Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL SECTION VOL: 9, No.: 1, SPRING 2019

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

The Antharjanam: Translating the Self, Reformism and Keralam[i]

Sucheta Sankar V.

Abstract:

The current paper studies *Antharjanam* (2012), the combined English translation of two Malayalam autobiographical texts, *Nashtabodhangalillathe* (2003) and *Yathra: Kaatilum Naatilum* (2006) by Devaki Nilayamgode. Due to the specificity of her being an Antharjanam [women of Malayala Brahmin caste], Nilayamgode places her seminal texts in a fraught relationship with caste and gender. Being the first woman of her caste to write an autobiography, she is also voiced into discourses of feminism in Keralam. In this context, the paper seeks to locate the various transactions that are opened up through translation; this includes the translational economies of the texts, as well as the commerce with pertinent discourses and worlds outside the texts. Further, the research seeks to explore the interstices of caste, gender, and feminism into which the seminal texts and their translation place themselves.

Keywords:

Translation; Feminism; Kerala Studies; Gender Studies; Women's Writings

***

Introduction: The Terrain of Difference

Translation is not an apolitical movement from the source text to the target language; it is an act deeply invested in the perception and rewriting of ideologies and values. The reconstitution of selves and histories in new contexts mark differences, the active mediation of the cultural features of the target-language on the foreign text. A significant clue lies in the understanding of difference as anathema to the integrity of a translation. This is partly based on an approach that views language as a fixed system, and roots itself in the concept of absolute fidelity in translation. Difference however deconstructs the process of meaning-making that constitutes language. It calls into scrutiny the employment of certain genealogies, the preference given to certain categories, the establishment of certain orders in the sequence of activities that make up the construction of a translation.

Across the interstice offered by difference, the project of translating Devaki Nilayamgode acquires new dimensions. The discussion focuses primarily on her two Malayalam autobiographies *Nashtabodhangalillathe* (2003) and *Yathra: Kaatilum Naatilum* (2006), reworked into the combined English version eponymously titled *Antharjanam* (2012). The translation must then of necessity grapple with the arguable notion that the narrator in *Yathra* is a seamless extension of the one in *Nashtabodhangalillathe,* as with the very idea of a seminal self that is subject to translation. Particularly, as the autobiographical self does translate itself into words, piecing together its own history and plots in a "literary encounter which opens up autobiographical spaces" (Nikolau 27). *Antharjanam* is thus the translation of a self that is already versed in cycles of translation. Further, the memoirs were ghost-written from the recollections of the past. A great amount of self-reflexivity is inherent in the matter.

Nilayamgode's comments on the role of memory in her writing are significant here: "I started thinking about all that [the past] so clearly when I became old...I had everything very clearly in my mind" (Sowmish Par.10). The narrator is sited unambiguously in twenty-first century Keralam. Her self-portrayal clearly amounts to the reification of a textual self via mnemonic access; a process that is bound to evolve and modify over the different points of time at which the two texts were written. Difference is thus already in play, much before the physical works are translated into a foreign language.

Secondly, the source-texts inventory histories of early modern Keralam from the perspective of a *Namboodiri* woman. *Nashtabodhangalillathe* opens as follows: "I am a seventy-five year old Antharjanam. My name is Devaki. I belong to the Nilayamgode *Illam*" (Nilayamgode 11). In these three lines are condensed the history of a social ordering that is premised more on sexual endowments rather than on caste. By identifying herself as an Antharjanam, the self codes itself into a series of gendered differences. It confers upon the authorial self a uniquely feminine subjectivity, versed in the alienating practices and codes prescribed by her community. Yet, this history also firmly establishes her ties in the patriarchal mode to that of her *illam,* her husband's family. The narrator is thus at once individuated and isolated in light of her gender. The translation must of necessity deal with this inherent paradox, as it must deal with the fact that Nilayamgode's social position as an Antharjanam – "...seemed to allow for the simultaneity of being oppressed (by gender regimes) and not (in other social configurations)" (Sreekumar 13). The translation in engaging with these articulations, encapsulates the schisms and continuities thus produced.

