CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of the word "translation" is described in The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary as the act of turning words, sentences or books from one language into another, or, expressing the sense of something in another form of words.

Collins English Dictionary gives a secondary meaning that reads: transfer from one place or position to another. J. Hillis Miller defines "translation":

"Translation": the word means, etymologically, "carried from one place to another," transported across the borders between one language and another, one country and another, one culture and another. This, of course, echoes the etymology of metaphor. A translation is a species of extended metaphorical equivalent in another language of an "original" text. The German words for "translation" mean the same thing: Übertragung, Ubersetzung, "carried over" and "get over," as though what is written in one language were picked up, carried over and set down in another place (Miller, 1996: 207).

Translation is as old as creative writing itself. However, with the arrival of the printing press when books began to be produced with the byline of the author defining him as the sole proprietor of the text, the concept of the original being superior to the translated text, especially in the domain of creative writing, took root in the West. However, this way of looking at things has now changed there.
The original is not seen as superior to the translated text any more. The gains made by the original text in translation are acknowledged now more, rather than the classical concept of loss in translation. Gabriel Garcia Marquez openly conceded once that the English translation of his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was certainly richer than its original in linguistic and semiotic qualities. In India, however, even now translation is viewed as a secondary activity and translators as inferior to creative writers, presumably by the continuation of the earlier influence of the West regarding in this regard. However, this was not the case in olden times. Traditionally, Indians have always accepted translation as a creative activity. No one would dream of calling great poets like Kamban, Pampa, Kumara Vyasa, Ezhuttachan, Tulasidas, Chaitanya, Sarala Das and others as translators because they have retold the great epics in their respective regional languages, even developing these languages in the process.

Now translation is seen in the proper perspective: as a re-composition of the text in another language whose qualities are different from those of the original, in which the translator is looking for parallel expressions rather than exact equivalents. In his pioneering essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin comes out with rare insights on translation, which the post-structuralists have developed further. Benjamin writes on "translatability":

Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability. It is plausible that no translation, however good it
may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life, as from its afterlife. For, a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history...(Benjamin, 71-72).

Benjamin goes on to say that translation ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. From here, he defines the “pure language” that is at the root of all languages of the world, in his cabalistic perception. And he sets the task for the translator “to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work (Benjamin, 80).

“Benjamin’s formulations evoked further theorisations by eminent theorists like Paul De Man and Jacques Derrida. Says Tejaswini Niranjana:

Benjamin suggests that translation expresses the kinship between languages; it does not necessarily follow that translation is, “a
relation from language to language.” In indicating that the translator is not trying to say anything, de Man cuts us off from a possible way of explaining a particular translator’s interpretative choices. To put it somewhat differently, in making translation a relation of language to language, de Man may be preempting any attempt to bring the political or historical dimension into a discussion of translation. Instead, he will suggest, as he does at the end of his essay, that politics in Benjamin actually means poetics.

Surprisingly, de Man seems to have ignored, in the previous paragraph of Benjamin’s text, the insistence of the notion of afterlife.... It is in passages like this one about “living on” that Benjamin seems to be circling around what would later become a major concern: a new kind of historiography, modelled after the translation process, that incorporates the critique of representation as well as a desire to engage “the present.” Benjamin’s concern with history’s being able to comprehend “nature” is part of a powerful critique of origins that also contributes to his thinking on translation (Niranjana, 129).

After examining Paul de Man’s positions, Derrida’s approach to Benjamin’s formulations is next examined by Tejaswini Niranjana. In his essay “Des Tours de Babel,” Derrida is providing (according to the editor of the volume, A Derrida Treader: Between the Lines) a kind of “prologue to an extended analysis of the influential essay by the German thinker Walter Benjamin, “The Task of
the Translator.’ There, the relations between translation and the proper name, indebtedness, the sacred text, the law are explored through Benjamin’s language. Derrida asserts that what he is doing thereby is translating “in my own way the translation of another text on translation.” This description not only recalls that reading and writing are first of all versions of translation, but it signals as well the limits on any theory of translation. “No theorization,” writes Derrida, “inasmuch as it is produced in a language, will be able to dominate the Babelian performance (p.243).” Derrida opens the excerpt of the essay thus:

“Babel”: first a proper name, granted. But when we say “Babel” today, do we know what we are meaning? Do we know whom? If we consider the survival of a text that is a legacy, the recit or the myth of Babel, it does not constitute just one figure among others. Telling at least of the inadequation of one tongue to another, for one place in the encyclopaedia to another, of language to itself and to meaning, and so forth, it also tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us. In this sense it would be the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on….

The “tower of Babel” does not figure merely the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalising, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and
architectonics. What the multiplicity of idioms actually limits is not only a “true” translation, a transparent and adequate interexpression; it is also a structural order, a coherence of construct. There is then (let us translate) something like an internal limit to formalization, an incompleteness of the construct. It would be easy and up to a certain point justified to see there the translation of a system in deconstruction (Derrida 1991: 244).

