

The Challenges And Opportunities of Translating Poetry: A Case Study of Aniketana by L.K. Ateeq

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Abstract

Translation is both an art and a challenge, especially when dealing with poetry. This study examines the complexities faced by translators, focusing on the English translation of the Kannada poem Aniketana by L.K. Ateeq. The analysis highlights the difficulties in preserving the essence, rhythm, and conveying the emotions of the original text. The process of converting a deeply rooted Kannada literary piece into English leads to inevitable compromises in meaning, tone, and philosophical references. Through a comparative analysis, this paper aims to showcase how translation, while bridging linguistic gaps, also transforms poetry in ways that may not always align with the poet's original vision.

ಓ! ನನ್ನ ಜೀತನ
ಆಗು ನೀ ಅನಿಕೇತನ ||
ರೂಪ ರೂಪಗಳನು ದಾಟಿ
ನಾಮ ಕೋಟಿಗಳನು ಮೀಟಿ
ಎದೆಯ ಬಿರಿಯ ಭಾವದೀಟಿ
ನೂರು ಮತದ ಹೊಟ್ಟು ತೂರಿ
ಎಲ್ಲ ತತ್ವದೆಲ್ಲ ಮೀರಿ
ನಿರ್ದಿಗಂತವಾಗಿ ಏರಿ
ಎಲ್ಲಿಯೂ ನಿಲ್ಲದಿರು
ಮನೆಯನೆಂದು ಕಟ್ಟದಿರು
ಕೊನೆಯನೆಂದು ಮುಟ್ಟದಿರು
ಓ! ಅನಂತವಾಗಿರು
ಅನಂತ ತಾನ್ ಅನಂತವಾಗಿ
ಆಗುತಿಹನೆ ನಿತ್ಯಯೋಗಿ
ಅನಂತ ನೀ ಅನಂತವಾಗು
ಆಗು ಆಗು ಆಗು ಆಗು

O my spirit be boundless
Go beyond the countless forms
Rise above the million names
Let a full heart inspire
O my spirit be boundless

Winnow the chaff of a hundred sects
Transcend the boundaries of all
philosophies
Rise and rise without direction
O my spirit be boundless

Do not rest anywhere
Do not build a nest
Do not reach the end
O become infinite
O my spirit be boundless

When infinite is your goal,
every day you become a seer
Infinite, you become infinite
O my spirit be boundless

A comparative textual analysis method was employed in this study, examining the original Kannada poem by Kuvempu and its English translation. Changes in structure, tone, and meaning were identified through side-by-side comparison. Specific instances of lost rhyme, altered metaphors, and shifts in philosophical depth illustrate the variations that emerge in translation.

The original Kannada line “ಓ ನನ್ನ ಚೇತನ, ಆಗು ನೀ ಅನಿಕೇತನ” retains a lyrical quality, with the words “chetana” and “aniketana” rhyming in Kannada. However, the English translation, “O my spirit, be boundless,” loses this effect. Additionally, “aniketana” encapsulates both “boundless” and “infinite,” which require nuanced interpretation in translation.

Similarly, the line “ನೂರು ಮತದ ಹೋಟ್ಟು ತೂರಿ, ಎಲ್ಲ ತತ್ವವೆಲ್ಲ ಮೀರಿ” translates literally to “Break through hundreds of religious beliefs, transcend all philosophies.” However, in English, it is rendered as “Winnow the chaff of a hundred sects, transcend the boundaries of all philosophies.” The metaphor of “winnowing chaff” introduces an agricultural reference that subtly alters the philosophical depth of the original line.

Another striking instance of transformation occurs in the line “ಎಲ್ಲಿಯೂ ನಿಲ್ಲದಿರು, ಮನೆಯನೆಂದೂ ಕಟ್ಟದಿರು, ಕೊನೆಯನೆಂದು ಮುಟ್ಟದಿರು” which, in a literal translation, means “Do not stop anywhere, do not build a house, do not reach the end.” The poet conveys a sense of boundless aspiration. However, in English, it becomes “Do not rest anywhere, do not build a nest, do not reach the end.” The phrase “do not build a nest” introduces a gentler, more metaphorical image, diluting the original forcefulness.

The Kannada phrase “ಅನಂತ ತಾನ್ ಅನಂತವಾಗಿ, ಆಗುತಿಹನೆ ನಿತ್ಯಯೋಗಿ” translates literally to “One who is infinite becomes infinite, thus becomes an eternal yogi,” while the English translation reads “When infinite is your goal, every day you become a seer.” The English version simplifies the idea and fails to retain the poetic fluidity and rhyme present in “anantavagi-yogi.”

The loss of repetition and emphasis also plays a significant role in altering the original impact. In Kannada, “ಆಗು, ಆಗು, ಆಗು” (Aagu, aagu, aagu – Become, become, become) intensifies the command, urging transformation. However, the English translation simply states “Become,” stripping away the forceful repetition and reducing the sense of urgency.

Metaphorical and philosophical nuances also undergo transformation. The Kannada phrase “ಎದೆಯ ಬಿರಿಯ ಭಾವ ಬೀಸಿ” (Edheya Biriya Bhava Bisi – “Let emotions burst from the heart”) carries a sense of intense emotional outburst, suggesting raw passion. In English, it is translated as “Let a full heart inspire,” which softens the imagery, shifting from an explosive emotional release to a gentler notion of inspiration.

Poetry translation offers readers access to poetic traditions outside their native languages, enriching their understanding of diverse literary styles and themes. Translators act as cultural mediators, capturing the essence of one language and reimagining it in another while preserving as much of the original tone and intent as possible.

However, many translators and poets have pointed out the lack of opportunities in poetry translation, both in terms of recognition and financial viability. Unlike prose or technical translation, poetry translation remains an undervalued domain, with limited institutional support and publishing avenues. Poet and translator Willis Barnstone highlights that poetry translation is often seen as an “invisible art,” where the translator’s effort is overshadowed by the original poet. Additionally, some argue that poetry’s deep-rooted cultural and linguistic nuances make it difficult to achieve a translation that satisfies both authenticity and readability, leading to skepticism about its commercial viability. This lack of opportunities discourages many from engaging in poetry translation, limiting the global reach of lesser-known poetic traditions.

The inherent challenges in translating poetry become evident through such examples, especially when dealing with texts deeply embedded in linguistic and cultural traditions. The analysis of



Aniketana demonstrates how translation can lead to the loss of rhyme, rhythm, and shifts in meaning. While translation enables cross-cultural literary exchange, it also transforms the original in ways that may not always align with the poet's intent.

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