However, these are not the only planes on which difference is acted out through *Antharjanam.* It is highly significant that the socio-historical realities of twentieth century, early modern Keralam are being retold in a language of global dominance, re-establishing with it the "asymmetries, inequities, relations of dominance and dependence [*that*] exist in every act of translating...putting the translated in the service of the translating culture" (Venuti 4). This entails a transformation of the creative self in the source-texts, from being versed in the linguistic framework of Malayalam to being scripted in the apparent universality of English vocabulary.

As a result, no arbitrary category will suffice in delineating the self – it would be impossible to suggest that the selfhoods in the source-texts are the exclusive function of a single ideology be it translation, caste or gender. Ultimately, what permits a definition of the autobiographical self is its operation as a locus upon which various levels of differences meet, initiating entirely new readings. Through a metaphorical extension, this is the principle by which the translation – *Antharjanam* – abides. It negotiates continually with the presence of the dual selves in the two memoirs, the variations of the narrator's voices in either texts and also with the schisms generated by the self writing itself. Reconciling with the contradictory directions of the texts is the only way in which a translation can occur. *Antharjanam* thus negotiates between *Nashtabodhangalillathe* and *Yathra,* interpreting the terrain of difference as it opens up.

Re-possessing the Antharjanam

The Antharjanam has long been regarded as an exotic figure of suffering in Keralam's cultural history. K. Devaki Antharjanam, a member of the Sree Mulam Legislative Assembly, comments thus in 1937, on the plight of Namboodiri women:

> Most Antharjanams observe ghosa [seclusion]. They have eyes but are prohibited from seeing anything pleasant. They have legs but their movement is circumscribed. Their state is like that of household utensils...In short the Antharjanam is a jailed creature. Antharjanams are constantly watched; they are not permitted to breathe fresh air, to see the world. An Antharjanam is born crying, lives her life in tears and dies weeping.[ii]

Much of early twentieth century reformist discourses followed these lines, hinging on the utter passivity and oppression that had been imposed on Malayala Brahmin women. The project of modernizing the Namboodiri community seemed directly related to the radicalizing of its women, to their breaking away from the ritualized domesticity, hard household industry and social segregation demanded by staunch tradition. There is no doubt that this rhetoric also fostered with it a 'male reformism' wherein what was ideally feminine was dictated to the Antharjanam. A case in point is V.T. Bhattatiripad's 1931 address: "I do not hide the fact that many of us who are married are fed up of your ugly, disgusting dress and ornamentation, and are able to do no more than curse ourselves" (qtd. In J. Devika xxiii).

It is against this backdrop that the autobiographical genre with its possibilities of self-inscription, resistance and re-telling becomes significant. Devaki Nilayamgode (1928-) chronicles the meaning of being an Antharjanam at a time when old constructs and identities were in flux. Translating this 'being' out of its own narratives, out of its own language and story-telling is to recreate a literary presence. As discussed elsewhere in the paper, legitimacy is not the currency that makes *Antharjanam* critically insightful; it is at the points of divergence from the textual authority of *Nashtabodhangalillathe* and *Yathra* that the Antharjanam is forged.

Often this allows the translation to herald a re-discovery of a 'lost time' to a twenty-first century readership: "The translator's notes make a reference to how, in certain places, the tone of detachment that characterizes the original undergoes mild alterations in the translation. This is to ensure the English reading public grasps the full-blown sociological implications of those times" (Sowmish Par. 12). Here we see the first sign of discrepancy with popular discussions on the plight of the Antharjanam; that of tone – the 'detachment' which is said to be the hallmark of Nilayamgode's voice precludes the universal conception of the Antharjanam's suffering. It is distanced from the emotional nature allocated to the ever-enduring protagonist of the autobiographies. The author's notes of both Malayalam memoirs are evidences of the same. *Nashtabodhangalillathe* proclaims "It was my daughter's son Kuttan (Thatagathan) and his friend Manu who upon hearing stories of my childhood asked me to write them down. This book is a result of that request growing into insistence" (Nilayamgode 6). While *Yathra* presents the same idea slightly differently, but in an equally unassuming fashion. The author's note in *Antharjanam* varies significantly in detail:

> In 2003, just after my 75th birthday, I published a slim book of my memoirs (*Nashtabodhangalillathe)* which literally means 'with no sense of loss or regret'. Until then, I had never thought I could write at all...The book was about growing up in the loveless, dim environs of a Namboodiri household in Central Kerala, even as the winds of change began to sweep over the community in the 1930s and 1940s. (vii)

The translation intervenes to re-establish the private and the personal into the narrative. The act of Nilayamgode penning her life story now empowers feminist readings that

were formerly neutralized due to the apolitical quality of her tone. The spirit is that of "the repossession of the word by women", making visible the silences embedded in the Malayalam texts (Godard 13).

