

Tamarind History Part 5
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Length: 38:42

So, in this chapter we are introduced to another interesting character called Aziz. Khader refers to him as uncle Aziz. So, you can see how in every chapter or in every few chunks of chapters, we get new characters being introduced. And how these new characters kind of push the plot a little further.

So, Khader gets a regular influx of money through the assistance of Aziz and Aziz helps him because he is a fellow Muslim. So, that kind of community spirit is slowly introduced and talked about, and this kind of community spirit snowballs as the election fever picks up in the next few chapters. So that idea is gradually kind of sown in the minds of the readers from this chapter on.

So I'm going to pick that kind of idea up from this chapter then also point out certain gender complications in this, chapter 2. Page 127. So this excerpt is kind of connected to the gender dynamics and the following one will be related to the community spirit. 'Even if he decided to sell his merchandise at reduced prices, Janab Abdul Aziz was not a man of tact. Like an old man who never stops telling his second wife how magnificent his wife, first wife had been, he spent his time at his door singing the praises of Singapore to anyone who came in, making sure they understood how wretched a place India truly was. No surprise really that business never took off.' So, it is pretty clear in the context where nationalism was a spirit which was rampant due to the independence movement, his preference for Singapore over India did not jell well with the nationalist-minded folk. So, that is one thing it is just pretty clear. The other thing is, look at the analogy there 'singing praises of the first wife to the second wife' will also not jell well. So, he is not a very strategic man. He is generous, he wants to help his community, but then he is not the sharpest tool in the tool box. So, that kind of idea is pretty clear.

Further down soon thereafter Khader asked him if he could borrow some money since his cash reserves were a bit too short to clear away bills from the bank. He helped them because Khader was a fellow Muslim. And Khader gets caught up in the desire to get the agency of Bombay Quality tobacco company and he does eventually get it because of the financial support of Aziz.

And Aziz wants something else from Khader. He has a daughter that he wants to marry off to Abdul Khader and he thinks that Abdul Khader is perfect because he is a very sharp merchant, he is very honest because he always pays Aziz back with interest very regularly. So, because of all these qualities, qualities of integrity that he sees apparently in Khader Aziz wants to make him his son-in-law.

So, there is a kind of a bargain going on, an indirect bargain on the part of Aziz who says that I will offer all my funds to you provided you marry my daughter. And that section is also very interesting because Aziz is kind of a modern Islamic character in that he brings his entire family, wife and female child, to Singapore. In those days men had the habit of leaving their family behind when they went overseas. So, he is modern in that perspective because he took the family to Singapore and raised the child in a modern way and that is indicating chapter (page) 132. 'If I tell my daughter that Khader has come over she will serve you tea and she will know everything about you in that one glance.' That is the faith of the father in the perceptive qualities of the daughter because he has given her all the necessary foundation to help her to assess people. That is the kind of girl she is. He does not tell Khader that he will like her. And if you look at the way the chapter ends 'You do like my daughter, don't you Khader?' there is no response. You should know that there is no response. Because Khader is obsessed with female sexuality in beautiful female sexuality he has a particular notion of the kind of woman that he prefers.

So, if you look at that big paragraph on 132 which talks about how he went and had a look at that girl and he did not like her at all. He did not like the fact that she was extremely ugly but he is forced to marry her. He is forced to marry her because he wants the money. 'He found the girl repulsive, if she had taken after her father she would have been quite lovely. Even if she had taken after her mother there is no way she could have been so ugly.' So there is this implication that Khader's wife is not a very very beautiful woman. Aziz's first wife is not a very very beautiful woman despite the fact that Aziz goes ahead and marries her. So, we get a picture of Aziz which is not like that of Khader, so that distinction is pretty clear even if she had taken after her mother there was no way she could have been so ugly. So, , so the wife is not as attractive as the father, not like Aziz. So, that implication is there.

Chapter 10. Chapter 10 focuses on the character of Damu. We also get a bit of his family details, about the brother, details about the common wife that Damu and Chellappan share. And we get details about the kind of rivalry that erupts between Damu and Abdul Khader.

