

**Tamarind History Part 7**  
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**Length: 30:43**

A talk by N.Kalyan Raman, a translator of Sundara Ramaswamy's 'Oru Puliyamarathin Kathai'

Good afternoon and it is a pleasure to be here. I thank Professor Divya for inviting me to the seminar and giving me an opportunity to talk at my own alma mater. It gives me particular pleasure. Now, is that okay? Can you hear me? Now, I am, what I plan to do in this session is two things- one is to, after briefly talking about the career, I mean a rather implausible career I've had as a translator as a literary translator, I want to talk about certain foundational concepts in translation. Foundational questions in translation in which I have dealt with, and therefore it might be useful to you. As these are fairly basic, so you know it will be good to put them out there and have your respond to them in some way. The second thing is to make a few remarks on important aspects of 'Tamarind History' which have not been, I mean I do not want to repeat what has already been said, so, I would like to say a couple of things about the novel *Oru Puliyamarathin Kathai* translated as *Tamarind History* by Blake Wentworth.

Now, I started translating, by the time I started I was in my late 30's. You know initially I had some plan of writing, and some interest in writing fiction and so on. But I gave it up soon enough I mean I thought that you know, the usual imposter syndrome and I was an engineer and although I could write and people could read but I thought I did not know anything about either about life or about literature as I thought. So, I mean that's the kind of thing when you live in a very closed-campus life that happens. And you know even there wasn't a profusion of media like there is today. So, in any case I gave it up but my interest in my abiding interest in my literature continued and I read extensively in both Tamil and English. And then, quite fortunately some friend of mine was a novelist, and she was putting together an anthology of short stories in all the four southern languages. And we were talking about it and she was trying to select the stories and then she asked me why don't you translate one of these stories? And that's how it started. I said okay and then I did it. And she edited it and all that, and it came out in the collection and it received some notice.

And after that I was commissioned to do a book of short stories by Ashokamitran. The first collection of short stories by Ashokamitran in translation. So, that was also fairly successful and

therefore it went on and on and in fact out of the first six books that I did, four were by Ashokamitran, and out of the twelve I have done so far, six have been by Ashokamitran. So, it is kind of you know. Of course, one of the reasons why I did it was that I read him, and I had deeply engaged with his work and therefore. And there is a, there is a lot to be done in his work and therefore I did it, and then I did the other things.

So, of the 12 of course, 6 are already by Ashokamitran. And I have done of course subaltern texts like Perumal Murugan, and then the arena which is on bull-taming was also a subaltern text but written by a Brahmin. But of course, it is sort of explicit prose. And then I have a woman's novel, and travel 'Farewell, Mahatma' which is kind of, which is modern in its prose which is very modernist prose, it's modernist fiction by Devibharati.

And now I've just completed a book of short stories by Salma and it's going to come out maybe later this year. So, essentially I have, and then I have translated and published about two hundred poems by you know by both women poets as well as Dalit poets. So, that is the kind of range that I have done. Of course, I have taken a lot of time, I mean it's about 25 years or something like that. Over a period of 25 years, I've done that because I had a day job as well for most of it so that is how it is. So, this is my experience in translation.

Now one of the one of the questions, like everybody asks, which is this question of fidelity. I mean there is the notion that faithfulness is a very important question in translation. Of course it is. But it not the only important question. So, let us, I mean basically we have to understand what a good translation is and how to arrive at it. You know, we all know that the language is the system of signification, you know. That when each word stands for something real in the world, the material world, or something abstract in our mind which we all understand. So translation is basically transporting a text written in the source language into the host language the target language. Now, you can be 100 percent faithful only if what is conveyed is mere information. So, you can sort of transfer this information into new language without any loss because it is just information, it does not say anything at all. This can be done. But if we take a literary text, literary text involves many things and for instance let me, let us say they involve the kalvi, it comes from a very particular culture, and then it comes from a particular language and all that. It involves narrative, it involves rhythm, you know, it involves music you know and so on and so on. So, how do you actually transfer this to a new language? That is the question.

