it is translated as “On my honour” (9). The term “nilavilakku” which is a culturally specific word when translated as standing lamp does not match well (13). Instead of “kerosene lamp” the translated word is “paraffin lamp” (17). For the “thodu,” which means a small stream in SL text, the TL equivalent used is the “canal” which is an artificial construction (15). There are several such examples related to landscape, faith, ceremony, food, dress, kinship and so on which are crudely approximated.

*Me Grandad ‘ad an Elephant* is a fictional work which bears least autobiographical incidents. It is the most complex of the three novels in its structure. This novel contains the information about the Muslim life in Kerala at that time. Beyond the narration of a beautiful love story, Basheer is trying to reform the Muslim community by conveying the actual teachings of Islam through his perspectives. Comparing with the other two, this novel is the most complex and most culturally specific. R. E. Asher, in his introduction to the translated text, observes:

In “*Me Grndad ‘ad an Elephant!*” in particular, Basheer uses a good amount of Islamic terminology that is no more familiar to the non-Muslim Malayali reader than it would be to the average non-Muslim speakers of English. He does this of course, not with the view to unnecessary bewildering the reader, but for a clear artistic purpose. Given that the context or a gloss written into the narrative by the author means that there is hardly any even slightly annoying obscurity, we have followed the original, in this respect in our translation, only on rare occasions taking the presumptuous step of writing in a gloss not provided in the Malayalam text. We have considered it especially appropriate to follow Basheer in using Arabic terms to refer to the Deity and His Prophet. Thus, as a synonym for ‘God’ we have not only ‘Allah’ but also ‘Rub’. (14)

Asher means that the novel is punctuated with Arabic words that refer to faith and religion. Moreover, it refers to the cultural values in specific life situations.

Culture-specific words that are hard to retain in translation are plenty in this novel. Words indicating the dress, kinship, religious traditions and so on make the task of the translator difficult. Culture-specific words like “kavani” and “kasavu neryathu” are some dress codes of Kerala which lack their equivalents in English. They are translated as “head-shawl” and “stole” which do not serve the purpose (55). Also, the words indicating kinships like “bappa”, “umma” and “ikkakka” and so on are also hard to translate as these kinship words are also culturally specific. These words that indicate the relationships are used exclusively among the Muslims of Kerala. In Kerala, each religious group has a set of kinship words which others do not use. So, generalising these words is not possible in translation. Muslim dialects that Basheer uses in these novels are entirely absent in translation. It is this dialect that gives this novel its beauty. R. E. Asher admits this in his preface:

One Muslim feature we have sacrificed entirely. The dialect of Malayalam spoken by Muslims (those who have not had the opportunity to advance very far up the educational ladder) is quite distinct from other dialects, as regards pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. In conversational passages of his stories, Basheer faithfully represents all aspects of this dialect. (15)

The true representation of the Muslim dialect is compromised or even sacrificed in translations. Thus, the originality and beauty of the story get diluted.

A number of religious terms are used in this novel as they cover almost all aspects of Muslim life at that time. Names of prophets in Islamic faith are different from those in Biblical style, though the prophets are the same. The latter cannot convey the Islamic ethos in Kerala. The names of Angels such as “Gabriel” are also given in Biblical nomenclature rather than “Jibreel” in the Koranic style of naming as in the SL text.

The act of offering “Kodikuthu” and “Chandanakkudam” in mosques or dargas for victory or gaining something are the rituals among the Muslims of Kerala. Translations of these terms as “to raise flags in the mosque” and “presenting sandal paste” are misrepresentations of these cultural ceremonies (71). These rituals are celebrated in mosques or dargas with a procession with band and great fanfare at the head of which is a caparisoned elephant carrying a pot of sandal paste. These rituals have a strong root in local culture of Kerala where the Hindus and Muslims co-existed. The elephant, the caparison and the sandal paste used in these ceremonies are the examples of this co-existence. The stories evolved in a

community where different religions coexist and use a mixture of culturally specific word enhancing problems of translation.

The usage of “elephant ant” for “kuzhiyana” is interesting. The English equivalent for “kuzhiyana” is “ant-lion.” But the exact equivalent cannot retain the humour in the usage of “kuzhiyana.” So, he used a new word in that place which does not exist (119). Asher explains this difficulty:

One problem, however, we found admitted of no really satisfactory solution. In the last chapter of *Me Grndad ‘ad an Elephant* we find some rude and uninhibited urchins claiming that the famous “aana” (elephant) of the title was in reality no such thing, but a small insect for which the name in Malayalam is “kuzhi-yana.” The English equivalent is “ant-lion,” which, regrettable, does not allow the necessary pun. We have made the best of a bad job by inventing the term “elephant ant.” The reader is warned that, to the best of our knowledge, there is no such insect. (xvii)

Kunjupathumma’s grandfather’s name “Anamakkar” also is literally converted to “Elephant makkar.” Anamakkar was the commonly used Muslim name which was no way related to the animal elephant.

*Pathumma’s Goat*, unlike the other two, is purely autobiographical and it depicts a story that contains almost all emotions of a middle-class joint family. This novel also has several problems of translation, beginning with the title itself. The subtitle of the novel is “Pennungalude Buddhi” in Malayalam. It is translated as “Wisdom of Women” in the TL text. The word “buddhi” is not about wisdom but about the cleverness. Through the use of the word “buddhi” Basheer is ridiculing the women.

Basheer presented “Kaniyan” as an Ayurveda physician as well as an astrologer. But the TL text represents “kaniyan” as a mere astrologer. Basheer himself says that “kaniyan was then the biggest physician.” It shows that beyond astrologer, kaniyan is mainly astrologer-physician of the locality. As in the other novels, kinship terms are another problem here. Terms like “Valyakkakka” and “Valyathatha” are translated as “Elder brother” and “elder sister” rather than transliterating them. Compared with the other two, *Pathumma’s*

*Goat*, is the simplest one in translation as it contains less culture-oriented words than the others.

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