It is interesting that the forewords of both Malayalam texts praise the aspect of implicity. Atoor Ravivarma in his "Moonoora" notes: "The vision of this work is driven by memory, passive and unclouded" (*Nashtabodhangalillathe* viii). In other words, Atoor vouches for an impartiality of judgement and lack of political intent. Similarly, O. K Johnny in his foreword in *Yathra* finds that the author is someone who begins her story in the *I* but upon continuing, "loses herself in past times and spaces, in the minutia of her expression...That none of the defining rules of orature, no embellishments of the craft of writing find their way into these accounts is indeed notable" (vii).

By contrast Indira Menon, one of the translators, notes that when dealing with a writer like Nilayamgode, it is necessary to "...bring out the steely quality behind the apparent pliancy: the strength that any woman or girl in her situation must possess in order to retain her sanity" (*Antharjanam,* x). Her co-translator, Radhika P. Menon emphasizes that in the process "the tone of detachment that characterizes the original has given way to one of superiority and the bare description has morphed into a mild claim" (*Antharjanam,* xv). The understated voice in the autobiographies is woven into the expressions of a feminine self against the grain of patriarchy.

The identity of the Antharjanam espoused in the autobiographies is also an exploration of the fault-lines of caste in Keralam. The translation endeavours to resituate and scrutinize these submerged links as they collide with Nilayamgode's dominant, upper-class vantage point. The normativity and pervasiveness of the caste system is evident throughout the Malayalam narratives, where stray comments often reveal deep-rooted principles. Discussing the Nair wives of the *Apphans,* Nilayamgode writes thus: "Since they are Nairs, their presence will remove the purity of the *Illam* should they venture inside" (*Nashtabodhangalillathe,* 23). This phobia of the Other's touch is a common strand in *Yathra* as well, particularly as it relates to travel and mobility. In the chapter titled "Leftovers", the author describes the practice of serving food to the Nair help on the plantain leaves once used by the *Namboodiri* women: "One of the dirty, wasted plantain leaves spread before the help was mine" (*Yathra,* 28). In either instance, it could be argued that the recording of the degradation of other castes constitutes a radical acknowledgement of the author's compliance with the system. However it must be noted that there is no explicit condemnation of the acts, nor a deliberate stance claimed against them.

The translation reverses this sense of familiarity with caste discrimination by opening the lines up, by using words that invert connotations and encourage ambiguity. *Antharjanam* uses the same instances as the Malayalam versions; in mentioning the Nair women, the translators employ a more clinical rendering: "Nair women were not permitted into the *illam* because they would cause a state of pollution" (35). The allusions to caste specific etiquette at feasts are transformed into an outright denunciation: "Why did I not, like Satyavati in *Prarthana Prathisruthi,* clamour for Amma's intervention? I wish now that I had had the sense to voice my protest, especially when I remember that one of those dirty leaves, spread out for the women to eat from, was indeed mine" (93). The spectre of caste is made provocative enough to invite critical attention and scrutiny to it.

Caste also appears to be a measure against which Nilayamgode's femininity is measured. Her Nair cousins, Subhadra and Bharati display agency that she cannot

aspire to from within the confines of her family and community. They are both highly educated and participated in public debates, winning prizes for their scholarship. Everything from their apparels to the manner in which they carried themselves is alien to a then 9 year old Nilayamgode; their very presence inspires inferiority in of the women within the *illam,* who are made aware of their primitive state of existence. Imbibed within this recognition is a sense of caste supremacy, as recognizable in her identification with *Seelavathi,* a high class woman who obeys her father and marries a senile leper. She spends her life caring for her sick husband and eating off his leftovers. The kind of public mobility and exposure enjoyed by *Sudra* women is not in keeping with the ideal of the lore; it prescribes a life of extreme abnegation and hardship for women of 'good' families. On the other hand, the Nair women Nilayamgode grew up with sang of Unni Aarcha, the warrior princess who defeats her attackers in physical combat. "While we sang in our gentle voices, songs of husband-worship, the children of our servants sang northern ballads with great gusto" (*Yathra,* 32).

