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RADICALISING LITERATURE:
THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN THE CREATION
OF A LITERARY PUBLIC SPHERE IN KERALA

ABSTRACT: The eventful decades of socio-political turmoil between the nineteen thirties and fifties in India coincided with major shifts in literary discourses that called into question the very notion of the literary. The reasons for the emergence of the Progressive literary movement have to be sought in the gathering social ferment at the repressive apparatus of colonialism and the exploitative regime of feudalism. Encounters with European literature, particularly social realist fiction, through various forms of translation enabled the writers to articulate their sense of resistance in contemporary terms. The case of Malayalam literature during its ‘progressive phase’ is taken up for detailed discussion to map the nature of contestations and confrontations that defined its trajectory. In the context of this paper, ‘translation’ has to be understood in the larger sense of ‘refraction’ or ‘rewriting’ that, according to André Lefevere, includes commentary, critical summaries, historiography, anthologizing and theatre production. It is argued in the paper that the process of rewriting that accompanied the Progressive literary movement called into question the prevailing norms of the ‘literary’ and the prestige styles that had legitimised earlier social systems. The debates and dialogues that followed in their wake pluralized the literary public sphere and radicalised Malayalam literature, redefining the relation between the literary and the socio-political.

KEYWORDS: Progressive literary movement, colonialism, resistance, prestige style, translation as rewriting, literary public sphere, radicalism in literature

0. INTRODUCTION

The present paper examines a critical moment of transformation in the literary sensibility of modern Indian literatures in general and Malayalam literature in particular from the larger perspective of the role of translation in radicalising the literary discourse in society. The period between the nineteen thirties and the nineteen fifties in India witnessed momentous events in the political field as part of the nationalist freedom struggle and these events impacted the cultural productions from theatre to painting.
and literature. As Priyamvada Gopal notes, “The years from about 1936 to 1954 were the heyday of a hugely influential radical cultural movement that spanned several regions and languages across India (as well as the region that became Pakistan)” (Gopal 2005:1). The writers responded to the massive socio-political changes that swept across India in the wake of anti-imperialist resistance movements by radicalising the role of literature in society and interrogating prevalent modes of representation. Translation played a significant part in this process of radicalisation of literary sensibility.

The nineteen thirties and forties of the 20th century were marked by socio-political upheavals across the world as evidenced by the economic depression in America, rise of fascism in Europe and intensification of the struggle against imperialism in Asia and Africa. It was against this backdrop that a group of writers from fifteen countries met in Paris in the spring of 1935 under the banner, “International Writers for Defense of Culture.” Among the writers who participated in the Conference were André Gide, André Malraux, André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Aldous Huxley, E. M. Forster, Boris Pasternak, Isaac Babel, Bertolt Brecht, Julien Benda, Heinrich Mann and Gustav Regler. The Conference had set “the guarding of our civil liberties, the organisation of writers to safeguard their own economic interests and to render help to the writers exiled by fascism” as its larger goals (Gopal 2005:24). Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zahir, both young writers from India, participated in the Conference and felt the need to disseminate the radical ideas highlighted in the Conference in India. Sajjad Zahir had already edited a volume of Urdu short stories, Angaare [Live Coals] in 1932 that had caught the attention of young readers. The influence of the European avant-garde of the nineteen thirties is apparent in these stories. This volume raised a storm in the Urdu-speaking Muslim community as most of the stories were highly critical of “the middle-class Muslim mores and practices of the period” and later the book came to be banned by the United Provinces Legislature (Cappola 1986:21). Sajjad Zahir was forced to leave India as a result of the controversy surrounding Angaare. He went to London for studies and there, along with Mulk Raj Anand, formed an organisation called the Progressive Writers Association. The Association drafted a manifesto which appeared in English in Left Review in February, 1936 and in the Hindi journal Hans, edited by Premchand, in October, 1935.
Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zahir were instrumental in organising the 1936 Lucknow Conference presided over by Premchand, the eminent Hindi novelist. Zahir mobilized support for the Progressive Literary Association by forming local chapters of the Association at several places like Allahabad, Lahore, Hyderabad and Aligarh. The Conference of the All India Progressive Literary Association was planned at Lucknow early in April, 1936 because a national convention of the Congress Party was scheduled there at the same time. The organisers hoped to rope in Jawaharlal Nehru to preside over the All India Progressive Literary Association. But eventually it was Premchand, the most eminent Hindi writer of his generation, who presided over the Conference that was attended by writers from all over India, including Kerala. The founding of the Progressive Literary Association of Indian writers in the Lucknow Conference galvanised the undercurrent of popular anguish against the oppressive apparatus of colonialism, the exploitative regime of feudalism and the regimentation of society along the lines of caste, class and gender. The manifesto that was prepared to commemorate the 1936 Conference spelt out the social role of writers explicitly:

We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence today: the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive (Anand 1979:20-21, emphasis added).

