Tamarind History Part-2
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Length: 56:05

Professor: Now, Suma would be reading excerpts from Chapter 3 and offering her comments on those excerpts and the kind of interesting thematic resonances that are attached to those excerpts.

Student: Hello ma'am. So today, what I would like to do is first of all, point out the larger areas, which are interesting to me and to substantiate those points, I will try to provide excerpts from the chapter. So firstly, what was interesting for me in this chapter is the idea of history itself and the way in which history feels as a process and the complexities of recollecting particular memories to something that is very interesting to me.

And I think the complexity I think I can substantiate why it is complex through taking several excerpts from this chapter. Firstly, I would like to talk about the figure of the storyteller? We get how complex the figure of the storyteller is, in reference to this particular chapter. So, if we look at the ways in which we get to know about Aasan and the way in which so, there is one particular paragraph in page number 34.

So, I am reading out the paragraph, 'Besides the new complication has arisen. I sensed that Aasan had grown tired of talking about the tamarind tree and was no longer interested in it. Yet, another of his own peculiar ways, I supposed. In an instant, he could sour on the very same thing he had just been describing with such passion, shaking off one topic, leaping to the next, just like that. I could never figure out the reason for these shifts of mind. Who knows, it could be that interest I had taken in the tamarind tree at one time was actually the reason why Aasan had grown weary of it. People have so many strange quirks and Aasan was an amalgam of strange natures come to life.'

So, what I would like to say is that we don't know whether, I mean the authority of a figure-teller is actually challenged may be, in this particular chapter by talking about how he keeps shifting from one topic to the other. We really don't know whether, you know, what he is going to speak. There is no coherence. There is no order as such. We can see that he is moving from one topic to the other and even the narrator doesn't know when he is going about the things that he wants to hear. So, I think that was very interesting for me.

And also, I would like to point out that how in this particular chapter; I could personally understand that recollection is a process that is not very neat. It is not very –you know, very very structured and it is a political process and it involves certain interests and certain clash of interests. And that is what I see in this chapter.

And also, I think that it is just not about the tamarind tree, because it has many other multiple narratives or stories coming in, even before we reach the story of the tamarind tank and how that evolved into this space of living. Because we see that in one particular place, we can see that the narrator starts off by talking about the tamarind tree and then we see that there is, like, a little bit of history about something else coming in between.

So, the other point that I would like to mention about recollection is the idea that it is not a linear process. There are multiple stories coming in that chapter, even before we understand how the tamarind tree has, the space around the tamarind tree has evolved. So, we have this particular instance of, like it is like the behind the scenes of this storytelling. We exactly don't get a single narrative. We get what are the things that are happening around the particular narrative.

So, for instance, I have this discussion between Joseph and Aasan about the politics of India that is taking place. So, it is on page number 36 and I will read out the paragraph. 'Joseph was rambling on about something or the other, explaining his revolutionary scheme to have the British out of the country and on a boat home within twelve hours. Aasan was sure that only the white man knew how to rule and thus, he was the only one who should.'

So, you can see that even, so in the next page you get the idea that, how what is it about the tamarind tree and how did the space evolve. Before that, you have like these small small narratives, which generally talk about many other things apart from, you know, the tamarind tree. So, what I would like to tell is that the problem, no not a problem, the idea is that we have multiple stories, which are connected in multiple different ways. So, I think the author is able to break the linearity of understanding a particular kind of a space and how it's developing.

And also, I would like to talk about how, how do we rely on this story? I mean the idea of relying on a particular narrative or something- that is really striking this particular chapter. Because what we see is that the way in which Aasan narrates the particular history or recollection, you can see that there are a lot of gaps and a lot of *him* in it at particular points sometimes. Because, you see, the way in which he talks about the king and the way in which the audience are, he talks about how a king's intervention in that space around that tamarind

tree and how that has changed the space forever. And you can see about how the entire process of the king coming and about how the audience are, about how citizens entire all of them talk about the king. You can see that there is a kind of worshiping that is happening here and I think that was pretty interesting. So at one place that I found really interesting was about the way in which he starts off talking about the king.

