



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A STUDY OF S.PATHMANTHAN'S TRANSLATIONS OF M. SHANMUGALINGAM'S  
THREE TAMIL PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the translation of three popular plays of Mr. M. Shanmugalingam, a renowned playwright and director of Tamil plays in Jaffna Sri Lanka. They are 'MaṅSumanthaMèniyar' ('With Sweat and Dust on their shoulders'), 'Velvithee' ('The Sacrificial Fire') and 'EnthayumThayum' ('The Land of our Parents'). Mr. M. Shanmugalingam wrote several plays to suit various levels of audience such as kids, school children, adults and educated. Among them the afore said plays have been staged several times and were considered as the best works of Shanmugalingam as he has skillfully used plots, themes, stage directions, settings and other techniques to introduce the characters and bring out the sub and main themes of the plays which were very much based on the ongoing war in Jaffna, at the time of writing and staging the plays, and its effects. The Playwright has utilized Hindu religious hymns such as 'thevara', 'thiruvagasam' to give titles to the plays and also to portray the characters. The use of Bharathiyar songs and quotation from epics- Ramayana and Mahabharatha, and folk songs appropriately suit the scenes, and mainly give meaningful effect in the dramas. The plays are written in Jaffna Tamil dialect with proverbs, idioms and old sayings and puns to enable the audience to get the message which the playwright often indirectly and ironically stated. Knowing that it is a herculean task, Mr. S. Pathmanathan has wholeheartedly taken it as challenge to translate these three plays into English language. This study attempts to analyze and gauge how Mr. S. Pathmanathan has brought attempts to give the same effect of the plays and whether his translation of the plays are successfully done to give the same dramatic effects and other features of the plays.

Key words: Translation, Transliteration, three Tamil plays, playwright

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INTRODUCTION

M. Shanmugalingam embarked on a career as a playwright in the seventies emerged within three decades as the outstanding Tamil dramatist in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. After successfully writing and producing quite a few school plays (Shan was, by profession, a teacher), he wrote his 'war plays' which were the expression of the anguish of a nation that found itself in the throes of unprecedented violence. Starting with

'*MaṇSumanthaMèniyar*' almost all the plays he has written are on the themes of War such as arrest, detention, disappearance, migration and so on.

Shanmugalingam nicknamed as Shan/Kulanthai Shanmugalingam is so deeply rooted in Jaffna's culture that he has opted to stay put here unlike most of his contemporaries who have gone abroad. He has been a witness to the travails of the Tamil people. The impact his plays made on the people was tremendous. '*MaṇSumanthaMèniyar*' shook the very foundations of the society as no other play had done before. It was followed by '*MaṇSumanthaMèniyar*' II, '*Yarkeduthuraippen*', '*Yarodunohen*', '*Annaiidda thee*' and his latest play '*Yarkolosadurar*' is obviously an anti-war play.

S.Pathmanathan the translator is an English lecturer, teacher trainer, poet and critic. As an accomplished bilingual, he has two poetic collections of translations. Now he has chosen three representative plays of Shan for translation. Prof. James Thompson of the University of Manchester provided the initial incentive to S. Pathmanathan (nicknamed as Sopa) to translate Shan's plays. Late Prof. Karthigesu Sivathamby too has motivated and assessed that Sopa is the right person to translate Shan's plays. With the consent of the playwright, Sopa boldly ventured into translating the plays. Initially he translated '*Maṇ SumanthaMèniyar*' ('*With Sweat and Dust on their shoulders*'). Later Sopa thought of including '*Velvithee*' ('*The Sacrificial Fire*') and '*EnthayumThayum*' ('*The Land of our Parents*') in his translation. Thus the translation of the three plays emerged.

*The play 'With Sweat and Dust on their shoulders'* is about a peasant family. One son in the family does social work and doesn't care about the family. The two girls are to be given in marriage. The youngest son is sitting the G.C.E A/L. The family struggles hard to survive as the war is going on. Instead of seeking personal happiness the boy who is more concerned about the society and its rights gives up studies and exams and joins those who work for the recovery of their own land.

