Subramanian Shankar. *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2012. Pp. xi, 185. US$39.95.

In a very thoughtful, timely, and perceptive book, Subramanian Shankar re-examines the status and value of postcolonial studies from the perspective of comparatism, translation, and the vernacular. At a time when the future (and possible demise) of postcolonialism is being passionately debated, Shankar suggests that the real problem might not be that postcolonialism has run its course but rather that it has consistently ignored aspects of postcolonial discourse that could have nourished and strengthened the field.

In some ways, Shankar's argument is not entirely new. Many years ago Ngũgĩ waThiong'o advanced a major critique of writing in English within the postcolonial project. More recently scholars and authors (including Amitav Ghosh, who chose not to let his novel be nominated for the Commonwealth Prize on the grounds that non-English texts were not eligible to participate) have, in very different ways, expressed the need to expand the boundaries of postcolonial literature to include "vernacular" literatures. Shankar takes this

argument further by advancing a complex and rigorous argument about what is lost in the process of excluding vernacular literatures.

The role of comparatism enters the discussion only in the conclusion. The major chapters of *Flesh and Fish Blood* are concerned with deconstructing the self-congratulatory positioning of Anglophone writing and establishing a powerful and very persuasive argument for moving beyond the limits and limitations of English writing. Clearly very competent in the broad reach of contemporary Tamil writing from South India, Shankar is also a translator, in addition to being a professor of English. He is thus ideally placed to discuss in great detail the nuances of Tamil writing and demonstrate the extent to which it differs sharply from Anglophone writing. As a point of comparison, he focuses on R. K. Narayan, a major Indian writer who also happens to be a Tamil from South India. Using caste as a touchstone for analysis, Shankar offers a lively discussion of *The Guide*—both the novel and the Hindi film version—to show how both very carefully avoid the multiplicity of what he calls the "varna-jati" complex. The author quite rightly argues that "varna" as a four-fold caste division is embraced by writers who choose not to engage with the typology of "jati" that both nuances and complicates "varna" through its manifold subdivisions within the four-fold hierarchical system. For readers who are used to the idea that to read Narayan is to understand India, the discussion is a salutary reminder that Narayan excludes much that is crucial to the lived experience of Indians.

Shankar's discussion of several Dalit texts, together with his own translation of *Thanneer* by Komal Swaminathan, are central to his overall argument that vernacular literature can include trauma, grief, and oppression without necessarily becoming tendentious "tractor" art. Salman Rushdie is dismissive of vernacular literature because it is predictable in its evocation of stock characters and situations. Shankar challenges this stance with his close analysis of Dalit texts, which, for the most part, adopt a referential mode to tell deeply personal stories. In fact, as with Bama's *Karukku*, the novels can be almost autobiographical. The realism, as Shankar quite rightly points out, is a necessary aspect of understanding the plight of those who go through life being told they are "impure" and inferior. Here again, *Flesh and Fish Blood* makes a crucial intervention in that, unlike a number of studies that deal with caste as a category with a complex (and colonial) genealogy, this work is more interested in how texts represent caste as lived experience in contemporary times.

The dichotomy between Anglophone writing and vernacular literature can only be bridged through translations, and the book seamlessly transitions into a discussion of the problems of translation. The author is less concerned with the idea of translation as an epistemological category—as metaphor—

than with the actual process of translating vernacular literatures into English. His own work as a translator alerts him to the difficulties of moving across languages, particularly when the languages draw on very different cultural traditions. He offers a very interesting argument about the symbiotic relation between modernity and translation in establishing universality. The point here is an interesting one: texts that are overtly framed by modernity—urban texts for instance—move across languages more readily than those that are more deeply enmeshed in "tradition." Some texts, then, that lend themselves easily to translation may not always be the ones that we need to translate.

The book concludes by invoking both comparatism and cosmopolitanism as constitutive elements of postcolonial studies today. According to the author, while both are necessary and significant, these alone will not sustain the field. The vernacular needs to be acknowledged more fully and translations must stand alongside Anglophone texts to move the field forward.

Shankar quite rightly concludes by stating that "renewed attention to the vernacular as a critical category, to translation as a literary and cultural practice as well as a trope, and to comparatism as a methodological imperative is a way to bring such nuance to treatments of the postcolonial world" (157–58). How exactly one achieves this goal needs to be the subject of another monograph. Although Shankar does not undertake an extensive analysis of the overall quality of available translations, many of us are painfully aware that translations are few, and good translations are fewer. One might add that major publishers have shown an interest in scholarly translations of classical texts, but such translations belong to a different category altogether. In the West there is an absence of sustained interest in translations of the vernacular, and thus such translations tend to be eclectic and often uneven. Some are vanity publications that are badly in need of careful editing. Some outstanding vernacular texts are so deeply self-reflexive in the language they use that they defy translation.

In addition to providing an extremely valuable reading of Narayan's *The Guide*, Shankar's text invites the reader to think through the multiple problems of postcolonial studies. He is aware that his analysis focuses on Indian writing and that the literatures of, say, Africa and Australia might confront a different set of problems. But the book is right in claiming that in order to ensure the longevity of postcolonial studies we need to move beyond the comforting but ultimately untenable confines of Anglophone writing.

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