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Hoping Against Hope: A Discourse on Perumal Murugan's *Koolla Madari (Seasons of the Palm)*

Ms Daisy, M.A., M.Phil. (ELT), Ph.D. Candidate



Perumal Murugan, author of *Seasons of the Palm*

Translation in India

Translation is commonly defined as “expression of the sense (finding the equivalence) of the word or the text in another language” (Vasanthi, 2007). India has a very long tradition of translation. Major epics composed in Sanskrit have been adapted through translation into other Indian languages throughout the recorded history of Indian languages and cultures.

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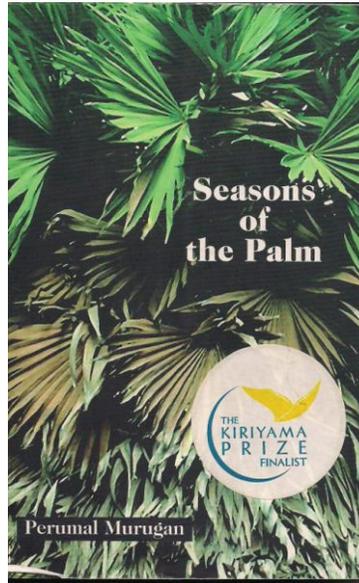
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This format of translation focused on the content and implications of the Sanskrit texts to communicate the same in other Indian languages. Aesthetic function played a very crucial role in such translations. However, literal translation has not been very popular, as this format of translation is heavily utilized in the translation of scientific texts.

Novels of leading creative writers in Indian languages have always been a popular choice among the translators in Indian languages. Such translation activity was noticed during the British India days as well. However, translation from English into Indian languages became the most dominant process of translation. Southern Languages Book Trust, a joint effort of south Indian states, focused on the translation of works from one south Indian language into another with great success. There were also several monthly magazines which brought out translation of creative literature from one Indian language into another language. For example, *Manjari* in Tamil focused on providing short stories translated from other Indian languages in Tamil to a large audience in Tamilnadu. Kerala's magazines always carried translation of stories from other Indian languages.

Often translation is always treated as a necessary appendage to the source text to establish communication with people who do not know that language. Especially in the multi-lingual country like India, the importance of translation from one language to another and from all regional languages to an international language like English is now well recognized by the government, the educationists and the reputed publishers. Due to such recognition, the translators have started feeling a sense of ownership to the translated text and automatically they take pride in the act of translation.

V. Geetha's Translation of Perumal Murugan's Novel in Tamil



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Among such translators is V. Geetha, whose English translation of Perumal Murugan's *Koolla Madari*, a novel originally written in Tamil, has helped render a not so widely known work of fiction accessible and universal. Titled *Seasons of the Palm* in English, the book is among the top five short listed for the Kiriyaama Prize in 2005.

Perumal Murugan's novel projects the relationship between Gounder landlords and their dalit servants. It echoes, as Murugan says in an interview, "the futility, the sadness that follows the inability to escape from *soolal* (circumstances, environment), notwithstanding the many efforts to break free" (Murugan, 2005). Besides portraying the cruelties towards the "untouchable" dalits, the novel projects the dream world of young adolescent boys of the said community who are struggling to hold their existence in a world of brutal injustice.

Perumal Murugan and His Translator V. Geetha

Perumal Murugan is a well known contemporary Tamil writer from Namakkal (Tamilnadu) whose strong work has won great appreciation from critics and readers. A lecturer in Tamil literature, he focuses his writings on life lived in the margins of society, both rural and urban.

Perumal has written 3 novels, a collection of scholarly essays on contemporary Tamil literature, several short stories and poems, and edited a dialect dictionary which won the state award for excellence. Murugan has also bagged the Katha Award for short story.

Seasons of the Palm is his third novel. V. Geetha, the translator of the novel, writes in English and Tamil and translates into and from both languages. Her concerns include Tamil history and culture, caste and gender.

On Defining Dalit Literature

This novel adds another important dimension to the concept of *Dalit literature* in that Dalit literature is not necessarily the compendium of creative works by *Dalit* writers only. Progressive creative literary writing in many Indian languages attracts writers of a variety of communities to focus on the inhuman treatment of the Dalits in Indian society. Some of these writers like Perumal Murugan, however, excel in their narratives by providing authentic descriptions, plots, and stories using the powerful native dialect of Dalit communities. The translator Vimala also becomes an excellent match to the powerful creative writer in her translation.