The above statement identifies the social backwardness of India as the reason for its political subjection. The writer as activist is also a rationalist, interrogating tradition and orthodoxy. The critical spirit enables the transformation of literature. In the presidential address given by Premchand some of these ideas were reiterated. He declared that a
writer is by nature progressive, and “the greater the intensity of his pain the more powerful his writings and the more realistic his portrayal” (Jain 2010:123). He added: “Progress, to me, is that situation which generates in us the resolution and the will to act, which makes us aware of our pain, which helps us identify the various internal and external reasons that have led to this condition of desolation and decline, and which impels us to try and overcome them” (ibid:124). He wanted writers to redefine their ideas of beauty in the context of changing society and inculcate in them an openness to new knowledge. He concluded his speech with these words:

But we do not consider literature as a means of enjoyment and luxury alone. Real literature for us is one which consists of high philosophy, a desire for independence, the essence of beauty, the instinct for creativity, and which is illuminated by the realities of life—one which can generate a momentum in our lives, make us restless and generate in us the will to fight; it should not put us to sleep, for to sleep any more now is a sign of death (ibid:131).

The credo of social realism, thus, becomes a mode of embodying the social ferment and gathering its potential for intervention in the direction of a radical poetic. Most of the literatures in India came under the spell of this radical poetic during the period from the mid-thirties to the late fifties. Sisir Kumar Das in his history of Indian literature has said that the impact of the Progressive movement was felt in all major literatures of India:

The most positive impact of the (All India Progressive) Association was on the growth of literature which can be loosely described as ‘socialist’ so far as its themes and moods are concerned. There was hardly any growing literature in India now which did not respond to the growing and expanding socialist ideas (Das 1995:88).

The case of Malayalam literature will be taken up here for detailed study as it will illustrate the nature of the contestations that defined the trajectory of this transformative poetic that emerged during this phase of literary development.
Translation had played an enabling role in the development of Malayalam fiction even before the arrival of the Progressive literary movement on the scene. In 1925 the appearance of the translation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* into Malayalam brought about a shift in the prevailing literary sensibility. Hugo may be better known as a romantic poet in France but for the readers of Malayalam, his *Les Misérables* opened up possibilities of imagining alternative models of reality. After the pioneering efforts of social reformist writers like O. Chandu Menon in the late 19th century, Malayalam novelists had become stereotyped in their approach to reality. While Malayalam poetry had responded to the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the 1920s with a new poetic, the novel in Malayalam merely reproduced formulaic plots. Against such a backdrop, the translation of Hugo’s novel based on its English version, by Nalappat Narayana Menon, proved a creative intervention. Menon employed the foreignizing mode of translation which had the effect of defamiliarizing the very syntax of Malayalam. Many of his literal translations have become part of everyday idiom in the language. This translation provided a new set of subtexts that could render into tangible narrative the unfocussed disquiet of a period that was yet to find expression. *Les Misérables* problematised the conflict between law and justice, suffering and survival, dehumanizing repression and the redemptive epiphany of human dignity against the turbulent period of a revolutionary France where people rose in mass revolt. This translation revamped the apparatus of fictional representation by making available to the reader a new discourse about being human. This made visible the inner contradictions of a stratified society divided along caste, class and gender.

A meeting of the Progressive Literary Association was held at Thrissur in Kerala on 20th April, 1937 under the leadership of K. Damodaran who had attended the 1936 Lucknow meeting, and a few political activists and writers like P. Keshav Dev, K. A. Damodara Menon, E. M. S. Nambuthiripad, C. Narayana Pillai, K. K. Variyar, P. Narayanan Nair and A. Madhavan. It is significant that E. M. S. Nambuthiripad and K. A. Damodara Menon became well-known politicians later. During the
proceedings of the meeting, contemporary Malayalam literature was criticized severely for its elitist bias and lack of social concern. The “Progressive Literary Association” was rechristened as “Jeeval Sahitya Samgham” in Malayalam to signify its close affinity with life (‘jeeva’ suggesting ‘life’) and “jeeval sahityam” (literature of life, literally) was defined as the “new literature that will promote equality of opportunity opposing the present exploitative system in favour of a realistic representation of man’s struggles against nature as well as his circumstances” (Sardarkutty 1993:49). In an article published in the Malayalam daily, “Mathrubhumi” on 25th May, 1937, the following objectives of the Jeeval Sahitya Movement were spelt out: “to publish literature of the progressive kind, to forge unity among progressive writers, to translate ‘progressive literature’ from other languages and oppose reactionary forces in culture and fight for the freedom of expression” (ibid: 52). The model provided by Victor Hugo received further legitimation from the endorsement of the social realist mode by progressive writers. As shown by the example of Angaare in Urdu, the critical examination of existing social mores was the new role that the Progressive Movement had envisaged for writers. The social realist mode functioned as an oppositional discourse interrogating the existing attitudes to culture and contemporary social thought.