Now Benjamin- Walter Benjamin, you know the famous philosopher who has written this 'Task of Translator'- he had this theory that when we write prose fiction for instance, what we do is really, when we read prose fiction, what we do is we disclose the meaning of what we read to ourselves, and in what language do you do it? We do it in the so-called pure language, or the language beyond languages. So, that is how we understand it, if you know what I mean, so that is the world of what is signified. And what the translator does, is to read and distill into pure language and convert the pure language into the host language. So, that is how it is done. And obviously, the new text, which is the translated text, is different from the original text. Now, if you consider translation as a service done to the original text, so here the original text and the translator is rendering a service, that is, the original text is a master and this is somebody who is you know ministering to it. If he does that, then there is no way in which, you know, you can even admit the concept of a good translation because it is going to be very different. But the thing is that this is a very fallacious way of looking at it because translation is an independent, creative process. There is, it is done from the original text but it does not have a kind of, it is not subject to the hegemony of the original text.

Because you know the process of translation is autonomous, it is creative you know, so what the translator does is to write a translation you know. In the sense, that if the translated text has to be literary, it has to have literary qualities. Then obviously, he (the translator) has to be a writer in some way otherwise you cannot really do that. Of course, the writer of the original text is also a writer, I mean he is properly a writer because he writes out of his head or imagination. And the translator writes out of an original text in another language, and he also goes through the same process of imagination, imagining the meaning of original text and then you know, producing something totally new. So the cliché that 'lost in translation' is something I think that has to be retired.

So, what we need to say is that the translated text is different from the original text. That is one of the fundamental things. Once you consider it as the original, as different then what you do is you evaluate it on the basis of how it works as a literary text, whether it has everything. So what does a translator do in such a situation is very simple. What he does is that he, I'm sorry I'm using only the masculine pronoun because I come from very, I come from long ago. So, I try to keep up with it, but you know it is not always possible. So, what the translator does is to read the original text

and then have a set of responses to the original text. And so he tries to recreate the original text, recreate you know the, recreate the new text in the host language in such a way that the same responses are possible you know. If there is ambiguity, then there will be ambiguity here, if there is a satire there will be satire, if there is a rhythm, there will be rhythm there. So, that is the, that is the way the translator tries to reproduce. So, any kind of faithfulness will be to the best of- you know there are certain limitations. One of the things that a translator does is to empathise with the text. So, here is this book called 'Sympathy for the Traitor' written by Mark Polizzotti, which is a fairly recent book. And he says that 'part of the translation part happens in the smithy of our souls. As joys had it, and the empathy we can feel for what we are translating, in the resources we can dredge out of our linguistic capabilities, in the instincts we can marshal when choosing exactly how to convey a particular blend of...' you know this is important '...tone sense sensibility music, information, emotion and rhythm.'

So, all these things are involved in the literary narrative. So, you need to be clear that you have to get all things right, you know, whatever that you have sensed out of the original text. So, this is what I tried to do myself. So in some sense, you can do this, you can do, you can get all things right only if you translate from inside the text. That is you have to be immersed in the text. So you cannot distance yourself, have a view oh this is satire, and therefore I will, I will make it sound satirical, or I will make it sound funny. So, you have to stay very close to the text and sort of follow it, that is, follow whatever it is. And it is very instinctive, it is not, it is done the same way creative writing is done. And you get it right. I mean like you know, if you're skillful enough and if you are if you are a good reader then you get it right. I mean that is what I think happens. And so here again, he says that '...to the best of their abilities and judgment, good translators produce versions that recreate the complex web of responses that they as readers have had to the source text, versions that establish a setting liable to elicit those responses in others.'

