

Whither Translation? An Interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam

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The late Professor Chelva Kanaganayakam (CK) was the director of the Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto. He was a co-founder of the Tamil Studies Conference and the Tamil Literary Garden, and the foremost translator of Sri Lankan Tamil literature into English as showcased in works such as *Lutesong and Lament* (2001) and *Wilting Laughter: The Tamil Poets* (2009). He was an intellectual who profoundly shaped the ways in which Tamil literature and Anglophone Sri Lankan writing was configured in the larger discourse of postcolonial studies. He was a generous and empathetic mentor who inspired generations of young scholars in the fields of South Asian and Southeast Asian literatures, and postcolonial studies.

What follows is the transcript of an informal interview conducted by Aparna Halpé (AH) with Prof. Kanaganayakam in his office at the University of Toronto, October 2011. The conversation took place in preparation for the panel “Translation in Sri Lankan Conflict Literature: Challenges, Opportunities and Implications” at the annual meeting of the Modern Languages Association (MLA) in 2013.

AH: What was your first translation project, and what brought you into this field?

CK: The first major project came out as *Lutesong and Lament*. This was in 2001. At that point, we felt that there was no significant collection of Sri Lankan Tamil literature translated into English. So the *Toronto South Asian Review* gave us this contract, and we put together a collection of short fiction, poetry, etc. All postcolonial stuff. So, that was the beginning. It also was the result of a real concern that Sri Lankan Tamil literature needed to be known to non-Tamil readers both within the country and outside.

AH: Were you drawing a distinction between writing coming out of Malaysia and South India?

CK: Largely, South India. The Tamil writing coming from South India had been foregrounded for a long time. They don't have too many translators, but they do have a handful of good translators. In Sri Lanka, this was not the case, and we had no organized framework for translating either. Translations were sporadic, they were done on the basis of people being interested in a particular work, and even then, we

didn't have very much, so having a project in mind enabled us to pull together a couple of people who were willing to translate.

AH: Did you have a relationship with Thiru Kandiah's Translation Project, and the effort to build a department for translation? I know they used the University of Peradeniya [Peradeniya, Sri Lanka] as a foundation; it was supposed to create able trilingual translators.

CK: No, I don't think I was ever formally involved with it. I had heard about it, but I wasn't directly involved at all. Also, to pick up on what you just said, at the time when I was an undergraduate at Vidyalankara in the 1970s, translation methods were being taught as part of the discipline. So at that time, there was a consciousness about the need to develop translation as a discipline.

AH: With what's going on right now in Sri Lanka, with the effort to use translation as a means to reconciliation, and also this whole business of "speaking English our way,"¹ how do you see translation as playing a part in reconciliation? Or is this far too premature, and even naive, given the circumstances?

CK: I think it's a good beginning. I think it can play a crucial role, but I'm not sure that translations alone can fulfil the purpose that we have in mind. Particularly in a Sri Lankan context, you need a bilingual public to begin with because both Tamil literature, and I would assume, Sinhala literature, grew out of particular contexts; to simply translate them individually would have a positive effect, but the impact wouldn't be as great as one would like it to be unless there is a bilingual translation. So the initiative should create a much more determined project to enable everyone in the country to speak two or three languages. Then a translation would not only be important, it would also be something that you would look forward to. Let's say you know that an important Tamil or Sinhala writer has produced a new work; you can look forward to it in translation.

AH: It's been pointed out to me that some of the most able trilingual translators have actually emerged out of the Muslim populations; M.H. Nuhman is one such. There is the idea that the Muslim populations in Sri Lanka often functioned as intermediaries...

CK: ... And were comfortable moving across the ethnicities and languages ...

AH: ... you might say that a certain kind of history, or a certain kind of context, gives rise to that.

[Brief pause as Prof. Nandi Bhatia visits Prof. Kanaganayakam]

CK: Yes, the trilingual situation is very interesting. The dominant mode has been for Sinhala or Tamil literature to be translated into

English, and then to be translated into one of the other languages. I'm not sure that that is the way to go. I think that one needs to translate into English only for a readership that understands English; but otherwise, one needs to translate directly into Sinhala or Tamil for a readership that understands these languages. And we need a group of people who are capable of doing this with fluency and ease.

AH: Can you tell me about the process involved in setting up your translation of S. Ponnuthurai's *Sadangu* (*The Ritual*, 2011) by the Gratiaen Trust.² The first initiative of the Gratiaen Trust's translation project was *A Lankan Mosaic* (2002); this was the second stage of the project. The idea was to translate two novels written after 1960: one in Tamil and one in Sinhala.

CK: My contact was primarily with Walter Perera. He got in touch with me on behalf of the Gratiaen Trust and asked me if I would supervise, and perhaps translate. He also asked me if I would identify a couple of texts within a particular time frame, and give reasons for wanting to showcase these texts. If I remember right, I came up with a couple of texts and showed why I thought they were important, and then I indicated that I would be happy to translate *Sadangu*, which, for various reasons, appealed to me.

