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Cultural Shifts, Back Translation and Machine Translation: A Comparative Study of English Translations of Rafeeq Ahammed's *Thoramazha*

Dr. Smitha C. R.

Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Languages, Nehru Arts and Science College, Thirumalayampalayam, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, Email: nascsmithacr@nehrucolleges.com

Abstract

Translation is not merely a linguistic transfer from one language to another; it is also a process of cultural negotiation. Literary texts, especially poetry, present unique challenges because they contain emotional, cultural, and aesthetic elements that are deeply rooted in the source language. This study examines Rafeeq Ahammed's Malayalam poem *Thoramazha* and its two English translations by Anita Varma and Rahul Kochuparambil. By employing Artificial Intelligence-based back translation, the study investigates how cultural meanings shift during translation and how machine translation reconstructs the source text from translated versions. The research integrates theories of Cultural Shifts in Translation, Back Translation, and Machine Translation to analyze variations in imagery, emotion, symbolism, and cultural representation. The findings reveal that cultural nuances embedded in the original Malayalam text undergo varying degrees of transformation in the English translations, while AI-generated back translations further illuminate the extent of semantic and cultural loss or gain. The study contributes to contemporary translation studies by demonstrating how machine-assisted back translation can serve as an effective tool for evaluating translation quality and cultural fidelity.

Keywords: Translation Studies, Cultural Shifts, Back Translation, Machine Translation, Malayalam Poetry, Rafeeq Ahammed, Thoramazha

Introduction

Translation has long been recognized as a bridge between languages and cultures. Literary translation, in particular, involves the transmission of meanings that extend beyond lexical equivalence. Poetry presents an even greater challenge because poetic language is characterized by imagery, rhythm, symbolism, and cultural references. Translators must negotiate between fidelity to the source text and readability in the target language.

Rafeeq Ahammed's poem *Thoramazha* is a poignant elegy depicting the grief of a mother after the death of her daughter, Ummukkulusu. Through vivid imagery such as the champak tree, the spotted umbrella, the chimney lamp, and the incessant rain, the poem evokes profound emotional and cultural resonances. The poem has been translated into English by Anita Varma and Rahul Kochuparambil, each reflecting distinct translational choices.

This study investigates how cultural meanings

are transformed in these translations and how AI-based back translations reveal these transformations. The research draws upon theories of Cultural Shifts, Back Translation, and Machine Translation¹ to evaluate the effectiveness of the translations in preserving the emotional and cultural essence of the original poem.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Shifts in Translation

The concept of cultural shifts in translation emerged from the recognition that translation is fundamentally a cultural act. Susan Bassnett (1991) argues that translation should be viewed within a cultural context rather than merely as linguistic substitution. Similarly, André Lefevere (1992) suggests that translations are rewritings shaped by ideological and cultural influences.

Catford's (1965) theory of translation shifts identifies changes that occur when formal correspondence between source and target languages is not possible.



Later scholars expanded this concept to include cultural shifts, where cultural symbols, customs, and emotional associations undergo transformation during translation.

In poetry translation, cultural shifts often occur because certain symbols and expressions have no direct equivalents in the target language. Translators therefore adopt strategies such as domestication, foreignization, adaptation, or explication. These strategies inevitably affect how readers perceive the original culture.

Back Translation

Back translation refers to the process of translating a target text back into its source language. Initially developed for cross-cultural research and questionnaire validation, back translation has become an important tool in translation studies.

According to Brislin (1970), back translation helps identify semantic discrepancies between source and translated texts. By comparing the original text with the back-translated version, researchers can evaluate the extent to which meaning has been preserved or altered. In literary studies, back translation serves as a useful method for identifying losses, additions, and shifts that occur during translation. The emergence of AI-based translation systems has further enhanced the feasibility of back translation as a comparative analytical tool.

Machine Translation

Machine Translation (MT) refers to the automated translation of texts using computational systems. Early MT systems relied on rule-based approaches, while contemporary systems utilize neural machine translation (NMT).

Researchers such as Koehn (2020) note that neural machine translation has significantly improved fluency and grammatical accuracy. However, literary texts remain challenging because MT systems often struggle with figurative language, symbolism, cultural references, and emotional nuances.

In the context of poetry, machine translation frequently prioritizes semantic clarity over aesthetic expression. Consequently, AI-generated back translations provide valuable insights into what aspects of meaning are preserved and what aspects are lost during translation.

Analysis of Anita Varma's Translation

Anita Varma's translation closely follows the

imagery and narrative structure of the original Malayalam poem. Her rendering of the opening lines preserves the atmosphere of loneliness and bereavement:

"The night Ummukkulusu died, Her mother stood alone outside the house."

The AI-generated back translation reconstructs this as:

"ഉമ്മുകുലുസു മരിച്ച ആ രാത്രി, വീട്ടിന് പുറത്തു ഒറ്റയ്ക്കായിരുന്നു അവളുടെ അമ്മ."

The emotional meaning remains largely intact, indicating a high degree of semantic fidelity.

The translator effectively preserves cultural elements such as the champak tree. Instead of replacing the image with a culturally familiar equivalent, she retains the reference, allowing the target reader to encounter the original cultural landscape.

However, certain shifts occur. The Malayalam expression "ചിമ്മിനിക്കൊച്ചുവിളക്ക്" becomes "a little chimney lamp." While semantically accurate, the emotional resonance associated with traditional rural lighting in Kerala is partially reduced. The AI back translation further neutralizes the image into a descriptive phrase rather than a culturally embedded symbol.

Similarly, the expression "കണ്ണീര് വെളിച്ചം" is translated as "teary light." The metaphor survives but loses some poetic intensity in the process of translation and subsequent back translation.

