



Translating the Untranslatable: The Cultural Terrains of G. Ravi's *Kandankunnu Muthappan* and Dipi Diju's *Kappiri Muthappan*

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Abstract

This award-winning Dalit novel is mainly noted for the voice of the oppressed. Dipi Diju's work "Kappiri Muthappan" portrays hyperdiffusionism. It portrays the slave deity worshipped in Kochi through folklore. In comparing Dipi Diju's Kappiri Muthappan and G. Ravi's Kandankunnu Muthappan, we see how the gap between two worlds is bridged to preserve a tradition's original identity. For acquiring linguistic knowledge, culture should be deeply established in language, mental processes and behavioural patterns. With their own cultural interactions, it protects the regional spiritual identities, which are not forced to conform to a universal standard. It reveals the boundaries of cultural translation by investigating how local gods resist assimilation into religious and linguistic systems and into history. The research focuses on the cultic figures of Muthappan through a unique approach that combines elements of subaltern studies, memory studies, and postcolonial studies, rather than a traditional approach that compares religions. The unique qualities and rituals of these Muthappans make them strong divine beings, despite their poorer qualities. The resistance of the Muthappans manifests through their unique mythological narratives, rituals like Theyyam, and other possession rituals, oral historical narratives, and spaces, which provide a cross-cultural experience that challenges traditional historical narratives and religious discourses. The process of translating these deities from a tourism, reformist, or classificatory point of view involves various approaches to control, bargaining, and hiding as means of exerting control. The research relates to other academic studies within the domains of postcolonial studies, anthropology of religion, and cultural translation studies. The approach of untranslatability enables researchers to study how the past of subalterns is preserved and how cultures develop a network of diversity.

Keywords: Malayalam Literature, Dalit Literature, Subaltern Studies, Kandankunnu, Kappiri, Muthappan, Theyyam, Folk Deities, Caste Resistance.

Introduction

Subaltern narratives have found space in the recent history of Malayalam literature. Writers such as G. Ravi and Dipi Diju have found new ways to express the voice of the oppressed through the realm of myth and memory. The award-winning Dalit novel by the noted writer centers on the voice of the oppressed. Similarly, Dipi Diju's work, *Kappiri Muthappan*, reflects the spiritual realm, history, and cultural hybridity. It draws upon the folklore about the slave deity worshipped in Kochi (Diju 38).

The updated narratives of "Muthappan" offer a lens through which to explore complex social themes by moving beyond simple word conversion to capture the identity and values of these spiritual figures. In comparing Dipi Diju's *Kappiri Muthappan* and G. Ravi's *Kandankunnu Muthappan*, it becomes clear that "translation" in modern literature is a process of bridging the gap between distinct worlds to protect and share a tradition's original identity. Because culture is deeply rooted in language, mental processes, and behavioral patterns, understanding these works requires more than linguistic knowledge; it requires empathy to comprehend how a specific group establishes its own unique systems of power. By treating these figures as living entities within their own land, the texts serve as educational tools that facilitate mutual comprehension. This ensures that regional spiritual identities are not forced to conform to a universal standard but are instead respected as unique cultural puzzles with their own distinct interactions. It is now widely recognized as a complex process of cultural translation, a delicate negotiation of meaning, context, and worldview. This challenge becomes particularly acute when the subject matter is deeply rooted in a specific regional, spiritual,

and folkloric landscape, where deities are not just worshipped but are living, breathing entities intertwined with the land and its people (Kurup 46).

Muthappan is first and foremost a well-known folk deity of Northern Kerala outside the Vedic fold. As a symbol of a multifarious cultural world which resists easy definition or encapsulation, he is depicted with a dog as his *vaahan* (Vehicle) and a theyyam dancer as a symbol of his fierce but kind nature. As a symbol of syncretism itself, the figure of Muthappan is that of a hunter, benefactor, and protector.

The approach which Dipi Diju has adopted in his novel *Kappiri Muthappan* appears to be rather different or even more radical in approach than what has been discussed so far. While Dipi Diju has certainly situated his subject in a historical and cultural context, especially in relation to the Malabar Coast or even around Kochi, there appears to be a rather strong association with Kappiri, or even the spirit of an African slave or a colonial military hire from Portugal's colonial past. The novel not only narrates but also interprets cultural memory in some sense too. The juxtaposition of these two texts also serves to highlight cultural translation in a rather interesting sense too. While it is important to find three synonyms of "theyyam/Kappiri," it is rather less important to recognize how a writer or even a translator manages to convey the very essence of a god such as "Muthappan," with his own rituals, mythology, and implications in society in a rather specific narrative setting or historical periodization too. This is the question that is at the very front of this introduction. This introduction seeks to analyze how "*Kandankunnu Muthappan*" and "*Kappiri Muthappan*" function as two very powerful yet

contrasting paradigms of cultural translation, one centered on the fluidity of history and the other on the permanence of tradition.

