

## In the Face of a Translation: Power, Pedagogy, and Transformation<sup>1</sup>

Clara A.B. Joseph  
University of Calgary

Once the dilemma is posed, the inevitable question is whether literatures written in vernacular languages are capable of dealing with postcolonial realities in a manner that is more nuanced and accurate.

—Kanaganayakam, “Pedagogy and Postcolonial Literature” (731)

More than a decade ago, in his essay, “Pedagogy and Postcolonial Literature,” Chelva Kanaganayakam raised the problem of English departments being unwilling to include translations in their syllabi. The situation has not changed. In his article, Kanaganayakam acknowledges that classrooms are undoubtedly the site of translation in that different ideologies and cultures are moved into its space. Accordingly, any literature that is taught in a classroom can be said to be translated. However, Kanaganayakam’s concern is the English department’s marginalizing or rejection of translations of “vernacular literatures” (“Pedagogy and Postcolonial Literature” 731). By vernacular literatures, Kanaganayakam is referring to the literatures in non-European languages that, for him, represent and engage with postcolonial aspects in unique ways. Certainly, Kanaganayakam was not the first to highlight this problem. He himself acknowledges the seminal work of Ngugi wa Thiong’o: *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). In this study, Ngugi wa Thiong’o bids farewell to English. He dedicated the book to “all those who write in African languages, and to all those who over the years have maintained the dignity of the literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African languages” (v). The salute is, indeed, hard-earned against grim competition from Indo-European languages, such as Afrikaans, English, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. If Ngugi wa Thiong’o stresses the importance of writing in the vernacular, Kanaganayakam focuses on its role within the classroom—that is, within a conscientious pedagogy.

Academic departments that recognize the importance of colonial and neo-colonial studies can do justice to the field or area only by opening up to translations. Non-English literatures from once-colonized countries represent aspects of the colonial experience not often found in literature in English; in addition, translations from vernacular languages also provide those who use English as their main language of communication, whether they belong to communities who were once colonizers or not, the opportunity to respond ethically toward those who are not the mainstream, and those who are the marginalized. Thus, not only visible members of the mainstream but

also the visible minorities who have been moulded by the same Euro- or American-centric education can find a way to engage with postcolonial realities and, importantly, peoples through translations of vernacular literatures. To investigate this possibility, I examine here the first travelogue of India, titled *The Varthamanappusthakam*. It is a Christian text, and thus theoretically meant to be “understood” in the West; yet, it communicates a South-Asian Christian perspective, and is hence suitable for a pedagogical challenge in vernacularism. It was written in the Malayalam language, which bears some resemblance to Tamil especially because it was written in the late 18th century and – of course—on account of the Malayalam country’s (present-day Kerala’s) geographic proximity to Tamil country, the present-day Tamil Nadu. This book was translated into English in 1971. What is the nuanced power politics of *The Varthamanappusthakam*? How might the text challenge traditional pedagogy in the Humanities and the Social Sciences in North America? Why does it promise an ethical encounter with the other? These are some of the questions that I will take up in this essay.

The very direct, yet sophisticated and challenging, philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas guides this project. Levinas’s reflections on concepts of ontology, responsibility, and the other can be linked to literary and cultural issues of imagination and representation, interpretation, and ethics as this essay examines issues of power, pedagogy, and the possibilities of a change that is fundamentally ethical. Levinas teaches what it means to look into the face of the other. This essay considers that encounter in the medium of a translation.

## On Power and Representing the Other

“Yes, the drum receives the blows and the drummer gets the money; we spend the money and they get the honour; they sit in the palanquin and we carry it; they are the lords and we are the servants! And what is our reward for procuring these honours to them? Chains and blows and death for our priests, disgrace and sorrow for our laymen!” (*Vartha* 64).<sup>2</sup> This is the author, Thoma Paremmakkal, capturing the Indian Thomas Christians’ experience under Portuguese colonialism. The missionary Bishop Francis Sales, from Alamanah, who had taken refuge among the Thomas Christians in Alangat switches his commitment back to the European missionaries of Veropoly from where he had originally fled. Having once received the traditional processional welcome, the bishop chooses to celebrate this change in obligation with ostentation and, therefore, imprudently acquires a government permit to have the faithful of Alangat lead him in procession back to Veropoly. The imprudence lay in the bishop knowing that such an application for a permit was superfluous considering that the government had initially enquired into and been satisfied that the procession which Alangat gave their new bishop was one of the several privileges that Thomas Christians traditionally