Seasons of the Palm

Seasons of the Palm makes a significant contribution to the genre of Dalit literature in Tamil, a literature of protest, resistance and subversion where the author recounts the everyday brutality of caste society in relentless detail. Born into the untouchable class in Southern India, the children work as goat-herds and face heartbreaking hunger and dispossession along with the universal difficulties of adolescence.

One of these children is Shortie, a lovingly drawn young-teen protagonist who is in bondage to a paternal yet very strict landlord. Shortie herds his Gounder's goats, works at his home, cleans his cow pen and takes care of all his goats even at night by sleeping at the goat pen amidst the smells of their piss and shit. His life is one of hard physical labour and cruel persecution, and so is his friends' - Belly, Tallfellow, Stonedeaf and Stumpleg.

All these children struggle to keep their fragile happiness when they are together at the palm-dotted pastureland herding the goats of their respective landlords. Their happy moments include sitting together and sharing the 'never enough' stale food given by their masters' families, playing some games together, jumping into the deserted well to wash themselves and the occasional adventures to go in search of something to fill in their empty stomachs.

All this is done keeping an eye on the goats, for God knows which goat trespasses into some other field and which chooses to deliver at that exact moment. If anything happens to a goat, the children get brutal beatings along with some fine from their masters. All these children live a life full of struggle with endless work and never ending abuses.

With lots of physical work and very less to eat, these *chakkili* (untouchable) boys and girls have become experts in finding food from nature. Picking nuts from nearby fields and eggs of some birds in the deserted fields, they somehow fill in their empty stomachs. But, most of the time, it is the palm trees in that pasture land which have something to offer in every season to the poor children like nuts, fruit, root, juice and toddy, etc. What if it is a thorny palm, twin palm or some other, its various offerings in different seasons are a treat for the hungry *chakkili* children who are also experts in climbing trees.

The children of their masters too come and play with the chakkilies but secretly, because nobody from the Gounders' family is allowed to touch any part of these chakkilies.

Selvan, the son of Shortie's landlord not only plays with Shortie but shares his adventures of school with him. He is sent by his father to guard the goat pen at night along with Shortie for a few months. While Selvan tells Shortie about school and movies, Shortie impresses Selvan by his bold demeanor and adventures like picking nuts and toddy from the palm trees. During this period, in spite of all care, they come very close and sleep together in one bed. One night, Selvan even drinks toddy from Shortie's bowl as there is no other cup.

Instances like this show that the boys have a bond that occasionally cuts across caste inhibitions, but whenever Shortie falls into a trouble because of Selvan, Selvan do not have the guts to save him. The traditional age old gap between the Gounders and Chakkilis does not allow the Gounder's son to come out in support of a Chakkili.

One day Shortie is caught stealing coconuts from the palm of his landlord's enemy. As punishment, Shortie is hanged upside down in the well. The incident has a strong effect on Shortie's mind and he suddenly becomes a quiet person. Everything in the world looks futile to him and he tries to run away from his environment, but ultimately comes back thinking of the fine his parents will have to pay and his little brother who will have to work in his place just as Stonedeaf's little sister Matchbox had to work in her place,

Every dalit (chakkili) child has more or less the same story.

Dalit Intelligence and Wisdom

The word 'dalit' in Sanskrit means 'suppressed' or 'crushed'. The children portrayed in the novel are really so, but it is very interesting to see that their personality changes completely when they are together in the pasture land. They seem very intelligent and sharp when they are away from their masters' grips.

Shortie is a nature lover with such fine sensibilities that he can be called another Wordsworth. Belly's IQ level can be a challenge to so many educated persons. Tallfellow has the guts enough when he refuses to work without payment after his master has beaten him enough. Stonedeaf is beautiful and knows all the work of a gounder household and fulfills the responsibilities better than her mistress. But the same children are helpless against their circumstances.

Due to their caste and their poverty, these boys and girls are doomed to meet the similar drastic fate. Abused every hour, cursed everyday and beaten every second day, they move towards their dark future when they will work in field all day like grown ups. Then, they will not have time enough to get together like this. It's a hopeless world they live in. Still they stay jolly and have the energy to play together and dream the impossible.

The horror and interference in their dreams comes to the fore every second day when something wrong happens and these children prepare themselves to bear the punishment.

