



Translation as Production of the New: Some Reflections on the Nineteenth-century Malayalam Literary Space

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In Kerala, as in many other parts of India, the turn of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of new forms of writing related to the realm of literature, such as literary critical essays, book reviews, histories of literature, alongside the development of new forms like the short story and the novel. Contemporary periodicals in Malayalam like *Vidya Vilasini*, and *Vidya Vinodini* and newspapers such as *Malayala Manorama* began devoting a separate space for literary writings and publishing literary critical essays and reviews. A literary association, Bhashaposhini Sabha, was established in the last decade of the nineteenth century for “nurturing” Malayalam language and literature. These developments signal the advent of new practices of reading and writing, and as creating a distinct literary space in Malayalam. Translation played a key role in the constitutive process of this space. Translations of literary works from Sanskrit and English into Malayalam gained momentum during the last decade of the nineteenth century - Keralavarma Valiyakoyil Thampuran’s translation of Kalidasa’s *Shakuntalam* in 1882 and a free translation of Shakespeare’s play *Taming of the Shrew* by Kandathil Varghese Mappila titled *Kalahinidamanakam* published in 1894 could be cited as two important events of translation activity during this period. Equally importantly Malayalam literary discourse emerged during this period as a translation of Sanskrit literary critical discourse: C.P. Achutha Menon published a series of such articles derived largely from Sanskrit discourses of *Kavya* in the early edition of the periodical *Vidya Vinodini*, established in 1889, which Menon also edited. This paper looks at the role translation played in shaping a new literary space in Malayalam in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The first section closely analyses the literary critical discourses in Malayalam mentioned above and attempts to demonstrate how translation was not merely a mechanical process of transferring ideas from one linguistic code to another, but was a creative process. The



second section of the essay looks at the relation between translation practices and literary discourse at a time when the realms of practice and discourse were in the process of emerging and not demarcated clearly. These issues are explored further by seeing them in relation to an emergent print culture.

By the closing decades of nineteenth century a strong Malayalam print culture emerged in Kerala. Newspapers and periodicals- such as *Vidya Vilasini* (1881), *Kerala Patrika* (1884), *Nazrani Deepika* (1887), *Vidya Vinodini* (1889), *Malayala Manorama* (1889), *Bashaposhini* (1891), to name a few - established during this period emphasised the need to develop a prose in Malayalam suitable to meet the demand of the times: to write reports, articles, essays, reviews, editorials, and also textbooks. The printing and circulation of these prose forms led to the creation of a new literate culture of mute reception – in the form of silent reading - of these materials. However, we need to bear in mind that the heralding of a print culture requiring silent reading as preferred mode of reception did not completely replace an existing non-print, mnemonic literate culture. A culture of versification continued to exist in the now available print sphere in the last decades of nineteenth century and verse forms like *shlokam* began to acquire a new life and function there. *Shlokam* was used now to write news reports, letters to the editor, obituary (*charamashlokam*), sketches of important personalities (*chayashlokam*), apart from their use as epigraphs in prose forms like essays that appeared in contemporary periodicals. These were usually citations from classical texts like *Bhagavata*, *Ramayana* or *Shakunthala*. Newspapers like *Malayala Manorama* encouraged literary practices like the setting and solving poetic riddles (*samasyapooranam*), and the results of competitions in skills of versification, such as quick composition (*drutakavanam*) were published in literary periodicals like *Bhashaposhini*. These examples suggest that the non-print literate culture of versification not only continued its existence in the print space but even assumed a new character there. It is important to maintain a distinction between the practice of citation from classical texts in the print space and the new uses of the *shlokam* form, such as writing a news report or an obituary. It is true that the former



represents an older literary tradition; nonetheless, their use as epigraphs in prose forms in print may be regarded as a new practice. This use of versification for writing news reports or obituaries is evidently a new phenomenon. I have cited these examples from the Malayalam print space of the final decade of the nineteenth century as a frame of reference while conceptualizing contemporary translation activity as a process of producing the new.

I

Vidya Vinodini, a periodical established in 1889, published a variety of items of discursive prose about Malayalam literature such as critical essays and review of literary texts, apart from publishing literary works themselves like poetry and plays, and some of the early Malayalam short stories.¹ It was through these essays, reviews, and literary works that a new literary space of Malayalam was produced in the last decades of nineteenth-century Kerala. In the following few paragraphs I shall look at the discourses on literature that appeared in various issues of *Vidya Vinodini* written by Achutha Menon in order to chart the formation of a critical literary discursive space for Malayalam and identify its newness.