enjoyed with royal approval. In response to Bishop Sales' application, the government grants the permit and, accordingly, the bishop is taken in style. Whereas the colonial period is marked rather heavily by such spectacles of colonial authority, for the Thomas Christians it was part of their custom to open up bejewelled and brightly coloured silk umbrellas that were set apart for special occasions such as this and to carry their bishop upon a palanquin, to music and the beat of drums. But the fact that Bishop Sales sought a permit gave occasion for the government to penalize the Thomas Christians for not seeking such a permit in the past. On account of Bishop Sales' action, they could not successfully argue their case again before the government, namely that they held traditional privileges in the matter and, therefore, did not require a permit. On the other hand, the fine was doubled for "deception." Several churches of the Thomas Christians, including Alangatt, had to cough up money to pay the fine. Some of the churches even ended up selling their processional paraphernalia to come up with the sum: in the then currency, a little more than 14,000 *panams* (*Vartha* 63). (One wonders if the purpose of such a sale was not also to deprive the European missionaries of future processions, unless they wished to replenish the paraphernalia at their own expense.) At the time in Malabar, which includes the present-day Kerala, a *panam* was worth anywhere from one-seventh to one-eighth of a rupee. According to Anirban Biswas, "the dominant currency metal [of the *panam*] was gold, not silver" in South India although, with an increase in the import of cheap silver during the period, which eventually replaced gold to produce the rupee, some were mixed gold and silver coins (86). The strain on the Thomas Christian community was undoubtedly severe, which explains why Paremmakkal bemoans in a single metaphor the joint plight of the musical instrument and its community at the hands of the colonial drummer.

Paremmakkal presents a not often told story of colonialism: the history of a community of Indian Christians who precede the era of European colonization and claim a first-century heritage through Doubting Thomas, suffering and putting into words the resentment they feel about the treatment they get at the hands of European Christians – the bishops and the clergy of the Portuguese Padroado, as well as the missionaries of the Roman Propaganda. It then becomes important to look at what, indeed, is nuanced in the power politics that *The Varthamanappusthakam* represents and its relevance for understanding the other. This nuance is evident in the impact of the government fine; as Paremmakkal records it, "[t]hrough the imprudence of the bishop we have become the losers of two things: the ancient privileges enjoyed by our forefathers, and the money which we earn with very great difficulty" (*Vartha* 64). Though a minority, the Thomas Christians are an elite community who have held privileges on account of their contributions to the kingdom on two fronts—trade and military. Copper plates attesting to the privileges were originally presented by rulers to the Thomas Christian community (Brown 85; Schuhammer 23; Mundadan 166-174). Throughout their history, apparently until the incident mentioned above, they were able to

zealously guard their privileges. Church historian A.M. Mundadan lists several of these privileges, including “the exemption from one-sixtieth duty on incoming articles and on articles on sale” (168). The royal permission to conduct Thomas Christian dignitaries in an ostentatious procession might come across as trivial and superficial. But for the minority community at the time, the spectacle, which was witnessed also by non-Christians, brought much-needed social recognition and respect. Whereas in time even Buddhists disappeared from the once Buddhist-majority region of Malabar, the Thomas Christians thrived as a minority. There is no doubt that the royal privilege of conducting processions did contribute, to whatever small extent, to the continued survival of the community as an elite group. The fact that the native government had challenged that privilege was an omen that European colonization had put the very survival of this ancient Indian Christian community at risk.

In his review of *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), Timothy Brennan commends the author, Neil Lazarus, for evaluating postcolonial studies through a Marxist perspective while, at the same time, emphasizing the particular and not falling into any generalizing that ignores complexities of race and gender. Brennan alludes to criticism that has time and again been raised by critics that postcolonial scholars tend to disregard the specifics of history especially when they see colonialism as a theoretical problem rather than an event of history that varied according to places and periods. *The Varthamanappusthakam* provides evidence that those who actually suffered colonialism understood very well the intricate proto-Marxist relationships and discourse of class-power and race-power and the role that both played in advancing the prospects of lower-class Europeans and hindering the ecclesiastical rights of the “dark-skinned” Cariattil (*Vartha* 167). A close reading of Paremmakkal’s commentary on the specific historical incident of processions and fines in the late eighteenth-century Malabar, however, itself suggests that an additional element needs to be recognized, beyond what both Brennan and Lazarus endorse: the role of Eastern Christianity as a native religion of a minority community. Religion is a realm of power struggle and yet a category that Marxist thought does not take seriously enough and canonical Postcolonial Studies (see for example, Bhabha or Viswanathan) reduces to a sometimes misleading binary of European Christians and Indian heathens, thus precluding discussions on precisely the kinds of issues *The Varthamanappusthakam* raises.<sup>3</sup> The episode in *The Varthamanappusthakam* indicates that it may not be highly productive to reduce power relationships to class differences, but that religion complicates the equation within the wider context of colonial and, thus, also race-relationships.

