



# **NAIPUNNYA INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (NIMIT)**

## **CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC IMPEDIMENTS IN TRANSLATION**

**Funded Project Submitted to  
Talent Publications Pvt. Ltd, Kochi**

**Principal Investigator:**  
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## **FUNDED PROJECT – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Cultural and Linguistic Impediments in Translation**

The project attempts to identify the impediments that surface when a literary work is translated from one language to another. It includes the cultural impediments, linguistic trauma, psychological barriers, emotional issues, translating language structure, idioms and expressions, compound words, two-word verbs, occurrence of multiple meanings etc. The ability of the translator to overcome these impediments determines the quality of the translated work. This talent moulds the work and imparts a literary aroma to the creation. In that case, the literary work he/she deals with may become a masterpiece or a classic. But, on the other hand, if the translator fails to overcome these barriers, the entire structure of the literary work may get distorted and the aesthetic fervor stands spoiled. These are some of the prominent issues discussed in disciplines like comparative studies, translation studies etc. Considering these aspects, this project tries to identify the significant issues that arose in translating Benyamin's *Goat Days* and how the translator strives to overcome these translational barriers.

Benyamin's narrative sparkles like the rustic unpolished small-talk of one countryman to another. It abandons the suggestive and states the obvious with plain simplicity. There is a conscious and powerful denial of the elite notion that meaning is deep, suggestive and beyond the realm of commonplace. Translating non-Sanskritic and partly rustic Malayalam, with a strong regional touch, into English hence heightens the barriers for the translator. The focus of the study converges specifically on these enhanced barriers.

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## **Cultural and Linguistic Impediments in Translation**

Translation is widely perceived as the communication of the meaning of a text in one language into another language. (Bhatia 1051). It is the process of transferring the meaning of a source text in a target language, and it plays a vital role in bridging the gap between different cultures and languages. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes in her *Indian Novels in Translation*, “It cannot be a mere coincidence that the translators concerned are primarily writers or scholars in English. Not merely adequate command of the English language but sufficient practice of sophisticated writing in English is necessary for successful translation into English” (Mukherjee 64-71). However, translation is not a straightforward task, as languages have unique structures, vocabularies, and cultural nuances that can pose challenges in achieving equivalence between the source and target text. Malayalam, a Dravidian language spoken in the Indian state of Kerala, has its own set of linguistic, cultural, and contextual intricacies that can make translation into English (a Germanic language widely used worldwide) particularly challenging. The translator has to consider the lexical, syntactical and semantic aspects of both the languages during the process of translation. The diction or the choice of words, the grammatical structure and constructions are significant from a linguistic perspective. The process of meaning making or the arbitrary relationship between the referent and the referenced becomes significant from a cultural perspective. An ideal translation would be one that takes into consideration the cultural as well as linguistic aspects and is hence an intelligent and sensible blend.

One of the primary challenges in translating from Malayalam to English is the linguistic differences between the two languages. Malayalam evolved from a Proto-Dravidian tongue and has common roots with Tamil. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the language

was influenced by Sanskrit in its lexis and syntax (Shanmugam 5). Modern Malayalam has its own unique grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, which may not have direct equivalents in English. Malayalam has a distinct grammatical structure, including a complex system of noun cases, verb forms, and word order, which may not align with the grammar of English (Pillai 22-24). Translators need to carefully analyze the grammatical structure of the source text and make appropriate adjustments to ensure grammatical correctness in the target language. For instance, the lexis or the diction of the source language text in Malayalam should be perceived along with various shades of its meaning and the depth of its implications. On the other hand, the translator should have a wide and deep understanding of diction or lexis in the target language, the shades of surface meaning, and implied multiplicity of meanings in the target language. This includes having a fair knowledge of regional dialects, local terminologies, and cultural references that are specific to Kerala and a fair idea about what kind of English would be suitable for the purpose. Translators need to carefully choose appropriate English words or phrases that convey the intended meaning and maintain the tone and style of the original text. Malayalam is also known for its rich use of idiomatic expressions that convey cultural meanings and nuances. Translating these idiomatic expressions can be challenging as they may not have direct equivalents in English. Translators need to understand the cultural connotations of these expressions and find equivalent idioms or adapt them to convey the intended meaning in English, without compromising on its essence.

Further, the source language and the target language would have their own syntax. It is observed that if both the languages belong to the same language family and is used by people following similar cultures and living in geographical terrains which are more or less alike, the source and target languages may have relatable syntactical

constructs. However, even in case of such languages where there are some obvious syntactical similarities, these similarities are not uniform and cannot be seen across all aspects of their respective syntaxes. Translation in case of languages which belong to entirely different language families and are used by people who are culturally different and living in varied geographical terrains, hence would be faced with many innate challenges.