So, it is on page number 38. I will read out the paragraphs- 'Aasan began his take by declaring the reign of Maharaja Puram Thirunal was the most illustrious period that history has ever seen. There was no Sanskrit text that the king did not know- metaphysics, theory, astrology, medicine and philosophy were all second nature to him. He had an immense love for his subjects. A pure and generous man.'

You can see that we do not, there is no truth value you can later actually talk about. There is a constant doubt, which is coming in because we see that Aasan's narrative also has his own personal interest coming in, you can see that he is worshipping the king. So, I think that is what I found interesting, that whether we can rely on the reliability of the story. That's something that is very interesting to me.

And also, at one particular place, I found the sources through which stories come, like the way in which the stories travel. So there is this grand description of, like a very detailed description of how the space of the tamarind tank has slowly evolved into a very social space and there is one particular line on page number 47 'Eventually, I learned from different people how the big shopping district in front of the tamarind tree and the western part of the town emerged.'

So, what I would like to interpret from this is that the entire of the tamarind tree is not from a single source. It is from multiple people and multiple sources that are coming to shape the history. So ma'am that is all.

Professor: Very good, very good. Thank you, Suma. Lots of interesting stuff there. I will revisit them when I do a discussion of this chapter in my own terms. So, just a reminder, the first two chapters talked about the legends of Chellatayi. The legend that was connected to that space of the tamarind tree. Right, in the first chapter how Chellatayi became obsessed with that stranger and then how she committed suicide and then the second chapter talked about how Damodra Aasan, very bravely, courageously saved that tree from being cut down by Koplan, right?

So, if you look at the nature of those two chapters, you can see that we can easily term them as legends. Legends, folklorish, they have that feel of that folklore. If you move on to chapter

three, we move into the world of kings. So, you can see a kind of an evolutionary process of recollecting the past. Folklore followed by narratives about kings and, lo and behold we have a kind of a history being written. A sort of history-making is happening on these pages, a reconstruction of the past through the eyes of both, Damodra Aasan and this narrator who calls himself I. He has other interlocutors, as you pointed out. So if we kind of take a broader view, we can see the social subtext for these stories.

So, if you look at this chapter, the point, the bottom line or the focus of this chapter is the character of that Maharaja. And how that Maharaja quote unquote 'civilizes' the space around the tamarind tank. We have really gory legends to begin with and then we have the civilising influence of this very benign, very generous Maharaja.

And as you rightly pointed out, we can see that Damodra Aasan almost hero-worships this king. He has immense faith and all these folklore too, he constructs them, in fact. He constructs, he narrates as well as constructs. Both are simultaneously happening. He is the only source and if you pay a little bit of attention to Joseph, the laundry guy, you can see that the voice of reason, the voice of rationality, you know round edges, round the margins, trying to get in but being pushed out, both by Aasan and by the narrator who is so seduced by these tales of Damodra Aasan. So, the elements of doubt are always there. Always there on the pages. Recorded by the narrator but it is the narrative of exaggeration that takes the most dominance space in these...

Student: Also, there were a lot of words like 'apparently', 'seems', so you are not really sure about what is happening. So, like hearsay, like somebody said that the king is having **(())(11:31)** somewhere and there are a lot of those words which actually makes us think about you know like doubt. The element of doubt keeps on coming always.

And also the idea of stories being incomplete, because there was one story that Aasan is actually narrating, and in between he stops and he started moving to some other story. So, that incompleteness is also left there and he is proceeding to some other story.

Professor: Yeah, correct, correct. And that tells you that life is like that. We do not complete every incident about which we are interested, in which we are a participant. Life is fragmentary. You know, in normal conversations, we do not complete our thoughts. Somebody interrupts, we interrupt. So, in terms of the reality that is being reflected –your point is really, kind of connects with that perspective. So, you are right there. And if you look at the way the narrator tells the story, he is very cautious. He lets Damodra Aasan talk at length. In fact, all the boys

beg him, bribe him to talk at length. But then, after that narrative is over, the voice of reason, the voice of caution is, you know, present too in the narrative.