Overall, Anita Varma's translation demonstrates a strategy of cultural preservation combined with linguistic accessibility.

Analysis of Rahul Kochuparambil's Translation

Rahul Kochuparambil adopts a more interpretive approach. His translation frequently expands the imagery and emotional atmosphere of the original text.

For example:

"The fading light, from the dim chimney stood so forlorn, wiping its tears."

The addition of "so forlorn" introduces an emotional interpretation absent from the original. The AI back translation reflects this expansion:

"അതീവ വിഷാദത്തോടെ നിന്നു."

This illustrates a cultural and emotional shift in which the translator amplifies the mood of grief.

Similarly, the phrase:

"a passer-by wind tried to stroke it awake"

represents a creative adaptation of the original image. The Malayalam source simply depicts the wind touching the child's dress. Kochuparambil personifies the wind to a greater degree, thereby increasing the emotional engagement of the target reader.

Another notable example is the translation of the umbrella scene. The original phrase about the umbrella's broken ribs becomes:

"had its frame broken badly, beyond repair."

This elaboration intensifies the image and provides additional contextual information. The AI back translation reproduces this expanded meaning, demonstrating how translator intervention creates new layers of interpretation.

Thus, Rahul Kochuparambil's translation exhibits greater poetic creativity but also introduces more pronounced cultural and semantic shifts.

Comparative Discussion

A comparison of the two translations reveals distinct translational philosophies.

Anita Varma emphasizes fidelity and restraint. Her translation seeks to preserve the original imagery with minimal intervention. Consequently, the AI back translation remains closer to the Malayalam source text.

Rahul Kochuparambil adopts a more expressive approach. His translation enriches emotional descriptions and elaborates certain images. While this enhances poetic readability for English audiences, it also increases the distance from the original text.

The AI back translations reveal these differences clearly. Varma's translation produces a back-translated text that mirrors the original structure and meaning. Kochuparambil's translation produces a back-translated version containing additional emotional and descriptive elements.

These findings demonstrate how cultural shifts emerge through translator choices. Even when both translations communicate the same narrative, they construct different emotional landscapes for readers.

Findings

The study identifies several significant observations:

1. Cultural symbols such as the champak tree, chimney lamp, and spotted umbrella are generally preserved in both translations.

2. Anita Varma's translation exhibits fewer semantic shifts and greater proximity to the source text.
3. Rahul Kochuparambil's translation introduces interpretive expansions that enhance emotional expression but increase cultural transformation.
4. AI-based back translation effectively reveals differences between source and target texts.
5. Machine translation preserves basic semantic content but struggles to reproduce poetic subtlety and cultural depth.
6. Back translation serves as a valuable analytical tool for assessing translation quality and cultural fidelity in literary texts.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Anita Varma's and Rahul Kochuparambil's translations of *Thoramazha* demonstrates that translation is fundamentally an act of cultural mediation. While both translators successfully communicate the central theme of grief and loss, their approaches differ significantly in terms of cultural representation and poetic interpretation.

The study further demonstrates the usefulness of AI-generated back translation as a methodological tool in translation studies. By reconstructing the source language from translated texts, back translation makes visible the shifts, omissions, additions, and reinterpretations that occur during translation.

Ultimately, *Thoramazha* illustrates the complexity of literary translation, where linguistic accuracy alone cannot guarantee cultural equivalence. The translator must continually negotiate between preserving the cultural identity of the source text and ensuring meaningful communication for the target audience. As machine translation technologies continue to evolve, they offer valuable support for translation analysis, though human interpretation remains indispensable for capturing the emotional and cultural richness of poetry.

References

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[illegible]

And found the spotted umbrella about which She used to whimper, "its ribs are broken!" She hastily ran and placed the opened parasol on top of the new mound of earth in the cemetery. The rain continues to fall interminably From the night Ummukulusu died. Translation: Anita Varma	ഉമ്മുകുലുസു മരിച്ച രാത്രി ഏഴുനീർ അ ഒന്നാം മരണനാളുകൾക്കു പാളിച്ചുകൊണ്ടിരിക്കുന്ന അരുന്ധതി. യുഗാന്തനാളിലൊ പരിതഃ സന്തതിക്കുന്നതിനൊക്കുളക്കുളിർ തള കറ തണുതിർ കൊമ്പൊടൊന്ന വരിതിപ്പുകൾ പാളിച്ചുകൊണ്ടിരിക്കുന്ന. South of the house, on the clothe-line where her worn-out frock was hung out to dry, a passer-by wind tried to stroke it awake failing which, nestled on a tree-branch above. On the night when Ummukulusu had died when Umma had stood outside, alone. a thunderstorm arrived all of a sudden, Umma rushed inside, and in a jiffy, was back with the spotted umbrella in hand, the same umbrella, which she used to complain- had its frame broken badly, beyond repair. On the new sand mound, in the graveyard she laid the parasol, covering it well, The rain still continues unabated, Ever since the night Ummukulusu had died. Translation: RAHUL Kochuparambil	"ഒന്നുകൂടി ഏഴുനീർ കൊമ്പൊടൊന്ന, ഒന്നു കൊമ്പൊടൊന്നുകൂടി" എന്നു അരുന്ധതി പറഞ്ഞിട്ട് പാളിച്ചുകൊണ്ടിരിക്കുന്ന അരുന്ധതി. യുഗാന്തനാളിലൊ പരിതഃ സന്തതിക്കുന്നതിനൊക്കുളക്കുളിർ തള കറ തണുതിർ കൊമ്പൊടൊന്ന വരിതിപ്പുകൾ പാളിച്ചുകൊണ്ടിരിക്കുന്ന.
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