



Tribal Voices in Translation: Negotiating Cultural Spaces in Narayan's *Kocharethi*

Suresh Kurapati

Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima, India

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Abstract— This paper explores how *Kocharethi*, the first tribal novel in Malayalam by Narayan an Araya tribal man, participates in a cultural dialogue through its English translation by Catherine Thankamma. As a narrative rooted in the lived experiences, oral traditions, and ecological consciousness of the Malayar tribal community in Kerala, the text offers a unique insight into indigenous worldviews. The study examines how the act of translation becomes a site of cultural negotiation, mediating between marginalized tribal voices and the mainstream literary discourse. Drawing on postcolonial translation theory and cultural studies, the paper undertakes a close textual analysis of key elements like language, idioms, customs, and narrative style to trace the tensions between fidelity to tribal specificity and the imperatives of accessibility. While the translation enables wider visibility and recognition for tribal literature, it also involves inevitable shifts, losses, and transformations. The paper argues that *Kocharethi* in translation functions as a dialogic space, where tribal identity is both asserted and adapted. Ultimately, the study affirms the potential of translation not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a powerful tool for intercultural understanding and literary inclusion in India's pluralistic narrative landscape.



Keywords—Cultural Dialogue, Indigenous Identity, Malayalam Literature, Postcolonial Theory, Tribal Literature, Translation Studies

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the *dialogue of cultures* has become increasingly significant in literary and cultural studies as it emphasizes mutual understanding and negotiation between diverse cultural systems. Mona Abousenna (2004) suggests that such dialogue fosters a “cultural consensus,” enabling civilizational unity without erasing cultural difference. Literature, in this sense, serves as a vital space for intercultural exchange where voices from the margins can be heard and validated. Within this framework, translation emerges not as a neutral linguistic act but as a powerful form of *cultural mediation*, particularly when it involves texts rooted in indigenous or tribal traditions (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990; Venuti, 1995). One such text that invites critical attention is Narayan's *Kocharethi* (1998), widely recognized as the first tribal novel in Malayalam from South India. Narrating the life, customs, and struggles of the Malayar community in Kerala, the

novel offers an insider's view into a culturally rich yet historically marginalized tribal society. Its English translation by Catherine Thankamma, titled *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman*, significantly expanded its readership and impact. However, the translation also raises complex questions regarding the representation of tribal identity within dominant literary and linguistic frameworks. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) argues, translating subaltern voices demands ethical responsibility, as the act inevitably involves choices that affect how the Other is represented. Similarly, Venuti (1995) emphasizes the translator's “invisibility” in mainstream discourse, suggesting that translation can either domesticate or preserve the cultural distinctiveness of the original. In the case of *Kocharethi*, the translation serves as a dialogic site where tribal oral traditions, ecological sensibilities, and community values interact with global literary norms resulting in both cultural preservation and negotiation.

This paper draws on postcolonial translation theory and cultural studies to critically examine how the English translation of *Kocharethi* negotiates tribal identity, cultural meaning, and accessibility within mainstream discourse. It argues that the translation operates as a dialogic process, mediating between indigenous specificity and broader readership expectations.

The following research questions guide this inquiry:

- i. How does the translation of *Kocharethi* function as a dialogue between tribal and mainstream cultures?
- ii. What is lost, adapted, or transformed in this process of cultural mediation?

Through close textual analysis, this study explores the ethical and epistemological dimensions of translating tribal literature, ultimately highlighting the role of translation in advancing inclusivity in India's multilingual literary landscape.

II. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Narayan, the author of *Kocharethi*, occupies a significant position in the emergence of tribal voices in Indian literature. Born in 1940 in Idukki district of Kerala, Narayan belonged to the Malayar tribe, an Adivasi (indigenous) community residing predominantly in the Western Ghats. A first-generation literate from his community, Narayan worked as a government official-postman and writer, but his literary legacy lies in his role as a cultural chronicler who gave voice to tribal experiences from an insider's perspective. His novel *Kocharethi*, published in 1998, is widely recognized as the first tribal novel in Malayalam, and by extension, one of the earliest tribal novels in Indian vernacular literature. It portrays the life of Kunjipennu, a tribal woman, and spans decades of sociopolitical transformation in the Malayar community, reflecting broader issues of land alienation, caste like tribal oppression, displacement, and resistance. The Malayar tribe, classified as a Scheduled Tribe in India, traditionally practiced shifting cultivation and had a deep symbiotic relationship with nature. The tribe's oral traditions, folk rituals, and communal practices are central to its identity but have long been marginalized within the dominant literary and cultural frameworks of the region. Like many indigenous communities, the Malayars have faced social exclusion, economic marginalization, and cultural invisibility. Narayan's novel, therefore, functions not merely as a narrative but as a form of cultural documentation and resistance preserving a worldview often erased in mainstream discourse. The emergence of *Kocharethi* must be situated within the larger movement of tribal literature in India, which has gained critical attention

