

**Paratexts and the Voice of the Subaltern: A
Comparative Study of the Malayalam Novel
Kocharethi and its English Translation
*Kocharethi: The Araya Woman***

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Abstract

Catherine Thankamma translated the Malayalam novel *Kocharethi* by Narayan into English. The present research article is a comparative study of the paratexts associated with the Malayalam and the English version. The paratextual elements which contribute to the production, transmission and reception of the subaltern text is analysed here.

Keywords: paratext, representation, subaltern, translation

The Malayalam novel *Kocharethi* by Narayan, published in 1998, is the first novel in the language by a tribal writer. Through the lives of the protagonists, Kunjipennu and Kochuraman, the novel depicts the life and struggles of the Mala Araya community in the hilly regions of central Kerala. The narrative opens with the Araya woman Kunjipennu's falling in love with a 'vaidyan' (traditional medical practitioner) named Kochuraman. Their marriage in defiance of the existing norms of the Araya tribe and their life together are narrated against the backdrop of the changing patterns of the community's fight for sustenance.

Narayan's pioneering novel, which gained attention as the first representation of Mala Araya life in writing, received a wider

readership with its translation into English by Catherine Thankamma. The novel, which seeks to give an authentic portrayal of the tribe, is in itself a revolt and a means of writing back to counter the misrepresentations of tribal communities in popular culture. Neelam Srivastava in her essay “A Multiple Addressivity: Indian Subaltern Autobiographies and the Role of Translation,” observes how “Subaltern writing . . . emerges as a unified body of work through translation, therefore also consolidating its potential for political resistance” (107). Srivastava’s argument, though its primary focus is on Dalit Autobiographies in translation, is applicable in the case of the present study too. Srivastava also demonstrates how “attempts to analyse this writing raises more questions than it answers” (127). The act of translation of subaltern texts, though primarily aimed at widening the range of readership, also succumbs to the interventions of the existing power structures. In addition to the subaltern text, the paraphernalia associated with its publication structures its existence. The materials which surrounds it play a significant part in how the reception of the text is programmed. This programming is differently designed for the native text and the English translation.

D.C. Books published a re-print of the Malayalam novel in 2004 as a special edition as part of the series ‘Novel Carnival.’ The series which commemorates one hundred and twenty five years of Malayalam novel attempts to re-publish representative works of fiction in the language. Renowned authors K.P.Appan and E.V.Ramakrishnan edited the series. Kocharethi is one among the eighty four novels chosen for ‘Novel Carnival.’ The re-print as part of this series is considered for analysis in this study, alongside the 2012 edition of the English translation. The text includes a ‘Prasadakakurup’ (Publisher’s Note), a study by Pradeepan Pampirikkunnu and an author’s preface to the novel in beginning, and a study by P.K. Pokkar as end-note, author’s brief bio-note, a reference to the first publication date and a list of studies on the novel in the end. The English translation of the novel, titled *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*, which won the Economist-Crossword Book Award in the Indian language translation category, was published by Oxford University Press in 2011. Thankamma’s translation of the novel, is accompanied by various

paratexts including “Author’s Note”, “Translator’s Note”, “Introduction”, “An Interview with Narayan”, “Glossary” and footnotes.

A paratext can be, as Kathryn Batchelor defines the term in *Translation and Paratexts*, “any element which conveys comment on the text, or presents the text to readers, or influences how the text is received” (12). Batchelor develops Gerard Genett’s concept of paratexts and delineates how paratexts, as “a consciously crafted threshold,” influences the ways in which the translated text is received (142). Kathryn Batchelor argues that “research into paratexts pushes to the fore questions around the agents involved in producing translated products” (39). According to Gerard Genett, “The ways and means of the paratext change continually, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work, and edition, with varying degrees of pressure” (3). Thus a scrutiny of the paratextual elements would reveal the ideological framework into which the translated work is devised to fit in. A comparative study of the paratexts of the Malayalam and the English version of *Kocharethi* would aid the understanding of the extra-textual elements which produce meaning to the actual text.

The present paper is an attempt to study how these paratexts creates the guidelines for the reading of the subaltern text. It seeks to understand the extent of mediation the subaltern’s voice undergoes to be heard, both in the native language as well as in the translated language. But the analysis here would be restricted to the materials inside (and on) the books and the works like newspaper articles, interviews published elsewhere, online reviews, research articles etc. are not brought into the canvas of this paper due to practical constraints. The focus of the paper would be limited to the cover pages, the title pages, introductory pages, illustrations and the appended materials which encrust Narayan’s novel in its two versions.

