

Indian Poetry- Part 4
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Hello and welcome to the session on regional Indian poetry in translation. We will begin with Salma's poem titled 'Perspective'. It was originally written in Tamil and the form is a translation.

Student: 'Perspective' by Salma – "I stand upside down and comb my hair, I cook topsy-turvy, and eat thus, too, I squat inverted to feed my child, heels upward, I read my books, upside down I gaze at myself, terrified, stunned and staring at me about hanging ripe on the tree in the garden."

Professor: Okay, so it is a very small poem, two stanzas. The second one is a shorter one than the first. And the first stanza is a list of things that the speaker, you know, does or carries out. What do you think?

Student: I feel that it is representing what a female normally does in a household where she is combing her hair and she feeds her child, she is reading the book. And it is all like details that the, that any, maybe gives me a feeling that she is somebody who is restricted to the household who does not have a life of her own outside the house.

Professor: What makes you think that she is restricted to the household?

Student: Because everything is related to that. She does not say anything that is, that can be related to outside world apart from the, apart from the gaze that she gets from the bat.

Professor: Yeah very good. And even that, too, it is a scene from the garden.

Student: Yes.

Professor: Right out from her part.

Student: Yeah.

Professor: Right. It is a garden scene. So, first section, if you want to spatialize the first section, you can put it within the four walls of domesticity. And the second one, right outside domesticity

in the sense that it is just outside the home, but not entirely part of the public sphere. So this is still private, right? So just outside in the garden, so these are the two spatial, you know, perspectives that we get from the poem.

There is another thing which kind of estranges us from this routine, from the mundane details, from the everyday details that she offers us, which is that she is always topsy-turvy. She is upside down. So all this is fine, like combing your hair, cooking, squatting to feed the child, reading, everything is normal, routine, humdrum activities that a woman can perform on a daily basis, except this, that she is doing all this while she is standing upside down.

Student: Yeah.

Professor: Like while she is in a topsy-turvy position. So that kind of estranges us. This is, you know, this kind of makes this whole scenario non normative, right. And the last line is interesting to me. "I gaze at myself," so we have a woman who is very self-conscious, who is self-aware and who is reflecting on herself and this is what she realizes about her, you know, that she is not, that she is not normal, that she is not, you know, at peace with herself.

She realizes that she is somehow being put in this distorted position. So that realization leads us to read the second stanza, she is just terrified, stunned and staring at me, a bat hanging right on the tree in the garden. What do you make of the second one, the second stanza? What are the associated ideas that you get?

Student: The associated ideas that she is always topsy-turvy, she, so the, definitely bats are always like that, they stay, they lay upside down. And that weird, you know, the connection that she draws between a woman herself and a bat is an idea that's natural I suppose, because I do not know, normally people do not compare oneself to a bat. And then just because she does all these things, stay upside down. That is, yeah, definitely that is the connection that you can draw.

Professor: She is capturing that moment of being upside down. And she thinks that here is a perfect parallel. Terrified, stunned, that set of adjectives is also pretty interesting. Terrified, this domestic routine, that she has been doing is something which is terrifying, deep down on a psychological level. She is done by the fact that she is forced to do all these things day in and day out. And that,

you know, normalization of this incarceration is a terrifying realization. She is stunned that she could kind of get used to this kind of 'routine', quote, unquote.

And for me the most interesting word in the second stanza is 'ripe'. I pick up on this word ripe when I teach you my students this poem, why that choice of the word ripe? Ripe indicates a set of associated ideas involving lush, attribute, attributes of being lush, ready for consumption, something which is very beautiful and attractive to look at, ripe for something. So what is that?

So, what I would do is for me the association is between ripe and the fact that she begins the poem by combing her hair. She is kind of doing something to her physical appearance, it could simply be out of the need to be presentable or the need to be attractive to somebody else's consumption. So, that idea of sexuality is also one of the subtext, very subtle subtext, which you can, weave around these words of being ripe, and combing your hair, and then she is very fertile as well, which is indicated by a child that she has. So all these things make us believe that on top of this list of routine, she has another job to do as well which is just not listed out by being inviting to someone in the household, so that is also there.

But the voice, I want to go back to the voice of the speaker. She is a very enlightened speaker who is able to draw comparisons between this creature from the wild, capture a particular moment of that creature from the world, which is hanging upside down and she could compare herself to that idea of not being in the upright position. Not being in upright position like the other beings in the world, like the other male beings in the world who are in an upright position and because of their uprightness, she has to be upside down. So that relationship is pretty clear to this female, the speaker, so this is an interesting poem.

