

ORIGINAL SIN

Kerala has an unmatched legacy in translation – to and from Malayalam – and often a translated literary work surpasses the original text in popularity. So, why are translators still not given their due?

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When attending workshops on translation, one is often confronted with questions that leaves one puzzled about the status of translators.

Are you an original writer or merely a translator? Why do you squander your time and energy translating others' works when you possess the creativity to produce original works? Unfortunately, notions that relegate translators' roles within the literary and academic spheres are prevalent, and it is only by knocking down these popular misconceptions that we can usher in an era that values and recognises translators as creative writers. Though Robert Frost remarked that "poetry is what gets lost in translation", there



is a comforting counterpoint: "what survives translation is poetry". Despite inherent academic and literary limitations, we still prefer to have translated works, as no one can master all the world's languages.

Also, while accepting that specific nuances may be lost, we continue to relish translations, as they serve as primary means of understanding the ways in which people worldwide lead their lives.

What sparked these thoughts in my mind is Dr Meena T Pillai's latest book, *Translating Kerala: The Cultural Turn in Translation Studies*, published by Orient BlackSwan, which I had the privilege of reading recently. The interdisciplinary work that carefully links the field of translation studies with cultural studies fosters critical discussions on topics ranging from translating marginal and gendered experiences to the politics of representation and the implications of translation as a political process. Pillai, in this volume, analyses the art and craft of translation by examining canonical literary texts as well as popular narratives. These include narratives by socio-political and literary figures like Nalini Jameela, CK Janu, Kamala Das, Ramu Kariat, MT Vasudevan Nair and Thakazhi. She extends her analysis by critically engaging with the Malayalam translations of the literary works of Garcia Marquez and Victor Hugo, contextualising them, and commenting on the socio-cultural realities of their publication.

Ours is a land of diversity, and the sustenance of this diversity is crucial to our unity. But of late, efforts to impose homogeneity under the slogan 'one language, one culture and one people' are increasingly threatening this unity. While, on the surface, they may seem innocuous, a deeper examination will expose their potential for inciting political fragmentation. In other words, imposing a monolithic culture and attributing superior status to a particular language corrode the unparalleled cultural diversity that India exemplifies. Against the backdrop of such disruptive attempts, the act of translation undertakes a crucial political purpose by ensuring cultural exchanges. It celebrates the plurality and diversity of our nation, which is integral for upholding constitutional values and