So, Abdul Khader eventually gets the agency of the tobacco company. He is successful in getting the lease and becomes immensely rich because of the sale of tobacco products from his shop. He also grows arrogant because of that. Let us read that section, page 140. 'Truth be told, the cigarette agency he obtained with the help of his father-in-law was the reason Khader had climbed so high. The sheer number of people descending on Khader's door to try and find cigarettes led him to grow arrogant and condescending'. So, you can see the rise of Abdul Khader and we get the sense that there is going to be a sharp fall as well and it is around the corner. And we kind of get the sense of the friction between Damu and Khader, Khader was afraid of Damu. Page 141. 'He was a man capable of violence and Khader wanted to make sure he stayed on his good side.' But it does not happen that way. There comes a time when there is open, you know, fight between the two of them and that paragraph follows next. On page 141. Damu comes to the store to support Arumugam who wants some tobacco, and Damu is not keen to oblige and in that movement all the hidden anger and resentment against Damu comes to the surface, and he says certain words which cannot be taken back. 'The book keeper jumps between them and Khader escapes being beaten.' His words have not been well chosen with that one sarcastic comment. And the question is what is that sarcastic comment that Khader offers? And that comment is- 'Fine so he is your brother-in-law. That means I am supposed to go get the stuff myself and give it to him?' So, the brother-in-law is a sarcastic, you know, point that Khader throws at him he is not actually his brother-in-law Damu is having an affair with the widowed sister of Arumugam and he brings it to light. So, that is the kind of the vital moment, the crucial moment which kind of widens the chasm between the two of them.

And he had openly mentioned the secret affair that Damu had been having with Arumugam's widowed sister and Damu's eyes burnt with untold fury. And things go downhill from this point on. The point that I wanted to have all your attention to is this the moment when the men fall out. So, one of the things that they fall out over is on the domain of sexuality. Damu is already married, he has his wife and then he has an affair and that is brought to light by Khader and that kind of creates trouble that kind of creates fractures in the community.

So, I want you to kind of look at the novel and find out all the fractures. What are all the faultlines? What are all the faultlines in the narrative over which people fight? So, one of the major faultlines is sexuality, one of the major faultlines. So, you can go back over all the major episodes in the novel, from Chellatayi's, you know, suicide. You can go back. There are two major strands- one is the strand of modernity, the progress of modernity, and the other is the strand of sexuality, the trajectory of sexuality.

And we also talked about how there is no very ideal romantic plot in this story. There is no proper courtship of plot and you can ask as to the reasons for this absence of an ideal courtship plot or the absence of an ideal heterosexual marriage plot in the story. So, we can read about the presences and we can also ask about the absences.

And once things sour between the two of them, I mean you can see how Damu also digs up the dirt on Khader too. He kind of brings to the surface the kind of affairs, the one-night stands that Khader has and then he makes use of Coolie Aiyyapan to bring all this information to the surface. So, it is like you know, the two of them throw dirt on one another in regard to this particular aspect.

So, that is something is ongoing. But let us go back to Damu's character. What kind of a figure is Damu page 134. 'Damu not only had a political background and had served as a secretary of the Betel Merchant Association where he had a fair amount of influence, but also was from a minority community that had a reputation for forceful people capable of disciplined solidarity.' So, he is a man to reckon with. So he has a particular background in politics and in terms of particular communities which are very forceful.

Page 135. We also learn that Damu was an ardent freedom fighter. So, that is discussed at length, the fact that how he resisted taking off his turban when a police officer asked him to. And that was much celebrated, and because that gesture of rebellion his shop was very popular among the Indian nationals. So, all these figures used to walk quite a bit of length to get to his store and purchase things. So, you can see how people supported him. And once independence dawns Damu's celebrity status comes down. He is not made much of as he was in the past. So that again is mentioned in the chapter.

And there is quite a bit of description on his personal life and you can see the prurience of the narrator in wanting to know more about how that domestic setup was managed by these two

brothers and that is on page 137 and 138. You can go look it up. And apparently, the two brothers made much of that wife because they believed that she was the good luck who made it happen. She was the reason for the success of their shop, 'Neither of the brothers would ever have said it openly, but they both believed that she was the good luck who made it happen.' So, again you can see the extreme positions given to women either, they are Goddesses, omens of good luck you know, totemic pole of good luck in success or they are you know symbols of objects of consumption. So, there is a massive swing between these two poles of fate in the women in this particular novel. So, whatever I am saying pertains to this particular novel so we should be very clear about that. There are other novels which kind of celebrate women in a different light so we need to be clear on that.

