

## At Par with Original – The Politics of Translation in Shyam Selvadurai’s *many roads through paradise*

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### Abstract

The 2014 anthology of Sri Lankan literature, *many roads through paradise*, edited by Shyam Selvadurai, makes no distinction between Sri Lankan literature in English and literature in English translation. The edited anthology breaks through the conventional linguistic discrimination between translated and original work and creates a new kind of literary ecology by bringing together three strands of Sri Lankan literature – Sri Lankan literature in English, Sinhalese literature in English translation and Tamil literature in English translation, at par with each other. Mapping the period from 1970s to the 2014, this anthology uses translation as a tool to stitch through the fragmented literary world of Sri Lanka, giving it a coherent character while retaining its richness. It is an attempt to provide a holistic picture of Sri Lankan literature encompassing as much variety as possible. The paper seeks to read the anthology in a post postcolonial literary environment with Sri Lanka going through various phases of literary and cultural upheavals and look into the postcolonial politics of representing the marginal through translation. It also explores the role of English in the literary movements of Sri Lanka and how translation emerges as a tool for survival and communication, with special reference to this edited anthology.

**Keywords:** *Translation, Sri Lankan Literature, Translation Studies, Postcolonial Literature, Postcolonial*

### Introduction

“The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place”. (Pg 37, Ashcroft, et al)

In countries like India, Sri Lanka, and others, English carries the baggage of a postcolonial anxiety - it is a language that had once been the weapon of the colonial rulers to dominate over the subalterns but since then has fallen from the position of such an absolute power. As a result, the practitioners of English language and literature in these countries, at least in the early postcolonial period, have also been suspected of being more loyal to the colonial masters and guilty of neglecting the indigenous or the vernacular languages. Yet in recent times

English has also been used as a medium or postcolonial tool by the Empire to write back. As Ashcroft, et al says, “the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege (37)”. This strategy of appropriation of the ruler’s language is an important landmark in postcolonial literature. Postcolonial authors writing in English, subvert the tool of the colonisers to raise their own concern and to give voice to the margins.

A similar politics of language can be identified even in the translation of vernacular texts into English in the later postcolonial period, as eventually discussed in the paper. In order to include the cultural connotations and socio-linguistic peculiarities of a vernacular text, the Queen’s English had to stretch itself beyond its conventional limitations. The result was foreignization of English language, to take the readers of the Target culture to the Source culture in the Venutian sense of the term, because translation also meant a translation of culture. These texts, with ‘English’ as their medium of expression challenged the “the notion of literary universality (Tiffin)” and create a strong counter discourse. The Target language is stretched beyond its existing boundaries to encompass newer roles and to chart unknown terrains. This widening of the role of a language to include the subaltern or the marginalized by translating texts from the colonies creates a hybridized world of resisting the colonial hegemony, making English, once the language of rulers, the language of postcolonial intervention.

Shyam Selvadurai’s anthology *many roads through paradise*, an anthology of Sri Lankan literature in English and English translation, fits perfectly into the above-mentioned categories of postcolonial resistances. Published in 2014, this anthology consists of sixty-one titles including poems, excerpts from novels and short fictions, covering a period from 1970s to 2014. Besides being a voice of postcolonial resistance, it defies certain other established modes of representation as well. The anthology, by placing the original literary works alongside translated pieces challenges the hegemony of the original over the translation. In a subtle but sure way it places the translator almost at par with the creative writer. This paper attempts to look at the anthology from the perspective of postcolonial translation studies as well as the politics of representation in translation particularly in multilingual communities like Sri Lanka.

### ***many roads through paradise* as a Work of Postcolonial Translation**

In a detailed introduction to the anthology, Selvadurai traces the trajectory of English language teaching and the use of English as a medium of literature in Sri Lanka. English came to this country, as it did in the other countries of the world - as a language of the colonizers. In a situation almost similar to India, English remained an important language of administration presiding over the local languages of Sinhalese and Tamil even after the colonial rulers had left. It became a key player in the language wars that the country faced. Though the country became independent in 1948, English remained the language of administration till 1956, when the parliament passed a bill to make Sinhala the sole official language, thereby giving steam to the ethnic rivalry between the Sinhalese and the Tamils that tore the country apart for almost 26 years.