The present study tries to analyse the cultural and linguistic barriers that occurred in translating the Malayalam novel *Aadujeevitham* to English as *Goat Days*. *Aadujeevitham*, a novel on the life and hardships faced by a migrant labourer Najeeb in Saudi Arabia is written by the Malayalam author Benyamin. Benny Daniel aka Benyamin (1971 -) was born and brought up in Kerala and worked at Bahrain for a long time. Though he has to his credit many novels, stories, essays etc. like *Abeesagin*, *Manja Veyil Maranangal*, *Mullappo Niramulla Pakalukal*, Benyamin became popular with his novel *Aadujeevitham*.

Dr. Joseph Koyippally, the translator of *Aadujeevitham* is currently working as Associate Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the Central University of Kerala. His contributions to the field of translation are stupendous. Apart from translating from Malayalam to English, Koyippally penned many books, articles and essays.

*Goat Days* portrays the life of a migrant labourer, Najeeb who has gone to Saudi Arabia in search of a job. Najeeb, who worked for a low wage in Kerala arrived at Saudi Arabia having dreams of becoming rich. Unfortunately, his dreams shattered to end up his life in a goat farm almost like a slave. Gradually, he was consoled with the company of goats. After three years, four months and nine days of suffering, he decides to escape from the farm. Finally, he succeeds. The novel is about a real-life story of a migrant



labourer from Kerala with the same name. *Goat Days* represents the bitter realities of human struggles to survive and the novel throws light to the life of hundreds of people who wrestles to earn for a better living in the deserts of Middle East.

The semantic level is mostly culture bound and hence the translator should have a deep understanding of the cultural contexts of the source language and the target language. Malayalam literature and culture are deeply intertwined, and many texts contain cultural references, customs, traditions, and social norms that may not be familiar to English-speaking readers. It has to be acknowledged that achieving exact equivalence, linguistic or cultural is not always possible in translation. It becomes more obvious when one takes into account the sheer multiplicity of meanings a text can give rise to at varied contexts. The translation of these multiple meanings into the target language without losing any of those contextual fervours will be nearly impossible.

The semantic thus is undoubtedly the most complex and perplexing aspect of the language. The process of meaning making, the change of meanings and significations that words acquire, the variance in shades of meaning which could be the result of a cultural, social or economic change, all contribute to this perplexity. At the surface level, the lexis would have a literal meaning. It is seemingly facile to perform translation at this level. At the deep level, the lexis is bound to a co-text and context. The co-text and context determine the first layer of implied meaning. The context of the reader and his/her interpretation of the co-text, subsequently may define another layer of implied meaning. A critical analysis or a purview of themes and motifs, obvious and latent, would generate a multiplicity of meanings and implications. Postmodern texts are often written with a fluidity that is most often deliberate, giving a lot of scope for multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. This pluralism, quite evidently builds up many impediments for the translator. The translator here, has to consider the world

of meanings that the source text produces and choose the appropriate lexis and available syntax in the target language, so that the target text does justice to the source text. This, definitely is a laborious and time-consuming task.

Some parts of *Goat Days* are set in rural Kerala, and the novel contains references to local customs, traditions, and beliefs. Translating these references while preserving their cultural context and significance can be a challenge. Najeeb narrates:

I noticed that one of the goats looked sluggish and weary. It was pregnancy fatigue – like Sainu’s. When I’d asked the arbab if I should take it out; he had nodded his head in permission. After we were half-way from the masara, the goat moved away from the herd and lay down. Puzzled, I stood near it. After a while, it began to mourn and squirm. Only then did I understand that it was going through labour pains. (Koyippally 105)

The protagonist seeks permission from the arbab (the owner of the farm) before taking action. This reflects a cultural norm of being with the pregnant lady as it is not prevalent in the Kerala cultural context. The goat is tired of labour pain. In a usual way the female members are only allowed to be with the pregnant lady during her delivery. However, the author breaks the custom. For a reader who is from a different culture other than Indian, cannot relate the previously mentioned tradition.

