

# Translating the Untranslatable: An Appraisal of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's "Vishwavikhyathamaya Mookku"

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## Abstract

Translation facilitates studying literature in a comparative framework. India, being a multilingual nation with rich vernacular literary traditions, opens an opportunity for a panoramic view of its cultural mosaic. Translation studies have become the need of the hour, and their development will take place as programmes in world literature expand, and the vital role of translation in the propagation of world literature will continue to be highlighted. The etymology of the word translation suggests that meaning is picked up bodily from one culture, transported across a frontier, expressed across the chasm that separates a language from the other and deposited unaltered on the other side. Edward Sapir has rightly said that different languages represent different world views and that it is not simply a question of rephrasing when one moves into another language. The paper will begin by evaluating Malayalam literary stalwart Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's "Vishwavikhyathamaya Mookku" with a kaleidoscopic view of linguistic provenances. Basheer is placed in the high altar of Malayalam literature as his literary creations are marked by the down-to-earth narration and sheer verities of the lives of ordinary folk. This titan of Malayalam literature, affectionately addressed as 'Bey pore Sultan', has earned a distinctive mark of his own in Kerala as a humanist, writer, freedom fighter, and novelist. Languages develop over time, and words accrue significance. The main challenge faced by translators is how far they are able to convey the same meaning without causing any damage to the subtle linguistic nuances and cultural flavour of a target language. The intended study likes to throw light upon the role of translation in the field of comparative literature and how it enables us to "read between the lines" with the aid of its English translation entitled "The World-Renowned Nose".

**Keywords:** Untranslatability, Linguistic Nuances, Cultural Influence, Target Language, Meaning

Translation studies have become the need of the hour, and their development will take place as programmes in world literature expand, and the vital role of translation in the propagation of world literature will continue to be highlighted. Translation facilitates the study of literature in a comparative framework, and India, being a multilingual nation with rich vernacular literary traditions, opens an opportunity for a panoramic view of its cultural mosaic. The etymology of the word 'translation' suggests that

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meaning is picked up bodily from one culture, transported across a frontier, expressed across the chasm which separates a language from the other and deposited unaltered on the other side. Edward Sapir has rightly said that different languages represent different world views and that it is not simply a question of rephrasing when one moves into another language. The paper will begin by evaluating Malayalam literary stalwart Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's "Vishwavikhyathamaya Mookku" with a kaleidoscopic view of linguistic provenances. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer was one of those rare artists who love the world with all its imperfections rather than one of those who go on trying to change it since they can love only a perfect world. It was this understanding of evil as an organic part of creation and the identification with the outcasts, even those the world considers clowns, idiots, cheats and villains whom his magic wand converted into lovable human beings, that helped Basheer redraw the map of Malayalam fiction many decades ago. (Satchidanandan,2)

Basheer is placed in the high altar of Malayalam literature as his literary creations are marked by the down-to-earth narration and sheer verities of the lives of ordinary folk. This titan of Malayalam literature, affectionately addressed as 'Beyppore Sultan', has earned a distinctive mark of his own in Kerala as a humanist, writer, freedom fighter, and novelist. By taking the readers through the dark corridors of human life, Basheer portrays the life of humble and ordinary folks. His literary oeuvre represents the real episodes from his life, and they are suffused with humour and pathos. His adoration for his brother man, concern for his society, the warmth of the colloquial language, satire, and suggestiveness elevate him to the stature of the sultan of the story. One can never trace any artistic embellishment, parading of verbosity, and scholarship in the writings of Basheer. According to the eminent Indian poet and critic K. Satchidanandan, "Basheer used to say he was never sure about the Malayalam alphabet; this apparent inadequacy compelled him to invent an idiom that is closest to the everyday life of Malayalis that revolutionised the art of storytelling in the language. He could make his fictional world possible only by radically altering the status quo vocabulary. Ordinary words picked up from the streets and the inner courtyards of Malabar homes gained a new vibrancy and artistic aura when Basheer employed them in his fresh narrative contexts. His seemingly artless manner had behind it an unarticulated yet profound theory about the use of language in contemporary fiction that taught different lessons to future writers" (Ajith,1). He wrote for ordinary people in a language easily comprehensible to them, and the words flowed out of his realistic impressions. His rich and varied experience of life across various parts of the world has the undercurrents of life, lifeblood and flesh. Basheer's works are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of Kerala, reflecting the everyday lives, struggles, and aspirations of ordinary people. His narratives often feature characters from the lower strata of society, and he weaves their stories with an authentic and relatable touch.

