

Translation

Meena Kandasamy

Translation was always something I wrapped around whatever else seemed to be directing my life – it never quite took centre stage, never stayed with me long enough to become the only thing I did well. It never formed a part of my daily routine in a manner that would let me tease a coherent narrative out of it. It filled up every hour of the night in my late teen years when I translated the radical Tamil Dalit politician and activist Thol. Thirumavalavan into English. Like changing a channel to escape boredom or catastrophic news, I sought escape from the monotonous days of my PhD by doing translations of the Dravidian ideologue Periyar Ramasamy. Most recently, as I juggled teaching jobs, a toddler, an infant, cooking, running a home and writing an experimental novel, I found that translating the renowned Tamil novelist, Salma, was my paid holiday, my moment of reprieve, my escape and my distraction.

So, when I start this talk, and try to find a single narrative thread which will allow me to anchor how translation has helped me and nourished me in my journey as a writer, I find myself writing in fragments, in jumps and starts, mirroring the role that translation has taken in my life.

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At eighteen, I began my literary journey as a translator. I had composed a few poems, I had written one long lengthy diatribe admonishing VS Naipaul for his casteism, his racism, his colonial hangovers. I had an anonymous online blog, and at some point, around 2002, I volunteered to edit a little magazine called *The Dalit*, a 60-page bimonthly that sought to document atrocities as

well as chronicle the rich heritage of the anti-caste resistance. We published three issues before it hit the wall: problems with funding. My work with the magazine, as well as my parents' connections to anti-caste activists in Chennai, led me to meeting Thol. Thirumavalavan, founder-president of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal (Liberation Panthers), a social movement-turned-political party that fought for annihilation of the caste system. I subsequently decided to translate his work.

Translation, like publishing, in India is a Brahmin industry: only the highest castes end up being editors, commissioning editors, translators, interlocutors, publishers, gatekeepers, reviewers, critics, curators of literary festivals, moderators of discussion panels. Brahmins, the traditional priestly caste, occupied and covetously guarded the space of the nation's de facto intellectual class; a stranglehold that they still do not appear to be willing to loosen. Twenty years ago, the situation was worse. Every once in a thousand books, this tiny elite would decide to 'discover' an author from the marginalised communities, and their discourses would hover around how this work made the privileged communities feel and how educational it was – there would never be an engagement with the actual issues. Translating a subaltern political leader was a step towards militating against India's English-educated political elite, and a feeble attempt at disrupting a literary space that reeked of Brahmin domination.

As the inter-caste child of an anti-caste marriage between a lower caste woman and a nomadic tribal man, I defied easy classification. My presence in Indian literary space was at least a fraction as foreboding as the Dalit leader/author I was translating. This is where I learnt my first lesson in literary life: that we write into a silence of conspiracy, a silence that does not wish to engage with us. We emerge into a space which has not held us – a space bewildered that we, the marginalised, have managed to dismantle their structures enough to force an entry. How else could we explain the

absence of work in English to represent the histories of resistance to caste that have taken place in the Indian subcontinent for hundreds of years?

Just as the mere act of translating writers and speakers imbued with an aura of militancy became an act of laying claim to space, history, and power, my own writing followed a parallel trajectory. I translate and write into a space which has been denied, and which therefore does not exist. And because I write into a space where I will be greeted with silence instead of critical reception, I became a writer, I became a writer who has at the same time to theorise what she is writing.

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By the time my two works of translation of Thirumavalavan were done, I was twenty, and had also started writing a little here and there. I had envisaged translation and writing as inseparable, twin activities that would go hand in hand. I did not foresee that other people would view my translation background as a liability to my writing career.

Well-wishers would come to me at the end of meetings and tell me over unbearably sugary tea: You are very talented, put your talent into writing (as in: Do not translate). You need your own identity, only that will let you grow. Sometimes, they would explicitly say: Do not be his shadow. Don't you know that nothing grows in the shade of a tree? You will become a mouthpiece, or a microphone.

In his book, *The Translator's Invisibility*, translation theorist and historian Lawrence Venuti speaks of the invisibility of the translator as a co-producer of a text, the invisibility of the translator's activity within the text of the translation itself, and the invisibility of translation as a cultural practice. Those who were trying to save me from my life as a shadow were not translation theorists or academic scholars. They feared I would disappear. They feared I would be subsumed. Looking back, I think what they were asking me to do

was to retain my individuality, asking me to stake it out on my own.

When they said: Don't be his shadow, they actually meant, Show us your substance.

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Being a writer and a translator set me up for an intense internal conflict. This ghost that haunts writer-translators is nowhere as transparent as it is in my bibliography. When my fiction begins, there appears a big blank in my translations. In 2007-8, I started the research and fieldwork that would eventually lead in 2014 to the publication of my first novel, *The Gypsy Goddess*. I steered clear of accepting any fiction translation commissions until I had published that, my own novel.