The final blow in this hell's image comes in the end when Selvan drowns as a result of his own mischief and Shortie dives into the well and goes deeper and deeper, thinking, "He must go deeper. Further, further than anyone has ever gone. To the end, where there is only thick darkness" (319).

Caste Cruelties

Seasons of the Palm enlightens the reader on many issues. This English translation of a contemporary Tamil classic captures a world that is virtually unknown outside the Tamil village – the layered and complex inner world of dalit ‘untouchables’, who struggle to hold their own in a context of cruel injustice. Caste, the rigid social system in which a social hierarchy is maintained generation after generation, allows little mobility out of the position to which a person is born.

The Indian caste system is organized into four main groups. There is also a fifth group that is considered to be outside the caste system. The people belonging to this class are literally outcastes. Hinduism, with its central belief in re-birth (or the endless cycle of birth-death-birth, called *samsara*) has scripture that explains how people are born into a certain caste based on the ‘karma’ they acquired in their previous births. The people born into this strata of society, often into an existence of grinding poverty and limited opportunities, are known by various names including ‘untouchables’, ‘dalits’ and chakkilies.

The untouchability feature is one of the cruelest features of the caste system because the persons born in this category of castes have no rights in the larger society outside their caste. One of the vilest social oppressions (it has been recently defined as racist in some International Conferences) in the world, it has been there in the whole Indian society irrespective of the regions. Early South Indian social reformers have passionately recorded and fought against these practices, long before such movements took roots in other regions of the country. The treatment meted out to the untouchables and members of the other lower non-Brahmin Hindu castes included many inhuman acts, such as even the sight of an untouchable or any other lower non-Brahmin caste was sufficient to pollute a member of a higher caste. There, the upper caste person had to pass through some religious ceremonies to purify himself if an untouchable or any other lower non-Brahmin caste person touched him or his possessions. Also, they had to wash or clean the places where the untouchable touched and stepped.

Set in the late 1960s, *Seasons of the Palm* is a touching story of the untouchable children in such a village in South India. While things have changed a lot since late 1960s, there are still vestiges of the old practice dominating in areas where the Dalit poverty is extremely pronounced.

The chakkili (untouchable) children depicted in *Seasons of the Palm* are the typical image of untouchables presented above. Quickly forgetting the constant physical and verbal abuse (which is part of their strategy for survival), they suffer poverty, hunger and beatings of their masters believing in the theory of *samsara*, the cycle of birth-death-rebirth based on their karma. If one of them like Tallfellow, who has to take care of a bed ridden old master, daily emptying his pan of piss and shit, does not want to believe in the

same, his grandmother is ready to make him believe so, 'Don't feel bad. He's like our god!' (55) Similarly, Belly, the little girl who is very sharp and loves to mimic her mistress when she is with her friends at the pasture land, knows very well about her status in the same mistress's house:

Belly feels tight and angry inside but knows she cannot, must not talk back. Sometimes though, inside the shed, she buries her face in a calf's downy neck and whispers her anger; or mutters into a buffalo's thick ear. They return her confidences with gentle, calm, sympathetic eyes. (34)

Shortie, a boy with sentiments, loves nature very much. He loves watching the mynahs and they 'remind him of home, in the chakkili quarter – the same loud chatter, the same happiness.' (25) He is generous enough to share his very small tiffin with a stray dog Poochi and does all his jobs very honestly. Like a saint, he lets the credit of (seeing the god Munisami) his dream go to Selvan. Shortie is very small but like an elder in the family, he saves Selvan and the goats when the storm comes. This outcaste is honest enough to hand over his self earned money (by collecting the palm roots) to his master on which the person has no right. But in spite of all these qualities, he meets the same harsh treatment which seems to be the 'be all and end all' of a Chakkili's life.

Beside being Chakkilies, they are *very* poor. And this double trouble makes it a harsh life for these bonded children who have no sympathy from their own drunkard fathers and helpless mothers. Still, these children cultivate among themselves and pluck moments of joyous togetherness while they are out grazing the goats. The innocence and generosity of Shortie, the sauciness of Belly, the boldness of Tallfellow, the leadership of Stumpleg and the beauty of Stonedeaf captures the reader's mind.

Apart from that, the bonds of friendship that occasionally cut across caste inhibitions and the virtue of sharing fostered by sheer instinct, continue to capture the reader's curiosity. The author has expertly piloted the fragile craft of the narrative to safety through the waves of sex and foul-mouthed language that one cannot simply wish away.

