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A Critical Study of the novel *Indulekha* through Translation Studies.

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Abstract

Studying the first major novel in Malayalam, *Indulekha*, through the critical lens of Translation Studies, is a fruitful journey, source language being Malayalam and target language, English; this novel becomes a site of cross-cultural appropriation and adaptation. It's journey parallels the journey of Translation Studies which, till the second half of the twentieth century was limited to the literal, word to word, or sense to sense translation. The emergence of Translation Studies as an independent discipline in the 1970s-1980s brought new insights into that significant moment of the first translation of *Indulekha* by Dumergue in 1890. Subsequent translations, re-evaluated the text through post-colonial frameworks.

Key Words: Translation, Adaptation, Malayalam, English, Re-writing, Culture, Junction.

The first Malayalam novel *Indulekha*, published in 1889, marks several milestones in Malayalam literature. It captures the socio-political reality of nineteenth century Kerala, when British colonial rule had made inroads into the Malayali society and polity. The novel depicts the changes happening in the traditional society, especially the position of women and caste system. This change is expressed effectively through the titular character-*Indulekha*-a young, educated, intelligent Nair girl who defies the tradition of eldest Nambudiri Brahmin son marrying a Brahmin girl and the younger Nambudiri sons marrying a Nair girl. She rejects the proposal of marriage from an older Nambudiri man and chooses to marry an educated Nair boy, Madhav. She faces criticism for this decision but insists on marrying a man of her choice. Thus O. Chandu Menon injects individualism into a traditional society.

By making an intelligent and educated girl the protagonist of his novel, O. Menon establishes the idea of women's education and their independent identity. Within a year, the novel was translated into English, and marked a major literary shift, as the traditional society of Kerala, as expressed in the original *Indulekha* was portrayed in a foreign

language, the language of the colonizer, so *Indulekha* becomes a site of translation, of what Bhabha, the postcolonial theorist would call ambivalence.

The birth of Translation Studies as an independent discipline was signaled by publication of *Translation Studies* by Susan-Bassnett-McGuire in 1980. According to Jhumpa Lahiri, “translation is not a finite linguistic act but an ongoing cultural one” (Lahiri, 120) (*InTranslation Reflections Refractions Transformations*)

O’ Chandu Menon noted in his preface to *Indulekha* that he wanted to translate Disraeli’s novel *Henrietta Temple* (1836) into Malayalam. He also wrote that a literal translation of the English romance into Malayalam would not translate well the socio-cultural matrix and interactions of nineteenth century English society. Thus was born the idea of writing an original novel in Malayalam-*Indulekha*, within the framework of the English novel, as he says “after the English fashion”, with realities of Malabar’s matrilineal society as the core, touched with idealism and romance of Disraeli’s *Henrietta Temple*. O. Chandu Menon builds the novel on caste hierarchy and the traditions related to it in nineteenth century Kerala. In Kerala, the Nambudiri Brahmins were very powerful, but also the most traditional. Nairs, on the other hand, were an upper caste community who were acquiring western education and highly placed in the colonial administration. It was the Nambudiri tradition that the eldest son would marry a Nambudiri Brahmin girl while the younger sons could marry a Nair girl and be a part of the matrilineal tradition of the Nairs. In this way, the Nambudiris cleverly maintained control of their land by following the law of primogeniture according to which land would be inherited by the eldest son. On the other side, the marriage between the younger Nambudiri sons and a Nair girl was not sacrosanct and could be broken or dissolved at will. So, when *Indulekha*, the female protagonist refuses to marry an older Nambudiri man, she faces criticism even ostracism. But she adheres to her decision and the Nair boy stands by her. Finally, they move to the then Madras, now Chennai and begin a new life.