One of the distinguishing features of the countries belonging to the Indian subcontinent is their multilingual nature. As Indra Nath Choudhuri observes, “the multilingualism of the entire third world is envisaged as problematic particularly when developmental culture is viewed from the perspective of the developed world” (25). He adds that, though these pluralities

in terms of languages, religions or races are considered to be factors causing 'fragmentation', they are actually more inclusive in nature, embracing a more holistic form of existence. But these diversities, particularly the linguistic ones, play a crucial role in the socio-linguistic, cultural and political environment of the country. While on the one hand it creates a polyphonic society that allows a multiplicity of voices and an inclusivity of existence, it also leads to several complexities - overt or subtle rivalries for domination between indigenous languages being one of them. The prime concerns that prominently feature in the linguistic relationships prevalent in these countries can be broadly categorized in two parts - firstly, as mentioned, the rivalry between the indigenous languages and secondly, the postcolonial anxiety regarding the problematic position of English in these societies. While the existence of several languages has fostered linguistic factionalism, the colonial past has also left a deep mistrust of English as a medium of either communication or literature. At the same time, English has continued to exist as one of the important modes of both communication and literature for at least certain sections of the society. In most of these erstwhile colonies English has been a language of elites from the colonial times and has gradually become a marker of certain social positions in an already graded society. In the postcolonial post globalized world, there has been a rise in the English-speaking section of the society all over the world, further empowering the language. Predominance of English as a language of commerce and communication is now also seen as a threat to the vernacular languages. Ironically, for the reasons just mentioned, translations in English also provide a wider readership platform to the works originally written in vernacular languages, helping them to spread farther. Digital revolution in this age of information requires a common language to overcome the territorial and linguistic limitations, a role that is being quite efficiently fulfilled by English. It's emergence as a 'vehicular language' that helps in correspondence across cultures or as a global lingua franca also means an increase in the number of English language readers. Hence a translation in English definitely helps in placing the regional text to a wider reading audience. All these make English occupy a dubious state of both a suspect and an aide in the postcolonial societies, a polarity that has remained unresolved. As Helen Tiffin says, "Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity" (18). English fulfils the role here as the link to this irresolvable binary. While on the one hand, it is a language that has till now been the mouthpiece of the colonial rulers, it also dawns upon itself the mantle of speaking for the marginal.

In Sri Lanka too, a similar situation prevails. Though the country now follows a trilingual policy with Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages and English as the link language, there is a lot to achieve in terms of linguistic harmony. The ethnic rivalry in Sri Lanka is actually a linguistic rivalry between the two communities of Tamils and Sinhalese; and English, though a link language in Sri Lanka, remains a suspect for various reasons and comes with a colonial baggage which people are eager to both shake off as well as to embrace. This has led to a continuum of struggle between Tamil, Sinhalese and English languages. The wars of ethnicity and identity politics that has marred the life in this island country for a number of years, has also created upheavals in its literary world, leading ultimately to the development of three separate branches of literature in Tamil, Sinhalese and English.

According to Selvadurai, Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 did not immediately lead to any major development of literature in the vernacular languages. It was only from the 1950s that Tamil literature and Sinhalese literature began to take a proper shape. This was also the period

of moving away from the classical form to the more accepted and contemporary forms for both Sinhalese and Tamil literatures. Tamil additionally also had to free itself from the shadows of Indian Tamil literature and develop a literary tradition more rooted in Sri Lanka. A significant corpus of Sri Lankan literature in local languages of Tamil and Sinhalese developed around this period. Many of the authors writing in these two languages drew from Western literature in terms of structure and form. In terms of content, however, they remained local, incorporating the local subjects, landscapes, customs, tradition and concerns.

On the other hand, Sri Lankan English literature developed much later. As Selvadurai himself says, “it remained trapped in its colonial past” (xviii). Hence English-language writers were severely criticized for their lack of engagement with Sri Lankan culture, socio-political issues and surroundings in a significant way. To quote Selvadurai again, “it took the failed socialist youth insurrection of 1971, led by the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) to finally begin to change English literature in a substantial way” (xviii). Contemporary Sri Lankan literature in English is rooted in the culture, politics and sociological concerns of that country, as will be visible from the pieces included in this anthology. It is now as much informed by Sri Lankan concerns as those written in Tamil or Sinhalese languages. All these three separate lines of literary developments led to the creation and existence of three enriching streams of Sri Lankan literature.

