



A Critical Reading of Select Thirukkural by Thiruvalluvar in multiple translations.

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Abstract: *In the present times, translation has become a part of human communication. It has built bridges between different cultures and languages. It is like a gateway to a different culture. The translation of various texts gives the reader a deeper and wider insight on the principles, morals and socially accepted life that one has to lead according to the society or place he or she belongs to. The paper aims to critical read a well-known literary masterpiece from the Sangam Period, Thirukkural by Thiruvalluvar which has been widely translated and studied by different scholars and writers. It attempts to bring out the richness of the ancient literature and culture which in turn give the reader wisdom about different cultures and practices that holds true to the present times as well.*

Keywords: *Translation, culture, literature, society, indigenous texts.*

According to George Steiner, "Without Translation, we would be living on provinces bordering on silence."

Translation has built bridges between different cultures and languages. It is like a gateway to a different culture. The translation of various texts gives the reader a deeper and wider insight on the principles, morals and socially accepted life that one has to lead according to the society or place he or she belongs to.

With globalization, our world is becoming smaller with people from different walks of life. Cultures, backgrounds, languages and traditions meet at a single forum and even live together. With all these practices translation of texts has given indigenous texts and translators bigger and better options to showcase their talents and expose the world to multi-cultures. Most of the earliest texts are re-read, re-interpreted, rewritten and translated according to the translators own understanding. Translation has now become a part of human communication.

The Thirukkural is one among the well-known Tamil literary works of the Sangam period. It is considered as one of the ancient literary works of the Sangam era which dates back to 3rd century BC to 4th century AD. It was written by Thiruvalluvar, an exceptionally powerful thinker, a master of his language and literature has put together complex poetic forms and has given to the world 1330 couplets that make up the Thirukkural. In Tamil, "Thiru" means "holy" or "sacred" and "Kural" means anything that is "short" and "brief". He deals with topics as the sublimation of the individual, education, domestic life, statecraft, etc. He has documented the soul and genius of ancient Tamil cultures in its language and diction. It is a flamboyant representation of its culture and age.

This masterpiece has been translated by many translators. The translation of this book is not just a mere translation but it is an exposition of one culture which still remains universal in the ideologies. Though culture is not universal, this text caters to have equivalent principle that collides into indigenous culture and foreign doctrines as well. In this paper, we have chosen a couple of translators of the Thirukkural to show how different each translator is and draw the problems associated with the original.

One of the pioneers of the translation was G U Pope, has gone into the work deep and emerges to find a translation which is flawless as the original. Gopalakrishna Gandhi has attempted to translate the Kurals with a sense of cultural psyche and shares his thoughts on a variety of topics mostly being personal ethics, social conduct and love. His translation is more intimate free flowing and conversational. C Rajagopalachari has translated the Kurals in an elaborate description in an attempt to convey principles to lead a life. He uses simple and easily understandable words to translate them in English. S M Diaz translates the Kurals in much simpler and easily relatable words and has attempted to bring the style of the original by making them short, brief and rhythmic.

For instance, the first Kural which praises God “அகர முதல எழுத்தெல்லாம் ஆதி பகவன் முதற்றே உலகு”.

G U Pope translates this as, “‘A’ as its first of letters, every speech maintains; The primal deity is first through all the world’s domain”.

Gandhi translates it as, “As ‘A’ is of every alphabet the primordial letter so is God world’s very fount and progenitor”.

Diaz has translated it as, “The alphabet begins with ‘A’; so does the universe, with God”.

On comparing the translated versions, we see a lot of dissimilarities. Pope has translated the Thirukkural in the year 1886 and his language and diction is in the Victorian fashion. It seems to be more complicated and formal, it is not easily understandable by a casual reader. The words like ‘speech’, ‘primal’, ‘deity’ have a formal and proverbial undertone. On comparing it to Gandhi’s translation, we see how he uses much simpler words like ‘alphabet’ and ‘God’ to convey the meaning of the first Kural. Diaz, a more contemporary translator of the 21st century has used casual, conversational words to translate the first Kural. We see how the multiple translations are different in the choice of words and style. The influence of the age they belong to is also very evident. As in how Pope’s translation is very different from that of Diaz. However, the translation focuses on God who is the first in the universe like that of ‘A’ is the first of all alphabets in all languages. This Kural is universal to language, culture and even religion.

The second Kural about the rain “வான்நின்று உலகம் வழங்கி வருதலால் தான்அமிழ்தம் என்றுணரற் பாற்று”.

Pope translates this as “If clouds, that promised rain, deceive and in the sky remain; Famine, sore torment, stalks o’ver earth’s vast ocean girdled plain.”

Gandhi translates it as, “Our sea bound land to thirst is doomed, and to hunger and pain; When clouds turn hard and their train-trove enchain.”

Diaz translates it as, “If the rain fails, hunger will cause infinite misery to the world. Even though it is surrounded by the wide oceans.”