Difficult Questions to Answer!

The novel makes the reader once again ponder over the issue of untouchability. For example, how can the cows and goats be touched and looked after by a person while the milk they yield becomes impure by the same person's touch? The lambs are being slaughtered in a ceremony at the grove and the boys who have brought up those lambs are not allowed to enter. How can the lamb who's been brought up by a person be pious and the person an outcaste?

Shortie has brought up Veeran, the sacrificial lamb, even the name Veeran was given by him. Shortie, who is the only human on earth whom Veeran obeys, lets him rest his head

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and sleep on the top of him just before the slaughtering ceremony, is not allowed to see Veeran in his last moments because he is a chakkili and the persons from their community cannot even go near the grove when such a ceremony is going on. No body is worried about the sacredness of the grove when there is no ceremony and 'it was deserted except for the squirrels and the garden lizards that scurred lazily through it. Shortie and others loved to play with the bells on the Muni's spears' (222).

And when everybody including the guests have eaten the feast prepared by Veeran's meat, Shortie, for whom meat is the best meal his hungry stomach can have, is human and emotional enough to refuse eating it because he says, 'I don't want to eat Veeran' (234).

Whatever the Hindu scriptures say, the incidents like this should make an upper caste individual hate himself and love this so called 'untouchable' lad. Perhaps the reality is quite different. It is also necessary to do some research as to how the readers from upper caste families view such narratives as Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm*. Do they derive any aesthetically ennobling feeling from narratives such as *Seasons of the Palm*?

Real Villains of the Story

'Might is right' is an old saying and applies everywhere. Irrespective of the communities, the stronger person punishes the weaker; man tyrannises over woman; but of course the Chakkili being an untouchable caste, they are at the receiving end all the time. This curse of Casteism and the hardy rural life that has too little to give are the real villains depicted in the novel and any sensitive reader can see that. If it is a hard life for the chakkilies, it is definitely not all cream and roses for the rest too. The lives the Gounders lead is also full of hardships.

Some Regional Contrasts and Regional Universals

For a person living in North India, many things of this Tamil novel are new and many are there which he/she can co-relate with his/her region. For example, one may view that the relationship between the landlords and servants in the north is less harsh and the treatment the untouchables get is much less strict. Also the picturesque detail of the palms and their various products in the novel are new and attractive to a North Indian reader. Shortie, the affectionately drawn character, resembles to every Chhotu of roadside 'dhabas' or small restaurants in North India, where no matter what he does, he gets the rebuking from his master. However much the differences are, the people and their attitudes all over India seem to be the same.

The Gounder Master of Shortie is very strict with Shortie when he steals coconuts, because his own father had been very strict with him for the same reason. The Gounder

tells his wife about the punishment his father gave to him when he had stolen a lime from the market:

He trussed me up and hung me upside down from the ceiling. And that's not all either. He stood there and burnt dry chilli dust on coals beneath my head. ... I yelled and my eyes watered ... and all the time I was upside down! My father stood there, feeding the coals with chilli dust and each time I sneezed, he said, 'Will you do it again? Take what is not yours?'.
(287)

The incidents like the above and the very strict fathers are common throughout India because they usually punish severely their own children for stealing, just to ensure that they do not lay their hands on things which are not theirs. We need to note that every part of India has the characters like Shortie, his helpless parents, his dominating master and the miser mistress from a variety of castes. And this binds people of India together. Also, the exploitation of the poor and weak untouchables as well as the poor and weak from other castes as well is common throughout the country which makes all the Indians more and more understanding of each other. Surely this bond is strengthened in this country of so many languages and cultures through the translations of the regional texts into English and other languages.

Value of Literary Translation

Literary translation is eminently worthy of celebration. Without it we would be imprisoned in a monocultural world, knowing neither our own heritage nor the heritage of other cultures. Without translation we cannot even understand the cultures of our nearby neighbours let alone the neighbours thousands of miles away.

Ketaki Kushari Dyson firmly believes that “the rich diversity of this human community cannot be appreciated or even understood without the essential tool of translation” (Dyson, 2009). India, which covers a total area of more than three-crore square kilometers and is the seventh largest country in the world, is multilingual and multicultural and thus it is a microcosm of the whole world. Due to this, the role of translation becomes all the more important in the literary life here.