*'The Sacrificial Fire'* is about a protagonist called Vasuki who becomes a victim of war. Vasuki and her husband Ranganathan are Counselors. When Ranganathan comes to know that his wife is pregnant; and had fallen a victim of rape in his absence; he doubts the paternity of the child. Ranganathan suggests aborting the fetus. The playwright juxtaposes Vasuki's plight with the characters Akalya, Sita and Desdemona in puranas, epics, and Shakespeare and leaves the audience to guess the end of the play.

*'The Land of our Parents'* is a play about the aged parents who are left behind in Jaffna by their children who have migrated. They eagerly wait for their children's letters and pass every day with disappointment. The old parents mutter the names of their children and die and even their funerals are even conducted by the neighbours.

Translation is not simply a matter of seeking other words with similar meaning but of finding appropriate ways of saying things in another language. Translating Shan's plays is not an easy task. For Shan, employs lot of lyrics such as folk songs, songs of Bharathi, Auvaiyar's sayings, Tamil proverbs, extracts of, thiruvācakam, AlvarPasuram, Palestinian poem, quotations from epics, puranas, fables and folk stories, and enriched the plays with the idiom of Jaffna Tamil idiom. He also employs and adapts various techniques of drama from various literature. He exhibits his brilliance by drawing the sketches of stages to suit the plays. He starts his plays with a short introduction and instruction of how the plays could be started. The careful handling of using stage props, asides, setting of the scenes, changing of the scenes, characterization, character contrast, personification, chorus, and soliloquy could be seen in Shan's plays. The knowledge of Shakespeare, Brecht, Ibsen, and Epics purposely or unconsciously used in the plays of Shan has to be understood from the view of the playwright. The socio, economic, cultural, educational, historical, traditional, religious, ethical and moral values of the Tamils of Jaffna are reflected and sometimes emphasized or even focused on in the contexts where they are needed in Shan's plays. Figurative language, metaphors, similes and repetition of words or phrases are used to add colour and vigour to the play. Shan employs chorus in different contexts and situations which is a unique feature of his plays. A *thiruvācakam* or a Bharathi song is used as a tool throughout the play to heighten the degree of seriousness or to draw the audience's attention to an irony or other.

A translator of such plays cannot function as a machine. While translating, the entire play should be understood without losing the effect and the intended meaning. Sopa has to work within the structure of the contents of the play and to be conscious about translating the play by using the same interface and set of commands which is really a herculean task.

#### **Translation and Transliteration**

Caught between the need to capture the local colour and the need to be understood by an audience outside the original cultural and linguistic situation, a translator must be aware of both cultures. Sopa has to translate and also transliterate the religious and cultural verse and prose in Shan's plays in order to transmit the socio, economic, cultural, religious, political, linguistic and geographical elements through his translation to initiate the target language reader into the sensibilities of the source-language. For instance in the beginning of '*With sweat and dust on their shoulders*' before the curtain goes up a chorus is sung. Sopa has transliterated and translated the entire song. Following are some excerpts.

விக்கின விநாயக கணபதி சரணம் ; ('*With sweat and dust on their shoulders*' p.10 )

**Transliteration:** '*Vignavinayaha ganapathy saranam*'

**Translation:** '*We salute Vinayaga the remover of obstacles.*' ('*With sweat and dust on their shoulders*' p.10).

The playwright ends '*The Sacrificial Fire*' with the following *thiruvācakam* which is sung as the last song in Hindu's funerals.

வேதமும் வேள்வியும் ஆயினார்க்கு ('வேதீ'ப.37)

*For the one who is both Scripture and Ritual*

*For the one who is both Falsehood and Truth*

*For the one who is both Light and Darkness*

*For the one who is both Grief and Joy ('The Sacrificial Fire' p. 102)*

#### **Employment of parallel terms in English and the structure of the contents**

The structure of the play has to be maintained in the translation too. As seen in the following, the translator tries to follow almost the same structure and idiom of the content.