Though written in the Malayalam language, *Indulekha* became a site of cultural negotiation between a foreign and alien literary genre in the realist tradition and the Malayali literary and cultural traditions. The novel is clearly open to interpretation through translation theory as it is a remarkable example of cultural translation. The term Cultural Translation first occurs in Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha begins with an epigraph from Walter Benjamin’s classic essay on translation, “Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity and similarity” (Bhabha, 212). Later, Bhabha brings in Derrida’s deconstruction of Benjamin’s concept of translation as an after-life or survival. Simultaneously *Indulekha* reflects contemporary reality and incipient modernity, changing gender relations, caste hierarchy, English education as well as the negotiation between Malayalam literary culture and Western literary form. The novel also reflects simultaneously the Victorian ideas of

love and marriage and it's writer, O. Menon was clearly influenced by realism in the Victorian novel, especially Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Henrietta Temple*. The novel illustrates how the English realist novel was transformed when it's core, it's structure, was influenced by Kerala's social institutions, customs, caste relationships, marriage practices, linguistic idiom and gender politics.

Dumergue's translation of *Indulekha*, studied and analyzed through Translation Studies offers multiple and new insights. Earlier translation was merely considered a subsidiary field of Linguistics. Indeed Translation was considered a mere transaction between two languages as J.C. Clifford's points out in his book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation; An Essay in Applied Linguistics* (1965). He defined translation as "process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another." Later, literary texts began to be thought of as not mere linguistic constructs, but cultural constructs too, as translation of regional Indian languages into English faced the problem of translating specific terms like *dhotti*, *kurta*, *roti*, *dharma* into English as they were peculiarly Indian and in contrast to western articles like shirt, trousers, religion and so on. Later translations considered such items as culture-specific and even that language itself was specific to a particular culture. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis underlined that a language defined and delimited the particular worldview of it's speakers, in the sense, that what they could not say in their language was what they could not even conceive of, seemed to support the view that specificity of a culture was co-extensive with the specificity of a language.

The unit of translation was no longer a word or even a text, but the whole language and culture in which that text was constituted. This new awareness was aptly described as "The Cultural Turn in Translation Studies" in the title of a chapter, jointly written by Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere in their book *Translation History and Culture* (1990). O ' Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* is an illustration of this as the changes in nineteenth century society in Kerala are portrayed in the alien genre of the English novel. Modernization was brought by the British through English education that impacted society by way of change in marriage practices. While the form is alien, the content is indigenous. The novel can be cited as an example of creative adaptation or cultural re-writing as it is not a translation of Disraeli's novel *Henrietta Temple*. Menon's movement from translating *Henrietta Temple* to writing *Indulekha* demonstrates that colonial literary transfer was not a one-way process of imitation. The English novel was appropriated, transformed and relocated within the social and cultural realities of nineteenth century Kerala. Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995) is especially useful when considering *Indulekha* because Menon's relationship with the English novel can be understood as a movement from translation to cultural adaptation.

Andre' Lefevere in his book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulations of Literary Fame*, argues that re-writing includes translation, adaptation, criticism, editing and other

forms through which literature is transmitted and transformed. The novel does not merely introduce the Western novel into Kerela, but uses the Western literary form to speak about Kerela's own historical problems. According to Susan Bassnett translation is a cultural process. Her book *Translation Studies* establishes that translation is not mere substitution of words between two languages, but also considers relationship between language, culture, history, ideology and literary form. Bassnett writes "Translation Studies draws on a combination of "work in linguistics, literary studies, cultural history, philosophy, and anthropology" (Bassnett 2002) (2002: xi)

O Chandu Menon's *Indulekha*, illustrates the notable literary phenomenon of transformation of the Western novel when it entered nineteenth century Kerela. His literary experiment demonstrates that literary forms are themselves transformed when they travel across cultures. So, *Indulekha* becomes a junction of Western literature, modernity, Malayalam language and Kerela's social history. It can justifiably be considered as a form of cultural translation. While O' Menon refrained from translating *Henrietta Temple* into English and only used the English novel form, Dumergue translated the Malayam novel back into English. The fascinating aspect of this English translation is that it carries with it the customs and culture of Kerela to the English readers: the matrilineal system among the Nairs and the Malabar family structure, Malayalam cultural terminology and Menon's critique of the contemporary novel. Consequently, Dumergue's translation becomes a cultural document about colonial Kerela.