We have other poems on the course. And I want to pick out one which is from a female speaker and that is "I have given birth to a son," so it is very clear. It is very clear that this is again from a female speaker. And my question to you is after you have read it out, what are the comparisons? How is this point comparable to the one by Salma? So can you first read this please?

Student: "I have given birth to a son – Dear sweet Sparrow, deliver this message for me. Tell my father that I have given birth to a son. Tell my mother that I have given birth to a son. Ask my father to give me a new saree, ask my mother for a multicolored blouse. Tell my brother that I have

a son. Ask him to give me a saree too. Tell my uncle that I have given birth to a son; ask him to bring me a multicolor blouse.”

Professor: This is pretty clear that this is a female speaker, female voice and she has just given birth to a son. And she has a particular set of demands from her kith and kin. She wants a multicolor blouse, she wants a multicolored saree, she wants a saree. A blouse and saree seems to be the repetitive demand that this mother has.

And we talked about this earlier in class and we perhaps thought that, perhaps there is a dearth of outfits, or perhaps that is the only thing that gives her joy, and perhaps this is part of ritual, so we had like a set of associated narratives that we had come up with. (a) it could be a ritual, that these relatives participate in by giving these blouses and sarees to a new mother. And the second is, she does not have any, and does not have quite a lot of outfits. So she is asking, and perhaps this is the only set of items that gives her immense joy. So these are some of the things that we talked about. Now, my question to you is, how would this speaker compare with this speaker from Salma’s perspective?

Student: In both these poems, you can see that they have just given birth, so they are the mothers.

Professor: Yes.

Student: In ‘Perspective’, as you have pointed out that she seems to be like a well-read person because she says that I read my books upside down. And I like the idea that you have pointed out that ‘ripe’, what I feel is that she thinks that she is that in the ‘ripe’ age, that she is, the comparison that she draws between her with that of the bat is that sense that very, this is like a moment where she understands that what is she doing with her life. She has is, this is an age for her to do something with her life, but she is restricted. She does not know why is all this happening. She is definitely a well-read person so she wants to explore more with her life and maybe domesticity has because of the childbirth, probably she has to remain within these four walls.

And the other poem, you can see that she is happy about it. I am not saying that this persona is not happy that she is a mother or anything. But there that, this is a sense of liberation for her. Yeah, that childbirth in the poem “I have given birth to a son,” is you see that childbirth is a sense of, is a form of liberation for her. She is extremely happy that she has given birth to a son, specifically

not a daughter. And that gives him, gives her a power. And she wants gifts from, not gifts but saree, specifically from her kith and kin, and from her parents.

Professor: I want to begin with the idea of Freud's uncanniness.

Student: Yeah.

Professor: So you pointed out that she has come to the stage where she is kind of reached the point of realization, this is, that something is terribly wrong with what is happening to her, so I would want to connect it with Freud's idea of uncanny. This is familiar yet strange, this is unfamiliar. That she is familiar to this world of the routine, domestic, you know, biological processes. At the same time, everything seems to be unfamiliar, too strange for her. So, maybe this is not the norm. Maybe this is not the right way to go about these domestic processes, something needs to be set right. So that kind of realization is coming into her thought process, which is why she is comparing herself to be a bat, which is upside down. So this is not normal.

The other thing that I wanted to point out was that, in both these points, the speakers are all by themselves. And there is nobody else apart from the child here, and the birth of the child here. And we do not know the sex of this child and in here, it is spelt out that it is a male. So the loneliness becomes clear. And the other differences as you rightly pointed out, she is reading, she is reading. But even the act of reading is not normal. Maybe the circumstances, the kind of spatial or the kind of the opportunities that are there which makes her read, even those may be circumscribed or constrained, so that she is not able to read the way she wants to read, she could be reading when she is cooking, looking after the child, and things like that.

So the room of one's own was not there for her, yet, that Virginia Woolf thought of, like in the 20th century. She is not there yet. So that that idea of, even the act of reading being upside down is what is very tragic about this one. Even there she is not able to kind of realize her full potential. The full potential in the sense that her sense of satisfaction here, she is not getting that, even through the act of reading, when she is able to get out of herself. When you read you go out, you go out of your own self to look at other selves, to look at other worlds. And that is not happening for the speaker in Salma's poem, perhaps, she's being circumscribed by frying something, or tending to the child. So, all kinds of interventions are there. Perhaps that is why she is feeling that

she is in a kind of slightly tilted position to the rest of the world, a slump. Not in the position of normativity.

