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Book Review: Mirage (Kanal in Tamil)

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***Mirage* (Kanal in Tamil). By K. Daniel. Translated by Subramaniam Jebanesan. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Kumaran Book House, 2016, xxi +321 pages.**

KANAL, translated by Right Reverend Jebanesan, it must be said, is a book that disturbs by choice. Written by K. Daniel, *Kanal* is a fine piece of writing that fictionalizes the contact zone within which encounters between Jaffna's castes occurred at the time when the Christianization of the Hindu lower castes was catching fire. This historical fiction, represents the struggles of S. Gnana Prakasar and the Dalit communities of Jaffna. Their search for ways to deliver themselves from the hierarchy of caste and its various discriminations and the practice of bonded labor makes demands on the reader to enter the religio-cultural context of the upper and lower castes. The novel retains the flavor of Jaffna through effective usage of Sinhalese and Tamil words that are used within sentences. This method of writing and translating does well in the service of representing a culture such that the colonial language of English is not permitted to erase contexts. Jaffna caste hierarchies and caste critiques are rendered plausible through this method of writing and translation.

The encounter between Christianity and Hinduism that polarizes Jaffna's agricultural communities is vividly represented by the writer. The struggle that Christianity engages in to gain hegemonic dominant status within a majority Hindu community holds the attention of the reader to the end. However, the failure of the Christian priest to find a solution to the increasing trauma that poverty brings to the people brings the novel to an end. The mirage (*kanal*) that the Catholic priest sees in the last chapter brings the narrative to the tail end of the argument it has

been formulating all along. The liberative potential that Christianity holds for the lower castes of Jaffna's farm laborers is shown to be a limited liberation. While it gives the Christian converts a definite dignity and sense of self-worth, it compromises on the issue of caste towards the end of the novel. The writer thus announces the brevity of the victory against the caste system after a battle that Christianity is depicted to have waged against it in order to grow the numbers of the new church in Jaffna.

The fictionalized account of caste practices and gender violence that is strewn through the narrative makes it a very real portrayal of the life in this part of Sri Lanka. While the lives of the Dalits are portrayed in a more positive light, the fact of the common trauma of caste is the bond that holds them together. The Dalit community is imaged as more sensitive and compassionate while only one or two of the upper caste men are shown to be capable of being humane.

A very useful set of 'Explanatory Notes' added at the end of the novel asserts the varied implications and micro-contexts within which the characters play out their roles in the narrative.

The novel's pointed use of the female subject and her body at regular intervals in the narrative by upper-caste men, including the strongman Tampapillayar, a land owning upper-caste character who is employed by K. Daniel to represent the violence that was perpetuated along caste lines, is significant given the intimate connection that caste politics has with bodies and the subjugation of the body. The assault and abuse of female

bodies reverberates through the narrative as a linking device used to narrate the increasing potential that Christianity deploys in bettering the lives of the Jaffna Dalits. The assault of female bodies by upper-caste Hindus has a crucial function: that of raising villains and protectors along caste lines, rendering the female characters helpless and lacking in agency. This is noticeable all through the narrative except when Cinni, now Terici after her conversion to Christianity and marriage to Cimiyon, is developed by the writer as a female character who grows within the embrace of Christianity. The other female characters are the recipients of abuse or minimally employed by the author to further the plot.

Caste and gender therefore come together such that the deliverance from caste atrocities parallels the deliverance from gender atrocities. Christianity however briefly plays deliverer before showing itself as incapable of having complete liberative tools to set the captives free.

So while this is a book that voices a virulent caste critique, it also registers a critique of Christianity. This is a novel which captures the nature of organized religions' failures and the limited hopes that it doles out to the Dalits of Jaffna.

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***Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology.* By Zoe Sherinian. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, xxix + 344 pages.**

ZOE Sherinian, Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Oklahoma, specializes in the intersections of culture, music, religion, caste, and gender studies, particularly in the context of South Asian Christianity and Dalit social life. This, her first monograph, brings to life the sound, power and liberative theological dimensions of understudied forms of Tamil folk music through an intimate and compelling portrait of the Tamil professor, musical composer, theologian and activist Theophilus Appavoo (1940-2005).

The book is not simply a biography, however, but presents Appavoo as a "catalytic node" (61) at the hub of this theoretically-informed, culturally-thick ethnographic study of the practice, values, and contexts of the music, politics, spirituality, and people he championed. The first three chapters (Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2) describe the book's theoretical orientations, introduces Tamil folk music, and the context of Dalit

oppression. While the Introduction is grounded in ethnomusicology, it builds on and beyond it to consider "music as . . . the human experience of and relationship to the divine" (3) that enables a "transformative process . . . informed by a commitment to emancipation from caste, gender, and class oppression" (4). Chapter 1 makes clear that high-caste Hindu notions about culture concealed within the history of Dalit conversion to Christianity maintain caste hierarchies in social life, specifically in the form of classical karnatak music in liturgy and, notably, "objective" western ethnomusicology (53-54). Despite this, and contra Mosse (24) and others who question Dalit Christianity's historical liberative role, Sherinian turns to Ortner's "subaltern practice theory" to listen for the subaltern voice via "slippages" within repressive systems (46). Thus, Chapter 2 narrows the focus to examine Appavoo's family history and Dalit Christians' historical