The translation uses these accounts to give the reader an idea of the immense social gulf between the two castes: "For us their very presence was a source of perpetual wonderment. Subhadra was twenty and Bharathi. They had knee-length hair, wore colourful blouses, and zari-bordered mundus with an uppercloth, plenty of gold ornaments, and perfume as well. As they walked in, a lovely fragrance permeated the air" (*Antharjanam,* 36). Removed from the plain descriptive texture of the Malayalam texts, this observation points to the exact privileges that were denied to the Antharjanam; every material element that might promote a modern depiction of the aesthetic body, that might mark the body as a sexual object is forbidden to them.

In *Yathra,* Nilayamgode mentions her sister's interest in *Thacholi Chandu,* a northern ballad that was once prohibited to Namboodiri women (28). In *Antharjanam* the same situation becomes symbolic of subversion: "Recently when I met my second elder sister, she sang the old *Sheelavati* song once again. She also gave me a part of *Thacholi Chandu,* a book she had bought sometime later. It seems I was not the only one who had been attracted to the forbidden tales" (Nilayamgode 57). The translation revisits the originals' interpretations of Nilayamgode's femininity, de-establishing the view that it was in fact a monolithic construct.

What the autobiographies did to re-locate the Antharjanam on one level, the translation does on another level; while *Nashtabodhangalillathe* and *Yathra* placed the travails and thoughts of an individual Namboodiri woman into particular historical contexts within early modern Keralam, *Antharjanam* politicizes the locations from which the autobiographies and its specificities are written.

Reformism, Antharjanams and Keralam

Reformism in the Malayala Brahmin community had a great many facets – it involved among other items, the right of *apphans* to marry within their own caste, female education, dress and marriage reforms, change in inheritance laws, against practices like polygamy and child marriage and enforced widowhood. Improving the quality of women's lives acquired a key role in the stratagem adopted by the Namboodiri Yoga Kshema Sabha. From modifying the sensibilities of the community, the focus fell on the assignment of radical new selves; the nationalist movement exerted a significant influence in this new direction.

Nashtabodhangalillathe and *Yathra,* though they open in the seeming vacuum of *Pakaravoor illam* do not preclude the histories of Namboodiri reformism. They often

foreshadow the coming of the upheaval, with events that are prescient in a way: "As I look back now, I can affirm that the year was 1931. One evening, some men and women gathered at the *madhom.* They were Antharjanams and Namboodiris. The Antharjanams had shortened their ears and wore blouses. The Namboodiris had shorn off their *kudumas* and wore shirts and mundus. They were about 40 or 50 in number" (*Nashtabodhangalillathe* 38). But it is with the pamphlet from V. T. Bhattatiripad that addresses the pitiable state of the Antharjanam, the full import of the revolt becomes clear. It also becomes clear the power of the pamphlet's rhetoric to instil sedition. The Namboodiri women, quaking with fear of being discovered, do not however throw them away. The pamphlet is hid carefully and perused at every given opportunity.

The same incident in *Antharjanam* is not greatly varied in detail: "By the time I could read V. T. Bhattathiripad's letter to the girls, there was little left of it. Soaked through with their perspiration, the pamphlet had fragmented completely" (104). What is striking is the agitated emotional appeal that undoes the nearly prescriptive 'patriarchal' language used in *Nashtabodhangalillathe,* where even the brothers' desertion of their home and community for school is met with decisive stoicism.