ஐயாத்துரை: சாப்பாடோ? பெரியையாவுக்கு 'சாப்பாடு' வந்திட்டிடுது! இனி வேறே ஒருத்தற்றை சாப்பாடும் அவருக்கு தேவை இல்லை. வேணுமெண்டால் அவற்றை சாட்டில் திதி வைச்சு நாங்க சாப்பிடலாம்.('எந்தையும் தாயும்' ப.32)

**Aiyathurai:** 'Did you say lunch? There is no need. He's bound for feast. We can have the alms-giving and dine in his name!' ('*The Land of our Parents*' p.47)

In order to make the play more effective the translator has employed **parallel terms**. The word cauldron for - for- kin, and friends.

**Usage of English vocabulary:** The playwright uses the **English** words as transliteration in his plays for various purposes. In '*The Land of our Parents*' he uses them to show the parents' and family members' of the children who have migrated using lot of English words in their day to day utterances. In the play '*With sweat and dust on their shoulders*' the names of the war apparatus such as **helicopter** and **bomber** are frequently used. The translator's work becomes easy in this context. **Proverbs and old sayings:** "Reading Shan is to acquire for oneself the history of the Tamils' socio-political life during the period of the last three decades; understanding him means confronting the power of an individual in a world full of people" (Jeyasankar 2006) .Shan is so steeped in the Jaffna Tamil idiom that in almost all his plays the characters abundantly use proverbs and old sayings. Sopa has flawlessly translated them so as to bring out the same colour, vigour, effect and meaning. The following are some examples.

கிழவன்: 'சோழியன்; குடுமி கம்மா ஆடுமே?'('மண் கமந்த மேனியர்' ப.38)

**Old Man:** 'The Cholian's tuft doesn't dangle for nothing.

They are those trading corpses.' ('*With sweat and dust on their shoulders*'p. 38).

'செத்த பிணங்களை விக்கிற சீவன்கள்.' ('மண் கமந்த மேனியர்' ப.38)

**Sensibilities of Language Culture:** One of the main goals of literary translation is to initiate the target language reader into the sensibilities of the source language. In Shan's plays Tamil cultural aspects are intricately woven into the texture. Culture is a complex collection of experiences which conditions daily life. It includes history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. This is difficult to comprehend completely. The translation work of Sopa reveals the fact that he had consciously and carefully handled the cultural aspects of the plays having the target language reader in mind. Following are some extracts.

**Sangarapillai:** He is the eldest, isn't he? The one to perform the last rites for me ...come...I'll give you the money (*'The land of our Parents'* P.44).

நளா: உண்மை எண்டு நாங்கள் நினைக்கிறது நூற்றுக்கு நூறு அப்படி இல்லை!

வாழ்க்கையிலை ஒரு சொட்டு மாயை இருக்கும் பாயாசத்திலை உப்புப் போல! ('வே.தீ'ப.15).

**Nalayini:** What we consider the truth is not the whole truth. There is always a drop of illusion in it –like salt in pāyasam(*'The Sacrificial Fire'*p.70).

வாசு: மணவறையிலை எங்களை இணைத்த ஜயர் “வாழ்விலும்இ தாழ்விலும் இ இன்பத்திலும் இ

துன்பத்திலும் இருவரும் இணைந்து நிற்பீர்களாக” எண்டு சொன்னது

உங்களைப்பொறுத்தவரையிலைஇ சுமமா சடங்கிலை சொல்ல வெறும் சம்பிரதாய வார்த்தைகள்

இல்லை என்தது எனக்குத் தெரியும் (வே.தீ ப.28).

**Vasuki:** Remember the words recited by the priest who married us? “In prosperity and adversity, in joy and sorrow, stand united!?”I know as far as you are concerned, those are not words parroted at meaningless rituals (*'The Sacrificial Fire'*p.89).