The cover page of the Malayalam version includes a painting by Abhilash Chacko. It shows a face and an irregular shaped palette standing out of a dark cluster of leaves. The palette has a leaflet dipped in blue ink. The leaves which form the dark background probably suggests the forest out of which nothing except the face and the palette

is discernible. It can be the depiction of the only representation coming out of a community which hitherto had been un-represented, from the point of view of the outer world. A multi-coloured painting by Thejo Menon forms the front cover of the English translation and the title and writers' names are given on top of it. The painting shows the figure of a woman in traditional attire standing beneath the canopy of a tree. When compared to the face and the chisel on the Malayalam version, the figure of more prominent and the view given is that of a closer vision. The difference suggests the wider readership received by the novel at the time of the English translation. The life of the community receives more visibility by this time. The picture is from the perspective of someone getting an insider's view and the protagonist and the peculiarity of her life is suggested.

The cover pages of the novels are designed to provide a bird's eye view of the book. The front cover and back covers together give a quick and brief idea about what comprises the book. They, apart from acknowledging the major contributors, introduces and recommends the text to the prospective readers. Both the front and back covers carries the imprints of the publishing houses. The back cover introduces the novel, the novelist and the translator. In the English translation, the name 'Narayan' is given in the same font size as 'Kocharethi' on the top and the style imitates a crude handwritten form. The fact that it is a translated version is given as a less prominent piece of information. The style used for "Translated from Malayalam by Catherine Thankamma" follows a printed format. In the blurb of the Malayalam novel, a short review by the academic and critic Dr. P.G.Padmini is given. Padmini introduces the book as capable of perturbing the critical reader's mind (Back Cover). In the English version, the novel is introduced as "a powerful saga of loss" (Back Cover). Narayan's achievements as a writer, including the fact that he is "recipient of the prestigious Kerala Sahitya Academy Award," is mentioned. The translator Catherine Thankamma's accomplishments as an academic and critic are also lauded. It also demarcates the potential readers by stating that the work "will appeal to readers of all hues, including students and scholars of Indian writing, comparative literature, and translation, cultural, and gender studies." Thus it is made

clear at the outset that the work provides scope for academic deliberations by inviting the attention of the academia. Finally, a recommendation of the book by the renowned writer Mahaswetha Devi is added to the cover. Thus a pan-Indian readership is aimed at when she calls it “a remarkable book” and recommends that it “should be translated into other Indian languages” (Back Cover). It is interesting to note that Mahaswetha Devi was a non-tribal activist and writer who had raised her voice against the discrimination suffered by tribal people. Therefore the cover pages of the book point to the paradoxes involved in the production and reception of a book which has the voice of a subaltern at its centre.

The title pages of the books further indicates names of the prominent academics who contributed to the paratexts of the Malayalam and the English texts. The opening page of the Malayalam book bears the details of the series to which it is part of. The title page, apart from providing the names of the author and publisher, acknowledges the contribution of Pradeepan Pampirikunnu, who has written an introduction. In the English version, the title page gives a list of the contributors. It states: “Translated from Malayalam by Catherine Thankamma, With an Introduction by G.S.Jayasree, Illustrated by Sudheesh P.S.” and “Edited by Mini Krishnan.” An analysis of the Contents reveals in the Malayalam version, out of the total one hundred and seventy six pages, the novel occupies one hundred and fifty six pages and in the English version out of a total of two hundred and fifty one pages, the novel occupies two hundred and seven pages. Thus eleven percent of the Malayalam book and eighteen percent of the English book comprise materials that explain, promote and justify the novel, its existence and its contents. These materials clarify the context of the production of the novel, its significance in the existing Malayalam literary canon and its similarities and differences with established forms of narratives.

In the ‘Publisher’s Note’(Prasadakakuruppu) of the Malayalam novel, Ravi D.C claims that the series ‘Novel Carnival,’ has attempted to include the books usually excluded from the mainstream instead of following the conventional benchmarks of Malayalam literature. He hopes the collections in the series enrich the reading experience of

Malayalees (05). The study by Pradeepan Pampirikunnu, titled “Apaharikkapedunna Jeevitham” (Hijacked Life), prefaced to the novel deals with the representations and lack of adivasi representation in not only Malayalam literature, but also Indian literature as a whole. A critical study by the Malayalam literary critic P.K.Pokker titled “Dalitpariprekshyam Adivasisahityathil” (Dalit Perspective in Adivasi Literature) is appended to the novel. Pokker situates the novel *Kocharethi* in the context of subaltern literature in Malayalam.