Let's look again at this chapter. So, it says, 'once upon a time, this was the heart of the city. Back then it was the heart of the city' and on the same page you can see the swing of, you know, progress. 'Once upon a time, it was the heart of the city but now, it is as bad as a cremation ground.' It was full of life. It is now like a burial ground. 'Home to nothing but the crushing darkness.' So we have on the same page the past and the future. A condensed view of that place is offered to us.

Page 34, 'I began to wonder how a place where there once had been only the tamarind tank and not a soul to disturb, gradually turned into the tamarind tree junction with all of its prestige. Was this a development that had taken place in Aasan's own lifetime? I wanted to understand this story of his in full, right from the beginning.'

So in the process of understanding the change of the nature of that place, we get all these multiple stories weaved around it. And I read somewhere that, you know the tree becomes a kind of a Mounasakshi, the silent spectator, right? Watching all the incidents go by without intervention. But you realise that when you read the story, the tamarind tree also becomes a participant in the events. It is not just a silent spectator. Things happened to it as a result of which, you know, the world becomes more complicated. So, it's a very complex novel but it doesn't seem to be complex at a first read. When you read this, at the beginning, you do not feel comfortable. You are not able to relate to it very closely. It would require a second, a third reading to get into it. To get into its universe. So, even for me, who doesn't know the period about which this novel was written, even for me, this felt alien. I am from this state. I understand the state to a certain extent. But I am far away in terms of the period to which I was born and belong and participate in. So this is slightly alien to me and I wonder how alien would it be to other readers from other regions of India?

But, having said that, I am sure there are parallels in your own literatures. Parallels, which will make you understand the kind of folktales, the kind of narratives about kings, the kind of development narratives, which you can relate to and speculate about, think about, rationalise. So, in that regard, this becomes representative because we more or less, have the same kind of developmental stages in the growth of this nation.

So, let's put some effort into getting into the mood of this particular novel. And, if you've realised, the narrator, every now and then, asks us, tells us to bear with Damodra Aasan. This

man is like a wild stream, beyond the powers of any guiding hand. He is like a wild spirit. He has his own reasons. He has magical story-telling capacities and he has swings of emotions and as Suma read out that passage, 'he could sour on the very same thing he had just been describing with such passion.' He would sour. He would be fed up. So, how would you assess that kind of character? One, who kind of, you know, moves from topic to topic, changes moods so quickly? And how reliable, once again, as Suma pointed out, would be his narratives? If he is not very reliable, why on earth are we having him as the key storyteller in the opening chapters of this particular novel? Why give him the limelight? Why give him the limelight? Why not go for some other rational figure who performs as a historian capturing life? Capturing life as securely as possible. Why not?

So there's a particular reason, there's a particular reason for Sundara Ramaswamy to have Damodra Aasan dominate the first few chapters of this novel. Once again, we talked about the truth-value of narratives, that seems to be less important than the kind of ideas that they place in our minds when they tell us stories. So, what stories does Damodra Aasan tell us at the beginning? He tells us the story of a young beautiful woman-committing suicide. So, what cultural function does that story serve? Is it a cautionary narrative? Is it a cautionary narrative?

So, you get to know about this society through that tale. What is taboo? What is acceptable? What places are scary places? Where should young women go? What happens to young women who have had affairs before marriage? So, all these dynamics are very clearly and powerfully told to the readers through his narrative. So, and you can also see how society accommodates these figures who transgress. Chellatayi did transgress. So, she was accommodated through her suicide. So, what happens with that space which was the setting for that taboo? What sacrifice that does that object offer? Its branch was logged off. So, you can see how certain things are brought under control through quote unquote 'the custodians' of cultural narratives. So, Damodra Aasan is a cultural custodian. It doesn't matter whether he is exaggerating, whether he is offering us realistic portraits, but his stories are important because stories like the ones that he tells you are floating about. So, we just get one sample of it. We just get one sample of it.

So, there are other stories. There are other stories. The point is, which story are you focusing on? That's what they say about Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*. Charles Dickens's novels are like, you know as big as the universe. Sometimes he just zooms in on one particular individual, say Little Dorrit, and lets her do the talking, capturing the universe according to her perspective.

