

Writing as Resistance: Caste, Gender, and Subaltern Subjectivity in Poomani's *And Then*

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Abstract—Poomani's debut Tamil novel *Piraku*, translated into English as *And Then* by T. Marx (2019), is among the earliest Tamil novels to render the lived experience of the Arunthathiyar (Chakkiliyar) community with sustained realism. Set in the *karisal* (black-soil) tract of southern Tamil Nadu, the novel follows Alagiri, a cobbler bound to a semi-feudal land-tenure arrangement called the *kaani* system, and his daughter Muthumari, whose life and death expose the intersecting violence of caste and patriarchy. This paper reads *And Then* through subaltern studies, cultural studies, and trauma studies frameworks to argue that Poomani constructs a doubly and trebly marginalized community whose labour, kinship, orality, and silence together constitute both the site of oppression and the ground of resistance. Attention to the novel's language politics, its staging of post-Independence electoral democracy, and its gendered trauma situates *And Then* within Tamil Subaltern writing and the wider world literature of the soil.



Keywords— subaltern studies, caste and patriarchy, trauma studies, *Karisal* literature, postcolonial democracy, translation studies, Tamil fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

Poomani's maiden novel *Piraku*, first published in Tamil in 1979 and translated into English as *And Then* by T. Marx in 2019, occupies a foundational place in the corpus of Tamil subaltern writing. Poomani, born in 1947 to a family of marginal farmers near Kovilpatti, has described *Piraku* as a pioneering account of the Arunthathiyar community, a Dalit sub-caste historically confined to leatherwork, whose story "no one before me had written about" (qtd. in Ramesh). The novel unfolds in Manaloothu, a village in the *karisal* (black soil) tract of southern Tamil Nadu, and follows Alagiri, a cobbler who migrates to the village and is absorbed into its *kaani* labour system, and his daughter Muthumari, whose short and violent life dramatizes the layered oppressions borne by Dalit women.

Read at the level of plot, *And Then* can appear to be an almost eventless chronicle of rural routine: buffaloes driven home at dusk, chappals stitched beneath a neem

tree, betel leaves exchanged in gossip on a temple dais. Yet beneath this deceptively placid surface, Poomani stages what the novel's own critical afterword calls the "pathetic and impoverished lives" of a community subjected to "the oppressive caste structure and social stratification" of rural Tamil Nadu (Armstrong 266). This paper argues that *And Then* should be read simultaneously as a subaltern text, a document of regional cultural memory, and a trauma narrative. It recovers the material and epistemic world of a community written out of upper-caste literary history, in the manner theorized by subaltern studies; it encodes that recovery in the specific idiom, oral forms, and agrarian knowledge of the *karisal* region, in the manner attended to by cultural studies; and it renders, most searingly in the story of Muthumari, the psychic wounds inflicted by the intersection of caste and patriarchal violence, in the manner theorized by trauma studies.

The paper proceeds in nine segments. It first outlines its theoretical framework. It then examines the

kaani system as the novel's political-economic substratum, before turning to the novel's remarkable staging of post-Independence electoral democracy and Panchayati Raj institutions as a second, distinctly political, register of subalternity. It then analyses the ideological freight of caste language, particularly the novel's opening slur and its translation. A central section reads Muthumari as a case study in trebly-oppressed subaltern womanhood. Subsequent sections consider the neem tree and the *karisal* soil as cultural and ecological witnesses, examine orality and folk song as a mode of narrative resistance, and assess the ambivalent hope invested in the grandson Sudalai. The paper closes by considering the act of translation itself as a political and epistemic intervention, before a brief conclusion.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Subaltern studies, inaugurated by Ranajit Guha and the historians associated with the Subaltern Studies collective, sought to recover the agency and consciousness of groups excluded from elite nationalist and colonial historiography, insisting that subaltern politics constitutes an autonomous domain rather than a diminished reflection of elite politics (Guha). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subsequent intervention complicated this recovery project by asking whether the subaltern, and especially the subaltern woman, doubly effaced by colonial and patriarchal discourse, can in fact "speak" within structures of representation not of her own making (Spivak 271-313). *And Then* dramatises precisely this problem: Alagiri and Muthumari are both granted extended interiority by Poomani's narration, yet their speech reaches the reader only after passing through the oral culture of the *cheri*, the printed Tamil text, and finally T. Marx's English translation. The novel is thus a productive site for testing Spivak's question, since it self-consciously stages the layered mediations through which a subaltern voice reaches a wider reading public.