These varied translations show how geographical spaces affect a translation. In most Asian countries, where more than half the population survives on agriculture as their primary occupation, rain plays a significant role. This Kural praises the rain and brings out the importance of it. All the translators have used words such as ‘torment’, ‘infinite misery’ and ‘pain’ to show how the world will become if nature deprives the Earth of rain. This kind of Kurals becomes region or nation specific and not universal. However, the translators face a challenge of who they translate for and to make the reader understand the context becomes problematic.

The third Kural is taken to show how an ancient writing is still relevant in the 21st century. This Kural states “ஒழுக்கம் உடைமை குடிமை இழுக்கம் இழிந்த பிறப்பாய் விடும்.”

Pope’s translation: “Decorum’s true nobility on Earth; Indecorum issue is ignoble birth”

Gandhi’s translation: “No one is born noble on this Earth; Conduct makes you trustworthy, not birth.”

Diaz’s translation: “Right conduct is true nobility; The absence of it is just ignoble”

In our present contemporary world while India is developing scientifically and technologically, it is still caught in traps of caste and class. There are many instances of honor killings, molestation, rape and public shaming in the name of caste is still prevalent. Thiruvalluvar in the ancient times wrote this Kural about a man’s conduct irrespective of the caste one belongs to, it is only the conduct that will determine one’s character. Pope, Gandhi, Diaz and Gopalachari share the same perspective. They have translated the Kural to be proverbial and more like a doctrine for the reader to follow. This only shows the richness of our ancient literature and how translation has helped us to appreciate our cultural and lingual texts.

The last Kural chosen is to show the poetry in the original version which all the translators have attempted to blend in the translation but have not been completely successful in doing that. The Kural, “பற்றுக் பற்றற்றான் பற்றினை அப்பற்றைப் பற்றுக் பற்று விடற்கு.”

Pope: “Cling thou to that which He, to whom not clings, hath bid thee cling; Cling to that bond, to get thee from every clinging thing.”

Gandhi translates it as, “There is this hold, though, the hold that holds all, the holder and the held; To that hold fast, hold long and well, and it’s rapture melt.”

Diaz: “The only attachment that will help to sever all the other bonds and attachments, is the attachment to the Lord who is boundless source of all things.”

According to Pope, a missionary and a staunch believer in his faith translated this Kural 350 according to what he has understood in context with his religion. He uses words like ‘cling thou to that which’ is attempting to tell the reader that one must be closely associated to God and that attachment will free one from all the materialistic greed, worldly pleasures and sorrows. Gandhi has been simpler in his approach in the translation. For instance, he used words like ‘hold’, ‘rapture’ and ‘melt’. This is easy to understand. Pope has made mention of ‘He’ while Gandhi has been safe by referring it as ‘He that hold that holds all’. Diaz has been very philosophical and spiritual in translation of the Kural. On the other hand, when we look at the original version “பற்றுக் பற்றற்றான் பற்றினை அப்பற்றைப் பற்றுக் பற்று விடற்கு.” It follows certain poetic pattern which is lost in the translation. The words do not rhyme or have an alliteration which is present in the original. This by and large shows that sometimes the translators find it a bit tedious to bring the effect of the original version into the translation.

On comparing between all the translators, we see how Pope- a well-read Christian reverent has juxtaposed the Kurals along with his own understanding within the context of his religion. It is grammatically flawless, didactic and is presented to the reader as rules that one must follow to get closer to God and lead a moral life. However, it is not very evident in his translations as he has made most of his Kurals more universal. He has attempted to make a few couplets rhyme. On the other hand, we see how he has used complex words and presented to the reader in a formal fashion. This proves him to be a typical Victorian writer.

Rajagopalchari, a great patriot politician and thinker. He has translated selected Kurals in a more descriptive and comprehensive manner. It is more like a commentary on his feelings and opinion of the Kurals. Reading his translations, one might find that he is concerned about state affairs more than religion, family and nature. He probably believed that a common man being interested in the betterment of the nation will have to follow the laws of the state. This will lead to a prosperous nation.

Gandhi in his translation has concentrated more on the intrinsic cultural psyche. He poetically visualizes the great Tamil thinker and poet Thiruvalluvar but it does not assume the role of a preacher and he has made the Kurals more intimate and easily connectable to a readers, situations and life. Thiruvalluvar does not make mention of any particular community or religion. His translation is applicable across all the creed and caste.

Diaz is contemporary translator like mentioned earlier. Hence, his choice of words is more informal, proverbial, simple and easily understandable. He has attempted to make the Kural slightly similar to that of the original by just putting them into two lines.

All these translations have worked on translating these Kurals, specifically to bring out the richness of the ancient literature and culture. These give the reader wisdom about different cultures and practices and thereby making it accessible to a versatile audience. It also invokes a sense of pride for one to know that this land of ours was once a land of great thinkers, scholars and poets. Now, the readers have an easy access to texts not only in their native language but they have access to multilingual and multicultural texts and thereby like George Steiner says it crosses “borders of provinces.”

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