in recent decades. Tribal literature unlike postcolonial or Dalit literature has historically been excluded from institutional recognition and has struggled to find space in national literary canons. This is partly due to its strong reliance on oral forms and the reluctance of mainstream publishers to accommodate narratives seen as peripheral. Scholars like G.N. Devy and Mahasweta Devi have emphasized the need to legitimize tribal voices, recognizing them as repositories of alternative knowledge systems, ecological ethics, and community-based epistemologies. In this context, *Kocharethi* plays a pioneering role in bridging the gap between oral culture and written literary form, while also challenging the linguistic hegemony of dominant castes and classes.

The English translation of *Kocharethi* by Catherine Thankamma in 2011 significantly contributed to the novel's reception beyond Malayalam readership. Thankamma, a seasoned translator and academic, approached the translation with an acute awareness of the linguistic and cultural challenges posed by rendering tribal experiences into English. In her own commentary in the introduction to the book, she acknowledges the limitations of English in capturing the emotive nuances and contextual embeddedness of tribal expressions. Her translation attempts to maintain fidelity to the original while also negotiating readability for non-Malayali audiences. This act of translation is politically significant as it participates in a broader process of cultural mediation, bringing indigenous narratives into transregional and global conversations. However, it also opens up questions about representational authority, translational loss, and the risk of co-optation within dominant discourses. Thus, *Kocharethi* as authored by Narayan and translated by Thankamma embodies a complex literary and cultural movement. It represents a critical intervention in India's multilingual and multicultural literary landscape, enabling tribal voices to engage in a dialogue with both national and global readers.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Translation, particularly in postcolonial contexts, is not merely a technical or linguistic task but a politically charged process involving asymmetrical power relations, cultural representation, and ethical responsibility. Postcolonial Translation Theory foregrounds these issues, especially when dealing with texts by or about marginalized groups. In the case of Narayan's *Kocharethi*, the English translation by Catherine Thankamma raises critical questions about the translation of tribal experiences from a non-hegemonic language (Malayalam) to a global language (English) with embedded colonial histories.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "The Politics of Translation" (1993) is foundational to postcolonial translation discourse. Spivak emphasizes that the translation of texts produced by subaltern or marginalized subjects must be handled with extreme sensitivity, as such texts carry the burden of representing voices historically silenced or misrepresented. For Spivak, translation is an ethical act of "intimate reading," in which the translator must inhabit the text and its socio-cultural context rather than simply transfer its surface meanings. She warns against the homogenizing tendencies of global English, which often flattens linguistic and cultural diversity in the name of accessibility. This is especially relevant to *Kocharethi*, a novel deeply embedded in the oral traditions, ecological consciousness, and socio-religious customs of the Malayar tribe. Any attempt to translate this into English runs the risk of diluting or misrepresenting the community's distinct worldview. Lawrence Venuti's concept of "domestication" and "foreignization" offers another key theoretical tool for analysing literary translation. In *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995), Venuti critiques the dominant tendency in English-language translation practices to "domesticate" foreign texts i.e., to render them fluent, readable, and culturally familiar to target audiences. This practice, he argues, makes the translator invisible and erases the cultural alterity of the source text. Conversely, "foreignization" resists such assimilation by deliberately retaining the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of the original, thus confronting readers with its foreignness. In the context of *Kocharethi*, the translator's choices whether to retain tribal idioms, rituals, and ecological references or to adapt them to suit English-speaking readers become central to how the tribal community is represented in translation.