Cultural studies furnishes a second lens. Poomani's fiction belongs to what Tamil criticism calls *karisal* literature, a regionally rooted body of writing, associated also with Ki. Rajanarayanan, that resists the Sanskritised, urban, upper-caste registers of mainstream Tamil letters and instead weaves land and language together in a single dialectical idiom (Armstrong 269-270). To read *And Then* as a cultural studies text is to attend to it as an archive of a specific material culture: chappal-making, the repair of water-lift leathers, agricultural labour, kinship address such as "Maman" and "Adei," and a repertoire of festival songs that together constitute what

the novel's own critical apparatus calls the epistemic world of the *Chakkili kudi* (Armstrong 275).

Trauma studies, finally, supplies the vocabulary for reading the novel's most devastating episode, Muthumari's suicide. Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as an event that resists full integration into conscious narrative and instead returns in fragments, silences, and repetitions, together with Judith Herman's clinical description of the psychological aftermath of chronic domestic and social violence, illuminates why Poomani renders Muthumari's death not through her own testimony but through the fragmented perceptions of others: her son's report, the villagers' shocked reconstruction, and the physical description of her recovered body (Caruth; Herman). The unspeakability of her suffering, structurally enacted in the narrative's refusal to grant her a first-person account of her final days, is itself an argument about whose pain a caste society permits into speech. Together, these three frameworks allow a reading of *And Then* that neither reduces the novel to a sociological document of caste oppression nor treats it as a purely aesthetic exercise in regional colour, but attends instead to the way Poomani's narrative form is itself an argument about subalternity, culture, and pain.

The *Kaani* System: Political Economy of Bonded Caste Labour

At the structural centre of *And Then* lies the *kaani* system, a semi-feudal arrangement whereby each man in the Chakkili cheri was assigned to a particular landlord, on whose land he worked in exchange for a share of the produce, providing landlords an assured supply of labour and providing each Chakkili household a bare means of subsistence (Armstrong 268). The novel's early chapters dramatise the community's own negotiation of this system when the arrival of Alagiri as an outsider forces the cheri to debate whether to allot him a share of an already scarce resource (Poomani 11-14). The debate, conducted among men named Vandari, Sakkanan, Kuppani, and Kandan, is significant for what it reveals about subaltern agency operating within, rather than against, an oppressive structure. The community never questions the legitimacy of the *kaani* system as such; it argues instead, with considerable procedural sophistication, over the ethics of distribution within it. Sakkanan's rebuke to the reluctant Kuppani, that no one among them owns patta land and that "we are cursed to live precariously" (Poomani 13), voices both a communal ethic of mutual aid and a resigned acknowledgment of the precarity binding them all. Kandan's offer to give up his own share so that "no heirs and nothing, only me and my wife" need not become an obstacle to a newcomer's survival (Poomani 14)

exemplifies a subaltern economy of reciprocity that functions as a shock absorber where no state welfare exists.

This communal negotiation exemplifies Guha's claim that subaltern politics possesses an autonomous domain: a self-governing, consensus-based mode of resource allocation operating below the landlord's notice even while remaining structurally dependent on the landlord's economy (Guha). Alagiri's own diplomacy in this scene, his statement that the others may give him a share "if you want to; otherwise let it be" (Poomani 13), displays a subaltern political skill of not appearing to claim what he in fact needs, a survival strategy calibrated to a world in which visible assertion invites retaliation.

