Thankamma Malik, "Horse-Cart Rider"

Translated by Ziyana Fazal

Translator's Preface

Thankamma Malik (1917–2001) was a pioneering bilingual writer and translator from Kerala, India, whose literary contributions bridged Malayalam and Hindi traditions. Born into a Christian family, her life took a transformative turn after hearing a speech by Mahatma Gandhi during the Indian freedom movement. Deeply moved, she committed herself to learning Hindi, pursuing formal education at Shradhanand Hindi College in Kottayam and later at Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth in Allahabad, where she studied under the renowned Hindi poet Mahadevi Varma. Malik's literary career included short stories, poetry, and translations, many of which appeared in Malayalam periodicals such as *Al-Manar* and *Muslim Review*. Her marriage to Malik Muhammed, editor of the Malayalam monthly *Mithram*, marked another turning point in her life; she then embraced Islam and adopted the name Thankamma Malik. Her writing, shaped by Gandhian ideals and a deep sense of social justice, played a vital role in shaping 20th-century Malayalam literature.

Malik's short story "Ṭāṃgāvālā" (translated here as "Horse-Cart Rider," 1954) exemplifies Malik's commitment to ethical transformation and social critique. It tells the story of Mothi Lal, an upper-caste Hindu man who falls in love with Sarojam, a Dalit girl working as a maid in his household. Inspired by Gandhian principles, Mothi educates Sarojam in Hindi, defies his Zamindar father, and ultimately renounces his caste privileges. Choosing love and justice over social conformity, he marries Sarojam and begins a new life as a horse-cart driver.

Historically, Muslims in Kerala developed a rich tradition of literary and journalistic expression that negotiated between Arabic, Persian, and Malayalam linguistic registers, reflecting both their diverse heritage and the sociopolitical pressures of colonial modernity. By the early 20th century, Māppiḷa Muslim women contributed to this evolving print culture through writings in both Arabi-Malayalam and Malayalam periodicals, engaging with reformist debates and secular national discourses. Thankamma Malik was one of the few 20th-century Muslim women writers from Kerala whose work transcended literary and geographical boundaries. Her writings

appeared in an array of periodicals, from Muslim reformist journals such as *Adhunika Vanitha* and *Ansari* to mainstream nationalist platforms such as *Mathrubhumi* and *Malayalarajyam*. Unlike many of her contemporaries, who wrote within the bounds of clearly demarcated ideological affiliations, Malik traversed religious, political, and linguistic borders in her literary practice. Her literary oeuvre elucidates the heterogeneity of the Māppila Muslim print public, challenging reductive frameworks that delimit Muslim women's writing within static communal or linguistic identities.

Translating Malik's work prompts a rethinking of dominant notions of the Islamicate as a primarily Arabic-inflected literary and cultural domain. I chose to translate "Ṭāṃgāvālā" because it foregrounds the intertwined questions of gender, language, and identity, while importantly situating caste not only as a structure of social hierarchy but also as a dynamic site of negotiation and resistance—a dimension frequently overlooked in Islamicate contexts. I first encountered Malik's writing in 2018 while conducting archival research in Kerala, and I was struck by two features: the remarkable multilingual range of her literary production, particularly her use of Malayalam and Hindi, and the conspicuous absence of Arabic. This absence is critical given Malik's identity as a Muslim woman from a region where Arabic historically shaped religious and intellectual life. Writing outside Arabic's orbit, a characteristic often associated with Muslim writings in postcolonial India, she crafted a voice attuned to the secular idioms of postcolonial India while also engaging with both national and transregional concerns.