Catherine Thankamma's translation of *Kocharethi* appears to straddle this tension. While she attempts to maintain fidelity to Narayan's original expressions and cultural specificity, she also must negotiate readability for an audience unfamiliar with the Malayar way of life. This balancing act reflects the broader challenge that postcolonial translation theory identifies: the translator must navigate between cultural preservation and communicative effectiveness, often under conditions shaped by linguistic inequality and market pressures. Thus, postcolonial translation theory provides a critical framework to examine the cultural politics embedded in the translation of *Kocharethi*. It helps foreground issues of representational ethics, linguistic agency, and the unavoidable asymmetries in translating indigenous literature into a global literary system.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF KOCHARETHI

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The English translation of *Kocharethi* by Catherine Thankamma plays a pivotal role in mediating tribal narratives for wider audiences. This analysis focuses on four major areas where the dynamics of cultural negotiation are most evident: language and orality, representation of tribal life, narrative voice and agency, and reader accessibility.

(a) Language, Style, and Orality

One of the defining features of *Kocharethi* is its deep grounding in the oral traditions of the Malayar community. Narayan's original Malayalam text draws heavily on tribal idioms, proverbs, and speech patterns that reflect the collective memory and ecological wisdom of the community. In translating these into English, Thankamma faces the challenge of conveying meanings that are highly localized and culturally embedded. While some expressions retain their tribal flavour, many are neutralized or generalized to maintain readability. For example, specific terms related to rituals or flora/fauna are sometimes translated into generic equivalents or explained through footnotes or contextualization. This reflects what Venuti (1995) terms "domestication," where foreign elements are adapted to suit the linguistic norms of the target language. The storytelling rhythm marked by pauses, repetitions, and oral commentary in the original is often flattened in the translation, leading to a loss of the performative quality of tribal narration. Nonetheless, Thankamma makes a conscious effort to preserve some idiomatic expressions and avoids over-sanitizing the narrative, thus maintaining a semblance of the original orality.

(b) Representation of Tribal Life

Kocharethi vividly portrays the marriage customs, healing practices, forest rituals, and agricultural life of the Malayar tribe. These are essential elements not only of plot but also of cultural worldview. In the English translation, many of these are retained through descriptive detail, especially scenes involving childbirth rituals, folk medicine, and communal gatherings. However, the translation occasionally simplifies complex cultural references, either by omitting detailed explanations or substituting them with more familiar concepts. For instance, healing chants or spirit-invocation rituals may be briefly described without conveying their cosmological significance. This simplification risks reducing indigenous knowledge systems to ethnographic curiosities rather than living epistemologies. Yet, the translation also creates space for cultural preservation by including tribal names for plants, spiritual beings, and kinship terms, thereby resisting complete assimilation into dominant cultural codes.

(c) Voice and Agency

A critical concern in translating indigenous literature is whether the voice of the community is preserved. Narayan's *Kocharethi* is notable for its use of an insider's voice that foregrounds the experiences of Kunjipennu and other tribal characters with dignity and complexity. The translation largely succeeds in maintaining this narrative integrity. Kunjipennu's agency, resistance to patriarchal and caste structures, and emotional depth are effectively conveyed in English, although some nuances of internal dialogue and cultural subtext are inevitably diminished. Spivak (1993) warns against the risk of erasing the subaltern voice in translation; in this case, the translator avoids overt interpretation or editorialization, allowing the characters' voices to emerge organically. However, some tonal shifts especially in emotionally intense scenes may reflect the translator's need to balance fidelity with linguistic clarity.

(d) Reader Reception and Accessibility

The translation of *Kocharethi* has made the text accessible to national and international audiences, including scholars of Dalit and tribal studies, postcolonial literature, and translation theory. This expanded reception is a major success in terms of visibility for tribal narratives. However, accessibility is achieved through a series of compromises. Certain culturally dense segments are abridged, while unfamiliar tribal concepts are explained in simplified terms or glossed over entirely. These strategies may help readers unfamiliar with tribal life but also risk diluting the very difference the text aims to present. This tension reflects what Venuti (1995) describes as the dilemma of the translator: whether to estrange the reader to preserve the text's cultural specificity, or to adapt the text for easier consumption. Thankamma's translation walks a fine line between these poles, at times achieving a delicate balance and at other times leaning toward domestication.