Yet the *kaani* system is also, unmistakably, bonded labour dressed in the language of kinship and obligation. Alagiri's fear on arrival, that he "should not antagonize these people, coming over here bowing to the wishes of the landlords" (Poomani 15), names directly the coercion beneath the courtesy. His years of obliging, obsequious service to the wealthy Villiseri landlord (Armstrong 268) are rewarded with occasional festival meals and casual patronage, an economy of scraps that stands in silent contrast to the landlord's four pairs of bulls, his buffaloes, and his vast holdings of the region's best black soil (Poomani 15). Caste ideology and material economy are thus doubled in the novel: caste furnishes the ideological justification for confining Chakkilis to menial and leather work, while the *kaani* system furnishes the material mechanism, bonded and share-based labour, by which that hierarchy reproduces itself across generations. Tellingly, in the novel's later chapters Alagiri twice relinquishes a *kaani* outright, first that of the landlord Appiah and later that of "the big landlord" himself, after being rebuked for his friendship with a lower-ranking neighbour (Poomani 233). The narrative neither celebrates this withdrawal as revolutionary defiance nor laments it as ruin; it records it simply as one more adjustment in a life of adjustments, itself an argument about the constrained horizons of agency available to the rural subaltern subject, who can withdraw from a particular bond of servitude but not from the system that produces servitude as such.

If the *kaani* system indexes the agrarian, pre-Independence face of caste subjection, *And Then* is equally concerned with the ways the postcolonial democratic state has failed to unsettle that subjection. In one of the novel's most pointed passages, Chakkili farm labourers discuss the meaning of Indian Independence while ploughing a field. One asks bluntly, "They say we are all liberated. Were we in prison earlier?", and an older man, Vedamuthu, answers that "freedom must be only for those who had been in

prison for a long time. Just for the sake of it, they would have said, it is for all" (Poomani 7). The labourers recall having been told that after Independence "anybody could have food at anyone's house without hesitation," an unmistakable, if oblique, reference to the promise of an end to untouchability, only to conclude that no such change has reached them and that landlords "would rather throw the wormy grain into the trash than give away to anyone" (Poomani 7-8). This exchange is among the most explicitly socio-political moments in the novel: it stages the gap between the legal abolition of untouchability under the Indian Constitution and its continued social and economic practice in the *karisal* village, and it does so in the ironic, understated register of field-labourers' banter rather than through authorial polemic.

The novel extends this critique into its treatment of electoral politics. When a local election approaches, the powerful Villiseri and Gopal Naicker landlords summon the Chakkili cheri's leaders to instruct them, in the imperative mood of caste command rather than the language of civic persuasion, that "the entire Chakkili cheri should vote for us" because the candidate is a relative of the landlord's family (Poomani 38-39). The scene that follows the election is still more damning: landlords interrogate individual voters about how they cast their ballots, and the labourers, evidently coached in advance, describe elaborate strategies for either voting as instructed or performing compliance, including folding the ballot and displaying it before dropping it in the box (Poomani 45-46). The secrecy of the ballot, the formal guarantee of individual political agency in a democracy, is here systematically nullified by the informal but absolute authority of caste patronage. Shortly afterward, the narrative notes with dry understatement that a new Panchayat Board has been constituted in the village and that "the big landlord has become the President" (Poomani 47), confirming that the very institution of local self-government introduced by the postcolonial state to devolve power to the village has been captured by the same class that dominated the pre-Independence agrarian order.

Read through subaltern studies, this sequence exemplifies what Guha and later scholars of Indian democracy have identified as the persistence of a dominant "little kingdom" logic beneath the formal apparatus of universal suffrage: elections and Panchayati Raj institutions, designed to redistribute political power, are here absorbed into pre-existing hierarchies of land and caste. Poomani's achievement is to render this absorption not as an abstract thesis but as a series of small, concrete, and often blackly comic scenes, the ballot folded and displayed, the landlord's casual assumption of the presidency, that allow the reader to feel the precise

mechanism by which formal freedom is hollowed out. The novel thus insists that any account of the socio-political themes of *And Then* must extend beyond the agrarian *kaani* system to include the specifically postcolonial institutions, elections, Panchayat governance, and the rhetoric of Independence, through which caste domination is reproduced under a new constitutional vocabulary.