Malik's literary corpus, often shifting between regional and national languages, unsettles the rigid mapping of Urdu, Persian, and Hindi to the North, and Arabic, Malayalam, and English to the South. Her choice to write and translate across linguistic domains resists these geographical and ideological boundaries. This transgression is particularly significant given Malik's roots in Kerala, where Islam followed a distinctive historical trajectory: Arabic supplanted Persian as the language of scholarship; the Shāfiʿī school predominated over the Ḥanafī; and the emergence of Arabi-Malayalam, a register that rendered Malayalam in Arabic script, was central to

Muslim textual practices. Malik's embrace of Hindi, along with her native language, Malayalam, challenges this inherited tradition and signals an alternative vision of literary and religious belonging—one that resists containment within both the linguistic hierarchies of the nation-state and the cultural expectations tied to her identity as a Muslim within the global umma.

The story "Ṭāṃgāvālā" constitutes not only a nuanced meditation on love, caste, and gender-inflected identity in postcolonial India but also a critical reflection on Muslim women's linguistic interventions within a fragmented and multilingual sociopolitical landscape. At a time when Muslim women's writing was often interpreted through pietistic or juridical frameworks, this story—with its Hindi vocabulary, Allahabad setting, and multivocal style—stands out for its nationalist undertones, narrative experimentation, and attention to linguistic plurality. Malik's prose moves fluidly across registers, incorporating elements of spoken Hindi, formal Malayalam, and occasional English—mirroring the multilingual world she inhabited and imagined.

This linguistic hybridity shaped not only the narrative texture of "Ṭāṃgāvālā" but also the process of translating it. Malayalam is my native language and the one I know most intimately; Hindi is a language I can read and engage with, though not fluently, and English is the language in which I write and theorize. Translating Malik into English thus became an interpretive act shaped by both proximity and distance, requiring a balance between fidelity to the source and the affective, social resonances it carries. The story's title is in Hindi, and it opens with dialogue—*jaldī* (hurry), *haṭo* (move)—that immediately asserts a linguistic and spatial setting distinct from the Malayalam-dominated narratives of her region. These shifts in language, tone, and register—reflecting class, regional, and emotional differences—are not ornamental but structural, shaping the story's emotional and social realism. In the process of translation, English, with its more limited capacity for conveying such distinctions, often demanded approximation rather than direct equivalence. This translation, then, is a gesture toward the complexity of Malik's literary world, an effort to preserve its layered textures even as parts of it necessarily resist translation.

Horse-Cart Rider

"Tr r-r– hurry, hurry–move aside–move aside." Do you know what that sound is? It is the sound of Babu's horse cart. Though it does not quite go r-r-r, Babu's Raman can outrun the horses of any other carts. "This one is of Arabic lineage," Babu says, patting the horse proudly on its back. Babu carries himself with the same proud bearing, holding his head high, much like how the horse keeps its head raised. Around 30 years old, he is strong and well-built, good-looking, with elegantly combed hair. Pajama, kurta, layered with a sweater. A wristwatch, shoes, all of it, completes the attire of this rider. You might wonder, "Is he really a rider?" Yes, he is. He must provide for himself, his wife, and two children with the earnings from his horse cart.

No traveler arriving at Allahabad railway station fails to be drawn to Babu. But even when he is seated in the vehicle, no one would suspect him to be the rider. As soon as he meets people, he immediately guesses where they are from. Most of the time, the guess does not go wrong. Why, then, do others feel disappointed when most people admire that horse-cart rider who skillfully handles languages like Hindi, Urdu, English, and Bengali? Other riders in the city looked at him with a mix of fear and jealousy. The rickshaw pullers and other riders called him Babu. It was a feeling anyone who met Babu shared. And for that reason, everyone respected him.

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There was none in Banaras who had not heard of Zamindar Ramesh Babu. Mothi Lal is the eldest of his two sons. The incident took place when Mothi Lal was pursuing his BA. Upon hearing about it, not only the family, but also the villagers were taken aback.

Mothi is the beloved son of parents who embodied orthodoxy. But Gandhiji's Harijan movement and Swadeshi movement all deeply attracted Mothi. It was only that he did not get involved in public activities out of fear for his father.