Overall, the English translation of *Kocharethi* emerges as a site of layered cultural negotiation. It opens up a rich tribal narrative to wider publics while grappling with the inevitable tensions of representation, fidelity, and reception. The translation does not merely bridge languages it mediates between distinct cultural epistemologies, thereby functioning as a dialogic space in the broader discourse of indigenous literature in India.

V. DISCUSSION

The English translation of *Kocharethi* by Catherine Thankamma offers more than a linguistic rendering of Narayan's original Malayalam text it exemplifies the complex process of cultural dialogue wherein tribal

identity encounters the conventions of dominant literary systems. As the textual analysis has shown, the translation negotiates multiple cultural codes, navigating between fidelity to the Malayar community's oral, ecological, and ritual traditions and the demands of a mainstream, primarily Anglophone readership. Drawing on postcolonial translation theory, this paper views translation as a dynamic site of negotiation rather than a passive conduit of meaning. In Spivak's (1993) terms, the act of translating a subaltern voice demands "ethical intimacy," a recognition that cultural particularities cannot be easily transposed without interpretive violence. Thankamma's translation of *Kocharethi* reflects this tension: while it strives to preserve tribal worldviews and linguistic patterns, it is also shaped by the implicit need to domesticate unfamiliar concepts for accessibility. This dual imperative to retain cultural distinctiveness while ensuring readability exemplifies the translator's dilemma in a postcolonial multilingual context.

Kocharethi as a translated text becomes a site of encounter between marginalized indigenous identity and hegemonic literary traditions. The narrative structure, tribal idioms, and oral storytelling modes carry the weight of a culture that has long been excluded from the mainstream literary canon. Through translation, these elements enter a broader discursive space, where they challenge the dominant narrative frameworks that have historically rendered tribal lives invisible or folkloric. At the same time, the very act of translation subjects the tribal narrative to new forms of mediation, often shaped by aesthetic expectations and cultural norms external to the community it represents. This brings us to the core tension of visibility versus assimilation. On the one hand, the translation of *Kocharethi* has significantly enhanced the visibility of tribal literature, offering scholars, students, and general readers access to a previously overlooked narrative world. On the other hand, the price of this visibility is often assimilation through linguistic simplification, explanatory glosses, or narrative restructuring that risks flattening the cultural complexity of the original. Venuti's (1995) critique of the "invisible translator" finds resonance here, as the translation walks a fine line between preserving the 'foreignness' of the source text and making it palatable for broader consumption. Nonetheless, *Kocharethi* in translation does not surrender entirely to this pressure. It retains enough linguistic and cultural markers to signal its tribal origins and to assert a distinct identity within the Indian-English literary space. This hybrid position neither fully tribal nor fully mainstream constitutes what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as a "third space" of cultural hybridity, where meaning is continuously negotiated and identities are re-articulated.

VI. CONCLUSION

The English translation of Narayan's *Kocharethi* by Catherine Thankamma stands as a compelling example of how translation can function as a dialogue of cultures mediating between the indigenous worldviews of a tribal community and the interpretive frameworks of national and global readerships. Far from being a neutral linguistic act, the translation emerges as a space of negotiation that engages with cultural, political, and ethical complexities. It brings the oral, ecological, and ritual knowledge of the Malayar tribe into conversation with dominant literary norms, thereby expanding the boundaries of what constitutes Indian literature in the postcolonial context. This paper has argued that while translation opens up important opportunities for cultural visibility and recognition, it also entails inherent limitations. The act of translating tribal literature often involves compromise linguistic flattening, simplification of cultural nuances, or partial assimilation into mainstream narrative conventions. These transformations, though sometimes necessary for accessibility, raise critical concerns about the integrity of indigenous representation and the preservation of epistemological difference. Yet, despite these challenges, the translation of *Kocharethi* marks a significant intervention in India's multilingual literary landscape. It not only amplifies a historically marginalized voice but also invites critical reflection on the ethics and politics of cross-cultural representation. By foregrounding the tribal as a legitimate subject of literary inquiry and aesthetic expression, the text in translation makes a strong case for including tribal narratives in curricula, public discourse, and literary studies. Ultimately, *Kocharethi* in translation affirms the potential of literature to serve as a bridge between cultures, fostering empathy, understanding, and critical engagement across linguistic and cultural divides. It reminds us that translation, when ethically and thoughtfully practiced, can be a powerful tool of both cultural preservation and transformation.

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