In this book, *many roads through paradise* Selvadurai brings together all three branches of Sri Lankan literature by including both original English literature and literature in English translation. English translations of Sinhalese and Tamil literary works help them reach a wider and global audience. Postcolonial translations are significant because they not only narrate the stories in the target language but also communicate the source language culture. The translations included here maintain a fine balance between readability and foreignization of the Target Language, communicating not just the Source Text but also the Source Culture to the Target Language readers. There is a liberal usage of vernacular words which are either explained within the text or at times left unexplained. In an almost Barthian sense of writerly texts, these unexplained vernacular words, force the Target Language readers to go to the Source Language. The presence of the vernacular vocabulary does not hamper the flow of the text or its understanding by the readers, but it does make the serious reader pause and ponder over a culturally untranslatable word or phrase and its significance. It is at these pauses that the postcolonial texts triumph over colonial superiority. It is through these unfamiliar terms that the margin communicates with not just the centre but also with other margins, because one needs to remember that the postcolonial translation is not just an attempt to write back to the centre, but also and very significantly, to establish communication with other peripheries. Translating indigenous literature in English becomes a medium to set up that dialogue.

In ‘Postcolonial Literatures and Counter Discourses’, Helen Tiffin says, “The processes of artistic and literary de-colonization have involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses” (17). English translations of vernacular literature from colonies in many ways move towards achieving the ‘artistic and literary de-colonization’ that Tiffin talks about. It creates a zone of hybridization, appropriating the language of the colonizer to make it a vehicle of expressing the colonized. Even in this post globalized world, where the Eurocentric hegemonies continue to

exist in several forms, these translations are one of the means to make the marginal visible and also to 'dis/mantle' the European codes of a homogenous world.

In the anthology *many roads through paradise*, readers come across two kinds of postcolonial translations, both challenging the limitations of the Target Language, requiring it to accommodate parts of the Source Culture. The translations of Sinhalese and Tamil literature in English are the direct works of translation that we find in the anthology. But, interestingly, even the original English pieces that have been included in the anthology are in many ways acts of translation. In an excerpt from *The Giniralla Conspiracy*, a novel by Nihal de Silva, titled as 'The Rag' (188-226) in this anthology, the author makes generous uses of Sinhalese sentences which are then translated into English in the next line. These sentences are mostly dialogues by characters which add a local feel to the text, differentiating it from an English text from any other part of the world. Introduction of certain local phrases also helps in stamping the text with an indigenous identity. Appropriating the Target Language by the liberal use of the vernaculars also helps in differentiating between the various forms of English(s) that has developed as a means of postcolonial resistance. To identify and differentiate between say Caribbean English, Sri Lankan English or Indian English, the use of the vernaculars play an important role. Such within the text translations, found liberally scattered across the pieces included in this anthology under consideration are also a common feature in the postcolonial English literature and therefore are tools used in shaping the identity of the text.

Even the translated pieces included in the anthology retain certain vernacular expressions, sentences or phrases, a foreignizing act in translation, once again, for the same purposes as discussed above. These phrases are at times untranslatable to carry the actual meaning in Target Language, or they add a flavour to the translated text. Whatever be the reason, such translations add to the corpus of English literature(s). Maria Tymoczko in one of her articles aptly finds similarities between the two genres, that is postcolonial fiction and translation by identifying certain grounds of similarities. "The ability to evoke two languages simultaneously" (149) which Tymoczko says, "achieve linguistic multivalence and polysemous communication, typically while maintaining a monolingual surface" (150) is a very important point of intersection between translated texts and postcolonial fiction. Selvadurai, by placing together both translations and original postcolonial writings from Sri Lanka within the same book, highlights this characteristic even more sharply.

Each piece of literature in the anthology presents a slice of Sri Lankan history, culture, politics and language to the Target Language readers and enriches the corpus of English literature(s). It becomes difficult to identify and separate the pieces as original or translated work unless mentioned by the editor due to their resemblance in terms of contexts, content and language. Language here does not reflect upon the personal style of the author but focuses upon the kind of hybridized English that has been used in most of these works. In terms of context too, the translated texts and the originals overlap, making it difficult to identify one from the other. While Ayathurai Santhan's 'The Whirlwind' (234-268), an excerpt from his English novel *The Whirlwind*, narrates the predicament of a group of villagers whose homes are under threat from the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), 'The American Girl' (311-322) by A. Muttulingam, translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmström is also marked by a search for one's home and belongingness in the foreign land of America. At the backdrop of both the works is the violence unleashed by the IPKF and the ethnic violence that had made many Sri Lankans

homeless or sent them to exile in foreign lands. It is significant to note that the concerns that mark all literature from Sri Lanka are irrespective of their original language and the translated pieces and the originals come together to create a gamut of what can be identified as Sri Lankan literature.