The Grammar of Caste: Slurs, Address, and the Ideology of Language

And Then opens not with description but with an insult: "Elei, Chakkili motherfucker, look at the buffalo grazing the haystack. Are you blind?" (Poomani 1), shouted by the landowner Pothi Naicker at the cattle-tender Karuppan. The novel's translator's preface reads this line as programmatic, arguing that the caste hierarchy between the "upper class" Pothi Naicker and the "lower class" Chakkili Karuppan is sanctioned by divinity itself, since Karuppan is obliged to address the landlord as "Sami," or lord, even as the landlord addresses him with a casteist slur (Natarajan vii). N. Natarajan's introductory essay on the novel's "ideological translation" argues that T. Marx's decision to transliterate rather than translate certain words, retaining "Elei" instead of rendering it merely as "Hey," and retaining "Chakkili" and "Sami" in their original form, preserves the specific "fascistic connotation" embedded in the original Tamil address system, a connotation that a purely semantic English equivalent would lose (Natarajan vii-viii). The same essay notes that this asymmetry of address is answered, at the novel's close, by an opposite and affectionate register: Alagiri's cry to his grandson, "Adei, don't fall down" (Poomani 265), uses the same grammatical form of address that Pothi Naicker had used with contempt, but here to express tenderness within the Chakkili community itself (Natarajan viii).

This linguistic doubling matters for a subaltern studies reading because it demonstrates that caste in the novel is not merely an economic relation but a linguistic and performative one, continuously re-enacted through modes of address that assign superiority and inferiority with every utterance. Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, though not itself a subaltern studies term, illuminates the mechanism at work: Karuppan is hailed into caste subjectivity by the very words used to abuse him, and his obligatory reply, "Don't scold me, Sami" (Poomani 1), confirms rather than resists the hierarchy inscribed in the greeting. Yet the novel refuses to let this interpellation be the whole story. Immediately after the confrontation with Pothi Naicker, Karuppan walks to the neem tree in the Chakkili street, where his kinsman Alagiri greets him with the affectionate "mamov" (maternal uncle)

rather than a caste epithet (Poomani 2), and Alagiri's advice, that Karuppan should simply "get and shed all such things" rather than allow the insult to fester (Poomani 3), models a subaltern strategy of emotional self-preservation under conditions where confrontation carries a disproportionate risk of violence.

Poomani's use of dialogue as the primary vehicle of narration, described in the novel's foreword as the *sangati* technique also associated with the Tamil Dalit writer Bama's autobiographical novel *Sangati* (Chellapan iv), further supports this reading. By rendering the community's self-understanding almost entirely through overheard, reported, and communal speech rather than through an omniscient narrator's summary, Poomani formally enacts the idea that the Chakkili *cheri* constitutes what Bama, too, understood as a collective subaltern subject whose selfhood is distributed across many voices rather than concentrated in a single heroic consciousness (Bama). The slur that opens the novel and the endearment that closes it thus frame the text as a whole: a movement from an externally imposed vocabulary of caste degradation to an internally generated vocabulary of kinship and care, without the novel ever suggesting that the former has been abolished in the world outside the neem tree's shade.

Treble Oppressed: Muthumari, Patriarchy, and the Limits of Testimony

If Alagiri's story dramatizes the subaltern male's negotiation of caste and economic bondage, his daughter Muthumari's story dramatizes what the novel's own afterword calls a "treble oppressed" subaltern womanhood, burdened simultaneously by caste, and by two successive patriarchal households (Armstrong 275). Muthumari's onset of puberty is treated by the community as a public, almost commercial event: the contractor's wife who discovers her condition at a work site publicly announces it to the assembled women with evident satisfaction, "a sense of pride" that the narrative associates with the "discovery" of something valuable rather than a private bodily change (Poomani 51). Muthumari's own reaction, throwing herself under a tree in shame even as her body remains "cool" in the heat, and her later silence as female relatives debate whether the ritual seclusion is being conducted properly, register her as an object of communal ceremony rather than a subject with a voice in decisions about her own body (Poomani 52-53). The scene culminates in her rapid marriage negotiations, initiated the same week, in which Muthumari's opinion is never solicited even as the community praises her stepmother Avadai's devotion in raising her (Poomani 54-57).