**Linguistic cultural element -Family names:** A name is a linguistic cultural element, and an author uses it for its associative value. It resists translation; therefore its evocative value is lost. The characters in their speeches address each other by using the names of their family relationship. The translator has to use the kinship terms such as *akka,thamby, pillai, annan, appa,mama and periiyah* etc., as transliteration.

**Jaffna Dialect, Speech act and idiom:** The playwright's usage of dialect is pure Jaffna Tamil and as Sopa is the native speaker of the same he was able to comprehend it and translate the same without the loss of its meaning and effect. **Speech act** of the characters are carried out perfectly in Sopa's translation. The language used by each character is unique. Each character represents that of the people in that age group in Jaffna. Their speech act reflects their attitude, views and responses to different: day to day and war, situations. The translator has to be conscious in bringing out the same sensibilities and ethos in his work.

கண்ணன்: அவங்கள் ஒருக்கா வட்டம் போட்டிட்டு நேராப்போறாங்கள்.அவைக்கொரு

சீசட்டை...('எந்தையும் தாயும்' ப.31)

சங்கரப்பிள்ளை: அதார்... படலையில் மணி அடிக்கிறது?! வாறன் பொறுங்கோ!!

'போஸ்ட்மனுக்கும்' அவசரம் கன காயிதம் கப்பலிலை ஒண்டா வந்திட்டு போலஇ சீஇ

இருக்காதுஇ அவன் நல்ல பெடியன் இ தவால் இல்லை என்தாலும்இ “இண்டைக்கு

பெரியயாவுக்கு ஒண்டுமில்லை” எண்டு சொல்லிப்போட்டுத்தான் போறவன். (எந்தையும் தாயும்-ப-

31)

The language and idiom of Jaffna women which is frequently used is translated without the loss of its meaning. Shan uses the Jaffna idiom liberally which even other Sri Lankan Tamils may have to get the meaning from the Jaffna Tamils. Idiom of Jaffna women: The utterances of women in Jaffna when they are helpless in a situation as a lamentation. The family names used by the playwright are very common names of Jaffna people.

அன்னை: 'என்றை தலையிலை இடிவிழ இல்லை எண்டு அழுகிறன். பிள்ளையளைப் பெத்து நான்

என்ன பலனை அநுபவிச்சுப்போட்டன்.' ('மண் சுமந்த மேனியர்'ப.47)

Mother: 'I weep because I've not been struck by a thunderbolt. What earthly benefit have I got by begetting children?'(*'With sweat and dust on their shoulders'* p.24).

**Faith in God and human values of Tamils:** A lot of examples could be quoted to show the translator's successful achievement in translating the playwright's use of the peoples' religious way of life, their religious believes, their temple worship, the rites and rituals. The following are some excerpts

ஜயாத்துரை: பெரியையா! சித்திர புத்திரனாற்றை 'பாஸ்போட்

ஒப்(வ்)பீசில்' ஆள்மாறாட்டம்இ தலை மாறாட்டம்இகையெழுத்து மாறாட்டம் எண்டு ஏதும் செய்து

போய்ச் சேரலாது.தலைஎழுத்தின்படி தான் அங்கை பாஸ்போர்ட்டு விசா இடுமிக்ரேசன் இ  
மைக்ரேசன்' எல்லாம்!' .(எந்தையும் தாயும் ப.20)

**Aiyathurai:** In Chitrputra's office, there's no room for impersonation. Everything – your passport, visa, migration etc are processed strictly according to the inscription on your pate. (*The Land of our Parents'* p.47).

**The Astrological beliefs:** The Astrological beliefs presented in the original are translated without the loss of their intended function in the play.

**Father:** The stars are favourable. You are sure to succeed, says the astrologer or else he will give up his practice. (*'With sweat and dust on their shoulders'* p -7)

**The living conditions:** The war situation and the struggle to lead a life are presented as sub themes in all the three plays. Even the economic condition is sarcastically brought in as follows. Bringing out the same sarcasm is not that easy for a translator.