The novel is set in the Middle East, which has a unique culture and customs that may not be familiar to English-speaking readers. For example, the novel describes the traditional Bedouin (nomadic Arabs) practice of drinking camel's milk, which may not be something that readers outside of the region are familiar with. The cultural difference again finds expression in the translated version of *Goat Days*. On narrating the harassments, he faced from the arbab Najeeb observes:

More punishment awaited me when I got back. I was severely beaten and reproached. The arbab accused me on four counts in that day's charge sheet; one had tried to take some water to clean the placenta and blood off my hands and dress; two, I was late to return with the goats; three, I had wasted time by looking at a goat giving birth – goats know how to give birth and don't need any human assistance, and four, that was the most severe crime, I'd tried to make the newborn drink its mother's milk (Koyippally 108).

Translators need to be aware of their own biases and perspectives, as well as those of the original author, to accurately convey the intended meaning. A translation can be influenced by the translator's cultural background and personal beliefs. Since the author and the translator of the novel under consideration are from the same cultural background, the beliefs that Najeeb shared about his perspective of a newborn child is alien to the English readers.

The narrator of the novel, Najeeb describes the condition of prisoners who have lined up before the officers. He feels that he is attending a marriage function in Kerala. Najeeb says, "Absurd as it sounds, this scene reminds me of the marriage halls back home – the prisoner's resembled the groom's-tired relatives milling about the venue. Now I had become one such relative!" (Koyippally 5). The cultural difference of a community is again observed here through the lens of a marriage ceremony in Kerala. The incident reminds the Malayalam readers of a familiar system of wedding whereas the English readers cannot relate it with their life. While translating *Indulekha*, the famous novel in Malayalam literature, John Willoughby Francis Dumergue writes, "With regard to the translation itself, no one can be more painfully aware than I am myself of its many shortcomings, and I would beg those who honour me by reading it

to remember, in criticizing the book itself, that the original must have suffered from the faults of the translation” (Dumergue viii-ix).

The presence of dialectical variations, sociolects and idiolects in the source text and having to find an equivalent in the target language, without losing the regional flavour, serves to accentuate the intrications of the process. The South Indian language, Malayalam has many dialects. It is classified as a Dravidian language having close connection to Tamil, though the influence of Sanskrit is also quite evident. The major dialects include the Central Kerala, Kasargod, Malabar, Nagari, North Kerala, and South Kerala dialects. These dialects are subdivided into smaller regional dialects. For example, the Central Kerala dialect includes the Ernakulam dialect, the Kottayam dialect and the Thrissur dialect, which vary profusely from each other. Narrowing down further, the Ernakulam dialect is spoken in many accents. The Fort-Cochin accent and Perumbavur accent in Ernakulam manifests clearly the degrees by which these accents vary and consequently influence the lexis, in case there is an attempted portrayal of those variations through either fiction or cinema. In fact, there are many popular movies, which attempted to capture the peculiar lexis and accent of these variations. Furthermore, there are social variations or sociolects within these geographical terrains.

There are differences based on religion, caste and class. There are sociolects of different religions which exhibit notable variations in vocabulary, style and accent. For instance, the Malayalam language used by the Namboothiri caste differs from that used by the Nair caste which in turn varies from that of Ezhava / Thiyya caste, which again varies from the language of the Adivasi or tribal communities. The sociolect of Pulaya caste, who were primarily an agricultural community shows distinction from that of other communities. Similarly, there are many other communities that used to pursue a particular caste-based profession in Kerala. The distinctiveness of their traditional job

and the interactions they were required to have with the society, have added some elements of distinctiveness to their sociolects too. The languages used by the so-called high castes exhibit more of Sanskrit influence than the language of the so called lower castes. The sociolect spoken by the Muslim or Moplah community has many syntactical variations and loan words from Persian or Urdu and Arabic. The Christian or Nasrani sociolect manifests the influence of English, Latin, Hebrew, Portuguese, Aramaic and Dutch (George 104-155). The standardized Malayalam, which is in fact a result of mass education appears mostly in mass media and in school or college text books. However, very few people use this kind of text-book language in their daily life or in real-life situations. Many literary text books and movies make profuse usage of regional dialects and sociolects so as to create a flavour of the real life. The sheer presence of these numerous varieties, dialect, sociolects and idiolects makes translation from Malayalam into a target language like English, such a daunting task.

Like most languages, Malayalam has several idiomatic expressions that can be difficult to translate directly into English. These expressions can be challenging to translate into English, as they may not make sense to non-Malayalam speakers. For example, in the novel, Najeeb is described as having "tastes like a mad elephant," which is a Malayalam expression used to describe someone who is very picky about food. Words often have multiple meanings depending on the context, and some words may not have direct equivalents in another language. This can create confusion and inaccuracies in translation. Some concepts or words may not have direct equivalents in the target language. Translators often face dilemmas in deciding whether to provide a descriptive translation, find a similar term, or leave it untranslated with a footnote or explanation. The Malayalam language has some words that cannot be translated into English without losing its essence.

