

Chasing the Spirit of Tamil Poetry in English: A Case Study of Kalamega Pulavar's *Thaththi Thā*

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Abstract:

The global recognition of many influential authors remains limited without the availability of translated works. Translation is crucial for the international dissemination and recognition of significant literary figures with distinct poetic voice beyond their original linguistic boundaries. The present study aims to demonstrate the spirit of Tamil poetry and profound difficulty of translating Tamil poetry into English. A case study conducted on Kalamega Pulavar's poetry revealed that the original ethos of Kalamega Pulavar's poems is consistently lost in translation since English language has a completely different phonetic and linguistic bases. Replicating the original meaning and poetic structure—specifically devices such as alliteration and meter—while retaining the precise double entendre of the source text is practically impossible.

Key words: assonance, alliteration, double entendre, translation unachievable

1. Introduction:

Tamil stands as one of the world's most enduring classical languages, a testament to linguistic continuity with attested inscriptions from around 300 BCE and a comprehensive literary archive extending across two millennia. The global recognition of many influential authors remains limited without the availability of translated works. Translation is crucial for the international dissemination and recognition of significant literary figures with distinct poetic voice beyond their original linguistic boundaries. Translating Tamil poetry ensures it becomes part of world's literary canon and academic study, enriching comparative literature and global literary history.

The present study aims to demonstrate the spirit of Tamil poetry and profound difficulty of translating Tamil poetry into English. English, with its different phonology and stress patterns, cannot replicate specific sound patterns. Recreating the original work's rhymes, meter, sound systems, and syntax in English, while maintaining the spirit and aesthetic coherence, is a complex creative act. While the core meaning can usually be conveyed through various strategies, not all text nuances can be preserved in a translated work.

Tamil poetry relies heavily on strict metrical structures (*chandam*), alliteration (*monai*), and assonance (*etukai*) that create a distinct "sweetness" or musicality (*suvaī*) to the ear. While numerous poets contribute to this rich tradition, the work of Kalamega Pulavar stands out for its unique blend of wit and acoustic pleasure. The scope of this investigation includes a specific poem authored by Kalamega Pulavar, which provides a compelling case study for understanding the stylistic innovations of 15th-century Tamil poetics.

தத்தித் தா தூதித் தாதூதித் தத்துதி

துத்தி துதைதி துதைந்ததா தூதி

தித்தித்த தித்தித்த தாதெது தித்தித்த

தெத்தா தோதித் தித்த தோ (Kesigan, 48)

Here is the transliteration of the poem "தத்தித் தா தூதி" by Kalamegha Pulavar into the English script using a common phonetic representation:

Thaththi thā thūthith thāthūthith thatthuthi
Thuththi thuthaithi thuthainthathā thūthi
Thiththiththa thiththiththa thāthethu thiththiththa
Theththā thōthith thiththa thō

Translating Tamil poetry that uses a series of words based on a single alphabet to create a musical quality presents extreme difficulties, primarily because of the underlying linguistic mechanism and cultural context are unique to Tamil and cannot be replicated in English. The poem highlights the poet's immense skill in wordplay. The meaning of the poem is "you go jumping and hopping from flower to flower, teasing the nectar. You squeeze the flowers to get the nectar to ooze out and drink it. You have tasted nectar from so many different flowers. Which of those flowers had the sweetest nectar? Tell me which one."

The repetitive use of the 'tha' and 'thi' creates a unique, rhythmic and musical quality almost mimicking the buzzing or hopping of the bee before the meaning is understood. The poet employs *siledai*, also known as *retturamozhithal*, a literary device equivalent to a double entendre. The poem's beauty lies in the fact that the same poem when interpreted as a message from a woman to her 'thuthi' or female friend carry a different, romantic meaning. Puns are language-specific, depending on homophones or polysemous words unique to Tamil. Since the English language has a completely different phonetic and lexical structure these linguistic bases simply vanish in a literal translation.

The core of this poetic device relies on the specific sound system of the Tamil language, including its unique array of consonants, and syllabic structure (*asai*). English has a very different phonology making it impossible to mimic the exact alliterative or single-alphabet sound pattern while maintaining the original meaning. The primary limitation of translating the poems of Kalamega Pulavar lies in his mastery of complex verbal acrobatics, specifically the extensive use of double entendre, puns and alliteration. Tamil words can be very concise and carry layered meanings, that is vital and constrained writing styles. English often requires more words to express the same idea, which further disrupts the tight structure and aesthetic of single-alphabet constraint.

The beauty and engagement for the reader in the original poem come from the auditory experience- the rhythm, flow, and internal music created by constrained use of single alphabet. This "music" is the essence of the poem's aesthetic form that may get entirely lost when words are changed into their English semantic equivalents, which will inevitably have different sounds and structures.

The translator faces a crucial dilemma whether to prioritize meaning. Translating the literal meaning will result in prose that loses its poetic structure and musicality entirely. Trying to force a similar single-alphabet constraint in English would result in forced translation that captures none of the original's elegance or natural flow. Moreover, word-for-word translation leads to a loss of meaning and impact, forcing the translator to kill the wit and musicality. While a translator can render the literal narrative or message of his poems in English, the inherent linguistic brilliance, the double meanings, and the musical beauty that define Kalamegha Pulavar's style are largely untranslatable. The translation as such may convey the semantic meaning but loses the acoustic pleasure of the original.

Though English lacks a direct, equivalent literary terms that encapsulate the specific musicality, depth and lyrical flow that is associated with Tamil, writing about Tamil poetry in English is valuable because it allows for analysis and appreciation of a unique literary aesthetic deeply rooted in it but largely unknown to new audience.

Bibiliography

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