Many poor families depended on Mothi's household. Among them, the gardener Ganesh held a special place. Although they were Harijans, Ganesh, his wife, and their daughter, Sarojam, were granted a certain degree of freedom within the Zamindar's

household. As a slightly older boy, Mothi often watched his younger brother Taranadhan play with Saroja in the garden. He was never bored of observing Saroja's radiant face and thick, curly hair. Mothi stepped into his 18th year. Desires innate to adolescence began to blossom within him, even without him realizing it.

One evening, Mothi was strolling through the garden. Hearing a scream, he looked around. Sarojam was standing amid the spread of rose bushes. Thorns entangled her hair and blouse. Mothi kept looking at her for a few moments. Would the 12-year-old girl, who did not yet know what shyness was, understand the secret behind that gaze?

"Babuji, please take the tie out of my hair," she begged.

"What will you give me if I take it off?" he asked.

"All the flowers in the basket."

"Oho! Such generosity! Do I need you to give me flowers from my own garden?"

"Then what should I give?"

"Will you give me what I ask for?"

"I will."

"Don't go back on your word."

"No."

He approached her. He pretended as if he were struggling to remove the thorns.

"Make it quick, Babuji. It is time for your mother's pooja. She will be angry."

"Let the pooja be late today. Why should my mother, who doesn't even touch you, perform pooja using the flowers you have touched? Does that not make them impure, Saro?"

"Whatever, I don't know."

"Where is Taranadhan today?"

"He went for his studies."

"Don't you want to study?"

"Would Harijans, especially women, pursue education, Babuji?"

"Who said they won't?"

"Mother said. Isn't that why I am not sent to school?"

"Should I teach you?"

"What?" She turned around and looked.

"Yes, I mean to teach you. Didn't you say you would obey what I say? Starting tomorrow, you should come to this place when Tara goes to study. I will bring a slate and a book."

"Isn't it shameful if someone gets to know about it?"

"I will take care of all that."

In six months, that intelligent girl learned to write and read Hindi reasonably well. Mothi was gratified. One day, Sarojam said, "From tomorrow on, I won't study. My mother is unwell. Father said I should do the sweeping work."

"Who will collect the flowers then?"

"Father will take care of it himself."

"There is no need to study. It suffices that you don't forget the lessons you have already learned," the guru advised.

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"Hey, mopping lady, please come and clean my reading room," Mothi called out. She entered the room with a broom in hand. He felt as if her body had become fuller and more developed. Mothi sensed a slight warmth in his blood at the sight of her. His heart longed to touch her once. But he faltered in courage!

One evening, Mothi was reading. Sarojam entered with a broom. She had a leaf packet with her.

"Why did you come so late?"

"There were some chores."

"What chores?"

"Look at this," she continued, pulling a garland from the banana leaf—"Father gave me many flowers since mother was not around today. I was late tying this flower garland. I never gave you dakshina[1] for teaching me letters. Here is my dakshina," she said, placing the wrapped packet on the table.

"You remembered about dakshina just today?"

"Today, I read the monologue Babuji gave me last week. Is it not because Ekalavya was downtrodden like me that the Brahmin guru expelled him, and the princes taunted him? Did not that

[1] *Dakshina* is a traditional gift offered to a teacher or priest, rooted in Vedic rituals where it was given as a token of gratitude after receiving instruction or performing a sacred rite.

egoistic guru and the others later come to the forest and ask for guru dakshina once he mastered science? Babuji, are these upper-caste people really that cruel? The guru asked for the poor hunter boy's thumb, didn't he? And what courage! He just chopped it off and gave it to him. Likewise." She looked at Mothi with a smile.

"You learned all this from reading that book? You really are an intelligent girl. Why did you stop, then? So, you decided to give some wilted flowers in the name of dakshina before I could ask for your thumb or something, right? Smart girl." Mothi also began to laugh.

"What are you saying, Babuji? If you don't like the flowers, return them. Let me go."

"Wait, don't leave. Don't you want to clean the room? If you don't give me the dakshina that I ask for, you will forget all the lessons you have learned," he said, feigning seriousness.

"Really?" the simple-minded girl asked.