So, the world according to Little Dorrit. So, this is the world according to Damodra Aasan, which is framed for us by this editor/narrator who is telling us the story. So, he is letting Aasan to talk. He is allowing him and then, of course, he will comment on it. He will tell, 'maybe he is exaggerating, you do not have to kind of complete it but he is an interesting character to keep in mind. So, let him walk through the pages.' So, that's what we need to understand. This world is made up of innumerable stories, millions of stories and we need to see which are the stories, which get the limelight and what is the implication of that.

Okay, there's another very interesting incident that I thought I should bring to your attention. There is a failed romantic plot, a very brief episode. He says, 'When I went away for a job, I got tangled up in a love affair. Could that really have been love!. That makes me cringe to think about it now, and when I came back home, job gone, head hanging lower in shame, I was the butt of every joke on the corner. Those were the days when I never ventured from my house. No matter which way I turned my head, I was greeted with mocking laughter. Even the men who went to women in the back alleys, towels off their shoulders and hiding their faces, sneered when they saw me. Laugh away. Laughter is good for the body. Anyway, I just let it go.'

What do we make of this failed courtship? And I want you to kind of chart. I want you to chart the representations of romance, if any in this novel and representations of women. It gives you an idea of the kind of images of women across time. The first, very powerful image that we got was of Chellatayi and the very next, I think is of this undescribed woman who is a part of this failed courtship plot. So, he is not very successful and he thinks that his love is not even really love because look at the directical comment, 'could that have been love' implying that that was not really love so the question is what exactly is love. But that is not discussed. That theme is not discussed but we do get references to lovers. We do get references to couples. So, I want you to think about the absent- the absent theme of romance and ideal domesticity, which seems to be missing from the pages of this novel. I can safely say missing because I have read the entire novel so I can safely say that but I want you to kind of trace in your own experience, what are the kind of images you get? And look at the laughter, the mocking laughter on the part of men who indulge in meaningless affairs, who indulge in physical pleasures in back alleys. It is these men who mock him for having failed in love. How do we square these things? How do we square these things? So, we need to think about that. He is mocked by these men.

Okay, I want you to revisit that passage about Joseph that Suma read earlier, page 36. 'Joseph was rambling on about something or the other, explaining his revolutionary scheme to have the

British out of the country on a boat home within twelve hours.' So, very very optimistic, highly optimistic there. 'Aasan was sure that the only white man knew how to rule and thus he was the only one he should.'

So, you get two very different opinions about the colonial rule and both are recorded and we do not get to know a lot about Joseph. It is Aasan who dominates these pages whereas Joseph is in the margins. That kind of comparative characterization is something that we need to think about. 'Aasan was sure that only the white man knew how to rule'- so, you can see that this man is somebody who accepts the status quo. More or less, he accepts the status quo because he accepts the reigning authority, just as he kind of appreciates the king and offers only praise about him. And after that, we come to the narrative of the king through the voice of Damodra Aasan.

Student: Just like how Aasan worships the king, even the narrator worships Aasan in a particular...

Professor: Yes, absolutely, absolutely, absolutely and you might want to ask why. You might want to ask why, because the narrator seems to be very well aware of all sorts of things. Social-political circumstances, situations, he seems to be well aware of that. He philosophises. He records a lot of interesting things from the developmental perspectives to folklore and other stuff. But despite that, why is he kind of privileging Damodra Aasan? So, we might want to think about that. That is a very interesting question to ask.

So, in some ways, this novel can be seen as an attempt to trace different structures of power too. That's one of the ways in which the novel moves. Different power structures. Some can be as loose as the power of patriarchy, the cultural power of rituals, superstitions and things like that. Others will be more organised. Others will be more organised such as the power of the king, with his own, you know hierarchical power and things like that. So, Maharaja Puram Thirunal is the figure who is described at length. Look at the number of pages that, you know, his story occupies.