This pattern of managed womanhood culminates in catastrophe. After a difficult first marriage, Muthumari is remarried into a household at Ayyankulam, where, following the death of a kindly relative she has known since childhood, her second husband accuses her of neglecting their infant daughter merely because she attended the funeral, and kicks her while she is still holding the child, shouting, "What does it matter if you are alive or dead?" (Poomani 219). The elder woman of the household offers only a token protest, "It is quite natural that a baby would cry" (Poomani 219), before falling silent, an index of how thoroughly domestic violence against a daughter-in-law is naturalized even by other women within the same patriarchal structure. The immediate consequence is decisive and irreversible: within days, Muthumari leaves her son Sudalai with instructions to find his grandfather, and drowns herself in an abandoned well with her infant daughter bound to her body by her own saree, "as if she did not want to see anyone" (Poomani 225).

Analyzed through Caruth's and Herman's accounts of trauma, the formal structure of this episode is as significant as its content. Poomani grants Muthumari no interior monologue in her final hours; her decision is narrated only retrospectively, through Sudalai's report of her last words to him and through the community's shocked reconstruction after Karuppan discovers her body (Poomani 224-225). The narrative's refusal to represent Muthumari's consciousness at the moment of crisis is not a failure of craft but a formal enactment of the trauma-studies claim that certain extremities of suffering resist direct narration and survive instead only in the fragmented testimony of witnesses (Caruth). Her death is also legible as an act of communication that could not otherwise be spoken: unable to name her husband's violence within a household that had already demonstrated it would not credit her account, she chooses an act that forces the community, however belatedly, to reckon with what happened to her, even at the cost of taking her infant daughter's life along with her own. That the Village Munsif's first response to this death is to extract a bribe of five rupees for not officially reporting it as unnatural (Poomani 226) confirms that the state apparatus, no less than the patriarchal household, is complicit in ensuring that a Dalit woman's death, unlike a Dalit man's labour, need not be accounted for at all.

Karuppan's unspoken, lifelong affection for Muthumari, noted by the novel's afterword as a love that could never be declared "because of societal taboos" governing kinship and marriage within the Chakkili cheri (Armstrong 268), adds a further dimension of foreclosed possibility to her story. Even within her own community,

where Muthumari might in principle have found a companionate alternative to her abusive marriages, custom forecloses the option before it can be voiced. Muthumari thus emerges as the novel's clearest illustration of Spivak's thesis that the subaltern woman is positioned at the intersection of overlapping structures, none of which offers her an unmediated space from which to speak on her own account (Spivak 287-295): not the caste hierarchy that structures her family's economic survival, not the patriarchal household that disciplines her body from puberty to death, and not even the affections of her own community, which love her but cannot say so.

Neem Tree, Black Soil, and the Cultural Landscape of *Karisal* Literature

Alongside its human characters, *And Then* grants an almost personified significance to the neem tree that stands at the centre of the Chakkili street, "a symbol," in the novel's foreword, "of the principle of perennial life that reveals itself in nature" even as it "participates in the sufferings of the people" (Chellapan v). The foreword's citation of the tree's description at the novel's close, standing "as ever in the same way" through cycles of flower, fruit, and barrenness while its trunk "alone remained without change" (Chellapan v), positions the neem as a witness whose endurance frames and outlasts the human drama of caste and loss enacted beneath it. Nearly every major scene of community deliberation in the novel, the *kaani* negotiation, Karuppan's account of his humiliation, Alagiri's grief after Muthumari's death, and the closing exchange with Sudalai, occurs literally in the tree's shade (Poomani 2, 233, 265), making it the novel's central chronotope: the one fixed point around which the mobile, precarious lives of the Chakkili cheri circulate.

This rootedness in a specific landscape situates *And Then* within what Tamil criticism calls *karisal* literature, a body of writing, including the work of Ki. Rajanarayanan, dedicated to the dry, black-soil districts of southern Tamil Nadu and to the dialectical relationship between land, labour, and language found there (Armstrong 269-270). The novel's own Afterword places Poomani in the company of an international tradition of "novels of the soil," from Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, that dramatize the struggle of impoverished agrarian communities against both natural and social forces (Armstrong 270). Reading *And Then* as cultural studies text means recognizing that its extensive attention to craft knowledge, chappal-making, the mending of water-lift leathers, veterinary care of buffaloes, functions not as ethnographic decoration but as a deliberate assertion of the Chakkili community's specialized, experiential expertise,

challenging what the afterword calls the reductive “stereotypical association of this section with making and mending chappals particularly” by demonstrating the breadth of indigenous technical knowledge the community actually possesses (Armstrong 272).