Translation of literary works has been done since the earliest times. In modern times three moments stand out in the journey of what is known as Translation Studies today. The first moment belongs to the period between 1890s and 1930s with a remarkable upsurge in translation of Russian fiction into English. The second moment belongs to translation of works from Latin America and East European countries of the then Soviet Union during 1970s and 1980s. This moment of change occurred in India also when, during the late eighteenth century, Charles Wilkins, Sir William Jones and other Orientalists translated Indian works like *Abhigyan Shankuntalam* of Kalidas from Sanskrit, constituting in Europe what Raymond Schwab called *The Oriental Renaissance* and J.J. Clarke *The European Enlightenment*. But these did not awaken interest in translation as an independent discipline. Rather, discipline of comparative philology came into existence. Translation as an independent field of academic enquiry happened only around the 1980s. Translation has been gaining ground during the past few years with the publication of Routledge Encyclopaedia of *Translation Studies* edited by Mona Baker (1998); the Encyclopaedia of *Literary Translation* into English edited by Olive Clane (2000); the *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* edited by Peter France (2000). To these may be added anthologies of theoretical and critical statements such as *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* edited

by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (1992), *The Translation Studies Reader* edited by Lawrence Venuti (2000), *Contemporary Translation Theories* by Edwin Gentzler (1993)

One may consider Translation Studies as interdisciplinary as it takes much from different areas of study as comparative literature, computer science, history, linguistics, philology, philosophy and semiotics. The term Translation Studies was coined in 1972 by an American scholar James S. Holmes in his paper titled Translation Studies and the discipline struck roots during the 1980s and 1990s. It focuses on how meaning moves between languages, on equivalence between texts, the role of culture, and the purpose of communication.

Following are some core concepts or key features of Translation Studies.

- Equivalence, where the translator's aim is to match meaning, effect and structure between the source text and the target text.
- Formal vs. Dynamic Equivalence: The translator opts between literal, word for word translation or evoking the same response in the new readers.
- Skopos Theory: The purpose of translation is to focus on purpose of the text being translated.
- Cultural Context The translator adapts the idioms, norms, cultural codes, myths that cannot be translated literally.
- Linguistic Analysis: Implies comparing grammar, syntax, and semantics across different languages.

O' Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* may be interpreted through the lens of the above mentioned aspects or features of Translation Studies. But, this interpretation may be preceded by a brief overview of socio-economic history of Kerela in the nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth century Kerela was going through a period of intense change. On the one hand upper caste Nambudiri Brahmins and Nairs were socially and politically dominant classes. Untouchability as well as agricultural and bonded slavery were prevalent and abolished only in 1853 in Travancore and in British Malabar in 1843. Amidst this rigid caste and class hierarchy, change came with the introduction of English education. Education brought social awareness which led to demands for temple entry, educational equality. New cash crops like coffee and tea and urbanization loosened control. It is in this society, on the cusp of change, that the novel *Indulekha* was published.

Andre Lefevere's concept of 're-writing' is a productive framework for Menon's relationship with the English novel. Lefevere treats translation as one form of re-writing through which literary works are transformed as they move into new linguistic,

ideological and literary environments. Dumergue writes in the preface about administrative value of *Indulekha*, “a novel supplies a distinct want” (Dumergue, Translator’s Preface). Menon writes about his motivation behind *Indulekha*, “First my wife’s oft-expressed desire to read in her own language a novel written after the English fashion...” (Menon xvi) (1965 Dumergue edition). This statement is useful for discussing translation as cultural mediation. Menon may have had Malayalam readers being introduced to a literary form- the English novel that had become associated with English education and colonial modernity. Menon may also have had the noble aspiration of revitalizing Malayalam literature. He writes “to contribute my mite towards the improvement of Malayalam literature which I regret to observe is fast dying out by disuse as well as by abuse.” (Menon xxi)

