



## **Politics of Translation of Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam: A Paratextual Study of the "First" Translation into Malayalam**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper attempts to understand the politics involved in the first translations of *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam. Prior to the genre of drama which was a late development, visual art performances like Kathakali, Koothu, Thullal, etc were the objects of appreciation and literary involvement of the Malayalee audience. The inception of the Sangeetanatakas into the Kerala land brought in many changes in the aesthetics of the Malayalee literati. With the translation of *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam, there was a revoked interest in the literary interest of the Malayalee audience. With numerous translations of *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam, some within the same time frame, there emerged a contestation in which work to be considered as the first translation and who was the author to first translate the globally acclaimed Sanskrit text into Malayalam. In this context of the contestation and debates existing around the first translations and the 'ascribed' first translation the paper examines the politics by employing paratextual study of the translations.

### **KEYWORDS**

First translation, *Sakuntalam*, paratextual elements, question of language, titles of text, Bhashanayam, Literary historiography.

## INTRODUCTION

Kalidasa is one of the greatest writers and finest dramatists of all time that India has ever produced. His dramas and epics have always been a source of wonder and amazement for the global literary world. *Abhijnanashakuntalam* of Kalidasa is hailed as the greatest literary masterpieces across the world. Swami Tathagatananda in his article ‘Abhijnana Sakuntalam “A Wonder Coming From A Land Of Wonders’ in the journal Vedanta Society of New York (2010) quotes the English translation by E.B Eastwick (1791) of Goethe’s words of appreciation for *Sakuntalam* as,

Wouldst thou the young year’s blossoms and the fruits of its decline  
And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured, feasted, fed,  
Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself in one sole name combine?  
I name thee, O *Sakuntala!* And all at once is said (p. 6)

The fame and name earned by this classic was so widespread globally that after William Jones translation of *Sakuntalam* into English in 1798, there were 46 translations of the drama into different foreign languages. Similarly, in the Indian languages, Malayalam too attempted the translation of Kalidasa’s *Sakuntalam* which kickstarted a proper genre of Malayalam drama which was until then occupied by the literary art forms like Kathakali, Koothu, Thullal etc. But now, as we try to trace the trajectory of the events, it is noticed that there are certain gaps or confusion among the literati regarding the translation of *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam. Thus, this paper attempts to study the politics surrounding the concept of translation and the question of language raised in the “first” translation of Kalidasa’s *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam by looking at its paratextual elements.

### **The Politics of Translation – An Examination**

As already discussed in the Introduction, the fame earned by Kalidasa and his literary works, especially *Abhijnanasakuntalam* cannot be confined only to the Indian subcontinent as it surpasses the geographical boundaries traversing across the globe, introduced by the translation of William Jones in 1789 (Figueira, 1990). Many translations followed thereafter in world languages and The Complete Review- a literary saloon reviews Figueira’s *Translating The Orient* (1991) and quotes “Kalidasa’s play, *Sakuntala*, was eagerly embraced by the Western world when it first reached Europe, acclaimed as a work that belonged in the pantheon of World literature and seen

as a proof that the Greek and Western tradition of drama was not the only one that could create a masterpiece.” (The Complete Review, 2004).

Parallel to the translations that took place, several discussions and critical studies emerged among the scholars on Kalidasa’s *Sakuntala*, among which Figueira (1991), examines the “emplotment of India in the Western literary imagination. Basing her discussion on the reception of an emblematic Sanskrit text, Kalidasa’s *Sakuntala*, Figueira studies how and why this text was distorted in translation, criticism and adaptation, and isolates the linguistic errors and cultural distortions that can be grouped into trends and patterns”(you must provide page number here).

Similarly, in the Indian context I would like to mention about Romila Thapar’s book *Sakuntala : Texts , Readings, Histories* published in 1999, which discusses in a systematic way the interactions between literature and history, culture and gender, that frame the development of this canonical figure. But my paper focusses only at the issues that are raised in the “first” available Malayalam translations of *Abhijnanasakuntala* by analyzing the paratexts, rather than delving more into the content of the translations.