Yathra documents the age of Namboodiri reformism more comprehensively, making note of the incursions of reformist attitudes and practices into Malayala Brahmin homes. The text mentions the gradual change in aesthetics, beginning with the shortening of the elongated ears of the Antharjanams and the institution of modern clothing among them. "Sari, blouse and ear-rings – this was the birth of a new woman" writes Nilayamgode (*Yathra* 71). This new woman also saw, in the period from 1930 to 1945, widow remarriage, the establishment of schools for Namboodiri girls, the 'progressive' adoption of the sari by Antharjanams and the operations of the women's wing of the *Yoga Kshema Sabha.* There can be no doubt that these instances indicate the formulation of a proto-feminist subjectivity; a matter of immense concern to the translation activity that resulted in *Antharjanam.*

However, the translation must engage with the debate on intentions: "My husband Ravi Namboodiri was convinced that my ears must be shortened"; "After my marriage, my husband's brother granted me permission to join the sadhanam, and to attend school" (*Yathra,* 70; 75). Herein, the narrative realises and trans-creates a feminist impulse out of an authorial voice which is firmly coded into patriarchal conformity. The chapter entitled "Social Activism" captures Nilayamgode's involvement with the Antharjana Samajam, the women's wing of Yoga Kshema Sabha (*Antharjanam,* 148-54). It is equally a delineation of a particular brand of feminism that was in vogue at the time. At its core, the Antharjana Samajam was symbolic, aimed more at fellow Antharjanams than at the community at large. Still, many of its public activities included picketing of old-age-weddings, of long-drawn debates and tireless awareness drives. Names of fiercer advocates like Parvathy Nenminimangalam, Arya Pallom and Devaki Warrier populate the narrative as tokens of authorial sympathy, a definite sign as to where her allegiances lie. It ends on a celebratory logic, "It was a period of activism that succeeded in bringing mere homemakers like me to the forefront of public life" (*Antharjanam,* 154).

The autobiography comes to a close here, at a social juncture where the narrator is "without regrets", and has achieved a remarkable transition via reformism. J. Devika analyses the particulars of Nilayamgode's conclusion:

That her autobiography closes here [*late 1940-s*] is something that historians of gender may like to ponder upon, because the vibrant debate in the Malayalee public sphere on

gender, its social significance, and the issue of women's attainment of full citizenship began to lose itself in platitudes precisely in the decades in which Nilayamgode chooses to end her story. (*Antharjanam,* xxx)

The assertion at the abrupt end of *Nashtabodhangalillathe,* that "Today there is no sorrow specific to a Namboodiri family" finds complementary echoes in the closing statements in *Yathra,* where the author has turned her attention outwards to allegedly more universal issues: "I prayed only that I never again see the faces of starving little children" (155; 87). Reformism is endorsed as having achieved liberation for the Antharjanam from exclusivity: "...after this, there can be no autobiography which claims to be the first by an Antharjanam or exclusively among us" (156). The translation bases its ideology on this perceived success of having undone the old world order, and un-disappearing the suffering of the Antharjanams.

It does not relate to the ways in which Nilayamgode has been assimilated into the gender equations of contemporary Keralam. Post-1950s, post the peak of reformism, the money she inherits from the partition of her family house allows her to settle comfortably into a nuclear family. This modern institution established a sphere within which the woman was enshrined, her femininity permitting certain powers, roles and obligations. It marks more curiously the reconstituting of patriarchy to suit the new ethos of post-independence Kerala.

The trajectory is poignant in revealing that reformism by positing what is feminine and demarcating the ambit of 'femaleness' for the Antharjanam is in fact complicit with a new, powerful if subtle network of gender oppression in Keralam.

Conclusion: Of Consensus

Underneath the commerce of language, the purpose of translation is the generation of consensus on meanings, images and principles in and between cultures. What consensus then does the translation of *Nashtabodhangalillathe* and *Yathra* construct in deciphering selfhood, histories and Keralam into *Antharjanam?* It begins as does any autobiography in the textual negotiation of the self, invoking a play of differences as it mediates the tangents of gender and caste.

Feminism, as Shoshana Felman puts it, is defined "here almost inadvertently as a bond of reading: a bond of reading that engenders, in some ways, the writer – leads to her full assumption of her sexual difference" (61). It is also a bond of translation where the feminist reading mobilizes this engendered autobiographical self, co-opting both translation and self in its search for a feminist Malayali past. Nilayamgode's engagements with the world without are placed into the purview of the historical processes of her era. Her tone of detachment is made to stand for something more than a sympathetic acceptance of the patriarchal episteme of her times. She is made symbolic of Keralam's gender formulae, as a woman who best embodies the 'womanly' qualities espoused by early twentieth century reformism. This finds acceptance as it poses no real challenge to the masculine public and intellectual spheres of present-day Kerala.