"Why else? Is it because of that fear that Ekalavya chopped off his thumb and gave it?" he said, trying to stifle his laughter.

"Please, tell me what I should give?" she asked.

"You don't need to give anything. Please take that garland and put it around my neck," he said, stretching his head out.

"That's nice, a fair dakshina," Sarojam said, laughing loudly as she began to run away. But Mothi grabbed her. He forced her onto his lap and whispered in her ears, "Crazy girl, don't laugh. Either today or tomorrow, it will happen. You are mine for sure." He held her close, swayed by his desires. The young girl, on the brink of crossing the final stage of adolescence, began to feel breathless and shivered through her whole body. She somehow managed to break free from his grasp and ran away.

After that incident, Mothi saw Sarojam very rarely. He felt that she was intentionally keeping out of his sight. Whenever they did cross paths, she would quickly run away, her captivating smile disappearing as she fled. These days, it is Sarojam's mother who comes to clean the room. Another six to seven months passed. It has been many days since he met Sarojam. Losing his patience, Mothi once asked Sarojam's mother about her. She replied: "Can the girl always afford to play around, child? She has grown up now. Your mother told me not to bring her for chores anymore. If only I could die after

finding a man for her and entrusting her to him. I have been sick this whole time, haven't I?"

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A grown-up girl and a youthful man! The girl is Harijan, and the young man is of the gentry. Especially when it involves the beloved child of a wealthy man, imagine the situation if that union cannot even bear the sight of the Zamindar!

Mothi is standing in front of his father, bowing his head. The Zamindar yelled: "Idiot! Such a disgrace to the whole clan! Was there truly no woman in the village that you would stoop to pursue an untouchable beggar? You must marry Kamala next month."

"It is not possible, father! I have made my decision. It was not decided today or yesterday. It was decided three years ago. I won't marry anyone other than that Harijan girl," Mothi said in a decisive tone.

"What? You decided? No one has ever dared to confront me in this manner until this day. If you don't obey what I say, you will end up begging."

"I would not hesitate to do that either. Wasn't it to reform the Harijans that the universally revered Bapu gave up his silk mattress and opted to live like an ascetic? Then, I would only be proud to marry a Harijan woman." The son did not back down.

"Damn your Bapu! He is the Fakir who has misled you and people like you. Boy, he is a learned thief. It's all just speeches. If he were truly genuine, why didn't he marry each of his children to women from the Tōṭṭi or Paṟacci castes?[2] One of his sons married the daughter of Rajagopalachari, who is from a higher caste than his own. Ptuie, what spirit!"

"In any case, I have decided."

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[2] "Tōṭṭi" refers to a historically marginalized caste traditionally associated with manual scavenging in Kerala. "Paṟacci" is a derogatory term used to refer to women from the Paraiyar (Pariah) caste, a Dalit community historically subjected to systemic discrimination and social exclusion. Both terms illustrate deeply entrenched caste hierarchies and are used here to highlight the social realities depicted in the story.

"If that's the case, I, too, have decided. You won't have any claims in my house or property from today onwards. You must beg," Father said in rage.

"No, father, I will not beg. But I know how to make ends meet by doing some job."

"'Job,' yes, you will get a job. Someone might give you a job if you go around taking my name. But . . ."

"I know what you are thinking, father. I will not walk around begging for a job by using your name or claiming to be the son of a Zamindar. We can leave this village entirely. I will go to another village and earn a living by carrying luggage or driving vehicles. What is demeaning about doing jobs? What sin exists in that? I prefer a small hut over this bungalow, built by squeezing and brewing the blood of the poor. It is there that I will find both prosperity and peace."

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Thus, Mothi Lal became a cart rider. A golden waist thread and a golden watch were his only possessions. He sold the waist thread to buy his horse cart. Sarojam is now a flower seller. She delivers beautifully tied flower garlands to houses. Every evening, the horse-cart rider returns to his small hut with a deep sense of peace and mental tranquility.