So, this is my credo for translation. So, there is no question of finding cues for the author's voice and so on. Because if you read deeply enough, you will be right there listening to it you know, and not apart from it and looking at it. So, and you produce you would have internalized it and you produce it. I mean this may sound mystifying or magical but that is really how it happened. And it happens with creative writers as well. I mean how do they write in the same voice over 200 pages? It is not some it is done in a very deliberate, wilful way, so that is how you do it.

And there is also another question I would like to deal with. I have also translated poetry, so how is poetry different from, how is translating poetry different from prose? I have said in some interview, that a translated poem is a wholly new utterance, but is equivalent to the original and of equal value, that is what I have said. And in fact it is not something that I have said but it is a translator who has translated Neruda, a person called John Felstiner who said this. You know listen to this carefully, before that I want to say that the difference between translating prose and poetry is something that has to be established. There are a lot of things in common obviously, between prose and poetry because you're using language that you're using, and the literary modes are similar in some ways, because it conveys the narrative or it evokes, so it is said. But it is also different in important ways.

He says, but this is from 'Why Translation Matters' by Edith Grossman, and she says, 'Over the years, I have been fascinated to discover there is a translation of artful prose or the translation of poetry are comparable in several significant ways. They both presuppose in the original writing an explicitly thoughtful use of language to create many effects that the literary arts are capable of: emotional resonance, conceptual engagement, rhythmic pattern, aesthetic tension and sheer gorgeousness of expression.'

Again this is a lovely way to describe any literary text. 'And they both represent analogous challenges to the translator's literary sensibilities, and a capacity for entering a text as deeply as possible. The specific experience of translating poetry with his obligatory attentiveness to the most minute compositional details, linguistic, nuance, rhythm, these are all special characteristics of poetry, and sound in two languages enhances immeasurably the approach to the translation of prose. An artistic idiom that has its own nuances and rhythm and sounds, all of which needs to be transferred, their aesthetic integrity intact, into a second language. In spite of these undeniable intergenre connections, I do not believe anyone could or would want to dispute the notion that poetry is the most intense, most highly-charged, most artful and complex form of language we have. In many ways it is the essential literary expression of our species, long associated with distant origins of music, dance, and religious ritual to early human cultures. Yet, although it may be universally human, the inescapable truth is that poetry can seem completely localized, thoroughly contextualized and absolutely inseparable from the language in which it is written, in ways that prose is not.'

So, this is the thing, that poetry, a poem is language distilled to its essence, and including cadence and rhythm and music and everything else. Whereas prose is, well prose depends much more on signification. This is signification plus a kind of alchemy performed on that using language. So, you have to get that right, and therefore you have to have this additional thing that you have to do. And Felstiner (2003) says it very nicely, he says, ‘Bring over a poem’s ideas, and images and you will lose its manner. Imitate prosodic effects and you sacrifice its matter. Get the letter and you missed the spirit, which is everything in poetry or get the spirit and you miss the letter which is also everything in poetry. But these are false dilemmas. Worst translation that is best generates a wholly new utterance in the second language, new, yet equivalent or equal value.’

So, I hope that I- a lot of these things are understood in the doing, their experience in the doing but I hope that I have at least conveyed you know what the difference is, in terms of poetry and prose translation. So, I think that I will stop with this. There is much more to be said about translation, but we do not have the time and this is not in the mode of a lecture, so I will stop with this. And I will go on to *Oru Puliymarathin Kathai*, Tamarind Trees. See one of the things I was referring to when I talked about the Sthalapurana, was that what is really Sthalapurana? You have a temple in a town, and then there is a Sthalapurana or something is supposed to happened, by which that God came here and he did something, some divine miracle or something like that. And then he got established as a local God in, or the local manifestation of a Vedic God perhaps. That’s how Sthalapuranas actually happened, you have Vishnu in someplace Thirunallar or in some other place and each place has a story of God coming there and interacting with the local community and performing something. Now, one way to look at it in a modern way to look at it is to say that, okay you have this temple and therefore it has to be invested with some meaning which can be held by succeeding generations of people, because we all tell stories and we transmit stories. Mankind has lived like that. And therefore the Sthalapurana is a very clever technique of investing this thing with meaning and therefore.

