

Translation and the Vernacular

The Tamil Krishna Devotional “Alaippayuthey”

S. SHANKAR

I COME TO A DISCUSSION of the fraught question of engaging with the vernacular literatures of India not only as a literary critic but also as a novelist and translator. These are distinct but complementary designations, and it is from this threefold perspective that I reflect on my translation of Oothakaadu Venkatasubbaiyer’s Tamil devotional song “Alaipaayuthey” to see what we might learn about the challenges of engaging with the vernacular literatures of India.

What follows is a set of preliminary observations provoked by the experience of translating “Alaipaayuthey.” I focus on how translation involves the transformation of a devotional song into a poem that is and is not the original text. Throughout, I emphasize the plurality of translation practice by drawing attention to the difference between the presentation of the translation in my novel and its appearance here in this brief critical reflection. To my mind, translation is best regarded as a species of interpretation. Approaching translation as interpretation allows us, I believe, to have a more supple and enabling view of it. I am developing this notion at length in the critical work that I am currently doing and in the brief discussion that follows mean to reiterate and further this argument. I conclude my observations on translating “Alaipaayuthey” by reflecting on how the practice of translation relates to the vernacular literatures of India.

I will begin with some background to “Alaipaayuthey” – providing, if you will, a kind of cultural translation of the song in the mode of a literary critic attentive to historical context. Oothakaadu Venkatasubbaiyer lived

during the early part of the eighteenth century in Tamil South India in the Thanjavur area. The first part of his name refers to the village in which he lived – Oothakaadu. Though he is widely accepted as one of the pivotal composers of Karnatic music (South Indian classical music), little is known of his life. He predates the trinity of great Karnatic music composers who lived during the latter half of the eighteenth century – Thyagaraja, Muthusami Dikshitar, and Syama Sastri. He lived when the Vijayanagara Empire had disappeared and before the establishment of British dominance over South India. It was a time of rule by minor kings largely of Maratha origin. Oothakaadu Venkatasubbaiyer's elder brother was the court musician of one such king of Thanjavur and it is through the descendants of this brother that most of the compositions of Oothakaadu Venkatasubbaiyer have survived.

Oothakaadu Venkatasubbaiyer composed in Tamil, Sanskrit, and, very occasionally, in Marathi, the language of the kings of Thanjavur at this time. He was a great Krishna *bhakta*, and though he composed songs about many deities, it is as a composer of devotional songs expressive of an ardent worship of Krishna that he is most celebrated today. Such Krishna compositions as “Aadaathu Asangaathu” (Immobile) and “Thaiye Yashoda” (Mother Yashoda) are sung commonly wherever Tamils gather in a religious mood – though it should be acknowledged that there is a strong Brahmin or upper-caste connotation to his songs now. Even when the name of the composer is not known, the compositions themselves are, for they have steadily grown in popularity through the twentieth century and have long since passed into the classical and devotional musical repertoire of Tamils everywhere. Such is the current popularity of the compositions that the celebrated director Mani Ratnam recently named a film “Alaipaayuthey.” The film includes a version of the composition by A.R. Rahman, the well-known music composer for contemporary Indian films, especially those in Tamil and Hindi. Thus has a precolonial, religious song arrived at a postcolonial popularity that transcends the religious without escaping it – the song has passed into the sphere of secular culture while remaining unmistakably religious. The past career and present status of “Alaipaayuthey” are part of its ‘text’ in complex ways; and because they are, the biographical and historical information that I have provided becomes a kind of cultural translation, as indispensable as translation understood in the narrower sense.

I have noted above that Oothakaadu Venkatasubbaiyer's compositions are part of the *musical* repertoire of Tamils. At the same time, I want to say the compositions have become part of Tamil *literary* heritage. Of course, the distinction I am making here, between the musical and the literary, must itself be regarded as suspect in the case of devotional songs. Venkatasubbaiyer's creations are not poems. Nor are they purely musical creations. In them, the literary and the musical are indissolubly linked. Within their native cultural context, the compositions are generally not read in the way a modern poem by Ka Na Su or the twelfth-century classical epic *Ramavataram* by Kamban might be. Rather, they circulate as songs. Nevertheless, I feel the need to invoke the literary in order to direct attention to the peculiar power the words of the songs continue to have, separate from the musical structure in which they appear.

Approaching translation as a literary critic attentive to questions of form and genre, I find the important role the words play in the circulation and the celebration of the songs can be captured for a non-native audience by an appeal to the notion of the literary. I hope it will be understood that I regard the literary as a culturally and historically specifiable category – i.e. that not all cultures or periods of history have a belief in the literary. To refer to the literary quality of “Alaipaayuthey,” then, is already to *translate* the text, or to *interpret* the text in a way that shines critical light on specific features of the text to the (temporary) exclusion of other features. Such translation-as-interpretation allows me to demonstrate to non-native audiences that, even as they are musical compositions, there is within these songs a properly literary power.