Sometimes to access the preclusion (whether of religion or an alternate category) it is necessary to look at a text not written originally in English. For Kanaganayakam, the problem, in fact, lay with the original medium and its innate paradigm:

One of the major concerns with postcolonial texts that are written in English is that they lack the capacity to address certain aspects of experience, since the

forms they work with are inherently incapable of dealing with such concerns. That is a circuitous way of saying that certain tools can create only the artifacts that the tools are meant to create. In short, the text written in English can only document experience in ways that its tradition allows it to do. ("Pedagogy and Postcolonial Literature" 733)

Kanaganayakam points to a convincing relationship between socio-cultural ideologies and language and literature. Whereas this relationship may not be foolproof,<sup>4</sup> it cannot be denied that a rather dominant scholarly tradition in English of seeing colonialism as a Christianizing mission has successfully suppressed or excluded narratives of South-Asian Christianity. Consequently, related communities have been severely marginalized within mainstream discourse and, thus, within literary and cultural imagination. Kanaganayakam's point is that suppression of peoples and histories that result from the dominance of literary representation in English can, to some extent, be corrected by opening up to vernacular literatures in translation, as those, too, come with their own paradigms. In this sense, *The Varthamanappusthakam* can provide a modest corrective to a Eurocentric paradigm (shared not just in the West) that has very little or no space for counter-narratives of Eastern Christianity of the colonial period.

Another way to look at this issue is through Edward Said's view on the role that translation plays in normalizing the other or representing the other as human which, for him, is crucial for the very survival of the other. Said discusses the issue in his article "Defiance, Dignity, and the Rule of Dogma," published in *Al-Ahram Weekly* in May of 2001. The article was prompted by a response he received a few years earlier following a lecture at Oxford University. Since Said had stressed the importance for Palestinians studying the history of Israel, as it concerned them, too, the question challenged Said's position on the grounds that such attention equals undiplomatic concession to the enemy. He does not quote the question but, in his article, Said attempts to more fully respond to that objection, critiquing the anti-normalisation campaigns in the Middle East that see efforts led by Arab and Israeli scholars to diffuse anti-Palestinian sentiments as normalisation and concession to the enemy. He writes,

Take the recent campaign against the translation of Arabic books into Hebrew. One would have thought that the more Arabic literature is available in Israel, the better able Israelis are to understand us as a people, and to stop treating us as animals or less-than-human. Instead we have the sorry spectacle of serious Arab writers actually denouncing their colleagues for "allowing" themselves to "normalise" with Israel, which is the idiotic phrase used as an accusation for collaborating with the enemy. Isn't it the case, as Julien Benda was the first to say, that intellectuals are supposed to go against collective passions instead of trading in them demagogically? How on earth is a Hebrew translation an act of collaboration? Getting into a foreign language is always a victory for the writer. Always and in each case. ("Defiance, Dignity, and the Rule of Dogma" n. pag.)

Said calls the bluff of Middle Eastern Islamic nations that refuse equal status to Palestinian migrants and refugees and yet interpret rare attempts by scholars to penetrate Israel's society with Palestinian

narratives as ‘collaboration with the enemy.’ According to Said, translation is one of the most appropriate and ethical means of generating communication between the mainstream and the marginalized, in this case between Israelis and Palestinians. His response to Arab leaders who are against normalization is that a Hebrew translation of a Palestinian book will facilitate a deeper understanding of the author and the represented nation (Palestine) by Israelis. A translated book has the potential to help Israel understand that the Palestinians are also human. This act of translation, Said believes, will prevent inhuman treatment of Palestinians at the hands of Israelis. In his *The Question of Palestine* and, later, in his “Afterword” to *Orientalism*, Said stressed that “only a negotiated settlement between the two communities of suffering, Arab and Jewish, would provide respite from the unending war” (*Orientalism* 338). Translations could facilitate that negotiation to an extent.

