
INTERVIEW

In Conversation with Prema Jayakumar

Ammu Maria Ashok

*Prema Jayakumar (PJ) was born in Kerala and studied in Kochi and Bangalore. She does translations from Malayalam into English and writes for periodicals. As a columnist and translator, she enjoys being the link between two critical languages, Malayalam and English. She has translated the works of well-known Malayalam writers, including Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, Mukundan, and A. Sethumadhavan, whose works have been published by Sahitya Akademi as also Penguin. She has retold the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and stories from Puranas for Mango Books and Real Reads, UK. She has translated several vital novels, published by the Sahitya Akademi as well as some of the important publishing houses. These include **Rama Raja Bahadur** (2003), **Yakshi** (1991), **Doorways to Death** (1995), **The Sixth Finger** (2017), **Pandavapuram** (1995), **The Saga of Muziris** (2016), **God & Mischief** (2002) and several others. She loves telling stories and finds the myths and folklore of Kerala an infinite source of interest. She also has a body of work on historical investigation in Malayalam.*

Ammu Maria Ashok (AMA): Many of your publications have dialectically investigated the parameters set by linguists and translation theorists in translation studies. Could you please explicate the gap between the theoretical postulations and the practical act of translation with respect to your own translated texts?

PJ: To me, translation is a purely creative process. When one language tells the story that was initially told in another language and manages to convey not just the story but the shades and colours of emotion in the original language, that becomes a successful translation. Theory does not come into the picture at all.

A carpenter who uses the three sides of a triangle in his calculations would be hard put to explain it in terms of Pythagoras and his theories. Think of me as the carpenter. The carpenter's pleasure is not in some theory. But when the joints fit, when the tap of a wooden hammer puts into place the rafters and beams perfectly and the finished work is a thing of beauty, he is pleased. So also the creative writer—whether it is a novelist, a poet or a translator—the pleasure comes when what you have produced works, when it conveys what you wanted it to convey.

AMA: Being a translator of many books, how would you define a good translation, keeping in mind all the cultural nuances?

PJ: I would consider a translation good when it conveys the atmosphere of the original as well as the story, when the people who read it get an inkling of the background, the relationships and the behaviour patterns of the characters in the original even though they do not have much knowledge of the cultural space in which the original stands. Sometimes the cultural nuances take careful interpretation, sometimes they refuse to yield to translation. Take the example of "*bhasmam*" and ashes. For the Malayali, ashes are something you put on your forehead after a bath. To the Anglophone, it may be where stray dogs lie! One overcomes such problems by saying 'sacred ashes' or something of that sort. Sometimes one sticks to the original word because there is no equivalent in the other language. Malayatoor's *Yakshi* was a case in point. Vampires are beautiful, no doubt, but they lack the romance of the *yakshi*, who is an accomplished artist as well as a beautiful woman when she needs to be. She can also yield to the softer emotions on occasion. Hence, I kept to the original word for the title. Sethu's *niyogam* was another such unyielding word. *Niyogam* is a nuanced word meaning the duty of a sibling to impregnate his widowed sister-in-law. There was no way this concept could be reduced to a word or a phrase, and so we changed the title to 'The Wind From the Hills' since the wind in the novel is a gossip monger.

Since I do not go by linguistic and cultural trends when I do my translations, I have not felt them as factors in my endeavours. My translations try to be as close to the original as possible without losing out on readability. An example is the translation of *Rama Raja Bahadur*. The language of the original is slang that belonged to an earlier century. An equivalent English would be possible with great effort. However, the

readability would be practically nil. So I stuck to a language that was relatively modern without much slang.

I have read translations when the original language was unfamiliar to me. Of course, any translation is inadequate because it is not the original. (And yet I have heard people claim that the translation was better than the original, especially in the case of poetry. Balachandran Chullikkad holds firmly that Changampuzha's translation of Jayadeva's *Gitagovindam* is better than the original because, according to him, 'Changampuzha is a better poet'. There is also the story of the translator who was executed because his translation of some holy text was better than the original.

AMA: A translator is a socio-cultural entity and he/she cannot control the act of translation as he/she is not alone in it. He/she is influenced by many factors in the process of translation. What are the factors that influence you in the process of translation?

PJ: As far as I am concerned, only one factor has influenced me in both the selection of the text and the actual doing of it. Simply put, I liked the original and I thought people who could not read the language of the original might also enjoy it. And so, I translated.

AMA: "In order to learn translation, one must translate." How much of translation theory is required to train a translator? What should be the pedagogic method in a translator's training programme?

PJ: 'In order to learn translation, one must translate.' Of course, you need to do anything to learn to do it properly. From swimming and driving to cooking and painting, all skills can be acquired only by doing the job. No translation theory is required in training a translator. Theories might prove inhibitive. The method should be what you would use in teaching a novice swimmer. Put the learner into the water, give aid when needed, and rescue if near drowning. Provide a text and request a readable translation that is as close to the original as possible.