What I had experienced earlier, even as a non-fiction/political translator, had taught me that I had to prove myself and my work; I had to prove that I was not a medium alone, I was my own person. The fear I had of embarking on translations of fictions from Tamil, even as I was trying to fashion my own identity as a fiction writer, was that I could be easily dismissed as someone who tells in English the stories that were (already) being told in Tamil. This quest to avoid a potential trap waiting for me, led me to fashion a voice and a style of my own: irreverent yet extremely self-aware of its aesthetics, artistry, ancestry.

I don't want to be mistaken for you, my writer self says to my translator self – and draws a demarcating boundary. My writer self partakes of every liberty that my translator self cannot access; it plays with form, it picks feuds, it is meta-fictional, it begins to own a voice that can work in one hybrid language alone – a Tamil woman's universe of English.

In escaping one curse, I run into the arms of another.

In creating a distinct voice and style, and in arriving by a process of titration in both poetry (exactitude + imagery) and in the essay (clarity of thought + making every sentence introduce an idea), I had arrived at my way to carry forward a story, I had found my feet in fiction writing. Little did I anticipate that this would loop back into my translation practice, and become an unreal, unnecessary expectation from others that would weigh upon me.

Recently, when I was commissioned to translate Salma's novel *Maanamiyangal (Women Dreaming)* into English, an editor specified that, 'The story must be Salma's, the language must be like yours in *Gypsy Goddess*.' I was taken aback, because I felt that such an exercise would not be a translation, it would be a fresh re-write. And that was unfair not only to me, but also to the Tamil writer involved.

No translator should overwhelm their author.

No author should enter another language, having lost their personality, reduced to a benign plot-generator.

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When I write in English, I labour twice as hard. I pay more attention to how my words sound off the page, because the rhythms of my ear are still attuned to Tamil, almost as a reflex. Writing in a second language allows me to be twice removed: once as a writer (standing out, writing in) and secondly, as someone highly conscious that this is not her mother tongue.

Writing my own work means starting at point zero, a blank page. Translating another's work (fiction, speeches, essays) is easier. It is like waking up in a lover's dream and inhabiting it. That universe has already been constructed. You go there, you are transfixed, you spend time finding

the right words to describe it. You do not decide what happens.

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What did I learn working between two languages: my mother tongue and the language in which I produce literature?

I learnt that one could have earned an MPhil unpacking the politics of gender in translation. That even the best dictionaries were inept when it came to capturing the language of the people, the language of resistance and counter-culture. That just as Dalit histories had been invisibilised, their language usages were never sanctified by the mainstream. I learnt that Tamil people's diglossia of Indian English and Tamil created a schizoid split. And when I translated fiction – entering the world of Muslim women in a small village in southern Tamil Nadu – I learnt that the vernacular and regional dialects were not the only ones not accorded dictionary status; so too was the Tamil language particular to the Muslims. That our best efforts at translation would render only so much visible, and yet so much would remain invisible – how could you explain that the feminine singular address is at times derogatory, and at other times, the height of intimacy, and that interpreting all of this depends on context, perhaps depends on being in the same room?

Although I've specialised in linguistics and translation studies, I could never enjoy the luxurious abandon of unpacking the sentence-level peculiarities and specificities between my two languages because the broader macro-level issues were so enormous, a procession of bedecked elephants in a room that no one really acknowledged.

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Looking back, I realise that I gravitated towards the writers I have translated because their politics captivated me: caste annihilation, women's liberation, the rights of self-determination. In turn, working with the words of these revolutionary leaders solidified my commitment to the politics, becoming the foundational basis on which my fiction and my poetry built themselves.

The revolutionary anti-caste tradition – Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, Thirumavalavan – continues to revolve around a rejection of patriarchy and has a rich tradition of challenging myths that perpetuate graded inequality and misogyny. Bhimrao Ambedkar – who drafted the Indian Constitution – also famously wrote *Riddles in Hinduism*, tearing down the caste-patriarchal myths of Hinduism. Periyar, the Dravidian ideologue, also dismantled myths and was known to propound Ravana, King of Lanka, as an alternative to the Aryan Hindu-masculine, Hindu nation-building Ram, in the *Ramayana*. Thirumavalavan tried to dismantle the shackles of patriarchy that portrayed Kannagi – the legendary Tamil woman at the centre of the Tamil epic *Silapathikaram* – as a symbol of chastity, instead revisiting her story to claim her as a symbol for militancy. As the translator of both Periyar and Thirumavalavan, I could see how they challenged mythology. However, their form was not for me. Within me, there was a coupling of these political influences and my own poetic influences (Anne Sexton doing *Transformations*, Carol Ann Duffy doing *The World's Wife*). These would become guiding lights for me as I wrote the poems in *Ms Militancy*, stripping away caste patriarchy through feminist poetry.