The translator into English of Derrida’s essay, Joseph F. Graham, proposes that the title “can be read in various ways.” Des means “some;” but it also means, “of the;” “from the;” or “about the.” Tours could be towers, twists, tricks, turns, or tropes, as in a “turn” of phrase. “Taken together, des and tours have the same sound as detour, the word for detour. The economy of language here points to a possible strategic economy of translation” (Niranjana, 143). Tejaswini Niranjana feels also that Derrida began his essay on Benjamin with a detour that is a parable of a tour, in homage to a kindred soul who works through detours and secret paths, through translations into parables.

Continues Tejaswini Niranjana:

The myth of Babel, in short, crystallises a number of Derrida’s preoccupations over the years into what Benjamin would call a “monad.” The concern with the myth of adequatio and the nostalgia for presence, with an always already deferred and divided origin, with phallogocentrism and the name of the Father with difference—these “themes” of deconstruction come together in the
name of this tower that never was. In fact, Babel is the name of *difference*, "the movement by which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes ‘historically’ constituted as a fabric of differences." *Difference* with its silent *a*, refers to "differing, *both* as spacing/temporalising and as the movement that structures every dissociation." It speaks therefore of what Derrida would call the possibility-impossibility of translation....

The Babelian performance, says Derrida, could serve as an introduction to the problematic of translation. It is a problematic that he would place at the heart of metaphysics; for the notion of the transcendental signified, which is at the “origin” of philosophy, takes shape “within the horizon of an absolutely pure, transparent, and unequivocal translatability.” Derrida has often suggested that the programme of translation is the passage into philosophy. The notion of translatability in the common sense, “as the transfer of a meaning or truth from one language to another without any essential harm being done,” is the “thesis of philosophy,” which finds itself defeated when it is unable to “master a word meaning two things at the same time.” Hence the importance of *das Gift* and of the *pharmakon* (both remedy and poison) in Derrida’s work of deconstruction. Hence the significance of translation, and the attention paid to Benjamin’s writing (Niranjana, 143-145).

From the above, we come to gather that Translation Studies, confined to the
department of comparative literature until a couple of decades or so ago, now forms part of literary and cultural theory. Colonialism, post-coloniality, literary history, semiology, and deconstruction are seen now linked to translation as illustrated above. Without being limited merely to literary texts, translation is seen as a cultural activity involving cultural codes. The asymmetrical relationships between cultures encoded in literary texts are foregrounded by post-colonial perspectives. Placing translation in the context of post-coloniality and post-structuralist theory, Tejaswini Niranjana posits:

The problematic of translation exists uneasily on the interface between the post-colonial context and post-structuralist theory. For some, this is also a version of the decolonisation debate, and to use “Western” theory in deconstructing colonial texts is to reproduce the conditions of neocolonialism. This attitude, which can be seen to be part of a nativist discourse, seems to me to deny history in at least two ways: first, in arguing for a return to a lost purity, it not only employs a discredited realist epistemology but also ignores the pervasiveness of a colonial violence that renders impossible even the positing of a mythical uncontaminated space; second, in denouncing post-structuralism as “Western,” the nativist does not realise the extent to which anti-colonial struggles have intervened in changing the trajectory of “Western” thought by demanding a nonexploitative recognition of difference. To accept the need for “theory” in the post-colonial setting is not to accept uncritically the
totalising narrative of global capitalism but to make the best use we can of the tools available for deconstructing that narrative and showing the infinitely varied inflections of the post-colonial condition.... Post-structuralism's attempt...to dismantle the hegemonic West from within is congruent with post-colonial praxis (Niranjana, 171).

Translation is at the very centre of all human activities. According to Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi:

Translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems (Bassnet and Trivedi, 1999: 2).

Cultural and linguistic problems thrown up by translation of a literary text are to be seen in the context of such a complex situation. When a work of fiction in an Indian language is translated into English, a great deal of culture-specific terminology and situations escape the comprehension of the target language reader. For example, the idea of prolonged courtship between lovers in a rural setting, in which physical intimacy is absent, and is often frowned upon by elders, bewilders a modern Western reader. Any number of explanatory notes will not be
able to bridge the communication gap between the Source Language text and the Target Language text in such a situation. Likewise, the linguistic peculiarities of the source language may not have any ready correspondence with the target language. Faithful translation becomes very difficult in this case. Untranslatable words, phrases or terminology, or dialectical variants would again leave gaps in the TL text. In any case, communication of the flavour of speech in a dialect, especially rural, in another language, is certainly impossible. These are some of the problems to be addressed in this study.

Malayalam has developed a rich literature, especially since the latter part of the nineteenth century. Its modern fiction, especially short fiction, readily ranks with similar fiction anywhere in the world in complexity and formal sophistication. Translation of modern Malayalam fiction into English has been gathering momentum, especially since the nineteen sixties, and grabbing national and international attention since the eighties. Translation of contemporary Malayalam literature into English raises a number of problems that can be broadly classified as linguistic and cultural.