The Jewish-French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, explains the relationship between what he refers to as the self and the other in even more radical terms. For Levinas, it is not a matter of normalization or of the self understanding the other. Such an understanding is an outright impossibility. Language, according to him, does just the opposite. Language deconstructs all assumptions to a common and, therefore, comprehensible origin, and, instead, gifts difference: “Absolute difference, inconceivable in terms of formal logic, is established only by language. Language accomplishes a relation between terms that breaks up the unity of a genus” (*Totality and Infinity* 195). Rather than the other giving way for the self in the name of the self understanding the other, the other not only proves itself outside any myth of commonality but also puts the very self into question. This alone is the ethical self-other relationship, which begins and ends with the other in the untranslatable *shalom*, an idea gesturing towards reason and peace (*Is it Righteous to Be?* 107).

It is true that no translation can be perfect. Hugo Friedrich begins his essay, “On the Art of Translation,” precisely by recognizing the impossibility of a full translation. As he puts it, “the art of translation will always have to cope with the reality of untranslatability from one language to another” (11). This untranslatability, I would argue, is also reflective of the inherent untranslatability of the other for the sake of the self, which Levinas theorizes. But this impossibility and unthinkability of the representation of the other in translation is at bottom ethical in that it undermines the self’s ego trips at the expense of the other through any “I now know you” or containment tactics. As a translation, *The Varthamanappusthakam*, in so far as it is not like the text of the Self, offers an ethical option “dealing with postcolonial realities in a manner that is more nuanced and accurate,” as Kanaganayakam considers, but also as a different postcolonial text of the other, thereby signalling its pedagogical potential beyond the power structures of mainstream languages and literatures, and their ideologies.

## A Responsible Pedagogy

In “What is a Relevant Translation,” Jacques Derrida suggests that reading and writing is an invitation to translation. He refers to it as “a summons to translation at the very threshold of all reading-writing” (175). This is the idea that Kanaganayakam alludes to when he acknowledges that different cultures and perspectives move into the classroom at various times, akin to a Freudian overlay of unconscious material to consciousness. But his insistence on the importance of introducing translations from the vernacular into the classroom, I would argue, points to the classroom of the department of English as one that privileges both reading and writing and, as such, has a unique relationship and responsibility to translation. This relationship is not necessarily attained by osmosis. In “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History,” Sheldon Pollock therefore insists on studies that privilege vernacularism “as action rather than idea, as something people do rather than something they declare, as practice rather than proposition (least of all, philosophical proposition)” (593). Vernacularism requires both a conscious and a conscientious effort.

The vernacular text in translation has the potential to contest mainstream pedagogy in that it introduces worlds and worldviews so far outside the paradigm of canonical texts and, thus, the other. This contest is what Gandhi had in mind when he advised Mulk Raj Anand to take care to stay close to the language and thought of the “harijans” (the untouchables) when writing his novel, *Untouchable* (1935). It was written in and not translated into English; however, the success of the novel which was, in turn, translated into twenty languages, has been attributed to the fact that the language and style approximated a transliteration. Even colonial administrators generously helped themselves to translations of Indian works to understand the people they ruled. It became evident to them that India had age-old legal and literary traditions, and an unforeseen consequence was the questioning of at least some colonial stereotypes (Metcalf 6).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the colonized and the colonizers in India have variously witnessed the translation effect.

The potential within translations to advance the other can easily be thwarted by power, as was seen in the history of colonialism. For instance, when some Thomas Christian merchants were waylaid by Vasco da Gama, their announcement of “Christian” and “Thomas” were interpreted as a request to be baptized rather than an attempt at identifying themselves as fellow Christians and, therefore, friends. They were, therefore, baptized: “Then they hung them up strangled, that they might not feel the arrows” (Stanley 334). Said mercilessly criticises such a history of colonialism under the label of Orientalism. Orientalism is the Foucauldian formula of knowledge plus power, the whole purpose of which was to control through colonization. If and when colonial translations gave way to the other it was in those moments when power missed its fatal grip, usually in the context of native resistance that required a reassessment of mercantile strategy. If profit was the motivation behind colonial machinations, it also

prompted a re-thinking of the political machinery, thereby facilitating a relationship with knowledge that was not always determined by power greed. The North American English class, even as it trains generations in the art of reading and writing, needs to be cognizant of some of the implications of a relationship with knowledge as that might vary between texts written originally in English and in an English translation of a vernacular.

Reflecting on the abysmal political situation of Sri Lanka, Kanaganayakam writes in 2009 that the narratives may not be reaching a wide enough English readership but that there has been a marked production of literary works in English as well as in the vernacular about the evolution of two different and conflicting nationalisms in Sri Lanka: Buddhist Sinhalese and secular Tamil. The writers in English he mentions include Michael Ondaatje, Carl Muller, Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunsekera, and Chandani Lokuge (2). Their writing along with that of some vernacular authors such as K. Danielle and Dominic Jeeva, Kanaganayakam notes, has a close affinity to nationalist Nigerian literature of the pre- and post-Biafran war, even though Sri Lanka's quarrels took an ethnic rather than a tribal characteristic (2). Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, however, stands out for him in that it prompts a deconstruction of the nation.