The trajectory of “Jeeval Sahitya Samgham” which held a series of meetings across Kerala in the next decade is one of bitter controversies and acrimonious dialogues between those who considered freedom of expression sacrosanct and those who wanted to use literature as a vehicle of social change. In the 1949 meeting held at Thrissur the eminent critic M. P. Paul, who presided over it, spoke against the main resolution that sought to ensure the allegiance of the writers to the political ideology of the Communist movement. The Progressive movement soon lost its sense of direction and purpose, but by this time it had succeeded in putting on the social agenda of writers in Malayalam issues related to the writer’s commitment to political ideology, the relation between form and content and the irreconcilable dichotomies of aesthetics and politics in contemporary literature. In effect, the writings that appeared in the wake of the Progressive literary movement problematized the very idea of ‘the literary’ and its relation with the socio-political.
3. A. BALAKRISHNA PILLAI AND THE EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDE

The radicalisation of literary discourse during this phase of Malayalam literature was largely achieved through the agency of translation. Here we will briefly examine the critical role of the writer A. Balakrishna Pillai who, through his interventions as editor, translator, literary critic and social commentator, shaped a secular, progressive and analytical language to speak of literature and its relation to life. Though Balakrishna Pillai was never part of the Progressive literary movement, he supported its radical agenda, articulating its core ideas through commentaries and review-articles in his periodicals and prologues to contemporary works. He was arrested thrice by the Travancore government for inciting ‘rebellion.’ His periodicals Prabodhakan and Kesari in the 1930s, proscribed later by the authorities, published a wide variety of translations from European avant-garde literature. Balakrishna Pillai, by combining the role of political activist, literary critic and social thinker redefined the relation between literature and the public sphere in Kerala society. In the pages of the periodical Kesari Balakrishna Pillai published translations of major European authors who had experimented with new language and style. He encouraged writers like Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai to translate social realist fiction from European languages. Among the writers Balakrishna Pillai translated and published were Flaubert, Maupassant, Balzac, Stendhal and Ibsen. In his editorials he dealt with literary subjects along with social and political topics which mounted scathing attacks on the king of Travancore and his diwan. In an editorial written on 21st January, 1931, titled ‘The turbulent Malayalam literature’ Pillai argued that free thinking and ‘desecration of the idols’ (vigraha dhwamsanam in Malayalam) are essential for literature to develop. The epic as a form, he said, was in decline all over the world. Quoting the Italian critic Croce, he argued that there was no essential difference between prose and verse. His essays contained translations from European thinkers and writers, translations clearing a space and breaching the closed world of prevailing literary culture.

What these translations of avant-garde authors from Europe and America belonging to different schools of writing collectively did was to create a
literary public sphere where the discourses of literature were seen as part of socio-political discourses. The critical role of literature, particularly the novel, in democratizing society can be discerned in these comments taken from his essay, “The pitiable state of Malayalam prose”:

When Malayalam writers produce novels portraying the reality of Kerala society, they will have to be critical of Kerala society. When they do so, the government, the Universities and then textbook committees will withdraw their patronage though they would not send them to jail as Mussolini did in Italy. Real novels can appear only when this state of affairs changes. And the public will have to work very hard to change it (Pillai 1991:11).

His book *Novel Prastanangal* (“Movements in the history of the novel”) documents the new trends in European novel elaborately through examples. The essays in this book carry translations of long passages from European novels to illustrate the narrative styles and techniques of writers such as Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, André Gide, John Dos Passos, D. H. Lawrence and William Faulkner. The psychological breakthrough achieved in the treatment of sexuality by Western writers is highlighted in another long section. Balakrishna Pillai’s interest in European avant-garde was prompted by the need to critique the Malayalam literary field. Central to his project was the creation of a new social imaginary which enables writers to critique the practices of a society and create a modern secular literary discourse. Balakrishna Pillai also wrote extensively on the new trends in European art illustrating with examples the characteristics of movements such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Surrealism and Abstract Art. He has entire essays on Van Gogh, Cézanne and Picasso and other masters of European art. What this accent on the European avant-garde achieved in the 1930s and 40s in Malayalam was the creation of a new consciousness about the role of art and literature in society. This enabled a new generation of writers to question the existing poetic, and through it, the prevailing prestige styles of literature and its canons. *The scavenger’s son* and *Two measures of rice* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, *The voices* by Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer, and stories such as
“The Goddess of Revenge” and “Admission of guilt” by Lalitambika Antarjanam partake of the new social imaginary as a metaphorical space that maps the fault-lines and fissures of a fractured society and polity. Nation becomes a contested space where the false consensus of elitist narratives is critiqued from the margins. Most of the writers of this period such as Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Keshav Dev and Ponkunnam Varkey were also translators. The domain of fiction externalizes the oppositional content through the marginalised voices which became available for representation through the enabling role provided by translation.