As part of a project undertaken during my research, to study how Kalidasa was received by the Malayalee literati in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, data was collected from a number of sources like NTM ( National Translation Mission), NMM (National Mission for Manuscripts), Kritisampada database, bibliographies of K.M Govi, Satya Pal Narang and extensive field work to some of the major libraries in Kerala especially the Oriental Research Institute and Manuscripts Library (ORIML) in Trivandrum. Surprisingly, the study showed that, there was an evident readership sensibility shift that happened among the Malayalee literati towards the literary works of Kalidasa, in manuscript and print form. Literary works of Kalidasa that were popular or widely written down in manuscript material found in Kerala, like *Raghuvamsa* and *Kumarasambhava* were very few in number in print and works like *Meghaduta*, *Ritusamhara*, *Malavikagnimitra* and especially *Abhijnanasakuntala* which were found to be few in manuscript material experienced larger readership in print. Also, it was interesting to note that, Kalidasa’s plays were never performed in classical art forms like Koothu, Koodiyattom, Thullal or Attakatha whereas, Bhasa’s plays were performed then for the Malayalee audience. Surprisingly, when Kalidasa’s plays became popular among the Malayalee literati, Bhasa’s palm leaf codex plays were discovered from

Trivandrum only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by T.Ganapati Sastri , editor of Trivandrum Sanskrit Series (TSS) books .

In this backdrop, tracing the trajectory of how the genre of Malayalam drama germinated, evolved and developed into what the Malayalee audience perceive today, takes us to its precursors of visual art forms- both classical (Koothu, Koodiyattom, Thullal, Attakatha, Kathakali etc) and folk (Theyyam, Thira, Mudi yettu, Padayani etc. In the *History of Malayalam Literature*, P.K. Parameswaran Nair (translated from Malayalam into English by E.M.J. Venniyoor) notes that drama or stage was a late development in Malayalam. He says, drama which is an important part in any literature has not been referred to until it comes down to a contemporary phase. The reason the writer cites is that there was no drama worth the name until about three quarters of a century ago.

Even though there was Koodiyattom (the staging of Sanskrit plays) since very early times, the Krishnanattam and Kathakali, these art –forms could not be brought under the category of drama. The one explanation that the writer gives for the sad neglect of the stage is the attitude of the poets who showed immense interest towards Kathakali that deprived them from looking into any other dramatic forms. The repertoire of Sanskrit was always before them and even though they were not averse to translating, adapting and imitating a great part of its literature, they left drama alone for the sole reason that they found Kathakali more to their liking.

But the breakthrough that embarked the path of development of the genre of Malayalam drama was the translation of Kalidasa’s Sanskrit play *Abhijnanasakuntala* into Malayalam by Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Tampuran as *Keraleeya Bhashasakuntalam* in 1883. It is surprising to note that until 1883, the Malayalee literati never felt the lacuna of having the genre of drama. There are major possibilities that the existence of the visual art performances was one of the reasons for the late development of the genre in Malayalam. The influence of Tamil musical drama troupe, musical plays, patronage offered by the royal family of Travancore etc. added impetus to the development of Malayalam drama.

With Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Tampuran’s translation, triggered many translations, as noted by M.N.R.Rajan in his article ‘Samskritha Natakangalude Malayala Paribhaashakal’, gives the list of a few prominent translations of *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam from Sanskrit, like Kottarathil Sankunni’s *Abhijnanasakuntalam Gadyam* (1896), Kodungalloor Kunjikuttan

Tampuran's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (1896), P.G Ramayya's *Bhashasakuntalam* (1903), Eruveyil M. Chakrapani Variyar's *Sangeetasakuntalam* (1901), P.S Varier's *Sangeetasakuntalam* (1910), Attukal Govinda Pillai's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (1914), M.R.VeluPilla Sastri's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (1933), Attoor Krishna Pisharody's *Kerala Sakuntalam* (1936), Vallathol Narayana Menon's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (1936) and many more translations. From my field work undertaken until now, I have come across eighty-four translations of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* into Malayalam. The translations also paved way for the emergence of independent plays being written and staged in Malayalam.

In their article 'Introduction to the Paratext', Genette and Maclean (1991) discuss about peritext and epitext that form the paratext, and opine that the paratexts act as a tool of enquiry and in understanding the text and the context in which it gets placed or situated. This paper focusses on the issues that the paratextual readings of Ayilyam Tirunal Ramavarma's *Bhasha Sakuntalam* (1883), Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Tampuran's *Keraleeya Bhasha Sakuntalam* (1883) and its revisions, and A.R Rajaraja Varma's *Malayala Sakuntalam* (1912) raise throughout in their peritext and epitext. The question of prose v/s poetry and that of language raised in these paratexts of the 'first' available translations of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* helps to understand the sensibility of the Malayalee literati towards the concept of translation, genre of drama and especially that of *Abhijnanasakuntala* during those times.