The “black soil” of the *karisal* tract thus functions doubly in the novel: as the material ground of agrarian exploitation, since it is precisely the best black soil that belongs to the Villiseri landlord (Poomani 15), and as a cultural inheritance that the Chakkili community knows more intimately, and works more skilfully, than the landlords who merely own it. This doubled landscape, at once site of dispossession and source of embodied knowledge, exemplifies the productive tension cultural studies identifies between structures of domination and the lived cultures that persist, adapt, and sometimes quietly subvert them from within.

Orality, Song, and the Aesthetics of Subaltern Narration

And Then is threaded throughout with folk songs, work chants, and oral formulas that constitute the Chakkili cheri's primary cultural archive, in the absence of access to formal, literate institutions. Karuppan's cattle-grazing song, comparing a black-soil girl's brow to the price of quails (Armstrong 273-274), and the engagement-ceremony nuptial song sung in Chapter 12, in which the imagery moves from a woman's forbidden hand and foot to her permitted waist-beads (Armstrong 273), together demonstrate a sophisticated oral poetics of courtship and labour operating entirely outside the formal literary Tamil associated with upper-caste writing. The novel's own critical Afterword compares this technique to Chinua Achebe's incorporation of proverb and song into *Things Fall Apart*, arguing that both writers integrate the oral culture of a colonised or casteised people into the fabric of the novel form itself rather than treating it as external ornament (Armstrong 273-274).

Poomani's Author's Note situates this oral material within a specifically political frame by quoting, in full, a field song titled “Ailasa,” whose refrain moves from “Before dawn, / Freedom came” to “After dawn, / Freedom gone,” concluding that what the people were promised, they lost the moment day broke (Poomani ix-x). This song functions as a compressed, poetic anticipation of the novel's later, more discursive critique of Independence discussed above; the labourers' ironic dialogue about liberation (Poomani 7-8) essentially unpacks in prose what the song had already stated in verse. That Poomani chooses to open the novel proper with this song in his Author's Note, before the narrative itself begins, signals that the critique of hollow postcolonial freedom is not

incidental to the novel but one of its organizing political claims.

Formally, the novel's reliance on reported dialogue, the sangati technique noted in its foreword as a shared inheritance with Bama's Sangati (Chellapan iv), extends this orality into the level of narrative structure itself. Rather than an omniscient narrator explaining the community's values, the reader learns them by overhearing arguments, jokes, insults, and songs exchanged among the Chakkilis themselves. This choice enacts, at the level of literary form, the subaltern studies claim that a marginalised community's consciousness is best recovered not through external description but through attention to its own modes of self-articulation, however fragmentary, occasional, and orally transmitted those modes may be (Guha).

Sudalai and the Ambivalent Futurity of Emancipation

The novel's final chapters shift attention to Alagiri's grandson Sudalai, Muthumari's orphaned son, who is raised jointly by Alagiri and his second wife Avadai after his mother's death. Where Alagiri's life has been organised entirely around the neem tree and the *kaani* system, Sudalai's is organised, however unevenly, around school: he carries “three shirts” and a bag “full of books and note books” (Poomani 264), attends classes irregularly while still helping with agricultural chores on Sundays, and articulates his own aspiration in the register of state institutions rather than village hierarchy, imagining that after finishing his tenth-standard examinations he might join the police or military and be given “a cap” of his own (Poomani 264-265). Alagiri's response, that the boy “should go for a better job than that” (Poomani 265), is the novel's closing statement of intergenerational hope, gesturing toward education and upward mobility as an alternative to both the *kaani* system and the coercive state institutions that have thus far treated the Chakkili cheri as a source either of bonded labour or of manipulable votes.

Yet the novel is notably restrained about the content of this “better job,” refusing to specify what emancipation might concretely look like, and the final image, Sudalai climbing the half-built walls of a new match factory in the village common while Alagiri calls out, “Adei, don't fall down” (Poomani 265), is poised ambiguously between industrial modernity's promise of a livelihood beyond agrarian caste bondage and the persistent risk, both literal and figurative, of falling back into the very structures the older generation sought to leave behind. This ambivalence is consistent with the paper's broader argument: *And Then* does not offer a triumphalist narrative of caste emancipation through education or industry, any more than it offered one

through Independence or the ballot box. Instead, it ends, as it began, beneath the neem tree, with an old man's watchful, affectionate warning to a child whose future remains genuinely open but by no means guaranteed.