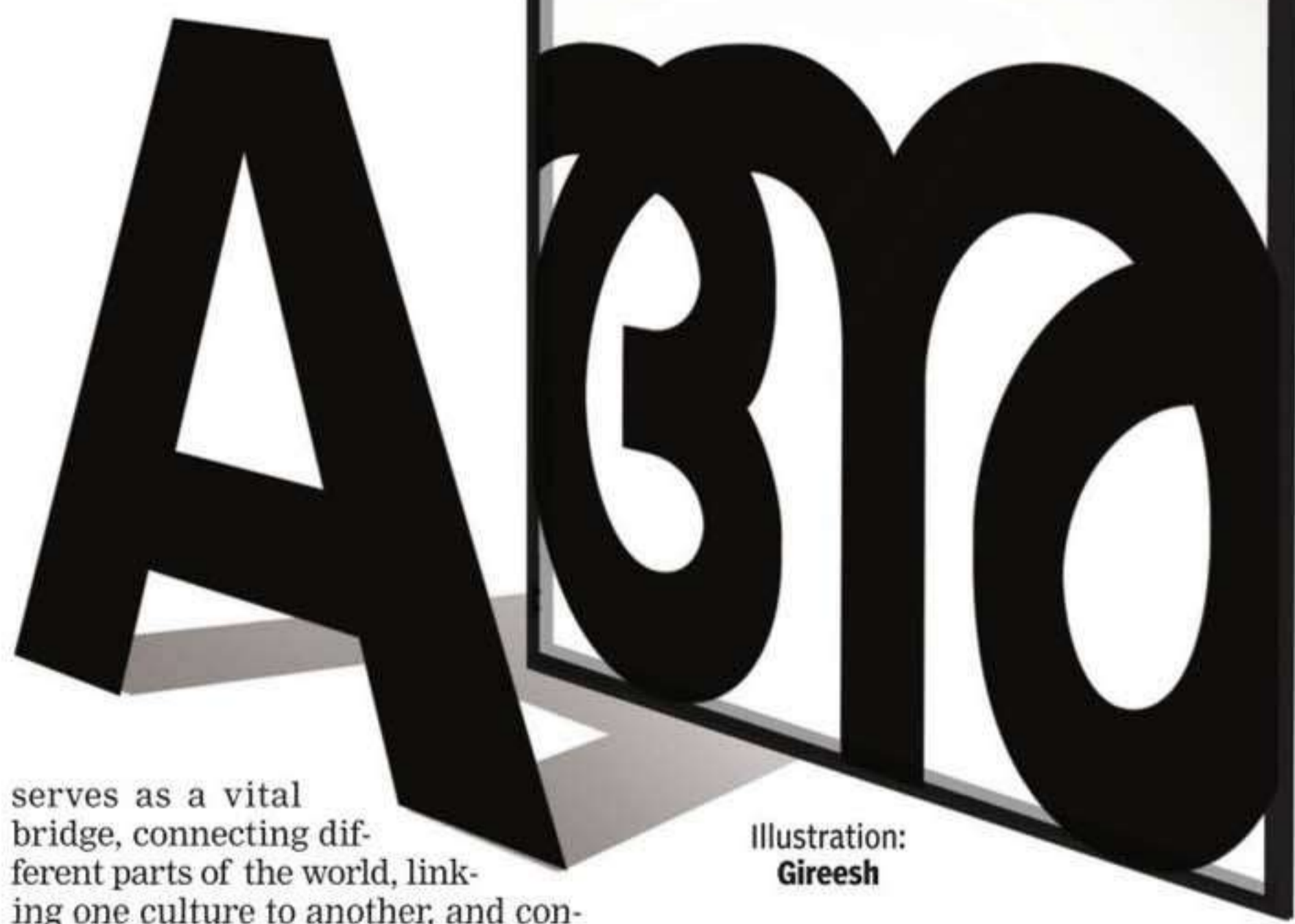


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serves as a vital bridge, connecting different parts of the world, linking one culture to another; and contributing to creating a global village.

The significance of Pillai's latest book lies in her attempt at recognising the politics of translation. By framing acts of translation as inherently political, a perception that liberates the practice and study of translation from the traditional framework of language and literature, she productively recontextualises it within the socio-cultural realities. For instance, in the chapter titled 'Gender and Translation,' Pillai problematises the absence of Malayalam translations of feminist literature. She takes it as a point of departure to hint at the public's 'covert fear' of feminist subversions and interrogates the hegemonic epistemological structures that eschew translating feminist critiques of patriarchal biases. In 'Translating the Subaltern', she delves into the politics of translating marginalised experiences, examining various mediations that shape the 'speaking subaltern subject.' In 'English and Postcolonial Translation', she further critiques the commodification of subaltern experiences and the increasing tendency of intellectuals to capitalise on them. Another chapter, 'Autobiography as Translation' analyses how cultural oscillation and re-centering of the self happens when one writes autobiographically across languages.

To return to the initial point, though translation is an essential means of cultural exchange and communication, translators often do not receive the recognition they deserve. Despite the emergence of translation studies as an academic discipline in many universities, translators still need to be considered for their creative capacities. Why is it so? This disparity clearly stems from the perception that translation is inferior to original writing. However, it is important to note that translators surpass original writers in certain aspects. While the original writer is a master of one language, a translator is proficient in at least two. This bilingual competence is complemented by a deeper understanding of the cultures reflected in the source and target languages. Since each language has its own linguistic and literary norms, which often differ in structure and style, trans-

lators frequently face syntactical and semantic challenges in replicating them in another language. In such cases, the quality of the translation largely hinges on the translator's passion, curiosity and clarity. If translated efficiently, a translated literary work can even surpass the original text in popularity.

Pillai's critical engagement with distinct acts of translation, revealing the politics mediating them, and her exploration of how translations cater to or question the needs of the target audience are significant in underscoring the role of translators in facilitating the journey of texts across languages and cultures. Her attempt at destabilizing the conventional hierarchy of the original text and its translation by delving into the ways in which translation helps broaden readerly sensibilities makes the volume an intellectually compelling read.

Contrary to common belief, Malayalam was the first Indian language to which Bhagavad Gita was translated from Sanskrit. Madhava Panicker, a member of the Niranam group of poets, accomplished this feat in the 14th century, predating the emergence of Ezhuthachan, who is regarded as the father of the Malayalam language. This significant literary feat was achieved even before Jnaneswar's Marathi translation of the Bhagavad Gita.

Now, the question is, is there any language in the world that does not have Shakespeare's works translated? Even in Malayalam, all 37 plays of Shakespeare have been translated, thanks to Dr K Ayyappa Panicker. Following his lead, K Sachidanandan recently translated Shakespeare's sonnets into Malayalam. Our language would have remained impoverished without the translated works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Can we imagine modern Malayali sensibility without the contributions of Albert Camus, Sartre, Pablo Neruda, and Gabriel García Márquez?

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