The culture and relationship between the Gounders and Chakkilies of South India becomes recognizable to the rest of the world through *Seasons of the Palm*. It should also be noted that there are poor and weak Gounders as well, who have also been subjected to ill-treatment minus untouchability.

The Writer and the Translator

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According to the translator, the motivation for her to take up this particular work for translation came from the fact that the book was not written by a dalit which conveys something important about the responsibility of the dominant castes in fighting their own proclivity and interest in sustaining untouchability. Both, the author and the translator have proved that it hardly matters whether they themselves are Dalit or not. The author has subsumed the pangs of the marginalised folk in his creative smithy and wrought a sharp, poignant sword.

The novel also touches the heart of every sensitive Indian because chakkilies or not chakkilies, since the poor people as well as the members of the lower castes in Hindu hierarchy are treated in similar ways throughout India. And varying in degrees in various regions, the untouchables have been the subject of worst and vilest abuse and maltreatment all over India.

A Reader's Perspective and Experience

It is the influence of this national aspect that after reading the novel, every small working boy reminds me of Shortie and every group of poor children playing joyously in spite of their torn clothes reminds me of Shortie's group. Not only this, it came as a surprise to even myself when driving through the countryside I saw a herd of goats and I immediately named them as Veeran, Mollachi, Vattalu, Mooli, Vellachi, Soozhiyan and Nedumbi. If the non-speaking animals described in *Seasons of the Palm* can stay in an Indian reader's heart, what to say of the 'touching' untouchables. However, this is where we need a heart large enough to transcend our socio-economic and caste backgrounds and deliberately experience the narrative with sympathy and agony. Unfortunately, the size of the population of readers of this nature is not yet large.

Revisiting Translation and Translators

As for the expanding area of Indian literature in translation, Shortie will not be easily forgotten as he is the very personification of adolescence doubly troubled by untouchability and poverty. Nor Veeran the sacrificial lamb, giving consent to be slaughtered when sprinkled with water for the holy feast.

The *Seasons of the Palm* is neither the first nor the last piece of work in translation. From times immemorial people have retold stories, shifted them from the context of one language and culture to that of another. The age old scriptures like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* have long back been translated from Sanskrit into other languages of India. If the translator is good enough, he/she becomes a historian, a sociologist, a culture specialist and above all a creative writer. An instinct, which develops through constant use, and a talent, which is initiated through experience serves well in the act of good translation.

Also, good translation can never be word to word translation. Though there are people who are of the opinion that a source text can be given a faithful reproduction in the new language only when there is word to word translation. It is because they believe that for every word or phrase in the source language there will be an exact equivalent in the target language. To quote Ketaki Kushari Dyson again

This is an illusion because every language is a world-view, a perspective, a way of looking at, classifying and analyzing the world. Each language is a window on the world, and no two windows give an identical view.
(Dyson, 2009)

Superb and Sensible Translation by V. Geetha

That's why V. Geetha has not given word for word translation. She has rendered the novel in the simple present to get over the problem of switching tenses which sounds all right in Tamil but clumsy in English. By turning the past tense of Perumal Murugan to the historical present throughout, she has also made the novel more evocative and dramatic. The agony of the dispossessed children and the ecstasy they pull out from their drab lives have been brought out very well by V. Geetha in her translation that effectively conveys the Tiruchengode dialect peppered with the Telugu of the Chakkilis.

Though it is not a word-for-word translation, Geetha leaves out nothing that is important for the action. To underscore the point how dalit children are not even allowed the dignity of their own names but are called by other cruel names, she translated the names into English. Hence, Shortie, Belly, Tallfellow, Stonedeaf and Stumpleg. Almost immediately we can co-relate them to Chhotu, Petu, Lambu, Behri and Lungra in Hindi. But she has retained the Tamil names for the plants, birds, animals and food wherever commonly English equivalents are not to be found. That's why, corn is there for cholam, but aavaaram (a plant) stays as it is. The palm predominates the landscape of the novel and the writer has lovingly detailed its numerous offerings like nut, fruit, juice and toddy, and hence the English translation is aptly titled *Seasons of the Palm*.

Translators have always played a pivotal role in social and cultural change in society. By translating the Tamil text *Koolla Madari* in English, which presents the relationship between the upper class 'touch me nots' and the 'touching' untouchables, V. Geetha has brought together all the Indians to ponder once again over the age old problem of maltreating the poor community in India because there seems to be no end to it.

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