The history of modern Malayalam fiction begins with the introduction into Malayalam of the novel and the short story in their Western forms, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The introduction of modern European philosophical and psychological insights into Malayalam, from the late twenties to the early fifties of the twentieth century, critically influenced modernist Malayalam fiction. Along with this, important works of French and Russian masters, like Dumas, Maupassant, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as well as the works of Marx and
Freud were translated into Malayalam. An encounter with these modern classics in translation widened the horizons of literary sensibility in Malayalam. The modernist and post-modernist trends found in Malayalam fiction are traceable to the increasing Western influence on thinking, education system and lifestyle in Kerala. Writers in European languages, for example, Kafka, Camus, Sartre and Beckett in the former period and the Neo-Marxists and post-structuralists in the latter period, besides other major writers of the world, like Latin American writers, introduced via the English language, have exerted their influence on Malayalam literature during the last couple of decades of the twentieth century. From much earlier on, the role of the Malayalam Bible had been considerable in shaping the idiom of modern fiction in Malayalam: prominent contemporary writers with Christian backgrounds, like Kakkanadan, Paul Zacharia, Sarah Joseph, Thomas Joseph and so on, sometimes use a language heavily loaded with Biblical resonances. Thus, cross-cultural experiences in modern Malayalam fiction place it in a larger frame of reference and processes of translation have historically played a prominent role in it. Translating such texts into English presents a very complex situation.

Literary translation in a post-colonial context poses specific challenges. In the first place, the text in the target language should not be appropriated by the target language culture as its own. This leaves the translator with the need to invent a form of expression replete with the cultural resonances of the source language. The other extreme to appropriation lies in the processes of ethnicisation, that confine the translated work to a particular ethnic group/groups in the target language culture/community. The translator is thus faced with the need to ensure
communicability on the one hand, while resisting cultural appropriation on the other.

Strategies to forge alliances with sub-cultures in the culture of the target language may lend relevance to the translation and ensure its contemporaneity. This may aid in saving the text in the target language from being blandly dressed in a characterless, literal idiom. Political/religious subtexts in the S L text would need to be conserved in translation and often this may involve inventing strategies for creating similar subtexts in the translated texts.

Questions of free translation and literal translation also are relevant in the study. Literal translation may generally pose problems of communication to the readers of the target language. But it helps in preserving the identity of the S L text. Appropriation becomes more difficult in the case of literal translations. However, free translation makes it convenient for the target language readers to understand the work, but this may be on their own terms. Authorial authority could be usurped here. There is a need to interrogate these processes in relation to aspects of cultural politics.

The choice of target language is an important factor in the post-colonial context. Using the language of the centre will put the context in the target language in a political frame that may be dislocated in historical terms; it would be most appropriate if the translation is done in the language of the periphery, or, the language developed in the erstwhile colony.

Questions of power inherent in the process of translation are also looked into. In the first place, the translator is, in a way, subverting authorial authority,
especially in a free translation. What the original author accomplishes in the S L text is changed into something different in the T L text, through the intervention of the target language and culture. The translator is also the authority that decides what the reader of the T L text should read. It is possible that the translator may resort to suppression, partial elimination or misinterpretation of elements or aspects of the S L text. Attempts on the part of the original author to get to the reader of the T L text, as illustrated in Milan Kundera's introduction to the translation of his work, *The Joke*, will also need to be studied. This would take us to the questions of authenticity and authorial authority over the T L text.

Translation Studies has become an important branch of comparative literature. The present researcher believes that this study is the first of its kind in analyzing the cultural and linguistic aspects of translating contemporary Malayalam fiction into English, with such a scope and reach. Theoretical and practical complexities involved in translation in a post-colonial context enhance the theme of the study in the Indian context as well.

The study attempts to:

(a) spell out the general problems faced in the translation of modern Malayalam fiction into English, thus defining the scope of the study. This is attempted through this "Introduction."

(b) trace the history of translation of modern Malayalam fiction into English. This is accomplished through an exhaustive survey in Chapter II.

(c) analyze the following sample texts in detail, identifying the cultural and linguistic problems encountered in the translation of these texts: Indulekha by

Furthermore, the problems faced in the translation of texts from a post-colonial literature into the language of the erstwhile imperial power are looked into. The question whether to use English or Indian English, the language of the centre or the language of the periphery, is considered. Possible solutions to these problems, in the form of strategies to surmount or circumvent them in an effort to retain the cultural specificity of the S L text are also formulated. The strategy of offering alternative translations for whole passages, phrases or idioms in the sample texts is also adopted as an illustrative method. These are attempted in Chapter III.

(d) formulate a concluding section that will wrap up the problems of translation and their solutions. The Conclusion is embodied in Chapter IV.

Listing out and annotating the linguistic and cultural problems encountered in the translation into English of modern Malayalam fiction spanning over more than a century, is a stupendous task; indeed, this is not exactly what the present researcher proposes to do. Hence the choice of crucial texts as samples for detailed analysis.