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"Vishwavikhyathamaya Mookku", one of the renowned short stories of Basheer published in 1954, unfolds as a story of love. The protagonist of the story is a cook, a grotesque figure whose nose started growing when he attained the age of twenty-four. The story focuses on his very nose, which has become a matter of dispute and sensational news among intellectuals. G.Kumara Pillai, in his introduction to *Poovan Banana and Other Stories*, says, " The bizarre story 'The World Renowned Nose' is a striking satire on the psychology of the masses whose curiosity is aroused by anything slightly unusual and the inveterate tendency of politicians to exploit everything for partisan ends( Abdulla 8)". No one knew the long-nosed one before his nose started growing slightly in length. His world was confined to the kitchen. He was unaware of the happenings beyond the walls of the kitchen. "Why should he pay attention to them? He could eat to his satisfaction, inhale as much snuff as he wanted, sleep, and work. His daily routine was confined to these activities. (148)" Although his nose started growing, he did not pay attention at all. He was able to snuff and inhale without any difficulty. One fine day, he was dismissed from his job in the kitchen just because of his nose. "No group came forward with the battle cry: 'Take back the dismissed employee. 'Political parties shut their eyes to this piece of rank injustice. 'Why was this man dismissed?' No lover of humanity came forward with this query. The poor cook! (149)". The long-nosed one and his mother struggled hard to make both ends meet. Luck favoured the mother, and soon, within no time. People began to bribe the mother to see her son's nose. The chill penury forced the mother to place her son to satiate the visual pleasure of the crowd.

The income of the long-nosed started growing day by day. In six years, the poor cook became a millionaire. He attained the status of a celebrity and acted thrice in films. Six poets wrote epic poems about the noble virtues of the long-nosed one. The government endowed him the title 'Chief among the long-nosed ones' and gave him a medal. He started expressing his views and opinions on anything and everything around him. Many political parties badly wanted him to join their group. This celebrity from the kitchen was even honoured by the President. To make matters worse, the opposition party began their agitation and violence on the pretext that the nose was a pseudo one made of rubber. All the newspapers splashed the news on their front pages. Protests and strikes broke out, and the President was left with the only option of taking him into custody. The furious and the fuming mass destroyed government buildings and burnt police stations. The President invited expert doctors from 48 countries to examine the long-nosed one. The doctors unanimously declared that the nose was a genuine one. He was nominated as a Member of Parliament, and three universities showered their magnanimity by conferring doctorates on the Comrade Long-Nose. The opposition party continued with their allegations, stating that the government has done fraud on the people by accepting the rubber nose as a genuine one. A person who was ignorant of the socio-political spectrums of the world is purposely brought to the limelight, represented

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and misrepresented by the common populace. People want to enjoy and satiate their needs, and a poor, local cook has become the victim of their selfish act. Basheer concludes the story thus: "Look at the way falsehood was being perpetuated! Would there not be confusion of thought? What could the poor intellectual do? (154)"

Basheer's narratives are deeply rooted in the cultural context of Kerala, drawing upon local customs, traditions, and social dynamics. Translating these cultural particulars without losing their core can be intricate, as certain elements may lack direct equivalents in other cultural settings. The translator, V. Abdulla, has tried to be faithful in translating the words that lack an appropriate equivalence in English. He has omitted the sentence from the source text where the writer says, "People are fools" (Basheer 10). The paragraph conveys the foolish activities of the government in the detailed description, albeit this exact sentence is missing. The examination of the long-nosed one is depicted in the source language with an emphasis on people as stupid and revolutionary beings (Basheer 17). The Malayalam terms like 'badukkoos', 'palungoosan', 'mandakootam', and 'andakadaaham' do not have an exact translation in the target language. Basheer, according to G.Kumarapillai, "was the first major writer to emerge from the large Muslim community in Kerala, and thus he made a signal contribution to the evolution of Malayalam writing into the language of the entire-Malayalam speaking people. His introduction into our literature of the Muslim background, imagery from Muslim religious lore and telling phrases and expressions peculiar to the community, is of more than sociological import (3)." This holds in the way he has used and popularised the language with all the spoken flavours. When people ask the long-nosed one to join the party, "The long-nosed one said in his tongue (151)". What he has said in his mother tongue has no equivalence in English. Above all, the language and the sentence used in the original are far different from the written Malayalam language and the commonly spoken one.