Fundamental to this literary awareness is also an understanding of the village and its usefulness as a trope for political positions (4), a perspective Kanaganayakam finds sorely missing in the English textbooks that dominated the curriculum of Sri Lanka until the late 1960s. It was difficult to come by this possibility even in post-colonial Sri Lankan literature, mainly because the worldview of Sri Lankan writers who went through the colonial schools was shaped by modernist nationalist beliefs. However, Kanaganayakam argues, a 1973 Tamil novel, *Nilakkilli*, by A. Balamanoharan, bears close affinity to *Things Fall Apart* in presenting the locale—a village—as a self-contained unit. The relevance of *Things Fall Apart* for Sri Lankan history itself became even more prominent for Kanaganayakam upon reading a 1998 Tamil translation of the book by N.K. Mahalingam. This prompts Kanaganayakam to write: “Had *Things Fall Apart* been written in Sri Lanka, using a Sri Lankan village as a backdrop, it would have been a logical sequel to all the political stances that used the village as an important trope” (4). He implies that a Sri Lankan *Things Fall Apart* would have undoubtedly represented villages in a more historical manner and, therefore, made more political sense. He is cautious not to consider literary works as anthropological and ethnographic material, but his responses to translations—whether the movement of vernacular cultures into English writing as in the works of Ondaatje or Achebe, his own criticism in English of a Tamil writer such as Balamanoharan, or his reading of a Tamil translation of *Things Fall Apart*—undoubtedly stress the unique role derived from unique perspectives that vernacular literatures and cultures have in correcting mainstream and modernist narratives.

So how might a text such as *The Varthamanappusthakam* contest mainstream pedagogy? What may be the significance of the realm of



representation and interpretation that the text can prompt? And what responsibility toward the other might that entail? The world of *The Varthamanappusthakam* is, among other things, a world of linguistic conflict, certainly between Malayalam, as the spoken language of the colonized, and Portuguese and Dutch, as spoken languages of the colonizers, but more so between the liturgical languages of Syriac and Latin. Much resentment was expressed and exchanged each time Thomas Christians were ordained in Latin, where the language consistently signified colonial rather than ecclesiastical authority especially when papal approval and encouragement had already been given as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century (see Goveau) to preserve Syriac as the liturgical language of the Thomas Christians. When the new archbishop, Cariattil, is required to confirm candidates in Portugal, he planned to do so in Syriac. However, he was advised to confer the sacrament of Confirmation in Latin to avoid scandal. He, therefore, proceeded in the Latin language and rite. Not long before, he had ordained a Latin deacon in the Syriac language and rite, also in Portugal. Clergy who resented that Cariattil had been made archbishop responded as follows: “This archbishop is ignorant of the ecclesiastical canons. A Syrian has ordained a Latin against the canons of the Church and against the most ancient customs. He gave Confirmation, not in his rite, but in the Latin. He is not therefore capable of governing his diocese” (*Vartha* 239). Paremmakkal is quick to point out in his travelogue that the same accusers do not deem it equally illicit to ordain Thomas Christians in the Latin rite. As Kanaganayakam observes in another context, “[w]hen colonization erased many of the structures that held social units together, religion asserted itself as a form of decolonization. The interplay between the discourse of Orientalism and the resurgence of religion was complex and nuanced” (n. pag.). Kanaganayakam has in mind the resurgent role played by certain Hindu communities in the colonial context. However, the exchange between two different kinds of Christians, one colonial and the other native, can come across as surreal in the English classroom even when the focus of the class has been South Asian or Indian literature in a so-called “postcolonial” course.