One of the ways in which you can judge whether an event is significant or insignificant in literature is the kind of space that particular incident is given textually. So, textually speaking, Maharaja's case takes up a lot of pages and paragraphs. So, it's a long, long, long episode, but there are two incidents. There are two incidents, which are highlighted. One is the incident about the football. The other is the ghastly smell that hits the Maharaja in the face when he is

crossing through that particular village. The football incident is also very interesting, culturally speaking, for several reasons.

Let's quickly have a look at that. It is on page 38, 'One day, it seems, Maharaja Puram Thirunal set off to watch a football match. Football had just begun to be played in his state. Just begun to be played in his state. Not ten minutes had passed since the match had begun and tears started to rain down in streams from the Maharaja's eyes. The officials and servants who were standing around him began to panic, wondering what had offended him, but no one was brave enough to actually go and ask. Finally, the Maharaja's private secretary, Stahnunatha Iyer, approached the king and stood respectfully before him. "Sthanu is my kingdom really this wretched? What is going on here? There is only one ball for a dozen people to enjoy the game. Can we not send them away with a ball for each man?" the king asked and began to cry. Aasan left it unclear whether the game went on or not or if the Maharaja had been reassured. I had the feeling that every single one of the players got his own ball that day.'

It's a very interesting episode. Firstly, it tells you how naïve that Maharaja is, how innocent he is, how ignorant he is about the rules of this game and it is quite reasonable that he does not know because this is a foreign game. This is newly introduced. It is a cultural aspect that is a foreign to this particular state. It is a foreign import, which is kind of accepted into this indigenous culture. So, you begin to notice several things about this particular narrative. So, he is innocent, naïve, ignorant and he wants to be very generous. He cannot bear the thought that his people have to fight for, you know, one ball. Like so many people, you know, wanting to get at that one ball. So, in a very very simplistic, farcical manner what Damodra Aasan, here tells the readers is that this is one massively, benign, generous, simple king. He is not the king about which we have stereotypes in our mind- tyrant-like, extremely powerful. He doesn't say 'off with your head' and things like that.

So, and the funny thing is, the narrator endorses Damodra Aasan's attitude towards the king. 'I had the feeling that every single one of the players got his own ball that day'. So, that is the narrator's endorsement of Damodra Aasan's narrative about this football incident in this Maharaja's regime. So, look at the way the narrative voice very cleverly endorses certain narratives, de-emphasises certain other narratives.

Uprising, no major social problem, which threatens, annoys the king. In the first incident, as I said, he is incomprehensible about certain aspects of the game, and in the second incident this very benign king is angered by the fact that this stench is hitting him across his face. He cannot

bear that, he kind of escapes from that scene. It is very interesting how this very very placid, calm king is pushed into provocation. He ultimately orders the removal of the Tehsildaar, the man who is ultimately responsible for keeping everything neat and clean and without any kind of unpleasant smell. The Tehsildaar is removed from his profession and as Suma was telling me, that at least he is not killed. His head is not chopped off. So, the authority of the king is not displayed in that brutal fashion.

But taking away somebody's livelihood in those days is an equally brutal act. It is not just that one single man who is responsible for that kind of stench. It is a collective responsibility. It is connected to the lifestyle of the people, and we do not get any images, which tell us how the people lived in a routine on a day-to-day basis. We do not get the images. Instead, the images that we get during the king's procession are page 39, 'It was a mesmerising sight. The Maharaja arriving in a golden chariot driven by six horses. The king would draw near his Divan following behind him. The Divan's chariot, however, only had four horses and his chariot was made of silver. Everyone's gaze was riveted by the Maharaja. They looked at no one else. The Divan, in turn, looked at them.'