We talked about how the two figures started to squabble in a serious way. Page 142. There is a particular incident which kind of vitiates the state of affairs, and that is during the time of the prohibition when you were not supposed to consume liquor. So, what happens is that Khader uses Coolie Aiyyapan to bring back prohibited alcohol and gets caught by Damu who hands it over to the police and Coolie Aiyyapan is arrested. So, in this context you can see how Khader kind of puts a spin for his own benefit. He says that 'The way Khader described it, filing in the details. Damu had told him that his wife would only open the door for him at night after he held the bottle up to the window. And he was constantly begging Khader to sell him more.' So Damu says that I am getting all these, Khader says that I am getting all these alcohol because Damu wants more alcohol from me to give it to his wife. And the poor guy is not let into the house until he kind of holds up the alcohol up to the window so that the wife can see it and kind of let him in.

So, you can see the kind of mockery, the kind of mockery that is thrown at Damu. 'It is no mistake but mine. But how many nights can a friend sleep out on the porch? Khader said to Damu's friends. Damu exploded if someone brought up Khader's name in front of him, pounding his chest saying, 'I swear to God, I will not die till I see that man sitting on the porch again with a pan full of tobacco, rolling bidis! His father swept the courtyard at the mosque and now he is lounging around in a car waving out of the window. That is what makes him so full of himself!'

So, again underneath all this resentment, there is this narrative social climbing which is kind of brought up time in again. He says this boy, this man came from the street. His father was sweeping the mosque. They came from a family which was extremely poor and look at the way he is

travelling, in car waving at people. So, he hates that kind of social climbing and he says that I will make sure that he comes back to the streets. And you can see how Damu very cleverly buys back Coolie Aiyyapan. He supports Coolie Aiyyapan when he is in jail, he employs a lawyer to get him out. And once he is out, Coolie Aiyyapan joins the ranks of Damu and he also kind of narrates all the underhand dealings that Khader used to do. And Damu also comes to know about the numerous affairs of Khader.

Page 146. Damu wants to attack the power that Khader has through the agency of these tobacco products. So, what he says is that he attacks Khader because he is not being very generous in selling the tobacco so he says that we will have to bring him down. So he makes speeches. 'In a long and passionate speech, he argues that the first order of decision is to inform the cigarette company's Bombay headquarters of the situation and invite one of their representatives down to see the outrageous way Khader was acting so that he would be stripped of the agency.' So he wants to break the contract that Khader has with the Bombay, the Bombay tobacco company.

And 'We refused to be humiliated by submitting to the British empire and now we are going to be humiliated by one measly businessman?' So, you can see how the empire is compared to one measly businessman that is Abdul Khader. So look at the way he is equating the immense power that the empire had over oppressing the, you know, the indigenous population with Abdul Khader kind of oppressing the population by not giving them the tobacco. He is not selling all the cigarettes that he has in stock. Apparently what Khader does is he hides away you know cartons of cigarettes in a warehouse that nobody knows of. And he says that he hasn't got any to sell unless the people kind of you know give him back all the dues that they owe him. So, there are lots of complications in the way the plot unravels. So, you need to kind of look at details. But there are plenty of details, plenty of plot complications. And how do you kind of manage the plot? How do you manage the proliferation of characters? We have so many characters in every few chapters, how do we make sense of this? What is the point that this tamarind history is making? And how is the tree itself kind of implicated in all these squabbles among a range of characters? So, I want you to think about character motivations. Character motivations, why do they fight? What are their fights over? Is it for money? Is it for women? So, that will help you make sense of these proliferating sets of characters. And what kind of picture do you get of this particular region at that point of time through this bunch of characters? You can see how trade kind of ascends the

supremacy pushing behind agriculture. This novel puts trade in the center of the novel. We do not have a lot of space given to the processes of agriculture. Remember it is left behind from the times of Chellatayi, that is the set where we saw people planting you know all these seeds and all. Chellatayi was asked not to go do the farming business because she was tainted. So, after that we do not see a lot of space given to the agricultural processes, and instead the importance is given to merchants, trades, trade agreements, getting agency of certain products. And tobacco picks up, betel kind of falls behind. The sale of betel falls behind. So, you can see how there is an influx of foreign goods as well.