It was, indeed, out of a deep appreciation of its literary as well as musical power that I translated Oothakaadu Venkatasubbaiyer's “Alaipaayuthey” as “Restless as the Waves of the Ocean” for my novel *No End to the Journey* (2005). In the novel, during a Diwali religious gathering in the Tamil village of Paavalamatti, “Alaipaayuthey” is sung. This is how I translated it for the novel:

Restless as the Waves of the Ocean

Restless as the waves of the ocean, Kanna,
is my mind.
Ebbing and flowing
in the joyous, melodious

song of your flute,
my mind is a restless ocean.

You stand still as an unmovable statue,
unmindful of the passing of time,
O marvelous player of the flute,
while my mind is a restless ocean.

Moon without blemish
burns hot and bright as day.
My brow furrows
from looking toward you in hope.
Your sweet flute song
comes blowing on the wind. Eyes roll helplessly –
dizzy, faint, I am overcome.

You rejoiced so in planting your foot
firmly on my restless mind!
You embraced me in a wild place,
woke my senses, made me bloom!
Like sunlight gleaming
on the resounding ocean waves
gleamed the anklets on your feet!

Is this your wish?
That I cry out like this to you –
wild, my mind liquid with longing –
while still you frolic with your other women?
Is this deserved? proper? just?

Like the earrings that swing
as you play your flute,
my mind swings, suffers,
restless as the waves of the ocean.
Kanna, my mind
is restless as the ocean
in the joyous, melodious
song of your flute.

In the novel, these translated words are not presented continuously as they are here. Rather, they are interwoven with descriptions of characters, their emotions, their responses to the song. The presentation in the novel

dramatizes one particular cultural milieu for the song – the Brahmin gathering, the little village, the Diwali season – in a fuller way than is possible here.

Unlike my presentation of the poem here, in my novel I aim to capture the indissolubility of the song's music and poetry. Musically, "Alaipaayuthey" rises to an impassioned peak in what corresponds to the fourth and fifth stanzas above before returning to a quieter, more reflective, mood in the final. "Alaipaayuthey" is a specific – and common – kind of composition known as a *kriti*. I myself would be the first to admit that this musical aspect of "Alaipaayuthey" – its elaborate structure of a *kriti* – remains largely untranslated, though I hope my translation evokes at least some sense of the musical movement of the original. In the novel, the translation's musical lack is less evident, for the very diegetic presentation of the song emphasizes the musicality of "Alaipaayuthey." Descriptions of the singer's performance surround the translated words. My interest in the novel is that the reader encounter the translated words with, among other things, an acute sense of the integrity of the musical and the literary within this composition, a sense absent when the translation is abstracted from the novel in the way I do it here.

This admission is no matter for embarrassment, for I believe translation practices are happily plural and different kinds of translation practice can be put to different kinds of use. As I have already observed, translation is a form of interpretation. To recognize my translation of "Alaipaayuthey" as interpretation is to free it from useless expectations of fidelity to the original and to begin to appreciate the ways in which translation opens up discussion as much as it shuts it down. Like any interpretation, a specific translation practice directs attention to particular aspects of the original text. If the translation of "Alaipaayuthey" into the diegetic space of a novel permits the emergence of certain emotional and cultural qualities of the original text, the presentation of the same translation here permits other emergences. To render "Alaipaayuthey" as I have above – as a continuous, stand-alone translation: i.e. as a kind of *poem* – is to engage in an interpretation that directs attention to its specifically literary aspects. "Alaipaayuthey" becomes amenable to the kinds of questions that one poses of literary texts, as distinct from songs and chants. Since, in Tamil, "Alaipaayuthey" is not simply a poem, this transformation may be regarded as a mistranslation. I prefer to see it as a kind of interpretation that

focusses attention on what certainly exists in the original Tamil – what may be called, in our context, the literary.

Speaking as a literary critic, then, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that "Alaipayuthey" depends on a contrast between movement and immobility. Thus Krishna is described as "nilai peyaraatha silai" – a statue that does not change its place, an unmovable statue – in contrast to the restless mind of the devotee. Krishna is also described as standing "neram agum theriyamale": that is, unmindful of the passing of time. At the core of the poem is a profoundly philosophical – even mystical – notion of the Divine's exemption from the contingencies of space and time, exactly that to which the restless mind of the Devotee anxiously awaiting the arrival of the beloved Divine is excruciatingly subjected.