*Goat Days* represents the colloquial language and dialectal variations spoken in the region. Despite the difficulties in translating the local dialects and language variations into English, the translator tries to sustain the veracity and essence of the original text. The translator must find a balance between readability and preserving the unique linguistic characteristics of the source language.

The novel contains several words and phrases that are unique to the Malayalam language and culture. For example, the protagonist's name, Najeeb, is a common Muslim name in India, but may not be familiar to English-speaking readers. Malayalam is a language spoken in the Indian state of Kerala, and its vocabulary and grammar differ from that of English. Therefore, the translator may face difficulties in accurately translating the nuances and expressions of the original text.

The translator of *Aadujeevitham* which is titled as *Goat Days* in English, Dr Joseph Koyippally used such words in his translation. The expressions like ‘like the maniyam fly, an unknown fear began to envelop my mind’ (*GD* 52), ‘eye-piercing darkness’ (*GD* 54), ‘words shattered against the barrier of language’ (*GD* 65), ‘my eyes and mind were filled with tears’ (*GD* 66), ‘like a dog wagging its tail, I followed him’ (*GD* 67), ‘kaadi – a type of cattle-drink’ (*GD* 83), ‘the rain’s snake-whistle’ (*GD* 136) are suitable examples for the linguistic barriers in translating *Aadujeevitham* to *Goat Days*.

Pondering deeper into the very nature of human languages, gives rise to another baffling question, whether any human made language, truly have the capability to render deeper thoughts, emotions, insights or epiphanies in its complete sense, without the original essence being lost. The human languages, belonging to different language families have evolved in distinct geographical terrains under varying cultural, social, political and economic influences. The need to communicate and express oneself had

been modulated under these multiple influences and over the course of generations have evolved in to human languages. They continue to evolve as the need changes and the influences alter. Deliberating about the degree of success any human language can achieve in deciphering exactly the deeper thoughts, epiphanies and realisations, which are not always human-made and often germinate from realms beyond human, problematizes the position of language as a tool for communication and self-expression. This indicates that, “not everything can be expressed through words” and points at several lacunae that exist within a text. The attempted portrayal of a deep subject matter, its intensities and intricacies, in the original source text, may hence have been done by making compromises on clarity, giving way to open-endedness, plurality of meanings and multiplicity of interpretations. The conspicuous presence or absence of lacunae in the source text often gets depicted through magical or the surreal or is allowed to remain as mere omissions, gaps and silences. In order to discuss untranslatability and to problematize equivalence, it is thus required to consider such literature, which are not exactly mundane, because of the depth and complexity of its subject matter, its treatment and altogether intense and pluralistic nature of portrayal. The absence or omission of certain stories, incidents, emotions or thoughts, at times done deliberately or because of necessity often contribute to the magnificence and marvel of such literature. The question that surfaces at this juncture is, “Is there any language which can express these lacunae?” This leads to another subsequent question, “How would a translator translate a source text in to a target language, when the source language failed to completely express what it has attempted to express?”

Despite the fact that the novel does not contain any elements of a language which cope up with the issues of translating one’s deeper feelings and insights explicitly, there are some instances which show the same. Perhaps in the novel, Najeeb

tackles with his seclusion and anguish with the help of vivid dreams and hallucinations. These dreams and visions are used to depict his emotional journey and his longing for freedom. While these elements have an imaginative quality, they are more aligned with the portrayal of the protagonist's inner world rather than presenting supernatural or magical occurrences.

This clearly establishes that achieving perfect equivalence in translation is more or less elusive, as languages are unique systems with different structures, vocabularies, and cultural connotations. The lack of equivalence in translation poses significant challenges to translators, who need to navigate various linguistic, cultural, and contextual factors to ensure an accurate rendition of meaning. This research paper, further explores the problems of equivalence in translation from Malayalam to English with special reference to Benjamin's *Goat Days*. The work was originally written in Malayalam and then was translated into many languages including English. We have examined in general, the linguistic challenges, including the differences in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, as well as the cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and contextual nuances that may not have direct equivalents in English. We have already discussed the various strategies and approaches used by translators to overcome these challenges and ensure accurate and effective translation. The unquestionable importance of considering cultural and linguistic factors in translation to achieve equivalence between the source and target text is thus established.



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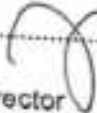
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1. Principal Investigator: Mr. Aby John, Assistant Professor, PG Department of English, Naipunnya Institute of Management and Information Technology, Pongam.
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