It is interesting to note that Dumergue in his English translation of *Indulekha* (1890) consulted Menon about the meaning of some Sanskrit passages and made notes to explain Malayalam social practices like the marriage or *Sambandham*, between the younger Nambudiri Brahmin sons and the Nair girls from the matrilineal Nair community. In fact, out of this grew the plot of *Indulekha*-the love story of Indulekha the young, educated, intelligent Nair girl and Madhav, an educated Nair boy. Dumergue, explaining these customs to the English readers in his translation of the Malayalam original is clearly a case of cultural translation. He makes Malabar and its culture and traditions accessible to colonial readers. Later, Devasia’s translation of *Indulekha* challenges the earlier colonial framing and becomes an example of postcolonial re-writing. In fact *Indulekha* is a remarkable example of double movement of translation as the original *Indulekha* in Malayalam written in the form of an English novel was already a form of translation before Dumergue translated it into English. Anitha Devasia, in her 2005 translation of *Indulekha*, explains her strategy in the preface to this novel. “I have tried to remain alert to the cut and thrust of the many historical issues at stake in the text.”

Devasia’s edition of *Indulekha* puts historical material alongside the translated novel. Her translation includes

- Dumergue’s Preface
- Chandu Menon’s Memorandum to the Malabar Marriage Commission.
- The President’s Supplementary Memorandum.
- A glossary of selected Malayalam terms.

. The 1965 edition reproduces Dumergue’s characterization of the novel as: “a good story, with a very simple plot” and describes it as set within “contemporary social life in Malabar” (Dumergue v). Here Walter Benjamin’s concept of the ‘afterlife’ of the text becomes applicable to *Indulekha*. Menon uses the English novel form to write a novel in Malayalam which is then translated into English by Dumergue giving *Indulekha* an after-life; then Devasia gives this novel another after-life from a postcolonial perspective.

Translation of the Malayalam *Indulekha* into English is thus, given a new life in another linguistic-cultural system.

In *Indulekha*, cultural translation is seen in the character of the protagonist *Indulekha* who received an English education, knew English but was rooted in Malayali cultural identity. Menon writes, “Though she knew English and had received an English education, she was keenly aware of her Malayali identity.” (Menon 7). In terms of Translation Studies, she is neither simply westernized nor traditionally indigenous. “She justifies Susan Bassnett’s ‘cultural translation,’ Even the education *Indulekha* receives is a blend of Western and Indian artistic traditions. She learns to play the piano, violin as well as the *veena* which establishes her hybrid cultural identity. Menon writes, “Besides, she was taught to embroider and paint like the young ladies in Europe” (Menon 7). While Europe becomes a reference point, the comparison is intelligible to the English language reader, in the English translation. At the same time *Indulekha* also challenges the colonial representation of Nair women as unfaithful because of their marital practices. She questions the validity of applying European marital norms to native Nair women and becomes an early example of what postcolonial critics Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths, would term, “Empire writes back.” *Indulekha* is here speaking against an outsider’s gaze at Malabar. Instead, she puts the onus on the European critics by wondering whether European women too become adulterous on receiving western education and freedom. Are all these women adulterous? Here *Indulekha* is challenging the assumption that European marital norms have universal validity. Here, the novel *Indulekha* predates the postcolonial idea of cultural relativism. Indeed, the novel projects many ideas that were to become the norm in the twentieth century and beyond. When colonialism had already spread its tentacles across the world, *Indulekha*, contests the dominant ideas of the times through the simple act of being written in the alien literary form of the coloniser, but in the native language, and then being translated in the English language by Dumergue, disseminating Kerala’s socio-cultural norms across the English speaking world.

Devasia and Tharu note that translation of *Indulekha* into English made available a “literary and linguistic evidence which British scholars and historians would find indispensable.”