Linked to this theme of divine transcendence and mortal contingency is the personal drama of the relationship between the loving but mortal Devotee and the beloved but transcendent Divine. While it is possible to read the statue as a metaphor, as I have done in the previous paragraph, it is certainly also possible to regard the second stanza of the poem as a literal description of the Devotee gazing with an entirely real expectation of movement at his personal idol of Krishna. Here statue is not metaphor, not even statue, but the all too real embodiment of the beloved Divine. Thus, when the Devotee cries "my brow furrows from looking toward you in hope" or asks later whether it is Krishna's wish to keep him waiting, the meaning is both personal and paradoxical. In the form of the statue, the Divine attains a literal and concrete presence that is also at the same time an absence (the Divine after all is busy elsewhere). This paradox is part of the personal anguish expressed in the poem.

To my mind, the greatness of "Alaipaayuthey" (presented here as "Restless as the Waves of the Ocean") inheres in the way it is able to evoke and transcend at one and the same time, in a work dramatizing a personal anguish, two intertwined aspects: the literal and concrete, on the one hand, and the metaphorical and philosophical, on the other. The mind of the mortal Devotee, vast and restless as the ocean, focusses on the Divine, still and unmindful as a statue because the Divine exists in a realm outside the constraints of time and space. In that other realm, the Divine is at play with His lovers. The last part of the song contrasts this play of fulfillment (after all, the Divine, unmindful, shows no *need* to respond to entreaties) to the unfulfilled desire of the Devotee. The song becomes suffused with a properly erotic longing, presented as the relationship between

the Divine gendered as male and the Devotee gendered as female. Such a gendering is conventional, common to the general rhetorical format of the devotional song, and though Oothakaadu Venkatasubbaiyer's identity as a male composer/poet provides an opening to raise a series of questions about the nature of these conventions, I will not develop this observation further here.

Above, I have repeatedly noted that the translation of the devotional song "Alaipaayuthey" into the poem "Restless as the Waves of the Ocean" can be regarded as an enabling act of interpretation that draws attention to specific aspects of the original text. I would like to round out this positive assessment by noting the challenges of translation. At the opening of "Alaipaayuthey" and throughout the poem appears the word *manam*, which I have translated as 'mind' – an English cognate that suggested itself to me as if self-evidently. Upon further reflection, though, 'mind' seems inadequate in many ways, because it implies reason in a manner that does not correspond to the resonances that *manam* has in Tamil. 'Mind' is indeed one of the dominant meanings of *manam*. It is the first meaning that you will encounter for *manam* if you consult a Tamil-to-English dictionary. At the same time, it means desire. *Manam* is resonant of 'heart'; it is a word implying not only thought but emotion. Indeed, the more I consider the matter, the point is precisely that in *manam* thought and emotion are irrevocably connected. Perhaps because as a language English makes a much more rigorous separation of heart from mind, emotion from thought, no English word seems adequate. What English word could ever overcome the challenges to translating *manam*? Words such as 'spirit' and 'soul' commit the translation to an ontology that is absent from *manam*. They also run the opposite risk of undervaluing the way *manam* implies 'mind'.

Because of the differences between languages, then, what can get lost in the translation of *manam* as 'mind' is the way in which the absence of the Divine is both a rational and an emotional dilemma for the Devotee. The restlessness of the Devotee is not only a matter of the mind, of comprehension, but also of the heart, of desire. The loss in meaning implied here is certainly worth noting as a cautionary reminder of the difficulty of translation; at the same time, it is also worth observing that the challenge of translation is often met and solved not word by word but at the level of the text as a whole. Taken as a whole, I hope "Restless as the Waves of

the Ocean” conveys the emotional implications more fully and thus makes up for the lack in the word ‘mind’.

Like any other kind of interpretation, translation is never a finished matter. Translating three hundred years later a precolonial, non-secular Tamil devotional song such as “Alaipaayuthey” into the English-language poem “Restless as the Waves of the Ocean” suggests how historically conditioned and philosophically complicated an act translation truly is on so many levels – of genre, language, form, cultural knowledge, theme, and so on. And yet, despite its dangers and complexities, I hope it is evident from my observations that I regard translation as full of opportunity rather than simply as a practice to be approached in a shame-faced and apologetic mood. In the debates over the relative merits of literature in different languages in India, translation has an inevitable role to play. While there will always be an incontestable place for those who know the vernacular languages and read the texts of those languages in the original, translation must suffice for those who cannot. Translation can never take the place of the original text, but that does not mean that it cannot, when approached in an historically sensitive manner, effectively and ethically convey for non-native audiences aspects of the original text. Indeed, translation as interpretation can go further and allow even native readers to appreciate anew aspects of the text that they thought they knew so well in the original. Translating “Alaipaayuthey,” for example, has left me with a fresher understanding of its literary and philosophical qualities. I suspect many native speakers of Tamil familiar with this devotional will be led to reflect anew on it, whether in a spirit of agreement or of disagreement, in the light of my translation. This, too, is an important form of knowing.