And here even in this one, as I said, perhaps, she is not very well-read, because there is no reference to any act of reading or anything creative, which takes her outside of this immediate set of ideas of, child and the gifts. And the other thing, as I think we also talked about this is that again she is the one who is sending out messages through the sparrow. No human messenger, and and we kind of interpret it in two ways - either it is the routine, the poetic trope of using a bird as a messenger, or it could be because nobody is there to give her a kind of support to this new mother, to kind of share her burdens. And there is a very clear absence of the male here. And the absence of the male, the father figure, so those figures are not referred to, there is no reference to the husband here, no reference to the husband there. And we have a set of demands in this poem 'I have given birth to a son', and you pointed out that this is a kind of liberation, yes, liberation in a sense, because she can voice out.

So having a son gives her the space to speak up. If you do not have a son you are not allowed to speak up. So that seems to be the underlying message of this poem, that if you do not have a male progeny then you do not even have a voice to talk about anything, to ask for anything. So this is a kind of freedom. Yes, but it is a freedom which is circumscribed by patriarchy.

So we need to be aware of that and and if you look at the nature of the demands, even that is circumscribed to external things, which makes her happy, which in fact, makes her beautiful. Which makes her inviting further and that invitation would further lead to other kinds of activities and then you will be kind of caught in that project of procreation again. And that reminds us of this poem where she is combing her hair, the reference to brightness.

So, there is a kind of inbuilt move towards sexuality, an inbuilt move towards sexuality, that kind of further entraps the woman. So, perhaps the tidying up, the decorating of oneself is not to fulfill one's idea of self, the female self, but to please someone else. So these associated ideas are there and we do not have opinions in the poem, which will negate that kind of picture that we are building up. That I am trying to build up, so we do not have an alternative voice which will kind of say no, this kind of meaning-making is wrong. All the suggestions seem to be going down that route. So anything else that you can point out about these two?

Student: Maybe in this poem you have this reference of sparrow, here you have the reference to bat.

Professor: Yes. Very good. Yeah.

Student: So how they associate with these birds per say. Yeah, sparrow is definitely a kind of creature that appears in almost all the poems, like not almost all the poems, but still you have sparrows and nightingales, which are related to singing and mirth making.

Professor: Definitely a sign of optimism.

Student: Optimism.

Professor: This is not so, that is associated with Gothic imagery. Gothic tropes, it is associated with darkness; it is associated perhaps with that bad luck, something that is not right, something that does not belong to the real world of light. It is associated with the underworld and other nocturnal stuff. So it is not a good omen and not a sign of hope or optimism, but it is a sign of darkness. So that idea is communicated through the imagery of the bat that here it is a sign of simplicity and happiness. So you can see that this speaker is a woman with a simple perspective on life. So we can say, yes, she has given birth to a child. She is immensely happy. She wants to spread the word. She uses this trope, the poetic trope of a sparrow, to send out the messages and make sure, she wants to make sure that she gets all the goodies.

Student: Yeah.

Professor: It is a moment of joy. You do not have to read it as a bleak portrait of a particular agenda. But then there is also these other subjects which can be read, you know, perhaps that woman does not know that her happiness is fractured. She is not even conscious of that fracture, the faultlines in her happiness, but as enlightened readers, maybe we can kind of see that behind this happiness there is also the deeper dissatisfactions and unfulfilled life, perhaps that woman is not aware of that, and for the better.

Student: Maybe it is because of the immediacy.

Professor: Yes.

Student: She has just delivered a baby. But on the other hand, in 'Perspective' she is a mother. It is not given that she has just delivered or anything, so we can take it for granted that she has been a mother for a year or two. Maybe so she has gone through that process.

Professor: Yes, very good.

Student: It is not about the happiness that you get when you deliver a baby.

Professor: Yes.

Student: And you have a lot of things that you have to undergo. Although there is this main figure, being a mother is a totally different thing. You have to take care of so many things, not just the baby, you have to take care of us, you have to take care of the family. So there is a burden. Yeah, that comes along.

Professor: The juggling of different kinds of duties and the pain underneath that. The pain involved in kind of trying to strike a balance across these different domains of domesticity, child rearing, and your own spiritual or professional pursuits, your intellectual pursuits, and the inability to kind of, satisfactorily manage all these domains are also part of the narratives.