AH: And you made the choice to translate the title as *The Ritual*.

CK: Yes indeed, because it seemed to me that the text worked well for translation to begin with, and it also gave expression to a certain kind of dimension that I thought would be useful in translation. It had a certain kind of realism that told an important story. It wasn't necessarily political, but I thought it was important.

AH: "The personal is always political."

CK: Exactly. Political, depending on who defines it.

AH: When you started the whole process, were you working with the manuscript?

CK: I worked with the first edition, and in consultation with the author.

AH: You've worked on several translation projects. Can you tell me what it was like to work on this particular commission? What was it like to work with Three Wheeler Press and the Gratiaen Trust? Did the climate there enable you as a translator?

CK: My contact with Three Wheeler Press was minimal. It was largely with the Gratiaen Trust, and with Walter Perera. It was altogether a very productive relationship. They were rigorous; they maintained proper deadlines, proper standards. They established the format and

created a context which, I think, made the experience very productive for me.

AH: Were you happy with the finished product?

CK: It wasn't lacking in any way. My only concern was that at the time, the funding was not adequate for proper typesetting. I would have liked a hard cover, with slightly different paper, and something that was typeset more professionally. The production of the manuscript and copy editing was fine; the actual production could be better, particularly if you want to appeal to an international readership.

AH: Did you maintain ties with the book once it was published?

CK: Yes, I sent a video message for the official launch, and I've had some sense of people buying copies from various parts of the world, but not a whole lot more.

AH: Did you see a renewed interest in the original text in Tamil? What audience was this really reaching?

CK: I'm sure it has the potential to generate more interest. I would have liked the non-Tamil reader, and also the second-generation Tamil reader, to read this text. But this requires a better distribution network, better advertising, ways to have readings and launches—events that demonstrate the need and purpose of a project like this. This is something to think about, since so much money and effort goes into the translation; I think one needs to push production further as well.

AH: To shift focus a bit, do you find that in these so-called post-conflict times, there is an interest, perhaps with the powers that be or with the diaspora, to foster translation in a tangible way, through funding, infrastructure etc?

CK: Not in any organizational way. As you may know, I'm involved with an association called the Tamil Literary Garden, and one of its objectives is to try and raise funds in order to undertake translations systematically: to be able to commission someone, do a project, get it published properly, and so forth. So at a micro level there is an interest, there is an awareness about the importance of this. But I'm not sure whether at the local level, in Sri Lanka, or in the diaspora, whether major organizations will take this up—particularly, with regard to literature. You do have translations of medical documents etc. But literary translations still need an organizational framework. And this is important in order to maintain quality, consistency and continuity.

AH: You've talked about the next generation of readers; what about the next generation of translators?

CK: This gets a little more complicated because what we also need to do is to foster a group of translators who are fluently bilingual. The problem in Sri Lanka was that people were fluent in Tamil or Sinhala, but not necessarily English. Here, it is the other way round. So you need to create, over time, a group that would be comfortable in both the host language and the target language. That's essential, or that bridge will be broken.

AH: A last question. If I can take you back to the early days of "Kaduwa:"³ We talk a lot about how the word *kaduwa* signifies the sword that the English language is, but what is completely under erasure here is the Tamil experience of English; it is simply not a part of this discourse. You were a student at Peradeniya and then at Vidyalankara, part of the generation that gave birth to Kaduwa. What was your sense of it back then, and how do you think it has evolved?

CK: It was very lively then! It's less so now, I think. But I think it's something that one needs to think about very carefully, because it has a role to play. And it has to be seen within a larger epistemological frame, and not simply as an ethnic issue.

AH: But isn't it interesting that, due to the nature of the discourse and its construction, it speaks largely to a form of middle-class Sinhala anxiety?

CK: That's part of the multiplicity of the nation; that's part of the multiplicity of the diaspora. And I think that once you distance it from class, and such issues, you see that it has its role to play as well. It could provide a very liberal alternative. It could provide an alternative reading. Now it is probably a good time to think about this issue seriously.

AH: How would you see this playing out, for example, in an institutionalized movement like Rajapaksa's "Speak English Our Way"?

CK: I think one needs to recognize that when one speaks in one's own way (take, for example, the cases in Australia and New Zealand) it shouldn't be a defensive structure, but something that gives form to local realities without necessarily setting itself up antagonistically. This dividing line is very important, otherwise we'll paint ourselves into a corner.

AH: Thank you.

CK: Thank you, this was very interesting, I wish we could have continued...

Notes

1. “Speak English Our Way” was an educational language program that had the state sponsorship of the Sri Lankan Government under President Mahinda Rajapakse.

2. The Gratiaen Trust was founded by Michael Ondaatje to foster Sri Lankan anglophone writing and work in translation. Three Wheeler Press is a publishing house associated with the Gratiaen Trust whose mandate is to publish works in translation.

3. Kaduwa was a literary and intellectual movement built around the magazine of the English Students’ Union at the University of Peradeniya.