Since the genre of drama was a late development in Malayalam, and its inception is marked by the translation of *Sakuntalam*, a contestation already loomed over the critical space of enquiry regarding which was the "first" translation of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* into Malayalam. Many scholars like M.N Rajan, Vayala Vasudevan Pillai, Erumeli Parameswaran Pillai opine that it was Ayilyam Tirunal Ramavarma, who first translated *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam. A.D. Harisarma in his preface to the translated text remarks, Ayilyam Tirunal who was then the king of Travancore had already translated Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* as *Bhasha Sakuntalam* in 1853 (M.E 1028). He further adds that, usage of prose as a style of translating a Sanskrit text into Malayalam during that time is in itself appreciable because the genre of prose was then not developed in Malayalam. In the paratext of Kerala Varma's *Manipravala Sakuntalam* (4,5 *Ankangal*), the Preface (*Avatarika*) by A.D Harisarma states that Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Tampuran who was friend and cousin of Ayilyam Tirunal began translating *Sakuntalam* in chunks for the *Vidya Vilasini* magazine that had 14 issues since May-June of 1881 to June –July of 1882 and later with minor changes, Kerala

Varma publishes it in book form as *Keraleeya Bhasha Sakuntalam* around 1883. And around the same time, he brings out Ayilyam Tirunal's translation of *Sakuntalam* posthumously.

However, in his *Sampoorna Malayala Charitram* Panmana Ramachandran Nair emphasizes the opinion of Ulloor who states that, Kerala Varma's translation is the first translation of *Sakuntalam* and Ayilyam Tirunal's translation cannot be counted as first because of it being a 'prose translation'. Thus, the question of form/ style being a deciding factor for a translation to take place reflects the sensibility that the Malayalee literati consisting of literary scholars, critics, target readers had towards language during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. And, in the midst of the debate, Erumeli refers to A.D.Harisarma's finding that Velutteri Kesavan Vaidyan has translated *Sakuntalam* as *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* prior to Kerala Varma and has staged it as well. Similar to the remarks made by Erumeli, Beatrice Alexis in his article refers to A. Govindapillai's *Malayala Bhasha Charitram* published in 1881, which also states that Velutteri Kesavan Vaidyan's translation of *Sakuntalam* was prior to the translations of Ayilyam Tirunal as well as Kerala Varma, but the translation has been lost. Apparently, there are no clues regarding the style or form in which Velutteri had translated; some critics even doubt whether the translation was an oral translation. Thus, it is not actually the contestation of authorship that seeks attention in the first place, but an impending interplay that underlies within the sensibility of the Malayalee literati then itself in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding form and style to be used while translating texts.

In the paratext that appears along with *Abhijnanasakuntalam (Manipravala Sakuntalam)* of Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Tampuran, the publishers have attached a dedication attested by Kerala Varma in 1881 and 1882 to the translations he had submitted to Vidya Vilasini magazine which states his dilemma over the concept of translation. He opines that, Monier Williams who has wonderfully translated Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* literally for phrase for phrase and shloka for shloka conducive to the metrical patterns available in English language translating into Malayalam becomes difficult due to distinct metrical patterns and syntactic structures.

Moreover, he opines that it is difficult to bring the essence (rasa) that Williams brought in his English translation without any loss in Malayalam. So precisely speaking, in the paratext, Kerala Varma raises the metaphor of apparel to compare content and language. In his concept of translation, dressing up an English translation (where content is body and language is the apparel)

exactly into a Malayalam translation (again, where content is body and language is the apparel) is difficult and hence language and content diverge. Apparently, this statement of Kerala Varma regarding the concept of translation goes against the theory that form and content cannot be separated. So, the paratext also raises the question of the politics behind the concept of translation that operates within the target language.

The questions that language raises during the study of paratexts is that of the title -changing over a period of time, of the same text by the same translator as well as other translators and that of the revisions that has happened to Kerala Varma's translation.