So, you are quite right in pointing out that this is a mother who has kind of, struggling with the fact that she has to manage all these, whereas this one is like the visceral immediate feeling of happiness on having given birth to a child. So this gives us a greater window, a bigger picture of the realities and this one is more, sort of a kind of...

Student: An image.

Professor: Yeah, this (I have given birth to a son) seems to be a stereotype for lack of a better world, if this is cliché, happiness, perhaps, happiness. But this is something which does not kind of connect with the realities. The everyday reality. We do not know what else she has to go, perform once this joy has died down, or at least come down from that heights of joy. So that kind of reality is not here, the specificity is missing from this one. The only window that we have is this materiality of the saree and the blouse that is the material thing that we can kind of think about as to why she is obsessed. It is a repetitive, like that the same material image keeps coming up time and again, perhaps.

And I also talked about the fact that the colour associated with this, multicoloured blouse. Perhaps that is the joy that she can derive, the joy comes from the various colours, perhaps the only colourful thing that she has is this one, rather than the routine that she experiences. There is no colour there in her spiritual sense.

There is no happiness there. Maybe everything is monochromatic, or at least she sees her humdrum life as monochromatic. And the extraordinary things are seen as colourful, extraordinary things which give her joy as seen as colourful. So, I think we can put an end to our discussion on these two points, but I want to bring out 'Chill Out'. And this is an interesting poem.

Maybe I will read this out. "Busy right now with my precious bamboo flute, my delicate fingers on the holes, darling, can't snuggle you now, , I am lost fiddling with melodious flute. Chill out - eat some chili, can't squeeze you right now. Busy with my precious bamboo flute, my delicate fingers on the holes."

I think this poem forms a nice piece to the other two as well here because we have a male voice. The two poems that we have just read are feminine voices and we have seen for the first time what the male is doing right now, and the male in 'Chill Out' says, "I am busy with certain things, the creative things and I cannot cuddle you now, cannot snuggle you now," and you can see the rejection.

It is a reasonable rejection, but we can see the rejection of the female from the male domain. He is busy creatively, but there is no space for the feminine in that creative processes. The flute-playing seems to be the domain of the male, so she has to kind of wait outside, wait outside for him to finish up and come and join her. So that separation of the gender roles becomes pretty clear, distinct.

So, domesticity, child rearing, looking after self so that one remains attractive for the other sex, these are all the gender roles. Like we can kind of read from these poems and gather a set of duties that the female is invested with. And we can see that, participating in some kind of creative public sphere is the domain of the male. What are your thoughts?

Student: It is very interesting to see that although the feminine voice is not predominant, in this poem, we can understand that she is there. Yeah that she is inviting him and he rejects her slightly. And, yes, what you said is the only thing that comes through my mind.

Professor: I can pick up from what you have just said. It is a very interesting point. Here they are completely erased?

Student: Yeah.

Professor: They are there but not exactly within the text. The women are kind of reacting to them, she is kind of presenting herself. She is trying to keep herself really attractive. I am keeping in mind that the male gaze, the male gaze is there. But in “Chill Out”, she is there in the text, she is kind of intervening. So she is intervening and he is kind of pushing her out. So she is trying to intrude on, interfere with the smooth functioning of the activities related to the public, to the community. So, when he is trying to make music, it is music for the community. So that is very interesting, the fact that she has found a space for herself within the textual space.

And he says, “Darling, can't snuggle you now, I'm lost fiddling this melodious flute.” So he is trying to immerse himself with this, within this domain of music. But still he is not able to completely enter the domain because she is the dissident figure trying to take him out of that. And he says, “Chill out, eat some chili,” there is a consonant repetition that ‘ch – ch’ sound, and chili again, connects her with all these chores associated with cooking, chili, making dishes.

So she is stepping out of her usual domain and it makes him, distracts him, to put it very simply, and he wants her to go back and kind of enjoy her own dishes. And he says “can’t squeeze you right now, busy with my precious little bamboo flutes,” so the bamboo is precious, because it is associated with community building through music. And in that project of community building she is not participating, at least within the confines of this particular poem. I am not saying that women did not participate at all in any of the processes, but within the textual dynamics of this particular poem, they are outside of it. So that seems to be clear.

And the interesting thing is they are kind of distracting, romance seems to kind of, romance and sexuality seems to kind of take them out, take the male out of their usual professional, cultural

duties. So that that kind of idea comes through in this one. Alright. So, I think we will stop here for now and we will continue in the next session. Thank you.