In the study made by Pradeepan Pampirikunnu the mainstream attitude to forest as a source of raw materials is discussed. Pampirikunnu says that the western notion of human beings as masters of nature bears the influence of philosophers like Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Francis Bacon (1561-1626). This has made the adivasis who reside in the forest to be looked down as ‘kadan’ or ‘kattalan’ devoid of individuality or agency (07). Pampirikunnu also speaks of the presence/absence of forest-dwellers in Malayalam literature. He notes the passive attitude towards forest in poems like “Sarppakavu” and “Pannipadakkam” and novel *Vishakanyaka* (1948). *Vishakanyaka* tells the story of encroachment of forest, thereby celebrating the sufferings of the conquerors. He observes that Malayalam Novel till *Kocharethi* remains silent on the plight of the people forced to withdraw to the interiors when newcomers colonise their land (07-08). This migration of the adivasis are dealt more sympathetically, though from the patronising point-of-view of the non-native, in the Bengali novel *Aaranyak* (1976) of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and the Kannada novels of Kota Sivaram Karanth (08).

In the Preface to the novel by Narayan, he justifies the title ‘kocharethi’ and lashes out at the misrepresentations of adivasis in popular culture. He informs the readers that young araya women were called ‘kocharethi’ by the vendors who came to the hills to sell trifles of modern living in exchange of expensive forest produce (13). Thus, he appropriates the title just as he has used the popular genre to write back to the colonizers. Narayan proclaims the authenticity of Mala Araya experience represented in the novel (14). Narayan speaks about “the ten years gap between its writing and appearance in

Malayalam, and then the next decade and more between its Malayalam and English versions” in the “Author’s Note” in the translation (vii).

At the outset, in the “Author’s Note” of the translated text, Narayan expresses his gratitude to the influential members of the academia and the publishing industry who played a significant role in publishing the Malayalam as well as English versions of the book for being “great, broadminded, and generous.” He further adds: “The marginalized have a life of their own and their writing reflects their perception of life. They might not have the artistic talent possessed by those who belong to the mainstream. I therefore bow to those who are sensitive to these factors” (vii). Here superiority of the mainstream literature is acknowledged by the tribal writer himself and the patronage received is accepted with gratitude.

In the “Translator’s Note,” Catherine Thankamma explains to the readers, the stylistic features of Narayan’s novel and its peculiarities, “The language is stark, to the point of being bald. The narrative often has a telegram-like abruptness where several words are left unsaid and intelligibility is taken for granted” (xi). Thus Narayan has adopted the genre and adapted it to suit the articulation of the experiences of his own community. Referring to Narayan’s choice of Malayalam over the tribal language, Thankamma argues that the Malayalam work is itself a translation. Here it is made clear that the very choice of a foreign language and genre by the writer is an act of protest against the dominant modes of representation. The novel’s translation into English aims at an even further reach, though it also intensify the degrees of mediation involved. The paratexts of both the Malayalam and English versions suggests the proportion of mediation involved in the transmission of the subaltern voice.

Thankamma describes her challenge in providing “the key that opens up a whole new world to the target reader” (ix). She defends herself for her selection of words:

Narayan has said that the decision to avoid the tribal language in favour of the dialect common to the region was a deliberate one, dictated by concerns regarding readability and intelligibility. He therefore confines himself to including a sprinkling of community specific words, most of which are presented in a manner that is self-

explanatory. . I have adhered to Narayan’s technique of including a few community-specific words to give the reader a feel of the original. (x)

Thus with an ethnographer’s zeal Thankamma seeks to provide is a peep into an alien and exotic world unknown to the target audience and herself. The illustrations by Sudheesh P.S. further help in opening up the tribal life to the readers of the translated text. Culture-specific pictures related to worship, dwellings, agriculture, trade, clothing etc. are interspersed throughout the English narrative. This pictorial detailing of the Araya life thus endeavouring to offer authenticity to the narration also adds to the othering of the community’s experience.