In “What Postcolonial Studies Doesn’t Say,” Lazarus approves of the need for periodization that attends to the birth and growth of the field as well as its main concerns. He, however, also cautions that postcolonial studies must go beyond genealogy to be able to provide worthwhile scholarship that links the concerns of the field with “developments in the wider social world” (4). *The Varthamanappusthakam* points to the need to study books in the vernacular or translations to be able to gain some grasp of the “wider” world. However, in an attempt to do a culturally-sensitive study of a text or a region, it is not unusual for scholars to latch onto some dominant and well-known aspects of the related context. For example, in her reading of R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide*, Gayatri Spivak promptly references the Sanskrit literary tradition (Spivak 249-261). In “How to Teach *The Guide* as a Culturally Different Text,” Kanaganayakam points to the problem in Spivak’s reading, namely that to provide an

alternative to universalist readings of Narayan's text, Spivak has embarked on a Marxist reading that ultimately zeroes in on a marginalized female character at the expense of the text. The problem is not that the methodology is Marxist but rather that Spivak adopts it at the expense of the historical and literary tradition on which *The Guide* is built. Kanaganayakam observes:

There is no denying that any reading practice needs to be extremely sensitive to the omissions and exclusions in the text. The danger is that in the process of critiquing a text for what it does not say, we may ignore a whole literary tradition of which it is a part. From a pedagogical perspective, ignoring the literary tradition could well lead to a form of didacticism that detracts the students from a necessary rigor that comes with learning a particular literary tradition. (n. pag.)

In Kanaganayakam's reading, the South Indian classic *Cilappadikaram* (c. 4<sup>th</sup> century) and pre-*Bhakthi* and *Bhakthi* traditions could provide insights into several literary choices that Narayan makes in the novel. In other words, although Kanaganayakam does not put it quite like this, it is not sufficient to resort to a nationalist and mainly North Indian interpretation to begin unravelling a South Indian text such as *The Guide*. To teach the culturally-different text, the instructor would have to put some effort into understanding the specific literary and historical tradition without resorting to essentialist positions.

Kanaganayakam's commentary on Spivak's reading of *The Guide* in turn provides some insights into the teaching of a translation such as *The Varthamanappusthakam* as a culturally different text. First of all, *The Varthamanappusthakam* would normally never find a slot in a conventional postcolonial literary studies course in the department of English, and not solely because it is a translation. But its use of the vernacular is one reason it would be excluded. Postcolonial literary studies happily shares with canonical literary studies the assumption that only texts written originally in English need enter its syllabus. What this assumption implies is the shared reluctance to associate with the specific historical and literary tradition of the translated text. Secondly, postcolonial literary studies shares with canonical literary studies the nationalist paradigm, which results in instructors either choosing only those texts that can be easily accommodated within this paradigm or else interpreting given texts as per the expectations of that standard, even when the task is to challenge the nation. Accordingly, a nationalist reading of *The Varthamanappusthakam* would tend to ignore the crucial narrative of community that is the life of this travelogue. Thirdly, postcolonial literary studies assumes, with canonical literary studies, that colonial narratives evolve on a binary of a Christian West and a non-Christian East. *The Varthamanappusthakam* challenges this binary, too, and, thus, its own prospects within the North American classroom.

On the other hand, if the Department of English were to open up to translations from the vernacular of once-colonized countries, the potential for scholarship and pedagogy would be considerably broadened. For instance, canonical 18th-century studies as well as canonical postcolonial studies would witness some positive modification in syllabi to include *The Varthamanappusthakam*.

Colonial narratives of colonizing as a Christianizing mission in India would receive a much-needed shaking as *The Varthamanappusthakam* unravels the details of the battles between Indian Christian clergy and European missionaries. Besides asserting itself within genre studies as a non-fiction prose text and a travelogue, *The Varthamanappusthakam* can become an invitation, as a culturally different text, to the study of a history and a cultural and literary tradition of South Asia that has been omitted so far within literary studies. Methodological and theoretical studies within the Department of English, too, would see some shifts as vernacular translations demand a matching critical framework. For reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser, the study of theory involves an understanding of the relationship “between the text and...the social and historical norms of its environment” (14). This precedes reading and is meant to function as an act of communication that modifies existing worldviews and produces “the imaginary correction of deficient realities” (85). The phases of pre-reading, reading, and post-reading can affect paradigm changes for the sake of the classroom. In short, *The Varthamanappusthakam* has the potential to allow students and instructors in secular and non-secular institutions in North America to consider—for perhaps the very first time—the place of colonized pre-colonial Indian Christians under the sun.