You can see that effect of gazes. People looking at the Maharaja, the Divan looking at the people, you know. These glances tell you where power and authority is rested. So, the glance is very very important. They direct how to look at people. They tell you how to treat people, how to glorify certain people. So, the glances are very important. And the chariot and the procession is a spectacle. It gives you splendour and along with that splendour and spectacle, we are told, informed about the power of that too. When the people seem to be lapping these images up. The fireworks page 40, 'The fireworks started at four o'clock. The flood of people stretched from Vadasery all the way to Ithamozhi. Children, teenagers, old men, old women, the entire road seemed awash in silks and gold. Awash in silks and gold. If you told someone who had not seen it for themselves. How many women? How many kinds of dresses? How much gold and jewels were actually in that town. There is no way they would have believed it. That town seems to be so rich. It is as if the roads are paved with gold.' As if it is awash with silk. It is hard to square this kind of imagery with the kind of life that we saw at the beginning of this novel, with the boys, and herding cows and people doing, you know, planting works in the fields, transplanting work in the fields and things like that. It's very difficult to square those things. 'And then, the people from the other town started to file in. so many faces, so many jewels, so many smiles, so much brilliance, so incredible.' Look at the repetition of certain

phrases. It kind of acts to that effect of splendour. It seems to be a golden age. The king's reign seems to be a golden age.

And when there is havoc during that procession, it's not the responsibility of any particular human being, it is the responsibility of that big gust of wind. So, the elements of nature seem to be the villains. 'The wind bore down even harder whipping women sarees, hard across their faces, the decorations hanging from the store fronts fell down in a crumpled mess.' The disturbing element does not come through the human agency, in a very apparent manner.

Now, we talk about the Tehsildaar, Muttamperumal, who is sitting in front of Suseentharam palace, holding his head in his hands and staring off in the distance. Everybody was talking back how bleak his fortunes now seemed, you know, worried about his fortune.

So, the king has his power over his fortunes. So, that authority is manifested at the end of the day, when the king orders his removal. And quite soon enough when the king returns from Kanyakumari, on his way back, everything is sorted. Everything is sorted. The entire tank surrounding the tamarind tree is drained. The water is kind of drained through a channel. It ultimately reaches the Indian Ocean and they kind of bring mounds of earth, fill that space up and all is well. They kind of burn woods, sandalwoods around that tank, around that space and so it becomes such a fragrant place. And the king himself seems to suggest that why don't you use flowers, fragrant flowers for this?

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So, an image is there for you. What is this? This is Pichipu. Very fragrant. I do not know whether some of you have noticed its smell, very fragrant. Puchipu, and then we have other kinds of flowers. Jasmine, right? Mallieu. This, you would have seen on the streets being sold. Again, very fragrant.

So, these are the smells that are familiar to the king. Not that stench, which the tamarind tree offers to the king when he visits that small town. And that place, because of his visit, is transformed. So, in that way, he seems to be the pioneer, the pathfinder, the man who lays the foundation for the new town, which crops up, which rises up around the ashes of the past. So, he seems to have laid the foundation stones. The Maharaja has that privilege and he is given that credit. That honour of civilising that space. That's what Damodra Aasan emphasizes. 'If not for the Maharaja, we would still be in the dark place, he tells Joseph.' He says nobody would have visited your laundry shop, if that Maharaja had not crossed this way. So, all these narratives are pretty interesting to unpack.

A single fetid pond, page 44, 'A single fetid pond had driven a king into hiding and Muttamperumal's livelihood had been sacrificed because of its rage.' The pond once again, you know, the object, that subversive object is not a human being, the pond. Of course, we know that the pond is stinking to heaven because of the activities of the people, but that is not highlighted or brought to the attention. So, it's as if the tamarind tree itself has some kind of agency, you know. That is the implication there. 'A single fetid pond had driven a king into hiding.'

And then, how do they go about sorting this mess? Page 45, 'With the assistance of a British engineer, an Indian engineer proposed a strategy at the cost of a 150,000 rupees.' It is a massive

project. Expensive developmental project even for those days, and they get it sorted. ‘By government order, all construction work was halted within a distance of 50 miles effective immediately.’ So, the king is going to pass. We are going to focus on this. Nobody is going to work anywhere. Everybody is going to focus on this particular project. Rings a bell? I do not know.

So, it was then what did they do? They kind of decimate a mound. A mound to kind of fill up the space of that water tank. So, then the name is interesting, we need further research to talk about the implications of that. It is called Maradhawa Mountain. It is also called Pariah hill. And this hill is kind of used to fill up that tank. ‘Once Pariah hill was level with the ground, the place where the tamarind tank used to be had vanished. Feet swollen, gashes across their necks, the bullocks simply collapsed, no longer able to endure the blows that rained down on them day and night.’