We shall, however, bear in mind that Achutha Menon was deriving from Sanskrit discourses on literature in order to develop one in Malayalam. He makes this clear in an essay titled “Kavyodeshyam” in which Menon wrote about the need to develop a poetics in Malayalam by drawing from Sanskrit and English literary critical texts, since Malayalam lacked a body of texts of poetics in the language:

The only way for common Malayali readers to appreciate the literary quality of a work is by applying the natural intelligence God bestowed on them. There are numerous books on literature available in English, and in Sanskrit, there are books like *Kavyaprakasam* and *Sahityadarpanam*; hence people who know these languages have no trouble in attaining a deep understanding of literature. Since such texts are not available in Malayalam, it is only natural that the aesthetic appreciation of people – who read available Malayalam literary works in print that do not display any proper literary quality (*kavyalakshanam*) – is not well



developed. Hence, in order to suggest to the people a proper way of literary appreciation we intend to say a few things about literature drawing from those texts available in English and Sanskrit (1-2).

Although there is an appeal here for deriving critical discourses from Sanskrit and English in order to develop one for Malayalam literature—perhaps stemming from a sense to address the belatedness of Malayalam literature’s appearance on the literary scene—the contemporary trend to imitate Sanskrit works by the writers of Malayalam was seen as undesirable. In the first installment of a lengthy review of *Kalyaninatakam*, a Malayalam play (*bhashanatakam*) written by Kodungalloor Kochunnithampuran, an important literary figure of the period, published in the early editions of *VidyaVinodini*, Achutha Menon elaborated on what he thought were the common shortcomings of the Malayalam poems of the period:

Contemporary poems in Malayalam lack novelty (*apoorvata*). They merely versify in metres what Sanskrit poets and classical poets in the vernacular had already said... Instead of doing this the poets would do a great service to the language by translating Sanskrit texts on various subjects into Malayalam. The attempt of Kerala Varma Valiyakoyil Thampuran at translating *Shakunthalam* into Malayalam entitled *Bhashashakunthalam* is a move worth emulating. Another defect of the vernacular poems is the primacy they give to embellishments of sound, such as rhyme and alliteration (*shabdalkaram*) than to figures of speech (*arthalkaram*). Poets should bear in mind that the soul of *kavyam* lies in *rasa* and not *alankara* (1-6).

While criticising the propensity of derivativeness to masquerade as newness in contemporary writings, Achutha Menon suggested translation from Sanskrit works as a worthwhile project, and maintained that original compositions in Malayalam literature ought to possess originality and newness. In this desire for novelty in Malayalam literary works and its expression may be located the newness in Achutha Menon’s critical discourse, which otherwise was largely derived from Sanskrit literary discourse. The suggestion, in the above passage, to give primacy to *arthalkara* over *shabdalkara* in Malayalam literary works is a sign of this. This call for primacy for figures of speech that operate at the level of meaning was possible only within the context of a recently emergent print culture and a system of modern education, within which



Malayalam literature could evolve and flourish. And the derivativeness and the newness together may be seen as an act of translation. In an article titled “Bhasha Kavitha” published in *VidyaVinodini*, Achutha Menon highlighted these developments and their implications for literature:

I have to state with great regret that even in these days when everywhere a new kind of education is spreading and everyone is making great efforts for the development of their own language and people, the measures taken by the Malayalees for the improvement of Malayalam literature and writers appear insignificant... In these days there is an easy way to help the writers in Malayalam. Provide them with the necessary financial assistance to print the books they produce. This will result not only in enabling writers to earn money and fame but also in increasing the level of knowledge of the people through the spread of books (6-7).

Hence it is in the wider context of the spread of modern education and print that we need to understand the literary discourses of Malayalam, developed through a process that can be conceptualized as translation, during the last decades of nineteenth century. We need to bear this in mind while trying to analyse the lengthy treatises on Malayalam literature that appeared in the early editions of *VidyaVinodini* titled “Kavyodeshyam”, “Kavyam”, and “Kavyabedhngal” written by Achutha Menon. These essays discussed various aspects of a literature proper, aiming at producing a discourse where literature could be discussed in idioms particular to the domain. Although presented as general aspects of literature, these were clearly aimed at developing a poetics for the now evolving Malayalam literature. Questions related to the function of literature, definition of literature, a lexicon model it could follow, and metre and rhyme scheme of Malayalam literature (*Bhasha Kavyam*) were dealt with in detail here. What is Malayalam literature? What could be its distinct features? These were the concerns that Achutha Menon seems to be addressing in his writings while trying to develop a critical literary discourse for Malayalam. Although drawn heavily from Sanskrit poetics, Achutha Menon’s writings reveal instances of bending this to suit the now emergent Malayalam literature. For example, in an essay titled “Kavyam” he argued that the term *kavyam* should be understood as encompassing



both prose and verse literary forms. Sanskrit maxim *vakyamrasatmakamkavyam*, Achutha Menon held, meant that *kavyam* is any writing (*vakyam*) which has *rasa* in it:

Since *kavyam* is any writing with *rasa*, it implies that it need not necessarily be in verse. Any writing which has *rasa*, even if written in prose, could be called as *kavyam*. Bana's *Kadambari*, although written in prose, is usually considered as a canonical work (*uttamakavya*). Hence the common perception that only those writings in verse could be considered as *kavyam* is absurd. If those works in verse without any *rasa* could be called as *kavyam*, then what is the difference between works like *Amarakosa*, *Astangahridayam*, and *Shakunthalam* and *Naishadham*? Those who understand the difference between verse (*padyam*) and *kavyam* will realise that only a few among us deserve the appellation of a *kavi* (litterateur) these days; others are those who simply write in verse (5-6).

Although the distinction between *kavyam* and *padyam* is a distinction within verse forms of writings, and is already made to categorise the corpus of Sanskrit writings (for example, *Amarakosham*, a Sanskrit dictionary in verse, as *padyam* and *Shakunthala*, a Sanskrit play in verse, as *kavyam*), the consideration of prose as *kavyam* needs to be seen as emerging at a time when literary prose forms like the novel and short story began to be written and published in Malayalam. I suggest that we need to see this also as an instance of translation. In one of the early critical essays on the novel— by Vengayil Kunhiraman Nayanar, a contemporary short story writer and essayist—published in *Vidya Vinodini* in 1891, the term *kavyam* was used to refer to the novel (“Akyayika” 1-10). Such contingency in discursive texts on literature in Malayalam needs to be seen neither as an aberration nor in terms of their proximity or distance from Sanskrit discourses, but as a site of translation that makes visible the newness of Malayalam literary space. In order to understand this site further let us consider the second installment of a review published in *Vidya Vinodini* of the Malayalam play *Kalyaninatakam*. We referred to the first part of this review earlier. In the second part of the review, Achutha Menon highlighted a few shortcomings of the play:

Since the story, *rasas*, and character of the protagonists in a play are staged through conversation, it is in the conversation that the effectiveness of a play lies. A



prolonged monologue by a character affects the conversational character of a play. Therefore we are of the opinion that the long story narrated by Thuppannamboothirippad could have been avoided.

Further,

We did not quite like the criminal trial present in the fifth scene. It is not easy to effectively make matters related to the court (*kodathikaryangal*), which are devoid of any *rasa*, a literary subject. As far as our knowledge goes only a few English plays could handle such matters effectively. Therefore it is better to avoid them in a play (2).

Although couched in idioms of Sanskrit poetics, these critical observations about the play *Kalyaninatakam* needs to be seen as addressing the specificities of contemporary Malayalam plays. In other words, I suggest that Achutha Menon's observations about the play—prolonged monologues and matters related to the court as undesirable in a play—shall not be taken as his attempt at examining the adherence or otherwise of *Kalyaninatakam* to the norms of Sanskrit poetics, but need to be seen as a site for exploring the historical newness of both critical discourse and literary writing. In other words, we can say that the critical discourse of late nineteenth century has a relationship of reciprocal dependence on literary works which were simultaneously emerging. In the following section I shall give specific instances from the Malayalam print space of the nineteenth century to explore this relation of reciprocal dependence further.

II

The relationship of the new literary critical discourse in Malayalam to contemporary literary production in the late nineteenth century is evident in “Kavyabedhangal”, another essay on Malayalam literature by Achutha Menon published in *Vidya Vinodini*:

We think that since Malayalam literature (Bhasha Kavitha) generally was modeled after Sanskrit literature, we can follow Sanskrit poetics while discussing various literary forms in Malayalam. However, even while briefly discussing various



literary forms and their properties following the Sanskrit tradition, we shall also highlight those aspects that are not appropriate for Malayalam literature and those that are specific to it. For example, in Sanskrit Ramayanam is written in *shlokam* form while Malayalam Ramayanam is written in *kilippattu*. Therefore all the literary properties provided in Sanskrit poetics do not apply in Malayalam literature. Further, since *Kathakali* is a unique form in Malayalam, we need to discuss their properties separately. We shall keep these variations in mind while discussing various literary forms (*kavya bhedangal*) (1-2).