So, what does this mean? What does this mean in understanding the representation of the nation? We also have discussions of the freedom struggle through Damu, especially through Damu. Damu becomes the representative of the freedom fighter, but what kind of freedom fighter is Damu? Is he doing it for the nation or is he doing for personal glory? So, that is the most important question you need to ask about Damu.

So, why is this novel representing a figure who is not ideal to talk about freedom and politics? So, you might want to ask all these questions. You need to question the narrator itself. The narrator himself has certain ideological slants which need to be unpacked. So, there are moments in the novel where he talks about the 'I', I think it was in page 136 chapter 10, 'When I filled my sister in on the day's events, delivering pompous lectures while we sat at the back of the house, I am sure an unconsciously embellish things,' says the narrator. 'I'. Remember when he was talking about Damodar Aasan, he says that if you can't believe Damodar Asaan, believe me. I have seen these things with my own eyes. He says that, why don't you believe me? I am a young man who is capturing life as it was then and now 100 pages down the line he says, 'I used to enhance things,' when he is narrating the set of events to his sisters at the backyard. 'I used to enhance things, always making sure that I inserted a few daring exploits of my own into the telling.' And the question is, what is a big difference between Damodar Aasan and the narrator? What are the kind of embellishments that Damodar Aasan inserted into the narrator that he offered to these young men, when they were sitting around and listening to the stories? 'Today as I tell you these stories, many years later I cannot really claim to have freed myself from that tendency. Even today, after these many years, when I am telling you all these stories I cannot claim that I am free of all these embellishments. Trying to fit the imagination within the ways of the world is an impossible task,

but we can take pleasure in forcing the world into our imaginations. Enforcing the world into our imaginations ultimately every attempt price to cut the foot to fit the shoe.’ Cut the foot to fit the shoe. So, reality is chopped up to kind of fit your fantasy, your you know impression of how the world should be.

So, reality is not what is offered through these pages. So you cannot kind of swear by the book and say tamarind history is the adequate representation of Tamil Nadu of that particular point and we cannot claim that this Tamil Nadu is representative of the entire landscape of India. So that is something we need to understand. This is a piece of fiction and we need to see what are the purposes of these fiction. The various fictions that you get in this novel. They have a particular purpose and I want you to kind of understand that these are fictions but they have a value, they perform cultural functions. And he claims that there is never real harm done, same page, there is never any real harm done. Because we know these are fictions these are fibs, the readers know it.

‘A veil called art now covers for the sin, a veil called art covers for the sin, of fibbing of lying, imaginative lying. So, it always receives forgiveness. We are continually aware of the pretence when we believe the things we read. We are continuously aware of the pretence . Taking pleasure in the experience, but we know that all of it will be cast aside as lies.’ All of this will be cast aside a slide, there is never any real harm done. So, we do understand that these are fictional narratives but there is a particular purpose to these narratives and I want you to connect this with the point that Lyotard was making about the truth value and the value of falsehood, and how narratives get passed on. So, we have Damaodra Aasan passing on narratives to these youth, and these youth will be passing on narratives to readers such as us, and we will be passing on these narratives. So, we are kind of transferring knowledge in one way or the other, “knowledge” within quotes unquote. So, it is like those folk tales handed over by grandmothers by mothers in backyards in kitchens to young children who in turn pass it on to their children. So, we need to understand how we place these narratives.

Page 147. A new figure is kind of introduced, and that is Isaki, the reporter for The Travancore Nesan. So, he becomes the next most fascinating character. So, if you see how the parade of characters has gone by, we had Gopala Iyer in recent memory, then we had Abdul Khader, and then we have Abdul Aziz. Each one is distinct, each one is distinct, but the one strength that kind of covers all these three or kind of weaves all these three characters is this obsession with trade.

