

**Poetry**  
**Professor. S.P. Dhanavel**  
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**& Shreekumar Varma**  
**Lecture - 75**  
**Discussion - 02 Part - 02**

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Now we live in your world where the questions of identity based on race, religion, gender, and other categories, influences so much. Is there anything of that kind of categories influencing your writing?

Shreekumar Varma: See, basically, unless you are writing about a situation or a political situation, or an emotional situation where all this matters, when you are consciously doing that, that is the only time. But otherwise, it is not even the casual reader, a reader of poetry who is interested in this, it is a scholar, it is the researcher who looks into it, and finds out where this fits in and they connect the dots.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: But as far as your writing is concerned, it is from whatever you feel, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: Maybe a political thought or maybe an emotional thought or whatever it is an inspiration, maybe a completely different isolated sort of idea. That is what it is between you and the page like I said earlier, but it is the researcher, the scholar, and maybe one or two readers who would find out all these pointers in it. But it is there all over the place. You cannot avoid the problems of race, gender, the problems.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: Because if you have to bring them in as a conscious effort, then you are a failure,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: As a poet, as a great writer.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes. but if you write, look at the problems that are created, and your heart sort of goes out to it, and then you feel like writing, that's a different thing.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay. Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: That I think, is the role of the poet to voice, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: His problems.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay, when you said you had some models, but you do not remember those names, at least some tools or techniques of writing poetry from those poets or from others. from other sources, have you read about them? Have you developed some techniques or tools like that?

Shreekumar Varma: I think it is not something which you keep as a template or you build upon but like I said, it all goes to make your foundation, so maybe different categories of poetries, I do not stick to one type of poetry or one, not even one, you know architecture of poetry, the form of poetry, I try and build the form according to the emotion of that particular point. So, I may be influenced indirectly by poets, but I do not sort of think of these poems or poets and then you know, build upon that would not especially now that I have come so far in my physical age or my,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, Yeah.

Shreekumar Varma: You know That now I can sort of go back and think about all those things, they may inspire us, they may give us great joy and it may all contribute to that quality, which is there which produces your poetry. So, that contributes, but that does not generally influence in that way.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: You know, in creative writing classes, writers generally teach some kind of techniques of writing poetry or tools of writing poetry, that is why I asked you.

Shreekumar Varma: Yeah, I will tell you. Yes, Yes. Because what happens is, you go there, and you tell them what is gone before.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: And you this is how, I used to teach my students.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: I used to give them poetry from the masters.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, they just absorb it, and then give them a few pointers which is my take on it or the general take on it by other scholars till now, but they have always to bring a new fresh gaze upon it.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, that is why even if you are mocking, when you are, your...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Script,

Shreekumar Varma: paper

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay. okay

Shreekumar Varma: what you do is, you look at what is there till now the people who have already written and what is the text till now, the guidelines all that is already there. But you do not you know forget the fact that the reader or the student also has one,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: True.

Shreekumar Varma: Extra level.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah. yeah

Shreekumar Varma: That he or she brings to that experience.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Every writer brings in.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes. yes.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So that when in the answer paper if the student does that overreaches (okay) the standard procedure, you should not be strict and say no, this has to, you know conform to a certain thing. Because the youngster is the one who helps poetry grow,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: True, true.

Shreekumar Varma: The next generation is the one who pushes poetry to grow.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay, breaks the bounce?

Shreekumar Varma: Yes.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, new ideas or new inspiration does not come in till the student who is influenced and inspired does his own thing.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay, that individuality must come out.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes. That individuality must come out and the teacher must recognize that there is scope for it beyond the textbooks.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay, I think now, our time comes for you to read your poems. And that question is what poem or poems do you think every reader should read in his lifetime or her lifetime?

Shreekumar Varma: I do not think there is anything like that. Even my son, I took him to a library for the first time and told him you just go ahead,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: He said you mean anything, and there some taboo or anything which is prohibited? So, I said, no, you just look around, I will tell you if that bad, I will tell you.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Ha, ha, ha

Shreekumar Varma: But you just look around and pick what you want.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Because that is how the world is, the world is all around for you and you have to pick and choose.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: It is open.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes. and you have to make your contribution even in your own selection, your conscious selection,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: That is how you can contribute.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay, I was really happy that it when you said ‘the core of poetry is something sacred,’ that sacredness to participate in the sacredness, I think every reader must read some poems.