The translation of *Sakuntalam*, by Ayilyam Tirunal was titled *Bhasha Sakuntalam* but never published. Later, Kerala Varma started translating it in chunks for *Vidya Vilasini* magazine under the name of *Keraleeya Bhasha Sakuntalam* and it was first published with the same title in 1883. Later, when a language issue arose among the Malayalee literati regarding the translation, the text was revised by A.R. Rajaraja Varma but still published with the same title. Still, the linguistic issues were not resolved and the translator, Kerala Varma himself, inspite of his poor health had to dismiss the former translation and bring a revised new translation. But this time, the translation was named as *Manipravala Sakuntalam*, published in 1912. The same year also witnessed another major translation by A.R. Rajaraja Varma as *Malayala Sakuntalam*. Thus, the movement is worth tracing. The change from *Bhasha Sakuntalam* to *Keraleeya Bhasha Sakuntalam* and then to *Manipravala Sakuntalam* over a period of time hints to the inner dilemma of the translators to appropriate the Sanskrit text *Sakuntalam* into Malayalam and to place it as a personal pride.

Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Tampuran's translation of *Sakuntalam* as *Keraleeya Bhasha Sakuntalam* begins with its publication for the 14 issues of the *Vidya Vilasini* magazine since May – June of 1881 until June –July of 1882. *Vidya Vilasini* was a magazine that was published in 1056 M.E (1881) under the patronage of Visakhama Tirunal Maharaja and Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Tampuran. Later, with minor changes, Kerala Varma publishes it in book form in 1883 (1058 M.E) as *Keraleeya Bhasha Sakuntalam* from Keralavilasam press.

R. Gopinathan in his Preface to *Abhijnanasakuntalam- Kathirum Pathirum Chikayumbol*, observes that, after Kerala Varma published *Keraleeya Bhasha Sakuntalam* in 1883, it was still reprinted until 1910. After its publication, the translated text was staged in many places and with

annotations by Ambalappuzha Krishna Sharma, the text was taught in schools somewhere between 1883 and 1910, because it was around 1910, that A.R. Rajaraja Varma had to come up with a revised version of the translation of Kerala Varma, since there was a debate brewing among the literary scholars and critics of Malayalam over the “highly Sanskritized language” used by Kerala Varma in his translation, for the non- Sanskritized Malayalee literati. Even though the revised version was published, it suffered more criticism on the hands of critics who claimed that, the revised version by A.R. ruined the literary craftsmanship of Kerala Varma and still there was no improvement in the highly Sanskritized language used. Thus, Kerala Varma was forced to dismiss the revised translation of A.R. and bring a new translation of *Keraleeya Bhasha Sakuntalam* in 1912 as *Manipravala Sakuntalam*. It was in this same year that, A.R. Rajaraja Varma brought out his translation of *Sakuntalam* as *Malayala Sakuntalam*.

## Conclusion

As we try to collect and bind our understanding of the contestations and the politics, we can come to a handful of conclusions which would definitely need more research to form a full circle. Still, from the cues we have understood until now, it is important to understand that the adjectives or prefix attached to the titles of the translations in itself reflects on the sensibility that the Malayalee literati had towards the use of language and concept of translation. The revisions exercised on the translation of Kerala Varma’s translation also emphasize the role of language and its usage in non Sanskritized Malayalee literati. Adding to this issue or question of the concept of translation, R .Gopinathan in his Introduction to *Abhijnanasakuntalam Malayalathil (Kathirum Pathirum Chikayumbol)*, a research study states that, P.G. Ramayyar’s translation of *Sakuntalam* in 1903, as *Bhasha Sakuntalam* is the first translation to conform to the “Malayala Bhashanayam” or Malayalam language practice that is appropriate to the target readers unlike the highly Sanskritized language used by Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Tampuran and in their translations. The question of language, in regard to what kind of a language is appropriate to be used while translating a Sanskrit text into Malayalam, especially in the genre of drama for non –Sanskritized Malayalee literati, is of interest.

Thus, the paratexts point out the interest that Malayalee audience showed towards discussing the form or style to be used while translation, the use of language in the epitext (title) and also in conducting linguistic revisions for a text after almost 27 years (1883-1910). The



paratext provides interesting insights into how the Malayalee literati looked at the genre of drama and the allied elements that constituted its translations. It impinges on researchers to delve more into the undercurrents of what kind of a sensibility operated among the Malayalee audience in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century towards Kalidasa and his literary works.

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