Now, after this narrative is over, look at the counter narrative. The counter narrative that is offered through Joseph and the narrator. ‘Neither Joseph nor I thought Aasan’s story was anything special.’ Like a very simple statement that seems to kind of destroy the big narrative that have gone before. We do not think it is very special. ‘We felt like Aasan was trying to make a big deal out of nothing just to prove his point. I thought that our town would have improved and had gotten bigger even if the king had not come. Even so, I kept my mouth shut. I did not want to get Aasan all riled up again.’ How do you unpack that particular passage, even if the king had not come that way, this town would have, you know, grown up the way it is now? So, once again I would question, why does he let Aasan offer such an extended description and trajectory of that Maharaja and why at the end of the tale, he is kind of deconstructing it by offering a throwaway remark? Which says that I don’t know whether it is true but even if it is not true, we would have, you know, come out the way we did.

So, once again, the idea of multiple narratives floating around and the unreliability of certain narratives and the inability of the reader to find out which is the true narrative. It seems as if these exaggerated versions are the ones which are given the space, given the emphasis and they are the ones which are dominating our attention. The other narratives, which might be truer, are the ones which are in the margins.

So, there is an example of that, I think page 47, ‘I feel certain that as long as the stories he told us remained in our thoughts and in the thoughts of those who learned his stories from us, he would stay alive in some way or another.’ Damodra Aasan has gone, perhaps to Sri Lanka, we

don't know where he went and we don't know how exactly he died. There are two narratives about his, you know, death. And then, we don't know which one is the real narrative, which one is closer to the truth. And then he has just gone away from this particular world. He has left us the world of the text and he says the narrator says that he is going to live in our minds as long as the stories that he told us are in our minds. So, he will live through the stories. The question is what are the stories? How real are the stories? Why is it important for Damodra Aasan to stay in the memories of the people who knew him? What kind of cultural significance does Aasan have? So, all these questions can be posed and it says, 'Eventually, I learned from different people, how the big shopping districts from in front of the tamarind tree and the western part of the town emerged.' Who are these different people? Where are their narratives? Why can't we have their narratives jostle alongside the narratives of Aasan? What is the rationale behind the editorial choice of the narrator who is telling us the story? So, where are those alternative stories? What kind are they?

We've got to remember that Aasan endorses British rule just as he endorses the generosity of the Maharaja. Ultimately, we know that this Maharaja is not completely benign because he does rule somebody from his position, from his job. So, it is a complex portrait that we get of the Maharaja. There is one moment in the story when he smiles and yet there is anger in his eyes. That one particular moment in that narrative, which tells us that he is a man who is who enjoys his power, who enjoys the power vested in his body. So, all these aspects are there in terms of this chapter.

We have the municipality coming in. Municipality proposing new schemes around that tamarind tree, shops coming up. It's how the place is becoming a trade centre. So, all those details are offered. So, we see this society progressing stage by stage and that progression seems to come with the trade. Progression seems to imply trade and you know, construction of parks. Spaces for pleasure. So, the following chapter is about that. Chapter 4 is about that. Page 49 we are still in chapter three, page 49. 'People stuck advertisements on its trunk. Tattered movie posters hung from its lower branches. Flags of every political party waved from its limbs.'

So, films, politics, trade. These seem to be the important currents running through the society and the tamarind tree seems to kind of reflect, you know, those streams, those trajectories which are occupying or which people are invested in. 'The tamarind tree stood there and endured it all aligning itself with nothing.' It seems to be a mute spectator. Not taking sides. Not taking

sides. But the question is of course, it is a mute object, mute living thing but what about the narratives, which are woven around it? Does it take sides? What are the complexities of those narratives? What are the significance of those narratives? What kind of worldviews do we get out of those stories associated with the tamarind tree? So, those questions beg to be asked.

