

On Death, Exile and Translatability

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Scattered like floating lotus
Defying land and time,
Our wings gained strength.
Your life the essence of kindness
.....

We can tread on fire, or
Defy the wind;
We cannot lose our lives...

These lines from an elegy I wrote for my close friend Sunila Abeyssekera, who passed away in 2013, were perhaps the last poem Chelva Kanaganayakam translated from Tamil to English. After reading and translating the poem Chelva was so deeply moved that he read it aloud to Thiru, his beloved wife. Then he called me in the middle of the night to share my grief. I was inconsolable.

Even though I was somewhat used to the dreaded midnight or early morning phone calls from Sri Lanka over the past several years of war and devastation, I was completely unprepared for the grim email message from Chelva's brother-in-law on November 22, 2014.

My father's poem titled "Ahalikai" was among the first set of poems—if not the first poem—that Chelva translated from Tamil. When poet Ashley Halpe—Chelva's professor and mentor—in Toronto, first introduced me to Chelva, Chelva was still in awe of my father's poetry and was not that familiar with my work. That was the time when he was gently attempting to shift from South East Asian literature to South Asian and, particularly, Tamil literature. Soon he began working on the path-breaking collection of Tamil fiction and poetry from Sri Lanka, *Lute Song and Lament* (1998). We had become close friends and colleagues by that time, and our collaboration in translating, editing, and promoting Tamil literature for non-Tamil speaking readers gained momentum. That was when Chelva started to read my poetry closely. As he always said, "to translate is an attempt to live through the experience of that poet."

In an ironical way, what animated and at times illuminated my poetry were the experiences of exile, torture, and trauma of genocide. Trying to find a way through the painful moments in this poetry was very hard on Chelva. Particularly, my latest collection, *Kaadaatru* (*Healing the Forest*, 2010), written mostly after the genocide of May 2009, was a painful experience for him. After translating each poem he needed to stop translating. He would write something else, or prepare for a conference and try to hide under the heavy clouds of graduate

teaching. The most haunting task, he would say, was to try and theoretically frame the peculiar “aesthetics” of the literature that captured those unimaginably imaginable moments of gore, mass slaughter, torture, and trauma. For example, how would you deal with a poem in which a soldier is cutting off your fingers one by one in one neat chop and putting them into your mouth so you won’t cry? Or, another soldier cutting out a perfect slice of flesh from your thigh, as a piece of cake?

While painful and disturbing to say the least, instances like these can be mental, linguistic, and aesthetic challenges for a translator. You wouldn’t call it “aesthetics of discomfort.” The term discomfort in medical jargon has become the replacement for pain. The collapse of the borders between horror, horrible dreams, pain, reality, poetry, and its translation had troubled Chelva continuously since 2009. For someone like Chelva who knew, understood, and felt but did not write those poems of pain and trauma, the act of translating these poems must have been a catharsis. In his attempts to configure a particular kind of aesthetics for poetry of genocide, perhaps the only point at which he ended up might have been Adorno’s dictum: “It removes us from things [aesthetics] as they are” (364).

The act of translation then becomes living through the pain and trauma while living far away from the locations of mass atrocities. It is not always possible to find closure to these experiences. This is precisely what the poem “Healing the Forest” suggests in a nuanced way. When everyone—politicians, influent sections of the international community, and the UN—clamors for “moving forward,” “closure,” and “forgetting the past,” without acknowledging the pain and trauma of genocide, it is impossible to heal the burnt forest. Nothing will sprout out of those ashes.

As Chelva notes in his introduction to *You Cannot Turn Away*, a collection of my poems he translated,

May 2009 marked a watershed in political life, and the poet’s works seem to imply that the poetic imagination, responding to the present, cannot simply rehearse the forms of the past. Noticeably absent are certain kinds of metaphors that are present in his earlier poetry. Poetic forms that seemed necessary and relevant in the past are no longer effective, and the poet alters his style to give expression to a different sense of the world. (vii)

The alteration Chelva talks about happens in literature but the political reality is far from altered. This is the crucial gap and a gaping hole in the politics and poetics of Sri Lanka’s killing fields that defies closure and therefore justice and equality to Tamils.

