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Located Within a Debate

S. Anandhi

MUVALUR RAMAMIRTHAMMAL'S WEB OF DECEIT: DEVADASI REFORM IN COLONIAL INDIA

Introduced and translated by Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran
 Kali for Women, 2003, pp. 217, Rs. 300.00

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Dasigal Mosavalai Allathu Madhi Petra Minor ('Web of Deceit or The Minor Grown Wise') is a Tamil novel written in 1936 by an activist of the Self-Respect Movement and a reformed Devadasi, Muvalur A. Ramamirtham Ammal. After being out of print for several decades, the novel has been recently reprinted in Tamil. The book under review is a translation of the novel along with a detailed introduction on the politics of Devadasi reform in colonial South India.

The author of the novel, Ramamirtham Ammal belonged to the Isai Vellalar caste, a caste that was closely associated with the devadasi system. Dedicated as a devadasi, she broke free from the system by marrying her music teacher. At a time when the nationalists opposed the participation of prostitutes and devadasis in politics Ramamirtham Ammal voiced their right to involve in formal politics. Her strong resistance to varied forms of marginalization of devadasis in the emerging public sphere was quite evident in her insistence on the leadership of the devadasis themselves in the abolition movement. Reminiscing this, a well-known trade unionist and a Congress leader of her time, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram noted in his autobiography that in 1925, when male social reformers of her caste invited him to deliver the keynote speech at the Isai Vellalar caste conference, Ramamirtham Ammal succeeded in inviting a devadasi social reformer from Andhra Pradesh to preside over the conference.

Unlike Muthulakshmi Reddy who demanded the reform of the devadasis through legislation, Ramamirtham Ammal in addition sought the transformation of the public sphere so as to recognize devadasis as citizens in the emergent nation. The novel conceptualizes this much-needed transformation through its critique of caste patriarchy, Brahminism, Hinduism and Congress politics. The novel is a product of Ramamirtham Ammal's long years of devadasi reform activities combined with her political activities in the Congress earlier and in the Self-Respect movement later. Given the author's identity as former devadasi, the publication of this novel in the 1930s was met with strong resistance from publishing houses in Madras city. Finally, a zamindarini from Pudukottai state, Vellai Duraichi Nachiyar who was concerned about the status of the devadasis, funded its publication.

The novel is about the world of devadasis and about what the devadasi reform movement, infused with the self-respect ideology of anti-brahminism and atheism, could achieve. On the advice of a wealthy dasi mother, two young talented dasis of much beauty deceive a zamindar's son, 'Tiruchi Minor'. He loses his wealth to them. When he attempts to pursue them, he encounters their cousin, a reformed devadasi, who sends him back to his family by reforming him. Meanwhile, another rich zamindar's son falls in love with the dasi sisters and drops his studies. On the very day of his wedding, he leaves his educated, intelligent wife to live with the dasi sisters. While he spends enormous wealth on the dasis, his father with the help of the young bride declares that his son has no right over his property and wealth. Meanwhile, the 'Tiruchi Minor' who has decided to teach a lesson to the dasi sisters disguises the young bride as a wealthy zamindar to attract the dasis. Having learnt that the zamindar's son has no access to his father's wealth, the dasis decide to throw him out and welcome his disguised wife. After rescuing her husband from the control of the dasi sisters, she moves out of the dasi household. Unable to find another wealthy zamindar, the dasi household falls into abject poverty and the dasi sisters' brother too sells his daughter to a dasi. But she resents being a devadasi and elopes with her music teacher. Through a devadasi reform association, she organizes the dasis against the system and thus earns the wrath of the men of her caste and also of the dasis who oppose the reform. In the end, the 'Tiruchi Minor', with the help of the reformed devadasis and zamindars, organizes a social reform conference to propagate devadasi abolition. The conference passes a resolution in favour of education, intercaste marriage of devadasis and against the dance performance by dasis during marriages and other festivals.

Located firmly within the context of the devadasi debate, the novel clearly articulates the demand for the abolition of devadasi system. While doing so, it does not merely advocate devadasi reform but as the translators of the novel point out, it "uncovers different layers of resistance and acquiescence" to the reform. The distinctiveness of this novel lies not in the story itself but in the fact that it allows multiple voices of devadasis to echo within the text and thus violating the stereotypes about the devadasis, which were in abundance within the devadasi reform movement. However, it should be emphasized that the author of the novel does not grant a free space for the dasis who were opposed to reform.

Written in a simple, easily readable Tamil, this voluminous novel with twenty-four chapters completely defies the conventions of novel writing of the time with its demystification of 'womanly virtues and manly behaviour'. The novel tells the story of multiple forms of love, sexual desires of both male and female and also of multiple masculinities and femininity. If the masculinity of the upper caste non-brahmin men who wield power over women is constantly ridiculed and critiqued, the emasculation of men of the devadasi household is often invoked, more sympathetically to highlight how the devadasi system equally exploits men (pp.113, 125). For instance, in one place a reformed devadasi alerts the 'Tiruchi Minor'

 

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about the masculinity of men who desire dasis in the following way: "Even the most intelligent, wealthy, wellborn gentlemen perform tasks for dasis which ordinary people would find distasteful. These same rich men get angry if their wives talk to them about family matters. They even demonstrate their bravery by using abuse and stick" (p.56). The moving portrayal of Karunakaran, a brother of the wealthy dasi sisters speaks volumes about the emasculation of men of the devadasi household: "Karunakaran walked along reflecting on the sorrows of being born male in a dasi household. He did not have any skills to earn a livelihood. He had no right to property. He had to perform every menial task he was asked to ..." (p.176).

Stories |

Kalpana and Vasanth Kannabiran have done a commendable job of rendering this novel in English without compromising on the content and meaning of the original text (though the title of the book gives the false impression that they have written a book on the novel). There are minor translation errors. For example, Kizhaveedhi in Tamil has been translated as lower street instead of east street. But these can be overlooked given the dexterity of the authors in handling the original text. The author's introduction to the translation not merely contextualizes the novel but offers a new conceptual framework to analyse the devadasi debate and locates the relevance of the novel in the context of the contemporary dalit women's movement, which strives to address the devadasi question among the dalits.

The publication of Ramamirtham Ammal's novel in English is timely. Currently there is a spate of translations of Tamil dalit writings into English—both political and literary—which seek to derecognize the contributions of anti-caste movements of the past such as the Self-Respect movement. Ramamirtham Ammal's novel is a reminder of the past inheritance of the present-day dalit and women's movement in Tamil Nadu.

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