Page 50, 'Where can you go these days and still see rows of shops brimming with so much charm and convenience? From salt to camphor, tiger's milk to an elephant's tusk. Everything was available. Parents could come, pass the betel to formalise their children's engagement one night and celebrate a lavish wedding the next morning, knowing that this one street would have everything they needed.' Sounds like T.Nagar- you go there, you get everything under the sun. I'm particularly interested in that statement from salt to camphor, tiger's milk to an elephant's tusk. That's exaggeration and that seems to be not the words of the narrator, the words of Damodra Aasan himself. You can see the voice of Aasan coming through the narrator at this particular point.

So, we wonder, we are made to think, is Damodra Aasan a version of this narrator? Do we have, you know, a personality who is masquerading as Damodra Aasan? Is that personality the personality of the narrator who kind of distances himself from Damodra Aasan and seems to be a very very self-conscious rational self. How far can we differentiate between the two? So, those questions come up. So, if you read the language, it will be, very very closely, you will know whether they are different selves or oneself masquerading as two.

Page 50, '...treat the stories that Damodra Aasan used to tell us as nothing more than his fantasies, as you want. You can treat them as fantasies if you like and brush them aside. Treat them as lies. Smeared everything that I have heard until this point as deluded lies. These could be treated as deluded lies. But will you refuse to believe what I have seen with my own eyes?' So, from this point on, the narrator is going to tell us the story around the tamarind tree from his own perspective from what he has seen with his own eyes.

So, we have seen the story through Damodra Aasan's eyes thus far. Now, we are going to see from the eyes of the narrator who seems to be more rational and the younger generation looking at the world with fresh eyes. So, would we believe those narratives? This is a very extended chapter. This is a massive chapter and it gives you the world in a microcosm. I think Sundara Ramaswamy wanted to capture every class, every position in this particular section as much as is possible. So, you get reference to professors to narratives about film stars to pensioners, to newly-weds to lovers. So, you get a cross section of the society. It is very interesting, it is as

interesting as a kind of a report in a newspaper, a human-interest article in a newspaper. Not a news article or political article. It is a human-interest story that you see and you can see how landscapes have been changed in the name of development,you know. And how these changes affect different communities. What happens when a park is constructed and how are the children from different communities allowed to play, enjoy that common communal space? So, you might want to compare the old world where there was no policing, no discipline, no moderation, no method. It's just, you are enjoying the space of nature and suddenly we have that nature being erased and reconstructed as a modified, specially-constructed space where everybody can participate and how that kind of world excludes people.

So, this chapter allows you to think about all those issues at the heart of this chapter is this event in which a big casuarina grove is decimated. Those trees are cut down and in that space, we have a park being constructed and I want to just highlight one analogy whether we may return to it later. This man, this narrator is watching the trunks being chopped off. One after another, page 55, 'One after another, the trees fell down, trunks screeching as they buckled...' it's as if human beings are cut down. This screeching is a reference to the connection between the human world and this natural world. 'The branches shattered into pieces when they hit the ground and pure shock of impact made the tree jump back a bit rising into the air, one last time, before they collapse with a thud.'

It's actually being caught live. You know, it feels as if it has been described real time. The trunks fall on the ground and then jump back a bit because of the shock. 'It was like seeing the fields of Kurukshetra after the Bharata war. When I saw how wretched each tree looked, I felt like I was watching a newly widowed woman collapse in despair, fully aware of how terrible her circumstances had become when you see misery like that a part of you dies too.' When you see misery like that a part of you dies too. So, you have a literal description there. Very vicarious, vivid, raw description of the murder of a thicket of trees and then, followed by that we have a fantastic analogy to the Kurukshetra. We can visually see the battlefield of blood, slain bodies, that imagery is evoked. And then, a very personal individual comparison is brought to our mind, the image of a widow, a new widow who still hasn't kind of come to terms with her loss of her husband. And then the narrator addresses the reader - 'you'- you know '...when *you* see misery like that a part of you dies too'. So, look at the way he is bringing you into that picture and this is writing at its best. It is emotionally moving you, taking you into that world. In terms of language too, it's a very very powerful book and I am sure it will be doubly powerful if you read the original as well.

So, I'll stop here and we will continue in the next class. We will go back to chapter four. We will look at the key points and then we'll move on.