According to Mehrotra, the different re-writings of *Indulekha* in English captured different ideological and historical moments “colonial, nationalist and finally postcolonial.” (143) Devasia and Tharu in their essay “Englishing *Indulekha*”, point out that the translation of the novel *Indulekha* is an example of cultural translation and not merely transfer from or substitution of one language for another. One can term the civil servant J.W.F. Dumergue’s 1890 translation of *Indulekha* as ‘Colonial’ as it contributed to the colonial knowledge system by documenting social and cultural practices of Malabar; T.C. Sankar Menon’s revised edition of this novel ‘Nationalist,’ and Anitha

Devasia's 2005 model as 'postcolonial.' It validates Lefevere's theory of re-writing which says that every translation is produced within a specific ideological and literary system. Devasia and Tharu comment on the English translation of *Indulekha*, "a translation that rewrites it's original into dominant..... discourse of the target language" (74-75)

In 1890, Dumergue describes the novel as "a good story, with a very simple plot" – reducing the Malayalam original with it's complex narrative into the familiar English love story. Critics have called it an example of paratextual framing where the translator's preface influences the English reader's understanding of the text, before reading it, what the reviews do for readers and audiences in case of books and films. Dumergue also describes the novel as situated within, "the framework of contemporary social life in Malabar" which makes *Indulekha* appear almost ethnographic. Here the translation and colonial knowledge intersect to provide the English reader with an English representation of "Malabar." It is worth mentioning that Dumergue's translation contributed in establishing *Indulekha's* early international reception as it was published in 1890, soon after the publication of Malayalam original in 1889.

Anitha Devasia's translation of *Indulekha* in 2005, establishes it in the postcolonial context, as many of the situations in the novel illustrate typical postcolonial phenomena of multiplicity, hybridity, gender issues and so on. If Dumergue makes Malabar intelligible to the colonial reader then Devasia traces the history of it's re-writing and makes it visible to the postcolonial reader. Oxford University Press describes Devasia's translation as attentive to the nuances of the original and includes appendices and a glossary.

In 1889 Menon explains his intention behind writing *Indulekha*, "to create a taste amongst my Malayalee readers, not conversant with English, for that class of literature represented in the English language by novels"(Menon xiv) Elsewhere, explaining his intention further Menon writes, "to illustrate to my Malayalee brethren the position, power and influence that our Nair women would attain in society, if they are given a good English education" (Menon xvi) Here Translation Studies and Gender Studies combine forces as Menon projects, even appropriates English education as a means of imagining a new kind of Indian woman. Thus, *Indulekha* becomes a site of cultural negotiation. Menon further explains his choice of language "The book is written generally in the style of Malayalam which I speak at home (Menon xvi) This is an important counterpoint to his admission of writing "after the English fashion." Dumergue mentions in the preface: "No book was ever written with greater justification than the Malayalam novel of "*Indulekha*" (Dumergue, "Translator Preface", 1890) Thus, Dumergue becomes a cultural intermediary between Malayalam literature and English readers. He comments on earlier literature, "there is a total absence of originality"

(“Translator’s Preface,” 1890) It is significant because Dumergue then goes on to praise *Indulekha* as an original work as it breaks from earlier literary traditions. Dumergue’s preface tells the English reader how to read *Indulekha*. The novel becomes simultaneously: a love story, an account of Malabar, an ethnographic document and an example of Indian social life. This phenomenon can be studied and analysed through Gerard Genette’s concept of paratext as well as Venuti’s translation theory.

Anitha Devasia’s translation of *Indulekha* (2005) follows a different strategy. She places it in the postcolonial context. She states her awareness of “the many historical issues at stake in the text” (Devasia xvii). So her use of glossary and historical appendices become significant. This makes her a “visible translator” to use Lawrence Venuti’s phrase rather than a transparent translator. (Devasia xvii)

Andre Lefevere terms Translation as re-writing and *Indulekha* demonstrates this idea as the different re-writings are not identical but shaped by a different history and sociology. One more translation of *Indulekha* is R. Leeladevi’s 1979 version (*Crescent Moon*) which also evaluates the text through postcolonial framework.

It is pertinent to conclude, that despite the shortcomings, Dumergue’s was an extremely prompt and quick translation of *indulekha* into English, gave it international exposure and provided fillip to Malayalam literature as well as regional Indian literature as a whole. It awakened the world of literature to the possibilities that lay in Indian literature. This study would be incomplete without a mention of the contribution of Anitha Devasia’s translation of *Indulekha* (2005) to Translation Studies. She uses an insider’s perspective to re-write a story of nineteenth century Kerala in a language suffused with empathy and understanding.

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