Gopala Iyer, he leaves behind the feudal way of making money, he kind of wants to become a merchant prince, and then Abdul Khader again he wants to become a merchant prince, and Aziz has kind of hit it big. He has been very successful, he comes home to retire and then he cannot let the itch go, the itch of selling things making money. And he supports Abdul Khader, and now we have Isaki.

So, the press is brought in. So, we have the press represented through Isaki, we have the freedom struggle represented through Damu. So, we have representatives of different kinds of domains which were significant in this nation according to this novel. So, his character is picked up in the next chapter, page 149. Remember the theft of the tamarind pods that happened a while ago in chapter five I think?

Now, chapter 6 or 5, it is in chapter 5 that theft of the tamarind pods takes place in chapter 5 and the police prepare two different cases, because right after the theft of the pods we have this smashing of the sign. The smashing of the sign of Abdul Khader's shop and we do not know who did it. And Abdul Khader is convinced that Damu did it and Damu is arrested. And he is taken out on bail. And Damu is furious at Khader for getting him arrested. So, we have this rivalry going on. Now, 'The police prepared two different cases. They suspected the scavengers had thrown rocks at the tamarind tree but since they also thought that Damu had spurred them on in the belief that they would take the blame after he sent someone over to smash Khader's sign, they drafted a single charge that combined both suspicions.'

So, you can see how both these events are connected. They are connected through the figure of Damu, the theft as well as this smashing of the sign. The police were quite confident that Damu had enlisted the help of Coolie Aiyyapan. So, another important figure is tied in that plot. The day after Damu came out on bail, they arrested another scavenger and things move on. So, all these you know intertwined connections between characters are there.

And eventually this leads to the destruction the rivalry between the three people leads to the destruction of the tamarind tree itself. And you can see how that tree becomes the victim of the greed and the personal petty politics of the people involved. How nature is sacrificed to fulfil the personal social advancement of certain figures. Earlier with regard to the casuarina tree, you can see how the municipality president and all these figures were keen to get rid of the grove so that

they can get the honorarium or they can get the honor of being recognized as figures of modernity.
So, personal greed is a major theme of this particular novel.

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Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives (2001)



Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life*

Narratives (2001):

"the form of writing produced by a self- interested individual, at a particular historical juncture in the west, with its intent on assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement" (2).



Let me do a quick rundown of certain ideas about life narratives and how we need to kind of see this particular novel through that lens too. The expert from this book 'Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives'. So I am trying to connect the narrator's story with the genre of life narrative and autobiography. 'The form of writing produced by a self-interested individual at a particular historical juncture in the west with its intent on accessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement.'

So, autobiography as a genre originated in the west. We have Indian examples practitioners as well of this particular genre. I have listed a few of the very famous ones towards the end of the presentation. But it originated in the west, and its purposes are twin fold, one is assessing the status of the soul, soul-searching exercise is his part of autobiography or the meaning of public achievement. So, the achievements of a society through reading a particular public individual.

So, these seem to be the purposes of life writing, soul searching or assessing a public achievement. The next one. So you might want to think about how would you place this particular novel as against this kind of ideas about life narratives or autobiography. Is it an exercise in soul searching? Are we assessing the achievements of a particular society?

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Story of Personality

French theorist Philippe Lejeune's definition, "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular, the story of his personality"



So, where do we put this particular novel. The French theorist Lejeune, its definition is, it is a 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular, the story of his personality.' So it becomes a story of a particular personality.

Now, keeping that idea in mind, how would you approach this particular novel tamarind history? Which particular personality are you going to assess in terms of this definition? Are we trying to trace out the features of the narrator, the young narrator who is revealing aspects of his personality as he is talking about a wide array of characters? So, we get to know something about this narrator through his description of Aasan, Joseph, the Pillai the textile store owner and other figures Janardhanan and other figures. So, what personality emerges in terms of the young narrator through his narration? What kind of character does the tamarind tree get through this kind of exercise?

The next one. What is the function of life narratives? It engages with the past to reflect on identity in the present. We talk about the past to make sense of identity which is meaningful in the present in the contemporary. How do we connect with the past? Or what kind of connections can we make with this newly-independent nation through this particular narrative?