Translation as Political and Epistemic Act

Any socio-political reading of *And Then* must finally reckon with the fact that the text under discussion is itself a translation, and that this act of translation is repeatedly framed, both within the volume's paratexts and in subsequent commentary, as a political and epistemic intervention rather than a neutral linguistic transfer. Tejaswini Niranjana's observation that translation depends on inherited, historically Western philosophical notions of reality, representation, and knowledge (qtd. in Armstrong 276) is invoked in the novel's afterword precisely to argue that *And Then*, translated by T. Marx, a scholar who shares the *karisal* dialect and cultural background of the author, resists that inherited framework by insisting on fidelity to authentic Chakkili "world views, cultural realities and epistemic practices" rather than assimilating them to a more familiar English idiom (Armstrong 276). Lawrence Venuti's account of translation as a site of overlapping linguistic, cultural, ideological, and political determinations (qtd. in Armstrong 277) is similarly mobilized to argue that the novel's translation cannot be separated from the caste politics it depicts: the choice to transliterate rather than translate words such as "Chakkili," "Sami," and "Elei" is not a stylistic preference but, as N. Natarajan's essay insists, the only way of preserving the "casteist sense" and "fascist connotation" that a purely semantic English rendering would erase (Natarajan viii).

T. Marx's own translator's note frames this challenge in strikingly similar terms, describing his effort to render Poomani's "blunt style" without either sanitising its slurs or exoticising its rural idiom, and recording Poomani's own anxiety that the English version might "Englising" the *karisal* experience more than the rustic, "primitively raw" original intended (Marx xii). The Sujit Mukherjee formulation cited in the novel's afterword, that translation is both a "discovery" and a "recovery" (qtd. in Armstrong 275-276), captures precisely what is at stake here: *And Then* in English is not merely a rendering of a Tamil novel for a new readership but an act of epistemic recovery that brings a previously untranslated, doubly marginalised community's self-representation into wider circulation, against what the afterword calls the gate-keeping tendencies of India's "privileged translators" and "literary elites" (Armstrong 276). Read this way, the very existence of the English text this paper analyses is itself a further, and later, chapter in the novel's ongoing socio-political argument: that subaltern experience, once written,

must still struggle to be heard, translated, published, and read.

III. CONCLUSION

And Then constructs its socio-political critique on several simultaneous registers: the agrarian political economy of the *kaani* system, which binds caste hierarchy to a concrete mechanism of bonded, share-based labour; the hollow promise of postcolonial Independence and electoral democracy, exposed through the labourers' ironic dialogue and the landlords' capture of the ballot box and the Panchayat Board; the linguistic ideology of caste address, in which a single word can carry either degradation or affection depending on who speaks it and to whom; the trebly compounded oppression of caste and patriarchy borne by Muthumari, whose death the narrative can represent only obliquely, through the testimony of others, in a formal enactment of trauma's resistance to direct speech; and the persistent, rooted cultural world of the *karisal* landscape and its oral traditions, which endure alongside, and sometimes in spite of, all of the above. Read together through subaltern studies, cultural studies, and trauma studies, these registers do not resolve into a single argument so much as they accumulate into a portrait of subalternity as multiply determined, economically, politically, linguistically, and psychically, and never reducible to any one of its causes alone.

Poomani's achievement, and T. Marx's achievement in bringing that novel into English, is to have rendered this multiply determined subalternity from within, through the community's own idiom, songs, arguments, and silences, rather than through the externalizing gaze of an upper-caste or foreign observer. That the novel ends not with resolution but with an open, watchful question about the fate of its youngest generation is perhaps its most honest socio-political statement: in the *karisal* tract Poomani depicts, caste, gender, and the postcolonial state have not yet been dislodged, only, perhaps, unsettled enough that a grandfather can imagine, even if he cannot guarantee, something better for the child still playing on the unfinished wall.

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