So, in tamarind, in *Oru Puliymarathin Kathai*, the way it is done is different, in the sense that Sura wants to talk about the tree, and therefore he has a story to tell himself. But initially the reason why he talks about this story- there are a couple of magical incidents, one is the, but it is the inversion of magic, meaning like magic is fraudulently attributed to the tree.

I mean that is Sura's technique in anyway. So, he actually inverts the idea of Sthalapurana in some way. But it exists as a story. So, the first one is of course the Damodara Aasan saying that it is possessed and you know therefore he tries to save it being cut down. And the second is about the pods disappearing, you know the whole harvest of pods during that season disappearing all together. And you know the municipal council is the thing. We all know how it disappeared, how they disappeared, but they do not know and therefore some kind of divinity is, fraudulent divinity is attributed to it. So, that is the, that is so much for this Sthalapurana. And I wanted to talk about, so that is one thing. The second aspect of Puliymarathin Kathai is that, there is a certain realism in it, the realism about the people, their tendencies. There is no, I mean he does not hide or flinch from describing people's low cunning, lust, appetite, greed, lack of decency, you know even homicide, that ambition, everything, there is a full display of all the human fragilities is available in Puliymarathin Kathai.

But the thing is that the narrator brings a moral vision, there is an underlying moral vision to the telling of the story. So this is what is important in some way, I mean I feel. And this moral vision is there in all his works. So, he is very keenly observant of the word even in the short stories and all that. And is very keenly observant of human beings and their weaknesses and frailties. But he posits a moral vision by which to see them, a lens by which to see them. And you can see this here too, and it is very subtle and ironic in many places. For instance, in the scene described by Professor Divya earlier, about you know the pregnant wife or the scavenger wanting the pod. Now, that is a very, that is a biological craving and it is a very special craving of pregnant women too, to eat sour stuff. So, it is a legitimate thing it is like somebody going hungry and wanting food, it is as simple as that.

But, on top of that because somebody because the stones are being thrown and all that you have a bunch of kids who are, well, amoral, and they indulge in this whole transgressive business of throwing stones and bringing all the pods down, which is transgressive and which is greed which is. They do not understand that it is public property and they should not be doing it. And the irony is that they absolve themselves by imitating the adults saying 'Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai!' Where Mahatma Gandhi is a symbol of higher morality. What we owe each other and all that. So, that I thought was, is very typical, and very deliciously ironic way of presenting.

So, there is a moral vision to his description of everything and not Gopal Iyyer. What you do in business to succeed, and then your assistance cuts your throat, the opportunities that you provide him by making him work for you. He uses it against you, uses them against you and gets on top of you. I mean, that is what happened between Gopala Iyyer and Khader, right? And similarly Damu and the other person and so on. And there is the journalist who uses it for blackmail, uses trade for blackmail and gain, and then there is electoral shenanigans, manipulations. And then finally of course the killing of the tree with mercury poisoning. So, there is all these and so Sura's way of telling the story is simply not all the people are like this and this is now it happens.

But there is an underlying moral tone to the telling of the story. And then finally he sort of, he even editorializes likes to saying that this is the tree which is blameless. And even in the beginning he says that living and dying. In some way, it also conveys that you can see the tamarind tree as a metaphor for the planet itself or the natural world. That while we are about our own frailties and perversities, we may end up destroying that planet.

So, there is a sort of moral more or less in that, and this is one of the reasons why I think that Oru Puliymarathin Kathai is an enduring classic, because it has a very clear vision of humanity, of its destructive possibilities as well as what we should be doing, what is the, what are the imperative of a, what are the human imperatives on our existence? So, that is for me that is the great thing about this novel. So that is all that I have now.