

Translating Ashokamitran's words – and his silences

Recent English Translations Help Non-Tamils Access The Works Of Leading Tamil Writer

Nareesh Keerthi

Octogenarian Tamil writer Ashokamitran is one of the most prolific authors in what is referred to as the *bhasha* scene – Indian language literature. He is one of few Tamil writers to have a decent representation in English translation, and what is available is still a small part of his formidable oeuvre. Two new translations by N Kalyan Raman for Penguin Books: *The Ghosts of Meenambakkam* (Paavam Dalpathado in the original) and *Still Bleeding from the Wound*, a collection of twenty short stories, are the latest additions to this set.

Ashokamitran weaves his stories around the most commonplace personae, and expands the plot using an unadorned style of prose narrative. His stories don't have surprise endings or clever twists in the plot, nor are they social commentary disguised as fiction. Instead, these stories are written with an aim to understand the lives of his characters – as vignettes from the very human circumstances of ordinary folk, presented with a masterly hand. Even while dealing with themes such as violence, bereavement or the preternatural, there is a measured restraint that adds to the potency of his stories.

All these qualities abound in *The Ghosts of Meenambakkam*, wherein the nameless protagonist finds himself embroiled with a terrorist group, while still reeling from a personal grief. The paths of his surreal situation contrasted with his bathetic observations make you want to laugh and cry at once. The narrator-protagonist is at the intersection of several tragedies, and demonstrates a startling mix of nonchalance, dependence and an unaffected disengagement. In Ashokamitran's delineation, these conflicting emotions don't clash, they somehow all build up into a nuanced culmination.

Another arresting trait of Ashokamitran's, seen in full flow in the short



Illustration: Shinoth Akkaraparambil

lences are devastatingly impactful.

The anthology *Still Bleeding from the Wound* mostly features stories set in urban landscapes – Madras, Secunderabad and Bangalore – and they capture the flavours of those cities from two-three decades ago with an ethnographer's precision. Extreme emotions like violence (*Children*), frustration (*Liberation*), or even horror of the supernatural (*The Colours of Evil*) are presented with an intense minimalist style that evoke a shudder and empathy in equal measure. Intellectual and political commentary is never made explicitly in the narrative.

There are excellent moments of wry humour; "I didn't write those letters with regular ink; rather I wrote them with tears... No, that's not quite accurate. The letters were intended to bring tears to the reader's eyes, so it would be more precise to say that I wrote them with a pen dipped in onion juice" (*The Colours of Evil*). This only heightens the reader's involvement with the character, who laughs because the only other alternative is to cry. The existential concerns of the music teacher who will never be a singer (*Evolution*) and the has-been politician (*Waiting in the Dark*) attest to the efficacy of Ashokamitran's gripping aesthetic, free of any figurative language or clever tropes.

Ashokamitran's aesthetic universe is unique and does not submit easily to English literary parlance. His reticent style builds up a sustained intensity of feeling. He crafts crisp narratives with near-anthropological insight using the most ordinary characters in quotidian settings. And ironic humour surfaces in the most unexpected corners.

Kalyan Raman's sensitive translations have captured these contours most effectively. His keen attention toward changes in register, and a courageous hand in translating certain colloquialisms (e.g. "I didn't steal and all" in *Spinning wheel*) are praiseworthy. The choice of retaining several words in the original Tamil to convey the right flavour is admirable, and the glossary is helpful as well. Furthermore, he has been a close observer of Ashokamitran's craft, and is a practiced and experienced hand at rendering the latter into English. Kalyan has succeeded exceptionally in translating Ashokamitran — the stories as well as the silences.

(The author is a translator and a cognitive linguist at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore)

'Non-standard Tamil drives away readers'

Though a modernist, Ashokamitran recognizes and appreciates today's Tamil writing that often takes up hyper-local themes. In a chat with Abdullah Nurullah, Ashokamitran, however, asks new writers to use standard Tamil in their writings.

● **Is it true that Tamil writers do not get due recognition on the national literary stage?**

Nobody stops anybody from flourishing. I don't subscribe to the theory.

● **Are there any writers from the South who are recognized across India? Tamil, Malayalam, Karnataka.**

Jayamohan is well-recognized. He writes in Malayalam and Tamil, and he's working on a very big project, re-writing Mahabharata in several volumes, and he's certainly well known both in India and abroad. Jayakanthan was quite well known. Now we have a new crop of writers like S Ramakrishnan and Azhagiyaasingar.

● **Do you think the themes the writers are taking up have changed with the times?**

One driving force in the olden days was the freedom movement. Since Independence, that focus has gone and now it has diversified into different areas. We focus on a lot of local issues now. We have writers who want to shock people. Writers in Telugu do this. At the same time we are handling themes related to humanity. There is also a more occupational focus. Joe D'Cruz is from the fishermen community. He was raised in the sea, around communities that were engaged in the occupation. The language used reflects that upbringing.