And the second point is pretty interesting because the writer as I said, I am constantly thinking about the narrator as well. I am not thinking just about Damu or Janardhanan or about Khader or

Aziz. I am also thinking about the storyteller, the young story teller, who has missed the independence struggle because he was young. So, once he grows up the independence struggle is over and India has achieved its freedom. And he feels that he has lost something just as other figures have felt the same, that lawyer for instance. So, the writer becomes the observing subject we do not usually pay attention to the narrator. And so but now through this reading exercise, we make that narrator the object of investigation. So, we need to be aware of that, not only the story but the storyteller. The next one.

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Postmodern and Postcolonial Opposition

"autobiography" as a privileged genre in the enlightenment that celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story (4):

"Its theorists have installed this master narrative of "the sovereign self" as an institution of literature and culture, and identified, in the course of the twentieth century, a canon of representative life narratives" (4).



So, Postmodern and Postcolonial theories are in opposition to this celebration of autobiography or life narrative as a genre. Why? What are the reasons for their opposition? They see autobiography as a privilege genre, they see autobiography as a privilege genre particularly in the context of the enlightenment that celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story.


This is celebration of the individual self at the expense of other individual selves which are marginalized, which are hidden, which are not occupying the center. That is one point, that is one of the reasons that they are anti-autobiography, anti-life narrative, because the self becomes sovereign, the self becomes representative. So, it is because of that reason we have opposition from the Postcolonial and Postmodern critics. And the second point, universalizing life story, once the self becomes supreme, sovereign that self becomes representative of all the other alternative selves out there. There is a homogeneity of meaning which hides, brushes aside other individualizing life

stories. For this reason they are in opposition to autobiography being celebrated to the utmost. Because it is, it has his homogenizing effect.

Its theorists have installed this master narrative of the sovereign self as an institution of literature and culture, and identified, in the course of the twentieth century, a canon of representative life narratives. So, this quote kind of is explaining in detail the point made in the first section. So this becomes a master narrative. The story of the tamarind tree becomes a master narrative, becomes the only representative narrative of that particular point of time, of that particular space. So, we do not want that to be institutionalized because of its oppression of other voices, its oppression of other life stories.

So, the sovereign self needs to be understood, needs to be celebrated as one of the selves, one of the selves as against a sea of other individual narratives. So, for this reason the Postcolonial and the Postmodern theorists do not want to make too much of this particular genre, because we will think this is the only story that is out there to be told, there are other stories.


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The Colonization of Psychic Space (2004)

Kelly Oliver in *The Colonization of Psychic Space* (2004) differentiates between subjectivity and subject position.

- ✓ subjectivity is one's sense of oneself as a self with agency
- ✓ subject position is one's historical and social position in one's culture.
- interrelated as they are in an infinite encounter with the otherness.
- subjectivity becomes intense when one subject is excluded, oppressed or abjected.



The Colonization of Psychic Space is a text by Kelly Oliver published in 2004, where there's a distinction made between subjectivity and the subject position. These are two different things. Subjectivity is one's self sense of oneself with agency, sense of oneself with agency. I am a subject, I have a particular set of agency. That is subjectivity. Subject position is one's historical and social position with larger society. So, subject position is one's historical and social, there is subtle

difference between these two. In one you have the power to express yourself, in the other you are located in a particular position. And these two are interrelated, these two are interrelated because you are always in contact with the other. You achieve your agency through your intervention in a public domain where everybody kind of participates, you are kind of relating with the other.

And in the subject position, also defined in relation to the other, how are you doing in relation to another subject? How are you doing in relation to a subject who is superior to you, inferior to you? So, we need to know the difference between these two. Subjectivity becomes intense when one subject is excluded, oppressed or abjected. It becomes a complicated poignant point of view when that subject is marginalized. So, I want you to think about the subject position of the narrator. The subject position of the narrator in this particular novel. I want you to think about the subjectivity of all the characters that we have seen.

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Damu, Coolie Aiyyapan, Abdul Khader, Abdul Aziz- what are the kinds of agency that they have in this society, is that a kind of righteous agency? What are the agencies that they have and how would you assess that agency in relation to the others that they come across? So, you can keep all these points in mind when you kind of make sense, make meaning out of this particular novel. Thank you for your attention.