However, it is not only with regard to unique forms in Malayalam like Kathkali, a classical form, and *kilippattu* that, according to Achutha Menon, required modifications while deriving a critical discourse from Sanskrit but also with regard to the contemporary Malayalam plays. Interestingly, here Achutha Menon enlarges his frame of reference— the Sanskrit poetics— and draws from formal aspects of English plays by looking at the now available translations in Malayalam, while discussing about the formal properties of Malayalam plays:

Since most of the plays in Malayalam are either Sanskrit translations or modeled on Sanskrit plays, they usually have a *poorvarangam* (Prologue). But in English this practice is not common. Most of the English plays do not have a *prasthavana*. Since there is a possibility to make Malayalam plays after the English model, we cannot say that *prasthavana* is compulsory in them (4).

Interestingly, Menon also took positions contrary to this in relation to English literary style. An instance of conversation of critical engagement between Menon and Kandathil Varghese Mappila, another important literary figure of the period who was also an editor and publisher, will help us see the complications of literary discourse that Menon was trying to generate.

There is a moment in the Prologue of *Kalahinidamanakam*- a free translation by Kandathil Varghese Mappila of Shakespeare's play *Taming of the Shrew*, published in 1894- where Tharakan, a character makes a critical comment about the play as a literary form:

Tharakan: ...what is your thought on this? Isn't it better to limit the usage of *shlokam* in a play? In fact, it is best to avoid them altogether. Actors shall focus



more on acting than trying to get the *raga* right while reciting. No wonder why people do not find these plays pleasurable (*rasikata*)! Why would anyone spend money to listen to the recitation of *shlokams* and verses taken from some books? . . . (33).

In an otherwise favourable review- published in an edition of *VidyaVinodini* in 1894 of this play, literary critic C.P. Achutha Menon expressed his disapproval about this point, and suggested that lack of *shlokam* in *Kalahinidamanakam* was a serious shortcoming:

Shlokam is nearly absent in this play. In our opinion this is a serious shortcoming. When a profound (*arthagambhiryamulla*) Sanskrit or English text is translated into Malayalam devoid of any verse, it is impossible to retain even a minimum level of literary or aesthetic quality (*aswadyata*) of the original. In the Prologue the author makes a character say this on the topic: ‘Isn’t it better to limit the use of ‘*shlokam*’ in a play? It is, in fact, best to avoid them altogether’. We agree that the use of *shlokam* in some new (*adhunika*) plays is superfluous, and therefore care must be taken to limit its usage. But we don’t agree- neither does Kalidasa nor Shakespeare- with the opinion that plays can be devoid of *shlokam*. (51-52).

In a Preface to the second edition of *Kalahinidamanakam* published in 1900, Varghese Mappila responded to Achutha Menon’s criticism:

Although I greatly respected the opinion of the worthy reviewer – about the first edition – that those parts of the original in verse ought to have been translated in verse, or that the verse form ought to have been retained in the translation as well, when I re-read the text I did not find in it any matter serious enough to be rendered in verse. Whatever be the intention of the great author of the original, I did not feel the need to change the natural (*swabhavikata*) and easy-to-follow prose I followed in the first edition (22).

This discussion about *shlokam* that occurred in a cross textual print space—across a literary text, a review and a preface—of Malayalam in the closing decade of nineteenth century indicates both the newly emergent character of the discourse on literature in Kerala on the one hand, and the historic specificity of Malayalam literary space in its formative years. Varghese Mappila’s assertions—that including a verse form like *shlokam* in a play affects the aesthetic quality (*rasikata*), and that writing in prose could bring about *swabhavikata* in literature—and Achutha



Menon's suggestion that avoiding *shloka*m altogether from a play could affect the enjoyability (*asvadyata*) can be understood as indicative of the newness of the discourse on literature shaping, and in turn shaped by, the now emergent print culture. This also needs to be seen significantly as production of literary discourse specific to the contemporary literary scene generated as an effect of the writers' responsiveness to literary translations of the time.

III

In this paper we saw how early literary discourses in Malayalam could be seen as an act of translation that conceive both the transfer of ideas and generation of ideas together as producing the new. We have also seen how critics like Achutha Menon, through his responsiveness to contemporary literary practices of translation, contributed to the development of a critical discourse for Malayalam literature. This indicates an important aspect of the emergent Malayalam literary space in the late-nineteenth-century; a specific relation between the discourse on literatures and literary practices. These appear to be dependent on each other at a time when these two realms were emerging simultaneously. An exploration of this relation, which may be done on another occasion, shall help to fully understand the formation of a literary space in Malayalam in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

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Poems of Kodungalloor Kunjikuttam Thampuran, Venmani Achan Namboothirippad, Venmani Makan Namboothirippad were abound in the pages of *Vidya Vinodini*; it also published Malayalam translations of Sanskrit plays like *Vikramorvasheeyam*, *Malavikagnimitram* and, VengayilKunjiraman Nayanar's short stories *Menokkiye Konnataru*, and *Dwaraka*.

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