Objectives

- To explore the methods, challenges, and socio-cultural implications of translating Northern Kerala's distinctive folk-religious culture for a global or non-native audience, as depicted in the novels *Kandankunnu Muthappan* and *Kappiri Muthappan*.
- To understand the process of cultural translation, create a theoretical analysis framework using translation studies such as Lawrence Venuti's concepts of "Domestication" and "Foreignization," Eugene Nida's "Dynamic Equivalence" and cultural studies.
- To Conduct a comparative analysis of the cultural landscapes in both novels, examining how each author constructs the world of Muthappan—one potentially rooted in a traditional, ancestral setting (*Kandankunnu*) and the other in a more folk-legend, syncretic context (*Kappiri*)
- To Analyse the political dimension of translating texts from subaltern cultures, considering how these translations bring a marginalized, non-Brahminical folk narrative into mainstream scholarly and literary discourse
- Using these case studies to emphasise the difficulties of translating India's diverse regional literatures without diluting their uniqueness can add to the broader discussion on postcolonial translation.

Review of literature

The negotiation of meaning between cultures as well as between languages has long been recognized as the primary difficulty in translation studies. Through the work of G. Ravi and *Kandankunnu Muthappan*, who take on the difficult task of translating the folklore and ritualistic universe of "Kappiri Muthappan"

from its native Malayalam context to a global English-speaking audience, this review of literature summarizes important theoretical approaches to this problem and investigates their practical application.

Scholars who changed the emphasis from linguistic fidelity to cultural transposition established the theoretical foundation for examining cultural translation.

- **Eugene Nida and the Concepts of Formal vs. Dynamic Equivalence:** Nida's distinction is a foundational starting point. A formal equivalence approach to translating a figure like *Kappiri Muthappan* would attempt to preserve the original terms and structures, potentially leading to a text that is obscure to the target reader (Nida 171-185).
- **Lawrence Venuti: Domestication and Foreignization:** Venuti (1995) provided a more politically charged framework. He critiqued the dominant Anglo-American tradition of "domestication," which smooths over cultural differences to make a text read fluently in the target language. The translation of *Kappiri Muthappan* sits at the heart of this debate. Should the translators domesticate the figure by comparing him to a "guardian spirit" or "folk saint," or foreignize the text by consistently using the term "*Kappiri Muthappan*" and embedding explanatory notes? (Venuti)
- **Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere:** The Translation Turn; Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) famously declared that translation studies had taken a "cultural turn," arguing that translation is always conditioned by the target culture's ideology, poetics, and patronage (Bassnett 123-140). Translating the syncretic, non-Brahminical, and potentially subaltern narrative of *Kappiri Muthappan* is not a neutral act; it is an intervention that introduces a marginalized Kerala folk deity into the canon of world

mythology, challenging dominant religious and social narratives.

Kappiri Muthappan is a folk deity unique to the Malabar region of Kerala, believed to be the spirit of an African slave or soldier (a "Kappiri") from the colonial era. His devotion is firmly anchored in regional customs, oral tradition, and a particular socio-historical setting. The translation of this tradition by G. Ravi and Kandankunnu Muthappan is an example of how the aforementioned theories are put into practice. A Combination Method: The translator's most likely use a hybrid approach. To maintain their distinct cultural signature, fundamental terms like Theyyam and Muthappan are probably kept (foreignization) to preserve their unique cultural signature.

Materials

The present study used a descriptive comparative analytical research approach to explore how culture-specific items are translated from a source text to a target text.

Source Text (ST): (A Malayalam literary piece like 'Aarachar' by K. R. Meera or a collection of short stories. The piece has been selected for its vivid descriptions of the sociocultural scenario of Kerala, which includes different customs and functions specific to the region.)

Target Text (TT): [English translation of selected text in TT, e.g., English translation of "Hangwoman" by J. Devika]. The English translation of the selected text was analyzed to examine how the cultural universe of the ST was translated to English.

Methods

The methodology was carried out in three consecutive stages: Identification, Categorization, and Data Analysis.

- **Identification and Extraction:** A detailed analysis of the source text (Malayalam) was performed to identify and compile a comprehensive list of CSIs. These items were extracted and presented in their

original form, along with the related sentence or context where they appeared.

- **Categorization of Culture-Specific Items:** The identified CSIs were categorised according to the typology proposed by translation scholars like Javier Franco Axilla (1996) and Peter Newmark (1988).
- **Ecological:** Terms associated with local flora, fauna, and geography (e.g., Kavu - sacred grove).
 - a) **Material Culture (Artifacts):** Items associated with food, clothing, tools, and architecture, such as Mundu and Ulakkaa grinding stones.
 - b) **Social Culture:** Terms related to social structures, kinship, and professions, including specific caste titles and kinship terms like Ettan.
 - c) **Religious and Ritualistic:** Concepts, objects, and practices linked to religious beliefs and rituals, such as Theyyam.
 - d) **Linguistic and Conceptual:** Proverbs, idioms, and swear words that embody distinctive cultural meanings.