● **Is the writing more ethnographic?**

Nothing wrong in that. The problem is that no one's writing in a universal language. This is true of English writers too. Even American writers don't write in an universal language and that's a problem because while the point of view may change with changing times, the language remains the same. James Joyce in his first work *Dubliners* used standard English language, but in his later work, *Ulysses*, he used a lot of Irish slang and I don't know anyone who has read that.

In Tamil, it's a loss if by use of language we drive away readers. You should not lose readers. So it's better to use some kind of standardized Tamil. You can indicate the ethnographical aspect. If there is a 'vaapa' (father

in Urdu), people assume it is about the Muslim community.

● **What is your writing process?**

We live in a small house. We have some privacy. I like to work in the open. So I go for walks and write with my hand. Now of course I am typing. I am 85 now. You are asking this question to an old man.

● **What do you think of the "award wars" controversy?**

I find that attitude childish. Where do you return the award? Do I go to Delhi to return the award? These people who have protested about intolerance and all that, that is not my concern. I just want to be known as a good writer. I don't want this kind of attention. You will get to the core of a person only through writing.

● **A set of 20 stories of yours has been translated into English. Can you talk about it?**

Penguin has released the books. But four years ago, they published *Manasarovar*, which didn't get much attention. One man can take a horse to the river water but 20 cannot compel him to drink the water. So I can't complain if people don't read my stories. This collection of short stories is different. The previous book was a new publication released in English, but these short stories are previously published in Tamil, written some 30 years ago. The lead story was written in 1973. So it takes 43 years, for a reasonably good Tamil story to get translated and published in English. But that's how it is in writing. Money is the problem.

This story is about a man who has lost money. He goes and assaults someone who he thinks has stolen from him, and at the end you don't know if the man has done it or not. The second story is also an older story. It's about elections. A worker for a political party is waiting to be attacked by members working for another political party. And it happens. The story is about him waiting for the attack. He sends his wife and children away. And as he's waiting, he almost falls asleep when the first blow of the attack lands on him. The attack is coming and he's waiting and it takes time.

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DOYEN OF LITERATURE

ASHOKAMITRAN (Born 1931)

► Novelist, playwright, essayist and critic, **Ashokamitran is among the living doyens of modern Tamil literature**

► **Real name** | Thyagarajan

► **Grew up as the son of a railway employee in Secunderabad, migrating to Madras in 1952**

► **Began his literary career with the play, "Anbin Parisu" (1954)**

► **Took up full-time writing as Ashokamitran after resigning his job in Gemini studios in 1966**

► **Managing editor of the legendary literary journal, "Kanyazhi" during its first 20 years**

HIS OEUVRE

► **Has written more than 250 short stories, along with two dozen novels and novellas**

► **In addition to fiction, he has steadily contributed essays and**

articles on a wide range of topics, especially on cinema and literature

► **Recipient of many honours and awards, including the Sahitya Akademi award in 1966**

► **His works have been translated into many Indian and European languages**

stories, is this poetic quality of suggestion. Not for him the clichéd short story with a fast-paced plot and a clever denouement; instead, the short stories tend to trail off into quiet endings that

leave you looking for more, and then play back in one's memory with a residual heat. Ashokamitran never brings his plot into a full circle, he will inscribe an arc and leave it at that – and his si-

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214ADV/1516 Dt. 26.03.2016	Outsourcing of Ironing operation for the year 2016-2017	1 Whole Job	Rs. 1,10,400 (Rupees One Lakh Ten Thousand and Four Hundred only)

Last Date and Time for Submission of Online e-OTE: 29.04.2016 upto 10.45 Hrs.
Technical Bid Opening Date & Time: 29.04.2016 upto 11.00 hrs.
Last Date & Time for Physical Submission of EMD in the form of DD/FDR/Bank Guarantee: 29.04.2016 upto 10.30 hrs.

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(1) Tender Notice No.: E/R/7/31/16-17, Date: 30.03.2016

Name of work: Through turnout renewal of 15 set (12 set = 1 in 8.5, 2 set = 1 in-12 & 1 set = Derailing switch) points & crossing in Bilaspur-Durg section of Raipur Division.

Tender Value: ₹ 29,25,291/- EMD: ₹ 58,530/- Cost of Tender Document: ₹ 3,000/- Completion Period: 12 (Twelve) months.

The tender form will be issued from 25.04.2016 (11.00 hrs) to 10.05.2016 (12.00 hrs). The tender document will be received from 06.05.2016 (11.00 hrs) to 12.05.2016 (12.00 hrs) and will be opened at 15.00 hrs. on 12.05.2016. For further details/purchase of tender document, eligibility criteria & the complete details for the above work, please contact Office of the Sr. DEN (Co-Ord), South East Central Railway, Raipur. Pin: 492008 or refer/download tender document which is available on our website: www.secr.indianrailways.gov.in

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