Chelva often wondered how I keep on writing after witnessing years of death, trauma, exile and, of course, other assorted “events”! As he quipped after translating *Healing the Forest*, “once burnt, forests cannot be healed.”

The following is a poem that I wrote in memory of my dear friend, tireless defender of human rights and a celebrated peace activist Sunila Abeyasekera. This is the last poem Chelva translated from Tamil to English.

Sundari

(For Sunila Sundari Janet Abeysekera)

Twenty-six years have passed.

Our first meeting,
North of Colombo,
a house on the beach.

Beyond the fence,
flowers and creepers;
fearful and shy
lovers trembling in passionate embrace.
Waves breaking incessantly.

For both of us
the agony and haste
of flight to safety.

The spark of righteous anger
a straight line on the sea,
unswerving we stayed the course,
reaching the Hague
where dawn and dusk
merged as one.

“Goluhathavaththin thunveniyamatta” —
your music my lullaby.

When Subha was born,
I heard her cry
I saw your tears.

Scattered like floating lotus
defying land and time,
our wings gained strength.

Your life the essence of kindness.

Divided by land and sea and space,
our dreams
a constant bridge.

“Son, where are you?
I don’t hear your voice,
send me your picture.”
The messages you sent.
The telephone bursting with
love.

A short life,
what did we learn?

We are puddles
created by chance;
not crystals of love;
poetry, music and freedom
remain always entwined;
we can tread on fire, or
defy the wind;
we cannot lose our lives.

This year in the Hague
when we met,
my farewell was final.
From you
a smile and a tear.¹

சுந்தரி

இருபத்தாறு ஆண்டுகள் ஆயின.

நம் முதல் சந்திப்பு
நிகழ்ந்தது
ஃகே ஒரு
ஃகரை
வீட்டில்

அதன் வேலிகளுக்கு அப்பால்
ஃொடி.
அச்சமும் நாணமும்
சூழ்ந்தாலும்
ஃோகக் கிறக்கத்தில்
நடுங்கும் காதலர்கள்.
ஃுறையீடு.

உயிர் தப்பி நிலம் விட்டுப்
பறக்கிற
அவசரமும் அவலமும்
இருவருக்கும்

நமது அறச்சீற்றத்தின்
தீப்பொறி
கடலில் வரைந்த நேர்கோட்டில்
நடந்து
ஃிசை பிறழாது தப்பித்து
ஃேறக் பட்டினத்துக்கு
வந்தபோது
காலைச் சூரியனும் மாலைச்
சூரியனும்
ஃ்றென ஒளிர்ந்த காலம்

்தென்
்வெனியாமமட்ட" என
இசையே என் தாலாட்டு

உனக்கு சுபா பிறந்தபோது
்டேன்
்தேன்

்தையும்
வென்ற
ோல
அலைந்தாலும்
ிமை பெற்றன.

்தெடுத்த
உயிர் உனக்கு

கடலும் காடும் வெளியும்
்மைப்
பிரித்திருந்தாலும்
இணைக்க என எப்போதும் இருந்தன
கனவுகள்.
"மகன், என்ன ஆளையே காணோம்;
்லை
படமாவது அனுப்பு" என
நீ அவ்வப்போது அனுப்பும்
ஒரு மின்னஞ்சல்;
விடுப்பார்வம்
ொலைபேசி
்செய்தி.

வாழ்வோ குறுகியது
எதை அறிந்தோம்?

-நாம் தவறி வீழ்ந்த
ுனைகள்
காதலின் பளிங்குகள் அல்ல
ிதையும் இசையும்
சுதந்திரமும்
ியாதவை
ீயை மிதிக்கலாம்
்றை எதிர்க்கலாம்
்கையை இழக்க
முடியாது-

இந்த ஆண்டு மறுபடியும்
ஹெக் நகரில் சந்தித்தபோது
ொன்னது
ிடை
உன்னிடமோ
புன்முறுவலும் ஒரு
கண்ணீர்த்துளியும்.

Notes

1. Written September 11, 2013.

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