Levinas prefaces *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* with Pascal’s statement: “‘That is my place in the sun.’ That is how the usurpation of the whole world began” (n. pag.). The subject is the dominating, colonial, self in Pascal’s scenario. Levinas reflects on “The Responsible Subject that is not Absorbed in Being,” the title of one of his chapters, and theorizes how looking *up* into the face of the other is the antidote to myths of ontological essence of being, where the being is the selfish self that places itself at the center of the universe. He presents the ethics of the face of the other by clarifying that the self’s relationship with the other is not a “commitment,” for that would be considered simply an episode in “the ‘ethical aspect of being’” (140). That is why for Levinas ethics is first philosophy. In *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur casts doubt on Levinas’ understanding of the self-other bond on the grounds that Levinas leaves the self untouched (for instance, by the absence of “commitment”) and that he tends to other the other. Richard Cohen, however, points out that Ricoeur misunderstands Levinas, for passivity rather than active “commitment” of the self defines it for a responsibility to the other that is at bottom moral. Further, Cohen argues that it is not a question of reducing the other (Ricoeur calls it a “reduction” [354]) to a single or monolithic figure of the other but that for Levinas “the issue is to grasp the alterity that makes any and all figures of alterity other” (158). The gist of Levinas’s theory involves the escape from the essence of being that Ricoeur conceives of. Here, the other is not an idea: “Levinas would insist upon the priority of the alterity and injunctive force of the flesh and blood other” (158). Art (a “bare arm sculpted by Rodin” [Levinas, *Entre Nous* 231-32]) can invoke the self to responsibility to the other, but – again Cohen clarifies – only on the basis of the originary life. This originary life or

the other is not another self as in Ricoeur's oneself as another or "another self" (Ricoeur 185). Again, this is the lesson that *The Varthamanappusthakam* can teach in the English classroom in North America: the place of colonized pre-colonial Indian Christians under the sun.

## Ethical Transformation

When Levinas's ethics of the face of the other is thus taken to *The Varthamanappusthakam*, and a case is made as a result for the inclusion of this book in syllabi of the Department of English, the classroom becomes a site of possibility and impossibility in the face of the translation. The language and the literary and cultural text resist translation in *The Varthamanappusthakam* as is exemplified by the very title, which stubbornly remains. Only the vaguest explanation in the translator's introduction is forthcoming, namely that it signifies any book of narrations. Yet any scholar who has touched the book will know that it is India's first travelogue proper, that it narrates a unique history, and that *The Varthamanappusthakam* is the *Vartha-manappustha-kam*, a name that impacts like the walk of an elephant, accenting each vocal step. This is the point, the starting point in fact, but only in the face of a translation, when the class has to concede that if translation is an ideal, the reality of it is that the meeting point of two different languages has the capacity to transform languages, cultures, and persons. Perhaps this is what Derrida means when he makes the following observation: "In the limits to which it is possible, or at least appears possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of transformation: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another" ("Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva" 243). The impossibility of meaning, the non-centeredness of texts, is the gist of Derrida's philosophy. Recognition of translation's limitations is part of that. But, interestingly, Derrida foresees the possibility for a change: the transformation of languages and texts in contact, albeit a controlled transformation.

The idea that translation can contribute to transformation brings to mind the biblical story of the Tower of Babel where, after the Flood, a people from the East decided to preserve their name by building a monolingual tower. According to Genesis 11:6-9, God forbids it and enforces His will on the people by "confusing" their language so that they can no longer understand each other and are, therefore, destined to disperse all over the face of the earth. For Derrida, this is deconstruction. At a roundtable on translation, in response to questions posed by Patrick Mahony, Derrida presents "God as the deconstructor of the Tower of Babel." He continues, "He [God] interrupts the construction in his name; he interrupts himself in order to impose his name and thus produces what one could call a 'disschemination' which

means: You will not impose your meaning or your tongue, and I, God, therefore oblige you to submit to the plurality of languages which you will never get out of” (McDonald 102). As the translator Peggy Kamuf explains, Derrida’s new term, “disschemination” bears, amidst notions of disseminating, de-schematizing, and diverting, also an allusion to the traditionally accepted name of the people that God disperses, the tribe of Shem (in de-Shemitizing) (103). God knows how to deconstruct really well. The alternative to that confusion of language would have been the imposition of a singular language. That, Derrida discerns, would have been possible only “by violence, by force, by violent hegemony over the rest of the world” (101).