Data Analysis

The frequency of each translation strategy employed would be noted. The pattern would be qualitatively analyzed to explore the possible implications in terms of ideology and communication. This would be done by assessing the impact of the employed strategy on the audience's perception of the source culture. Thus, the balance would be struck between the need to 'domesticate' the translation by making it familiar to the audience and the need to 'foreignize' it by maintaining cultural otherness. Thus, the comprehensive understanding of the 'Translating Culture' process in the selected literary work would be achieved. Using the obtained figures, the discussion on 'Translating Culture' would revolve around the ways in which the local divine identity is constructed, performed, and translated in various social/ritual situations.

Discussion

Cultural translation is a multifaceted and intricate practice of rendering a localized belief system, practice, or deity meaningful across various social, ritual, and metaphysical contexts. Cultural translation is not merely about translation. In this regard, we have a good instance within Muthappan Theyyam, particularly with G. Ravi Kandankunnu Muthappan and Dipi Diju's 'Kappiri Muthappan.' This is because these two variants of Muthappan are related yet distinct.

The Two Muthappans: A Ritual and Social Translation. The primary act of translation occurs in the ritual performance of Theyyam itself, where the divine is embodied by a human performer. The singular Muthappan is translated into two primary ritual forms:

(a) G.Ravi's Kandankunnu Muthappan (The Benevolent, Domesticated Form): Translation of Function: This form translates the wild, forest-dwelling Muthappan into a more formal, "domesticated" deity suitable for worship in dedicated temples (like the famous Muthappan Temple in Parashini). The name "Kandankunnu" itself refers to a specific sacred grove, anchoring him to a place of worship.

(b) Dipi Diju's Kappiri Muthappan (The Fierce, Ancestral Form): Translation of History and Memory: This is the most powerful example of cultural translation. "Kappiri" is a term for the spirits of African slaves or soldiers (from the Portuguese word *care*) who were believed to have been brought by colonial powers. Their spirits, often unappeased, were incorporated into the local folk cosmology (Niranjana 137).

Translation of the Marginalized: By translating Muthappan into the Kappiri form, the culture performs a profound act of assimilation and memorialization. It gives a divine voice and a place of reverence to the spirits of the oppressed and the forgotten. Dipi Diju Kappiri Muthappan is often depicted as darker-skinned, more aggressive, and connected to the liminal spaces (riverbanks,

crossroads). He represents the translation of historical trauma and colonial encounter into a manageable, and even protective, divine force.

Important Points of Discussion in "Translating Culture: Using these two forms, we can discuss several critical themes: Intra-Cultural Translation: The discussion isn't about translating Malayalam to English, but about translating within the culture—from the divine to the human, from the wild to the domesticated, from the historical memory of oppression to a ritual of propitiation.

Performance as Translation: The translation is performative rather than textual. Each Muthappan form's unique oracular speech, dance, costume, and makeup (*aharya*) serve as its own translation mechanisms. These various cultural meanings are expressed and comprehended through the Theyyam artist's body. In large temples, the Kappiri form may even represent a secondary manifestation of the Kandankunnu form, which often represents the "primary" deity. Here we see an example of social translation, in which the more "acceptable" representation was privileged while the more transgressive and historically significant representation remained necessary but occupied a different space (Tarabout 290).

Challenges of External Translation: The challenge becomes more difficult when an outsider, who works as either an anthropologist or documentary maker, tries to explain this phenomenon to people worldwide. The term "Kappiri" needs to be conveyed through its full meaning which extends beyond the basic translation of "ghost". The explanation needs to show how one god can represent both the deified spirit of an African slave and the well-known Hindu deity without causing comprehension problems. Translation as a Living Practice.

Living Process of Translation: Kappiri Muthappan demonstrates that cultural translation exists as a continual process which people complete through multiple steps. The

study requires social structure and environmental issues and historical background to obtain complete comprehension of this intricate individual. Muthappan's complex personality shows through his two different expressions which originate from his riverbank community and his temple sacred environment. Analyzing these depictions requires moving beyond simple word replacement to understand the unique power systems and social interactions that determine Muthappan's cultural value. Translating the figure of Kappiri Muthappan demands a deep sense of empathy to express his true identity and values, which allows us to comprehend how another individual experiences the complexities of life. Such cultural practices function as educational tools that protect a tradition's original identity, ensuring it can be shared with a global audience for mutual comprehension without being forced to conform to a single universal standard.

Conclusion

Cultural translation is a simple replacement of words from one language to another. The culture is deeply and firmly fixed in every aspect of human life through cognitive processes and social behaviours. Every culture is unique, and each translator's objective is to bridge the gap between different languages rather than to seek perfection. Stories of Kandankunnu Muthappan and Kappiri Muthappan imply the necessity of these figures, which cannot be conveyed by any word substitution alone but require the expression of their values and identities. For effective translation of cultural content, one needs to understand the particular power dynamics and social system inherent to a group. By respecting culture, specifically these translations share the original identities within a mass audience.

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