AMA: Do you think the approaches from linguistic to literary studies are inadequate in the process of translation?

PJ: As for the adequacy of linguistic and literary approaches—I don't do theory.

AMA: How far is the post-colonial approach to translation adequate for translation - the concept of Anglophone or gender in translation, for example?

PJ: I do not recognise any period separation in translation. A good translation is a good translation, regardless of its relation to colonisation or post-colonial theories.

AMA: Nowadays, most translators have interpreted translation as a site of knowledge creation and determination. How would you reflect upon this view?

PJ: I do not translate to create knowledge. I translate to recreate the pleasure I got from reading the original.

AMA: Every translation has problems of its own, and a good translation depends on the accurate understanding of the subject matter. What would be the correct methods according to your practical experience in translation that could be generalised to all kinds of translation?

PJ: Yes, I do agree that a deep understanding of the original is necessary for a successful translation (which, as I said earlier, should be readable and as close to the original as possible). When Vijayalaskhmi's *sandehiyaya rajakumaran* becomes 'The Doubtful Rajput' in English, the translator has not understood the original. There is only one Prince filled with doubts, and that is Hamlet, and in reading the poem, I felt that was what the original poem meant.

AMA: What are the approaches that you would like to propose for translators who take up all kinds of translation? What are the semantic and linguistic aspects of text type features that should be considered for determining a good translation?

PJ: I don't propose any academic approach to a would-be translator. What I would say is: read the text repeatedly. You might have missed some nuances in your first reading, even if you enjoyed it. Translate it. Read it out aloud to yourself because the ear often catches infelicities that the eye does not. Check the readability of the whole. I do not think of semantics or linguistics as I translate.

AMA: What are the cultural and linguistic gaps you find in your translation?

PJ: Yes, cultural and linguistic gaps exist when a story travels from one language to another. As I explained about the ashes earlier, some things do need some explanation (preferably in the text itself). Kinship terms are sometimes difficult too. For an English reader who considers a mother's cousin a cousin, not an uncle or aunt, understanding the vast

structure of the Indian family can be challenging. Some explanations might be needed.

AMA: With respect to your translations, do you agree with the statement “Translators are licensed to trans-create?”

PJ: Yes, I do agree. Without transcreation, what you would get would be just a dead treatise.

AMA: How would you view a translator’s subjectivity in the process of translation?

PJ: There is always subjectivity in translation. As a matter of curiosity, I once read through the famous stanzas in Kalidasa’s *Sakuntalam* where Kanwa talks of his sadness at Sakuntala’s departure, in a number of Malayalam translations. Each was different in the stress laid on the various parts of the stanza. If I remember right, I read through some thirty five of them and each was different. So, obviously the translator mattered.

AMA: Do you think translators should be more equipped culturally than linguistically?

PJ: No, I do not think cultural facilities will make up for lack of linguistic proficiency. Your basic tool is the language and the skill with which you use it makes for the success or failure of your work. Of course you need to know the culture you are presenting to an outside world well. But, if badly expressed, it may not be understood at all and then what price is the cultural knowledge?

AMA: How does the political underpinning of the text influence the process of translation?

PJ: The political underpinning of the text does not really influence the process of translation except perhaps in the matter of choosing the text. One would not choose to translate a text that goes against one’s convictions, political or social. I’ll put it this way: I’m more likely to translate *Kanchanasita* than *Adhyatmaramayana*.

AMA: What ideological factors in translation motivated you as a translator to take up translation work?

PJ: No ideological factors influenced me in taking up translating. It was serendipity. It started with my holding forth about a character who attracted me and my friends wishing they could read the book. So, I

translated for them. It got published, again accidentally. And then it went on.

AMA: Have you ever tried translating poetry? If so, what are the major differences you find in translating prose and poetry?

PJ: Yes, I have tried translating poetry. The major difference is that poetry is very compact. And when you are translating someone like N.N. Kakkad, the knowledge and depth of understanding that have gone into the choice of a word is a challenge. And of course, untranslatable words are more in abundance in poetry. How would you translate 'achamanam'? The beat and the rhythm of the lines too make for difficulties. Good prose too has its rhythm and beat but in a poem it is very integral to the meaning and needs to be conveyed. But when you get it right, the satisfaction is proportionally great too.

AMA: Thank you very much for your time.

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This interview was conducted for research in Applied Linguistics (Translation Studies) under the guidance of Prof. Udaya Narayana Singh, Chair Professor and Dean, Faculty of Arts, Amity University, Haryana.

Ammu Maria Ashok holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and TESOL. A poet, translator, and academic, she has taught at several universities, sharing her expertise in language and literature. Her poetry and translations of short stories and poems have been featured in numerous anthologies, books, and digital platforms, including the prestigious Kerala Sahitya Akademi.

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