Instead, God has the people speaking in different tongues. For Derrida, this is also God’s impossible command to translate: “translate and, to begin with, translate my name. Translate my name, says he, but at the same time he says: You will not be able to translate my name....” (102). This impossibility is, ironically, precious. Derrida does not extrapolate on its potential, but he highlights the risks of a contrary situation, as the previous quotation shows. It is, however, useful to consider what it means for an institution such as the Department of English to insist on originary texts in English. The English Department’s insistence, I would argue, evolves from privileging the mimetic aspect of literature and the English literary text is assumed to best accomplish that preference. Mimetically, the originary English text is situated hierarchically, with the majority of courses teaching canonical British texts and a minority set of courses ghettoized as “indigenous” as well as “postcolonial” or “multicultural” or “diasporic” texts. This hierarchy appears natural enough considering that the English language did, after all, move outward from the British Isles and the importance of this history is preserved in the originary English text. The English curriculum reflects not only this history but also its societal power structures and, further, aims to inspire future generations to professionally maintain the status quo. The English text in translation, on the other hand, predicts confusion for the Tower of Babel. In fact, it is already the condition of the colonized and the migrant – the dispersal and babbling in languages. As colonial territory, this is also the pre-condition of North America, a point the Department of English in North America works very hard to ignore by preserving its traditional—read British—curriculum, even when that curriculum might see so-called additions and expansions such as “film studies” and “digital humanities.” On the other hand, to witness redemption by “confusion,” the Department of English will have to open up to English translations of the vernacular in its curriculum.

*The Varthamanappusthakam* is not the representational text in the Department of English. Its modernist inclinations, where those can be found, are mostly not in vogue; its alternative worldview is uncanonical, to say the least. Its proto-nationalism and communal narrative may only partially fall in place even among the courses of “difference” that have served to ease the Department’s conscience. Most of all, its presumption of a Christian East and the ensuing challenge to canonical narratives of colonialism spell “confusion.” As

the Department of English goes, it is almost useless as a mimetic text. But Kanaganayakam contrasts the transformative to the mimetic quality of literary works, recommending translations as *the* way to expand one's experience of the former (2010: 60). God's impossible command to translate is sacred at the point of transformation, in the challenge to at once meet and not meet the face, the linguistic locale, of the other. It befuddles the mimetic text as the translation evades the colonial self as well as the colonized other. In that confusion, startlingly, God passes through. For Levinas, the moment of transformation is not that the self looks toward God but, rather, that the self looks *up* to the face of the other, when—it so happens or thoughtlessly—God passes between the self and the other. As a colonially nuanced text, *The Varthamanappusthakam*—as a translation in English – has the space if not for God at least for the face of the other.

In conclusion, the work of Kanaganayakam in the area of translation studies inspires us to consider what it means to study and teach a culturally different text of South India, such as *The Varthamanappusthakam*, in the North American classroom. In *The Varthamanappusthakam*, the incomprehensible other is marked by its challenge to the very notion of a colonial Christianity and to related ideas of modernity, including the nation. It prompts a rethinking of fundamental literary concepts—of representation, interpretation, and ethics. It pushes for a review of canonical and non-canonical (including postcolonial) courses in the Department of English. At a broader level and based on a critique of the book, I have argued that the impossibility of translating *per se* is reflective of the impossibility of reducing the other to the conception of the self, and that since this exceeds the grasp of power (of the colonial self), the double-bind of the translation and the other can be pedagogically transformative. A book that Kanaganayakam admired was S. Shankar's *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular*. In this book, Shankar offers a new formula in place of knowledge as domination: "knowledge as solidarity" (157). Perhaps mundane concepts such as love and humility will do the trick, will open the Department of English to look up to the face of the other.

## Notes

1. This article has drawn on research supported by a Standard Research grant of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. I am grateful for the research mentoring provided by the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Calgary, especially of Vice Dean Florentine Strzelczyk, and for the insightful comments of the scholars who blind reviewed this article.

2. Citations from *The Varthamanappusthakam* appear as “*Vartha*.”

3. Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity” has the potential to negotiate relationships beyond binaries; yet, the historical narrative that Bhabha uses as context for such sophisticated theorizing regrettably falls flat by assuming that the Bible arrived in India as the “English Book” (Bhabha 46). On the other hand, it is also important to keep in mind that neither colonialism (hence also colonial discourse) nor postcolonial studies is in any way monolithic.

4. This is not to suggest any impermeability between literatures written originally in English and those in translation in terms of historical burdens and ideologies. Aamir Mufti in fact cautions against theorizing “world literature” as a tool of unity while being oblivious to the historical and continuing economic and cultural domination triggered by the English language.

5. In *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee rightly sees the European production of knowledge, especially in the post-Enlightenment period, “as the moral and epistemic foundation for a supposedly universal framework of thought which perpetuates, in a real and not merely a metaphorical sense, a colonial domination” (11). Chatterjee’s insight is a caution that colonial domination is not a thing of the past but tends to persist in modern and postmodern knowledge production. Taberez Neyazi *et al* critique what they see as Chatterjee’s tendency to ignore several aspects of society and culture that are not defined necessarily by class difference. They propose, what they call, the “vernacular public area” as a space of intersections and in-betweens where change can happen (5-6).

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