The real danger here is of consensus running amok; by working feminism solely into the respectability of the 'taravad' and the family, into the unquestioning acceptance of the norms of a male modernity, the movement becomes the product of a bargain struck with patriarchy. It does not account for other forms of feminism that break with the 'legitimate' spaces opened to them; it excludes the fight for unconditional public

mobility, the fight for the female body and the fight for sexual expression, being non-interventionist in nature.

In the mainstream, this consensus builds cultural canons that are feminist in a particular sense just as Nilayamgode's entrenching of her gendered self into a patriarchal literary canon is feminist, just as the re-imagining of her private world in collaboration with socio-historical Keralam is feminist. But what is at stake in *Antharjanam* is not our knowledge of feminism, but our ability to repudiate existing public consensus on gender; in short, to translate ourselves out of the celebratory isolation of contemporary feminism in Keralam.

Notes:

---

[i] Reformism refers to the widespread social activism in the period from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries in Keralam. I have deliberately used the term 'Keralam' to refer to the Malayalam-speaking lands that later merged to form a political union in 1957. A version of this paper was presented at the National Multi-Disciplinary Annual Research Conference organized by the Internal Quality Assurance Cell, University of Kerala on 16th December, 2015.

[ii] This is an instance of a strong first-wave feminist discourse in Keralam. The rhetoric however also perpetuates much of the discrimination against Antharjanams brought to light by the reformers. This excerpt is from J. Devika's critical introduction to *Antharjanam* ("Introduction: The Namboodiris of Kerala" xxv).

WORKS CITED:

Chamberlain, Lori. "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation." *Signs* 13.3 (1988): 454-472. Print.

Devika, J. "Introduction: The Namboodiris of Kerala." *Antharjanam.* New Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.

Flotow, Luise Von. "Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices and Theories." *Erudit* 4.2 (1991): 69-84. Print.

---. Mini Sukumaran. "Making Space for Feminist Debate in Kerala." *Economic and Political Weekly* Oct (2006): 4469 - 4475. Print.

---. "Being "in-translation" in a post-colony: Translating Feminism in Kerala." *Translation Studies* 1.2 (2008): 182 – 196. Print.

Felman, Shoshana. *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993. Print.

Geetha, V. *Patriarchy.* India: Bhatkal and Sen, 2007. Print.

Godard, Barbara. "Translating and Sexual Difference." *Resources for Feminist Research* XIII.3 (1984): 13-16. Print.

Mehrez, Samira. "Translating Gender." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3.1 (2007): 106-127. Print.

Moi, Toril. *What is a Woman? And Other Essays.* Oxford: OUP, 1999. Print.

Nilayangode, Devaki. *Antharjanam.* Trans. Indira Menon and Radhika P. Menon.

---. *Nashtabodhangalillathe.* Kozhikode: Mathrubhoomi, 2003. Print.

---. *Yathra: Kaatilum Naatilum; Oru Antharjanathinte Anubhava Smaranakal.* Kozhikode: Mathrubhoomi, 2006. Print.

Paschalis, Nikolau. "Notes on Translating the Self". *Translation and Creativity: Perspectives on Creative Writing and Translation Studies*. Eds. Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella. London: Continuum, 2006. Print.

Sreekumar, Sharmila. *Scripting Lives: Narratives of 'dominant women' in Kerala.* Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009. Print.

Venuti, Lawrence. *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.

Wilson, Rita. "The Writer's Double: Translation, Writing and, Autobiography." *Romance Studies* 27.3 (2009): 186-198. Print.

BIO-NOTE

Sucheta Sankar V. is an Assistant Professor of English at Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore. She was awarded the Kerala Council of Historical Research's Doctoral Fellowship (2015-16) and a Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral Research Fellowship (2016-17) at Brandeis University, USA. Her interests include Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Travel Writings, and Kerala Studies.

E-mail: sucheta.sankar90@gmail.com