

and even influenced by other social identities such as those of religion, class, caste and ethnicity. Circumstances often draw the loyalties of one dimension of one's identity to the foreground and gender identities then take a back seat.

I have not dealt with all the papers individually, not because they suffer qualitatively or do not have much to say, but because of lack of space and the impossibility of dealing with the articles in any depth in a short review. It may be said that one can find rigorous thematic unity in the text under review. The papers provide an index to the number of ways in which the theme of religion and gender can be dealt with, rendering it a welcome addition to the growing corpus of readers on issues of gender and identity in South Asia.

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**Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran (trans.),** *Muvalur Ramamirthammal's Web of Deceit: Devadasi Reform in Colonial India.* New Delhi: Kali for Women. 2003. 218 pages. Rs. 300.

Muvalur A. Ramamirthammal wrote *Dasigalin Mosavalai Alladhu Madhi Perra Minor* in 1936. Set within the discourse of Periyar's Self-Respect Movement,<sup>1</sup> the novel provided an insider's perspective of the lives of *dasis* and their social plight. It is heartening to note that the text is reaching a national and international readership through its translation into English.

The detailed editorial note is an elaborate discussion of the anti-*nautch* movement in the early 20th century, the Devadasi Abolition Act and the varied responses to it. It brings into focus the political economy of the system, changing male-female roles, notions of morality, the role of art and performance in evoking feminine charms, adoption of the girl child, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Though contextualised in the colonial era, the discussions are products of a pre-colonial society with its attendant notions of decadence.

The translators offer three reasons why the work 'continues to be an important text today' (p. 3). The first is to see it as relevant

for Dalit mobilisation in Telugu- and Kannada-speaking areas; the second to make available writings on reform in the Indian language contexts; and the third is in the context of the terrain of legal discourse. I find the first reason that links this text to the Ellamma cult in Telugu areas (that covers the themes of sex trafficking, caste and women's oppression) highly problematic. The feminist agenda overtly present in the text would squarely place it in the context of high culture and art. It would be simplistic to associate it with Dalit mobilisation in the contemporary context, which has an entirely different political economy altogether. Even without these reasons, the text is a valid repository of information, context and argument.

The translators have recorded how the deceptively linear narrative tries to weave in the complex realities of the lives of *dasis*. While undertaking a highly moralistic tone about the behaviour of these women and presenting monogamous family life as an alternative, the novel does not advocate a tame subservience to patriarchal notions of family. It basically emphasises compatibility in relationships, and the translation has captured the nuanced tone of the text. There are researchers of the performing arts and culture studies who bemoan the loss of a rich performance tradition (Saskia Kersenboom, Avanti Meduri, Amrit Srinivasan), with not much recognition of the importance of the movement for abolition of the *devadasi* system. This text would help them understand the insider's perspective. Of course, the authors have also mentioned the arguments of anti-abolitionists. It would be interesting to read the dialogues between Balasaraswathi and Rukmini Devi on this issue of art and aesthetics (see Lakshmi 2003: VII–LIII).

It should also be mentioned that *Dasigalin* remained in relative oblivion for long and Sivasakthi publishers, Nagapattinam, have recently brought out a new edition (2002). I cannot but compare another text, also published by Kali, in discussing *The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing of Self-Respect Literature*, edited by Srilata (2003). The latter has also included sections of Ramamirthammal's text. In fact, a major portion of Srilata's text is devoted to it (pp. 106–76). Srilata translates it as 'Dasis' Wicked Snares or the Playboy Who Came to His Senses', and has a note on her translation. As one involved in translation, I realise that much depends on the decisions taken while working at the task. But I have to point out an interesting difference between these two texts.

Right in the first chapter, a telegram arrives and Bogachintamani sends her son to the lawyer's house to get it translated. The Tamil original has a page-long description of the gesture codes of behaviour of the brother, the lawyer and the client. The telegram is also presented within inverted commas as a form of direct speech. Sri-lata provides a verbatim translation, which might be a strain on only-English-knowing readers, while Kalpana and Vasanth give us a cryptic paraphrase of the whole event and the telegram is also given as reported speech. A reader of the English translation might not feel the difference as *Web of Deceit* has a wonderful flow and readability. But for one familiar with the original, it is a matter of great difference. And in a text that uses the physical sense of behavioural codes as a crucial point of social ethics and morality, such omissions lose out on important aspects of the narration. I think the translators should have at least provided a note on the translation so that the readers know that certain editorial measures have been taken. In some sense, the text, if translated thus, is read more for the content rather than for the mode of narrative. However, being a literary text, I feel it is essential to understand the modes of narration as well as get into the translated text.

This brings me to the other question that both versions have omitted, namely, the place of this text within the context of literary history in Tamil. This is a highly debated area since most literary critics and scholars present the lack of 'aesthetic' appeal in texts belonging to the Self-Respect and Dravidian movements as a major critique of the movement itself. The question is much more interesting for feminist literary criticism, since most early fictional writings in Tamil have women as protagonists. Arasu (2002) identifies at least 13 women who wrote novels before the 1920s. Madaviah, V. Ramasamy and other early writers have dealt with issues of widow remarriage, child marriage, conversion and education. Even within the Self-Respect Movement, Girija Devi wrote *Mohana Ranjani*, a semi-autobiographical novel on widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage in 1931 (Sundararajan and Sivapadasundaran 1977: 141–44). When we place *Dasigalin* in this literary gamut, it is plain and direct, and there is very little exploration in self-hood. Periyar's discourses reveal an unparalleled insightful comment on these issues. There is also relatively meagre fictional output, especially by women from this movement, for which one can look for many reasons. But Ramamirthammal's text is situated in the public domain; there is very little revelation

of the private sphere. Coming as she does from a non-English-speaking background, the models for her must have been the polemical rhetoric of political campaigns. That was a genre perfected to its heights by the Self-Respect and Dravidian movements.

While I am aware that there are no in-depth studies of Tamil literary history, and women's literary history available in English, I think there is a need to place a text like *Web of Deceit* in the literary context as well. The book is a welcome addition to the sparse material on Tamil socio-political and literary history available to English readers. It is also a text that is of value to scholars from varied disciplines such as Tamil history, Periyarism, feminism and performance studies. Hopefully it will provoke constructive debates in understanding one of the most crucial movements of the 20th century and its ramifications.

### Note

1. Periyar is a title given to E.V. Ramasamy. He was an important force behind the formation of the Self-Respect Movement (1925) and later formed the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) in 1942. He insisted on rationality and offered a radical and controversial critique of micro- and macro-level issues, chief among them being gender. For more information refer to Geetha and Rajadurai (1998).

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