### Bringing Creative Writer and Translator at Par / Politics of Representation

One unusual thing that immediately catches the readers' attention is the title of this anthology. The title, as opposed to the established convention, does not use any capital letters. *many roads through paradise* by its very name challenges the rule of capitalization prevalent in English but absent in any of the Sri Lankan and even Indian languages. As a deliberate strategy then, it assaults the self-asserting role that capitalization plays in any piece of writing and instead, brings everything at par in a continuous flow of words. Thus, at the very outset Selvadurai chooses to omit one of the basic rules of English grammar and brings it closer to that of the languages of his country. This postcolonial strategy of appropriation of the foreign language that the editor deliberately uses in this anthology is an important form of resistance or protest against the white, Eurocentric binaries.

Similarly, he also does away with the convention of separating translated literatures from the original works of fiction, presenting all the included pieces as representatives of the greater identity of Sri Lankan fiction. In pursuing this course of action, Selvadurai is also making a political statement. In a land fraught over linguistic identities, where ethnic wars over languages have marred the country for decades, he is attempting to unify three separate strands of Sri Lankan literature. He makes his perspective clear – “This anthology presents an opportunity to know a country and its various cultures in a holistic way by reading a multiplicity of literary voices. In a post-war situation, this anthology provides an opportunity to build bridges across the divided communities...” (xxv).

The anthology in English therefore has a particular task to accomplish. In a country ravaged by linguistic feuds, it is an attempt to bring the warring communities closer to each other by providing for a common platform for literary exchanges and facilitating a literary interaction. For any plurilingual country “the language can act as an important means for an individual identification, that is, people's access to their own cultural tradition and their distinctive religious and political representation. These arguments show how language is used for social, economic and political developments of different countries” (35 Wakkumbura). In a country like Sri Lanka, where two major sections are Sinhalese and Tamils, other linguistic communities comprising an almost negligible minority, language ethnicity has been the cause for a clash of identities. The linguistic or ethnic feuds maiming the Sri Lankan society have often been considered a result of faulty administrative decisions. English, that had long remained the language of administration, in spite of not being the language of any of the ethnic communities, and only much later replaced by Sinhala with an even later addition of Tamil, still enjoys the position of ‘link language’ in Sri Lanka. Selvadurai capitalizes on that role of English in Sri Lanka to make a bridge across all three dominantly used languages of Sri Lanka. It is only by using the translations of Sinhalese and Tamil literature alongside English writings of Sri Lanka that Selvadurai can hope to represent a proper cross section of what holistically Sri Lankan literature consists of. Translation therefore plays the role of a literary emissary that binds the solitary threads of literature of a nation together.

The history of English translation in Sri Lanka dates back to the early colonial period when the British rulers translated the colonial texts, a policy rigorously followed by them in most of the colonies as a part of their imperial mission and in keeping with their imperialist policies. But most of those translations, till the point of Sri Lanka's independence, can be viewed as "transliterated, a horse-shoe attempt at assigning words to phrases, cultural slangs and idioms, and concepts that do not exist in English language" (27, Karunakaran). Translation remained caught in 'transliteration' or at its best, became "a one-way process, with texts being translated into European languages for European consumption, rather than as a part of a reciprocal process of exchange" (4, Bassnett and Trivedi). It is only well into the twentieth century that there was a 'cultural turn' in the field of translation studies that gave predominance to the cultural translation of a text and made it a vehicle for representing the Source Culture to the Target Language readers. In Selvadurai's anthology, these translations are successful in communicating the Source Culture to the Target Language readers as closely as possible.

The translations included in the anthology therefore become the spokesperson for their respective literary and cultural heritage. But the anthology contributes much more to the field of Translation Studies. It does away with the concept of the superiority of the original text over translation. The anthology, as mentioned earlier, deliberately refrains from categorizing the pieces as original or translation. In a democratization of the role of the translators and in acknowledgement of their role in the development of literature, the editor of this anthology treats each piece of work for its literary merit only, and not on the basis of its original language of composition. Hence, an anthology of Sri Lankan literature boldly opens with two translated works - the first 'The Chariot and the Moon' (4-5) a poem composed by Mahakavi aka T. Rudramoorthy, the pioneer of modern Tamil poetry in Sri Lanka and translated by S. Pathmanathan; followed by 'The Mahagedara' (5-35), an excerpt from a Sinhalese novel by Martin Wickramasinghe and translated jointly Lakshmi de Silva and Ranga Wickramasinghe. The third work that we come across in the anthology is an excerpt from a memoir in English 'Our Valavu' from *The Yaal Players: Memories of Old Jaffna*, written by Vimala Ganeshanathan. So, the tone is set right from the beginning - the anthology successfully introduces three diverse branches of Sri Lankan literature. As the anthology proceeds, readers realize that the inclusion of the pieces, whether translation or original, do not follow any fixed pattern of appearance. In the editor's own words, "to promote (the) ethos of unity, I have not, as many previous anthologies of Sri Lankan literature have done, divided the work by the three language streams. Instead, the work is grouped under four themes that are explained at the beginning of each section" (xxv). The Sri Lankans who have remained 'largely ignorant' of the 'thoughts, experiences, history and cultural mores of their fellow countrymen... due to linguistic divides" (xxv) can get an access to the rich heritage through such works. So, translation here also becomes an agency of promoting a unified national literary heritage. It promotes the noble intention of the editor to unify the segregated strands of Sri Lankan literature and bring them under a common platform. It also allows for a dialogue across cultures which has been disrupted due to years of feuds between them.