Just as the Malayalam novel, the Introduction to the English version, is in the format of a research article and is titled “Adivasi Rachana: Life, Land, and Language.” It begins by giving a rather detailed account of how Malayalam Novels have always engaged with “the question of land” (xv). A literary tradition is attempted and the present novel is argued to be belonging to that tradition. But the writers mentioned, C.V.Raman Pillai, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, M.T.Vasudevan Nair and O.V.Vijayan, are the established novelists from the privileged classes. As Narayan’s Novel is given validity as a successor of a tradition, the exclusionary policies of the same tradition is not dealt with. Interestingly, Catherine Thankamma, has observed in an essay titled “Othered in One’s Own Land: Adivasi Writing in Kerala” that “Kerala’s academic terrain is dominated by canonical writers, mostly upper-caste Hindus with a smattering of Muslim and Christian names” (42). Nevertheless, the same book which brings forth a side-lined voice endorses the widely accepted canon. No attempt is made to comprehend the absence of other voices in the canon or to problematize the canon itself.

Tracing of a lineage which includes only the writers of the upper elite classes and the exclusion of writers of deprived classes is highly questionable. It is self-contradictory that the touchstones used are still the same. Narayan’s own words quoted in the interview appended at the end says that the very purpose of writing the novel was to break the stereotypes embedded in the earlier portrayals. Narayan talks of his decision to write:

One reason was the growing realization that creative writing was in the hands of the elite upper classes. The adivasi when represented, appeared as a monochromatic figure; like the *rakshasan* or *nishacharan* of mythological stories. . . . There were a few of us who wanted to resist such a biased representation. We wanted to tell the world that we have our own distinctive way of life, our own value system. We are not demons lacking in humanity but a strong, hardworking and self reliant community. . . . So this enemy – who thought that they had the exclusive right to read and write literature . . . had to be tackled some or the other way. I thought, why not use the same weapon they use – writing? (208-209)

It is ironic that the work which seeks to rewrite the existing representations has to be judged with the existing standards. After the attempt to position *Kocharethi* in the Malayalam literary canon by a thematic comparison with established works, its position in the genre of aboriginal literature is established.

In the two articles included in the Malayalam book, however, the authors have looked at the novel *Kocharethi* in the context of subalternity, colonization, marginalisation and modernity. Both Pradeepan Pampirikunnu and P.K. Pokker, though compares the novel to O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha*, it is with regard to the potential of community reformation attempted by community narratives (10 & 171, respectively). But use of the term 'Dalit' to include adivasis is problematized by Narayan in the English translation. In the paratexts of the Malayalam version, the words 'dalit' and 'adivasi' are used interchangeably. In the Interview appended to the English translation, Narayan says, ". . . the difference between the two – the dalit who was subjugated and degraded within the caste system and the tribal who lived a difficult life but retained a definite identity – is as glaring as day and night" (213).

The paratexts included in both the books place the novel in context of not only Malayalam literature but also native resistance across the globe. They are not silent on the political ramifications of *Kocharethi*. The voice of the Mala Arayas is located in the "large-scale agitations by adivasis and dalits over land rights" (xxviii). Narayan is also critical of the patronising presence of the external forces. In

his interview Narayan states how the patronage from the mainstream, especially that of the Christian missionaries and the Hindu leaders, have paved way for the disintegration of the tribal religion and heritage. The interview ends with Narayan's message to the readers of his book: ". . . we Arayar are the children of the hills. We are a hardworking, close knit community. We are not parasites. Therefore we do not ask for favours but for the right to live with dignity (216). This assertion of the rights is, however, made through the technologies of domination. The power structures integral to the institutional spaces mediates the voice. Putul Sathe, in his essay "Notes Towards Reading Adivasi Literature," demonstrates that in the case of the 'new subaltern,' "subalternity is not posited directly opposite to agency, but points to the manner in which agency is available and manifested in subaltern politics"(87). Here the subaltern does indeed speak and is not totally lacking in agency. The 'new subaltern' has attained agency but its nature is more complex.

Kocharethi, the novel which tells the story of a tribe from self-sufficiency to dependence, is in itself an attempt to regain agency and ensure visibility. As the very existence of the two versions of the book, the Malayalam and the English, is an instrument of revolt and a demand for a rightful place, the translated text seeks to justify its demands through the paratexts. The paratexts are instrumental in channelizing the subaltern's voice and enabling it to be heard. The patterns in addressivity suggested through these paratexts also implies at the limits in the reach of the subaltern's voice even in translation. Thus the subaltern text is methodically fashioned to be heard within specific contours of interaction.

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