Translation studies unite many nations; it is because when a text is translated, people can find similarities between their languages and the translated text. The translation shows how language is universal rather than regional or national. Through translation, "othering" disappears. Translating Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's works poses a unique challenge due to the intricacies of his language, cultural nuances, and the distinctiveness of his storytelling. The concept of "untranslatability" becomes particularly relevant when attempting to convey the richness and depth of Basheer's writing in languages other than Malayalam. Basheer's narrative style, infused with humour and wit, adds another dimension to the challenge of translation. The subtle interplay of words and the author's unique voice contribute significantly to the overall experience of reading his works. Translators must navigate this intricate linguistic dance to preserve the humour and emotional resonance inherent in Basheer's storytelling.

Basheer's Malayalam is so simple that the translator trips up in his choice of words. The very terseness of his writing, brought to perfection by continuous

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writing and rewriting, poses somewhat baffling problems to the translator. Much of this relates to his use of colloquial words whose nuances of meaning are too complex to convey in any language other than the original. For a translator who gets fully absorbed in Basheer's Malayalam, it is not easy to judge how an English translation would appear to a non-Malayalee reader (13).

Despite these challenges, attempts to translate Basheer's works have been made, acknowledging the importance of sharing his literary contributions with a broader audience. However, it is essential for readers of translations to recognise the inherent limitations and appreciate that specific nuances may be lost in the process. One aspect contributing to untranslatability is Basheer's use of colloquial language and regional dialects. His narratives are deeply embedded in the linguistic landscape of Kerala, incorporating expressions, idioms, and linguistic subtleties that may lack direct equivalents in other languages. This challenges translators to capture the essence of the original text while ensuring the translated work resonates with the target audience. Cultural references present another layer of complexity. Basheer's stories often draw upon the socio-cultural fabric of Kerala, referencing local traditions, customs, and historical events. Translating these references accurately requires not only linguistic proficiency but also a deep understanding of the cultural context. Basheer frequently employs idiomatic expressions and turns of phrase that might not have direct parallels in other languages. Translators must navigate these linguistic subtleties to ensure that the translated work captures the intended meaning and tone. "Outwardly, most of his stories deal with the lives of Kerala Muslims, but it would be a grave mistake to reduce Basheer's fiction to its ethnic content. At the deeper level, they are tales of men and women everywhere, trapped in the ironic irrationality of the human condition. That is why even the English translations of Basheer's stories done by various translators from Ronald Asher to V. Abdulla, while retaining little of their dialectal poetry, still manage to capture their ultimate human appeal" (64). In short, the untranslatability of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's works lies in the intricate interplay of language, culture, and narrative style. While translations offer access to his stories for a wider audience, they may not fully capture the richness of the original text. Nevertheless, the endeavour to translate Basheer's works remains a valuable pursuit, contributing to the dissemination of his literary legacy beyond the boundaries of language and culture.

Basheer's language is a testament to his commitment to authenticity. Translations, even if they fall short of replicating every nuance, serve as valuable conduits, allowing readers from different linguistic backgrounds to experience the essence of his storytelling. In reality, the untranslatability in Basheer's works lies in the elaborate interchange of linguistic, cultural, and exceptional narrative elegance. While the translation may not fully mirror the original, it remains an admirable endeavour to share the literary brilliance of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer with a global readership. His



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legacy as a realistic writer endures through the timeless relevance of his works, which continue to resonate with readers, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries.

Translation studies have become the need of the hour, and their development will take place as programmes in world literature expand, and the vital role of translation in the propagation of world literature will continue to be highlighted. They are essential in comparative literature; it is because through translations, literature influences each other, and people understand others better. It unites two or more literature in the form of comparative literature. Foreignisation does not mean translating a text word for word; instead, it means giving the message of the original text by using its cultural and linguistic elements. Translation studies contribute to the future of comparative literature. Translation into English can certainly foster the growth of a holistic view of Indian literature, and the techniques in "Vishwavikhyathamaya Mookku" transcend all cultural, linguistic and national disparities. According to Walter Benjamin, "the mark of the translatability of a text is its ability to be "identical with truth and dogma, where it is supposed to be the true language" in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning". He supports the necessity of translation in comparative literature. He believes that translation makes literary works alive. As long as they are translated, they will survive. Hence, posterity will not willingly let the grandeur of the short story in the target language die.

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