Shreekumar Varma: The reader must read some poems and the poet must prepare himself for that. It is a rite of passage that he has to go through to reach that place,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay,

Shreekumar Varma: Where he can write poetry that goes out into the world.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay,

Shreekumar Varma: And the reader must be aware of things, that, that is a slow process. The reader that is how he educates himself, that is how he arms himself, qualifies himself, by reading.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, now, let us listen to your poems please.

Shreekumar Varma: The first poem is about something which I am very interested in cinema.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: And this is in the words of a projector. There is a darkened room and people are watching a movie, and the projector is talking.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: I see. What is the title?

Shreekumar Varma: It is called ‘Projector’

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Projector, please go ahead.

Shreekumar Varma:

“In a hallway curtains crush the last sunrays,  
they wait in semi-silent stupor-

hundreds, facing a white bright screen;  
kindred, as they share a dream.

no one notices me; The screen sparkles two life  
and the story begins, spouting from my eye  
through a magic ray slicing the night-  
image quickens and becomes life.

i regurgitate film and fool their senses,  
throwing up carefully crafted scenes of life;  
of people, and places and slices of happiness,  
humor, and song with chest heaving sighs.

shut your eyes, you will know what I mean;  
the darkness mothers your every dream.  
there's hero and villain and ravishing bride  
and love in the midst of punishing pride!

So leave them with their popcorn and tears;  
they're safe in their ignorance.  
when they know light. When they know me,  
it's time for deliverance."

That is one of them.

And there is one about a boat tragedy in a place called Kumarakom in Kerala.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, after I was pretty much affected by the things that went on afterwards the people who lost their lives and families deprived of their people. So, after that I wrote this, and the poem is called 'Kumarakom.'

“days after the drowning  
when companion villages  
raised the memory of their various dead,  
and boats and blame were re-examined,  
and officials packed up, exhausted,  
dredging out certificates and compensations;  
one evening when the wails had stilled the sky  
like ghost singers fading out, and the lamp  
reached the threshold like any other evening,  
the old woman hobbled out, muttering her prayers,  
and cursing each member of her family  
for leaving her alone,  
unaware of the reason  
for the terrible silence in the house,  
that invaded even heard deafness.”

And there is one very light poem about a poem; poet thinks about he is a big person.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: okay

Shreekumar Varma: he is full of ego and stuffed, ...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: The label of a poet, ...

Shreekumar Varma: Label of a poet but when he is sitting there, somebody comes to visit him. So, this is called 'The Visitor.'

“Each day, I sit before the screen  
facing a window, this garden of green  
tall trees, birds, and squirrels and bees.  
A langar that is nature's idea of peace.  
A white sky glows through in patches  
offering itself as the muse catches,  
my eyes feast and the mind wanders  
delicate pride as a writer ponders  
and through the grind gear of my tail,  
she flutters to my vision without fail.  
Sharp beat and as small as my palm,  
a simple message, shattering my calm.  
What does she know this tiny bird,  
the heavenly ring of a single word  
of worlds churned out from the writer's mill  
as she hops about on my window cell.”

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Oh, Great, I listened to some kind of rhyme here in this poem.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes, I try, I try to experiment sometimes with the rhyme and with the rhythm. There is one about the I told you about the silence of words.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yes.



Shreekumar Varma: That is, I will, I will end with that one.

Shreekumar Varma: It is called 'Silence of Words.'

"I wonder, even as I drink coffee  
and abandon newspapers yet again  
and settle down to question the clear white screen  
seeking words and moments, faces and bondings  
that aren't so ready-made as you think.

We have our moments of consummate summation,  
when the Muse hesitates, confused;  
a writer's world isn't filled by words  
but by the silence of words  
so there, you have it even as you  
hug the dark corner, picking off-colored  
beads scattered all our predicament;  
It's not a happy world, but a seeking one,  
never brought to fruition but by completing  
the circle of life like my arms reaching around  
yet losing you each time by that hairs-breadth between fingers  
I wonder still."

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Oh! That is a lovely poem, is there any philosophical dimension to this Silence of words?

Shreekumar Varma: Yes, because everything, see, for one thing, for me, it all began with my love for music.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, between each word, with within each word, within each letter there is music.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That is wonderful. Could you tell us a little more about the music of poetry?

Shreekumar Varma: Because you, see there are two aspects to it. One is the rhythm, the rhyme, the words themselves, where you place the word, the gravity of the word, the simplicity of the word, little you know, teasing of the word. All that. And then there is also the silence of the word, between the words, what is unspoken, like you say, they heard melodies and...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Sure.

Shreekumar Varma: unheard melodies something like that. So, I think music which I have grown up with, all kinds of music.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Excellent.