4. TRANSLATION AS REFRACTION/REWRITING

The concept of translation has to be understood in a wider perspective in the context of this article. André Lefevere has argued that literature is a system “embedded in the environment of a culture or society” (Venuti 2000:235) and that “the degree to which the foreign writer is accepted in the native system will be determined by the need that native system has of him in a certain phase of its evolution” (ibid:237). It is the inner dynamics of the native literary system that decides the ‘acceptability’ of the translated works. Lefevere also argues that we need to expand the very concept of translation to include various forms of reception of foreign authors. He uses the word ‘refractions’ or ‘rewriting’ to suggest the following:

Refractions are to be found in the obvious form of translation, or in the less obvious form of criticism (the wholesale allegorization of the literature of the Antiquity by the Church Fathers, e.g.), commentary, historiography (of the plot summary of famous works cum evaluation type, in which the evaluation is unabashedly based on the current concept of what ‘good’ literature should be), teaching, the collection of works in anthologies, the production of plays (ibid: 235).

New writing styles and themes come to be validated through the patronage extended to the translations, thus facilitating a transformation in the very structure of the sensibility. The patterns of contestations of
the prevailing ‘prestige styles,’ initiated by Balakrishna Pillai’s critical articles became an organized form of revolt with the arrival of the Progressive literary movement in Malayalam. The debates on the relative merits of the old and the new, the role of the artist in society and the relation between literature and politics soon defined the direction taken by the literature in the next two decades.

To illustrate the nature of these debates we may briefly look at the arguments of those who opposed the Progressive literary movement. Kuttikrishna Marar, an eminent critic, was outspoken in his contempt for the group of writers who supported “jeeval sahityam.” He agreed that all literature has a social function of imparting moral instruction. However, for him, the literary form was primary and not the content. It is the formal perfection that enables art to influence society and not the mere fact of its content. A. Balakrishna Pillai had argued that a poet or a novelist is only a skilled worker and he cannot claim any greater status than other skilled workers in society. Kuttikrishna Marar countered that readers have to make efforts to reach the sublime levels attained by the aesthetic beauty of the artist. He or she has to cultivate taste through education and reflection since the artist will always remain above and beyond the reader (Marar 1990:354-359). The key words of the debate that continued through the thirties and the forties were life, society, reality, commitment, art for art’s sake, art for life’s sake, proletarian literature vs ‘prestige’ literature, form and content and the public role of the artist.

In his history of Malayalam literature, N. Krishna Pillai lists more than forty European and American novelists who were translated into Malayalam during the three decades from the mid-thirties (Krishna Pillai 1998:375). The social energy generated by these translations and debates democratized literature and widened the literary public sphere. The new fiction could effectively channel this social energy into narratives of resistance which began appearing in Malayalam from the late 1930s onwards. Thakazhi’s Thyagathinte Pratiphalam (“The reward for the sacrifice,” 1939) tells the life story of a woman forced into prostitution. P. Keshav Dev’s Otayilninnu (“From the gutter,” 1948) narrates the struggles of a rickshaw-puller to lead a life of dignity. Thakazhi’s Thottiyude Makan (“The scavenger’s son,” 1948) narrates the life of
the depressed classes who are condemned to work as scavengers, and his *Rantidangazhi* (“Two measures of rice,” 1949) depicted the life of the Dalit farmers from Kuttanad. Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer’s *Balyakalasakhi* (“Childhood friend,” 1944) told a tragic love story against the background of poverty and suffering set in a Muslim community, while his *Sabdangal* (“The voices,” 1947) projected the traumatic memories of an ex-soldier haunted by war and violence. Previously unknown communities now became visible through fictional narratives.

Indian society which had been immobilized by colonial power structures and the stratified caste system resulting in the alienation of large sections of Indian society, found its articulation through these oppositional narratives.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it was the agency of translation in all its various forms of ‘refraction’/‘rewriting’ that mediated the creation of a literary ‘public sphere’ by legitimising new modes of expression and mapping new contours of experience. Translation negotiates between two literary sensibilities, pluralizing centres of authorities and opening up possibilities when a literary system is in a state of ferment. Editorials in the periodicals, manifestoes of the literary associations, commentaries on new books and authors, descriptions of new artistic and literary movements, debates on the comparative merits of two approaches to art and aesthetics, introductions to anthologies and new historiography have to be studied in consonance with translations to understand how the literary system in Malayalam and other Indian languages during the Progressive phase developed a new habitus and a new poetic that reflected as well as engaged the contradictions of a transitional period and formulated a new equation between the literary and the political by incorporating the marginalized into the literary public sphere.
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