Such an anthology is also a remarkable achievement in terms of providing the required visibility to the translators. Until quite recently translation was at best recognized as an imitation of the original that required a linguistic fidelity to the original text. Translators remained second grade citizens in the literary world for a long time, a stigma even now not completely erased. Though there have been a number of authors in world literature made famous through

translations of their work, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Leo Tolstoy, Orhan Pamuk being a few examples, the name of the translator remains invisible, the role of the translator too is rarely talked about. In recent times there has been a noticeable shift in Translation Studies and in the act of translation where translation itself has been considered an important tool of cultural exchange. In the south Asian countries, particularly the Indian subcontinent, the presence of a large number of languages adds further importance to the role of the translator. The act of translation becomes an act of ethnographic interpretation as well, but the translators remain neglected. Even after a lifetime of hard work, they often remain invisible like the backstage technicians of a successful play. The kind of disregard that the translators have to face can be understood from Rita Kothari's speech after winning the 2018 Vani Foundation Distinguished Translators' Award at Jaipur Literary Festival. She says, "Now that I have got an award, it explains that we are finally getting some recognition". Though she speaks of the Indian context, the situation remains the same almost everywhere. Tim Parkes, the renowned translator, while speaking of the Harville -Sacker prize for the young translator says in a candid expression, "The translator should do his job and then disappear. The great, charismatic, creative writer wants to be all over the globe". He rues the lack of visibility that always accompanies a translator in spite of all the hard work that goes into the act of translation. Selvadurai's anthology can be a step forward to counter such apathy towards translators. By placing the translators at par with the original writings in the book and by providing the short bio-notes of the translators alongside that of the authors in the back of the text, this anthology provides an identity to the translator. Translators' names are mentioned at the bottom left-hand corner of the first page of each work - a placing that gives visibility to the translator without taking it away from the original author whose name is mentioned, as per convention, just after the title. All these together make this anthology an important one from the perspective of politics of representation of translation as well.

## Conclusion

Globalization and the digital revolution have turned the world into a global village with an increased interaction between people of diverse cultures. In such a social scenario, to promote a better understanding of each other and to save the world from turning into one monochromatic, homogenous platform, translators have an important role to play. With the increase in the number of people using English as their second language, any translation into English has a scope of reaching a very wide reader base. Translation facilitates conversation between cultures, beyond the linguistic barriers and generates an interest in the lesser-known cultures. In the postcolonial period translations also became an act of resistance. By translating the marginal, it challenges the dominant, the normative and the homogenous. Translations of Sinhalese and Tamil literature included in Selvadurai's edited anthology, *many roads through paradise* fulfill both these roles and much more. Firstly, it establishes a communication between three different streams of Sri Lankan literature which had been developing separately as a result of the language wars in the country. Secondly, as a postcolonial translation, it is a remarkable act of resistance and hybridity - the third space of contact where culture survives. While discussing Catford's theory of 'linguistic untranslatability' Bassnett says, "linguistic untranslatability is due to the differences in TL and SL, whereas cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL culture, of a relevant situational feature for the SL text" (38). So, the untranslatability of culture specific expression or word reveals a gap in the Target Language, its inability to accommodate or explain certain cultural elements through its language system. This



chink in the TL becomes the site of postcolonial resistance challenging the supremacy of the TL over SL.

Selavadurai's anthology points at the rising importance of translation as a practice in literature as well as culture studies. It is a significant movement in terms of providing visibility to the translator and to the activity of translation. In a positive way, *many roads through paradise* acknowledge the irreplaceable role of translation in presenting one's cultural heritage to the world. More such translations in various other languages should be taken up to continue the cultural and literary exchanges and mutually gain from the interactions.

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