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As a translator, I become an annotator. Thirumavalavan's speeches are lined with mention of atrocities, but the place names, victim names, and back-

ground details are no longer common knowledge. Those speeches were historical chronicles, and translating as a teenager, it felt like an immense responsibility to write the annotations. This exercise set me onto something.

There is an essay, 'Must Venmani Be Fenced?' in the first collection of Thirumavalavan that I translate and annotate. It talks about the Kilvenmani massacre in which 44 Dalit men, women and children were burnt to death by landlords, while striking for higher wages, and challenges the attempt by Marxists to treat the memorial to it purely as their private property. His essay claims history for Dalits; it puts their militancy front and centre of the class struggle. As I piece together the names of the victims, as I follow the judicial horror (every landlord was acquitted) and the people's reaction to oppression, their revolt under caste-feudalism sows the seeds of what will become a seven-year quest to write my first novel. How do we write an atrocity aimed at obliterating a people? How do we put into words the cruelty of a social structure aimed at erasing Dalit people's memory, of even their militancy?

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I have outlined some of the political, linguistic and semantic-lexical influences of my translator self on my writer self. Somewhere buried inside me is an emotional footprint that I am too scared to unpack, undress. I am drawn into thinking of my first work of translation.

When we are working on the footnotes to our two books of translation, whenever an instance of a caste atrocity that involves sexual violence is under discussion, and where a rape has taken place, Thirumavalavan struggles to say the word. And they attacked her and then that, too. Or, they did that and then killed her. There were five policemen involved, and all of them

did that. Adhu. That. It is a 'that' with a long pause; a 'that' which he will not, does not utter by its name.

I think his silence comes from his deep shame and sadness and anger – but I also soon realise why someone as outspoken as him doesn't dignify this word by uttering it, why he fills that word with 'that' instead, why he lets me work out these blanks. To talk about male violence to a woman, someone much younger – in the shared solitude of a phone call – is a form of violence in itself and he wants no part of it, although he doesn't explicitly say any of this. Saying that word would spoil what we precious share: respect, a working relationship, and most of all, trust. To utter these words – even when the context demands – is to stand witness to a horror which divides us into man and woman, which strips away our roles as author and translator, as political leader and writer. To talk of rape divides us into one capable of rape, and one capable of being raped – and I can see why he has no intention to do that harm. This was an utterance that lay beyond the semantic, a speech act which on its own could be devastating.

Years later, when I would sit down to write about rape – my own in a violent marriage – I would think of this. The challenge of writing about 'that' in a society where there were men who raped, and men just shattered at the misogyny in our culture. I would think of Thirumavalavan's silence, and my act of translation. I would also think of the sheer violence of rape, and how it has always gone unspoken from the women's perspective, and I would bleed on the page struggling to retain my grace and dignity while writing about it.

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As I write the last lines of this talk, and how my themes appear to have branched into fractal fragments, I think of one of my most favourite chronicles of the translation process: Kate Briggs' book, *This Little Art*.

Perhaps this needs to be a book I think of at the end of a talk that appears to grow and grow endlessly – *Ravanan thalaipola* – as they would say in Tamil, referencing a ten-headed demon king of the Ramayana who would sprout new heads if any were severed.

The only way to capture this intricate relationship as a translator-writer is to start, and to finish by saying that translating affected me as an individual, transformed me in ways which I still cannot count, and this in turn left a deep imprint on who I became as a writer.

Meena Kandasamy

Meena Kandasamy is a poet, translator and writes fiction and essays. Her debut collection of poems, *Touch*, was themed around caste and untouchability, and her second, *Ms Militancy*, was an explosive, feminist retelling/reclaiming of Tamil and Hindu myths. Her critically acclaimed first (anti) novel, *The Gypsy Goddess*, smudged the line between powerful fiction and fearsome critique in narrating the 1968 massacre of 44 landless untouchable men, women and children striking for higher wages in the village of Kilvenmani, Tanjore.

Kandasamy's second novel, a work of auto-fiction, *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer As A Young Wife* (published by Atlantic Books) drew upon her own experience within an abusive marriage, to lift the veil on the silence that surrounds domestic violence and marital rape in modern India. It was selected as book of the year by several newspapers; and was

shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2018 among others. Her third novel, *Exquisite Cadavers*, was published by Atlantic Books in 2019. She has a PhD in sociolinguistics. Her work has appeared in 18 languages. She lives in East London. **www.kandasamy.co.uk**

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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