**Aiyathurai:** Periaiya, you know the price of petrol? Rs.2800/=! How to operate vehicles? They use kerosene and the mobikes are belching fumes and suffocating pedestrians. (*The Land of our Parents'* p- 44)

ஜயாத்துரை- (திகைப்போடு உரத்து) 'காரோ!! (மெதுவாக) நல்லத்தான் அறளை பேந்து

போச்சுது. (உரத்து) ஒரு போத்தில் பெற்றோல் ரெண்டாயிரத்து எண்ணூறு விக்குது! கார் எங்கை  
ஒடுறது?ப-28

செல்வரட்ணம்: தனிய அரிசிமாவோட மட்டும் ஆக்கள் வாழ ஏலாமே? ('எந்தையும் தாயும்' ப.23)

**Selvaratnam:** You don't live by rice and flour alone .These fellows don't appreciate the values of children's letters. (*The Land of our Parents'* p-39)

**Build up the plot and theme Retaining Dramatic techniques:** The playwright employs various techniques to build up the plot and the theme in his plays .Sopa has almost given an equal effect and emphasis in his work. In '*With sweat and dust on their shoulders'* the 'narrators' play an important role. In the play '*With sweat and dust on their shoulders'* Sopa has to emphasize the theme statement with the same emphasis.

கிழவன்: ஓம் இ இது என்றை நிலம் எனக்கு முன்னம் என்றை அப்புடி அப்புவின்றை அப்புடி

அவற்றை அப்புடி அவற்றை அப்புடி எண்டு காலாதிகாலமா எங்கடை சனங்கள் குந்தியிருந்து  
வந்த நிலம். ('மண்கமந்த மேனியர்'-ப-50)

**Old Man:** 'Yes this is my land, my father's land, my grandfather's land- the land on which from time immemorial, our people squatted.'

கிழவன்: இதை வித்துச் சுடுகிறவைஇ என்றை பிணத்தை இந்த மண்ணிலை புதைச்சுப்போட்டு

அப்பிடிச்செய்யுங்கோ ('மண்கமந்த மேனியர்'ப.51)

**Old Man:** 'Anyone who sells this, first bury me here and then dispose this.'

**Jane Austen's stream of Consciousness:** In *The sacrificial fire* the plot of the play is presented with the juxtaposition of present events of the plot with the past happenings in the puranas, epics, and in Shakespeare's Othello. The playwright juxtaposes the characters Rama and Sita ,Ahalya, Othello and Desdemona and employs the dramatic technique **stream of consciousness**. Sopa has carefully handled the prose and verse in his translation while retaining the effect and impact of dramatic strategies.

**Usage of glossary and footnote:** Sopa utilizes glossary and footnote to make his translation more meaningful and effective.

## Conclusion

Sopa's translation of the three plays has become a piece of one of his excellent literary contributions . The following appreciations prove that too. "Sopa with such a background has attempted to render the exact

meaning of the original in such a way that the readers have not found difficulties in understanding the message of the translated text. In a way the original is untranslatable but it has got to be translated and the translatability is important to bring across the human sufferings of the play". (K.Sivathamby2007). James Thompson sent the following comment after reading the translation of 'The Land of our Parents': "The play that is deceptively simple yet speaks to some of the most important issues of our day. It clearly resonates here in UK many miles away from Jaffna – a sign of a great play."(James Thompson 2008).Sopa's work is outstanding for he had worked hard "to get across to non-Tamil readers not only the significance of N.Shanmugalingam as a playwright, it also reveals the type of social tensions and problems, Tamils of Northern Sri Lanka have been facing during the contemporary 'ethnic war' that was shaking up the very base of Jaffna Tamil existence".( K.Sivathamby 2007).In short Sopa taking the readership into account has made the content and the beauty of the original plays ready for readership. Finally to quote Prof.K.Sivathamby (2007) "The unqualified success of this translation is that Sopa has been able to bring out in English something deeper than the events portrayed" (K.Sivathamby2007).

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