Shreekumar Varma: That has helped me and I think, even while I am writing words, there is music.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: In novel also, in play also?

Shreekumar Varma: In all of them, without music, I do not think a creative writer can organize and put his words together. That is my, take on it. I don't know about others.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yeah, it is alright. Thank you. Now let us come to our practical classroom situation. How do you want your poetry to be introduced to the students in the classroom?

Shreekumar Varma: I do not think I have any prescriptions for that.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: It depends on how the lecturer or the professor reads my point and how each individual student takes it, that freedom has to be given, that is the only thing I ask, Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: That freedom of interpreting a poem individually, has to be given to the student.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay. Next question is related to, again, academic situation where we have to evaluate answers on poetry. Do you have any suggestions?

Shreekumar Varma: Yes, I told you, when you are writing, when you are evaluating poetry, you have to give that extra dimension possibility to the student. Because it is not just the text or the guides, or the scholars that have gone before who have formulated it. But there is an element of growth when the new reader adds his or her own bit. So, I always did that. Whenever I was teaching poetry, I read it out, I asked them to read it out. And then I asked them what they themselves felt about it.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: And only after that, did I talk about the poem,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: So, there is one element to it, one extra atmosphere to it. Which you have got into it, so that poem lives from that moment onwards to in a different way.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That is great. That means every reader must have the chance to read the poem by himself or herself.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Do you also want to give importance to the loud reading of the poem or silent reading of the poem?

Shreekumar Varma: That depends on the person. There are certain people like the silence of words may be better if you read it in silence.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: But another person may see the music to realize a music of the words by reciting it aloud. So, both are, see there is nothing, which is taboo that is what I am saying. There are no templates which need not be broken.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Every template has the inbuilt bomb within it to burst it open and take leave place for another template or another reading of the poem.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: We come to the last question. How would you want your student to read your poems? There are many students we have in our campus, in many campuses across the country, how would you like a student to write your poems?

Shreekumar Varma: I think if I had a prescription like that, I would not be a poet at all. the poet has to leave his poem.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay. Just leave it.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes. you have to write the poem and then you have to leave it, so that somebody else has full authority over it.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: And each individual, each reader, each student who picks up the poem is the owner of that poem from then on.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That means you are willing to this disavow this ownership of your poetry?

Shreekumar Varma: Not ownership, I am not talking about the copyright or legal thing, I am talking about the meaning, the value, the quality of the poem.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Okay.

Shreekumar Varma: Because unless a reader takes it and owns it, and grows it as he grows older, that poem dies, it is a monument, any every monument is a dead monument, you cannot build further on a monument,

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: No, no, no...

Shreekumar Varma: So that, when you monumentalize something like that, then it is over. But if you give with that position to that potential to grow, then that poem lives forever, maybe.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Can I summarize my understanding of your words?

Shreekumar Varma: Please.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Particularly last one, does it mean that you want the student or reader to give life to the poem that you have written on his own or her own, and give any shape, any meaning to it?

Shreekumar Varma: Absolutely, there may be a core like I said there may be a core idea or understanding on which the poem is built. That remains because that is the poets,...

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Shreekumar Varma: idea of it.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: That is the starting point,

Shreekumar Varma: Yes. But even then, when to put that bomb in that, that you never know what stays and what you know, because even when I was 14, if I had read a poem and then I write that same poem when I was 35.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Exactly Yes.

Shreekumar Varma: There is no difference because not only has the poem acquired that sort of sensibility to me, I have grown.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Shreekumar Varma: My experiences my reading has grown.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: Yes.

Shreekumar Varma: I have become bloated with other people's inspirations and understandings, to be able to add my own new reading or new meanings to that.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: okay, thank you so much for coming to our NPTEL studio, sharing your rich experience of writing poetry, teaching poetry. It has been wonderful for us. You have

spoken to us about your own process of writing poetry, the challenges that you faced as a writer of poetry. Particularly, in your case you were lucky, you said the you were into journalism, so you did not have that much of difficulty, but others do face such difficulties that you have acknowledged. And from my listening to you, I understand that you lay so much of emphasis on the freedom of the writer and the freedom of the reader to write in any way to shape up his or her own experience in any way, so that the poem lives on its own.

Shreekumar Varma: Yes.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: I am very glad that you were also able to share your experience of teaching poetry in certain places where you want the readers to experience that joy of reading, experience that freedom of reading and interpreting the poems. Thank you so much.

Shreekumar Varma: It is been a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful day for me. IIT is a place where I always enjoy coming back to.

Professor S.P. Dhanavel: You are always welcome. Thank you so much. Thank you.