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The modern adventures of Kanian Poongundranar, classical Tamil poet: Reflections on literatures of the world, vernacularly speaking

S. Shankar

If the vernacular—understood as more than simply language, as also rooted in sensibility and practice—is that which in its very rootedness resists traveling globally, how is one to study it outside its particular sphere of operation? How are texts written in languages termed vernacular or texts exhibiting vernacular sensibilities to be comprehended outside their vernacular contexts? Given the qualities of the vernacular, what tools do we have available for a respectful and self-critical worldwide conversation about literatures and literary traditions in all their variety?

In this chapter, I reflect on questions such as these by way of an exploration of modern readings of “Yaathum Oorey, Yaavarum Kelir” (யாத்தும் ஊரே; யாவரும் கேளிர்), an ancient poem/song (henceforth simply “Yaathum Oorey”) from the Sangam Age of classical Tamil literature. The Sangam Age is generally dated to the first couple of centuries of the Christian era, though this dating is by no means undisputed. An overview of the controversies is provided by David Shulman in *Tamil: A Biography* (2016), where he notes that Tieken locates the literary collections from which the name Sangam is taken as late as the eighth century, while the “regnant view ... places the poems in the first two or three centuries A.D.” (67–82). P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar in *History of the Tamils: From the Earliest Times to 600 A.D.* (1929 [2001]) follows the regnant view in dating the earliest specimens of Tamil poetry (i.e. Sangam poetry) to the “beginning of the Christian era” (152), as does A. K. Ramanujan, whose translation of “Yaathum Oorey” appears below.¹ George Hart, whose co-translation of “Yaathum Oorey”

¹ See, e.g., p. xiii in *The Interior Landscape*; and p. 197 in “Form in Classical Tamil Poetry,” in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan* (1999).

is also provided below, dates the poem “between the first and third centuries” (1993: xv). In brief, there is much debate about the precise dates of the Sangam anthologies and, thus, about the historical period to which they have lent their name. I have chosen to be conservative in following the regnant view in assigning the period to the first couple of centuries. It is worth noting that a difference of even centuries in the dating of the Sangam collections does not affect the substance of the argument here, which is about the *modern* reception of an undoubtedly ancient poem/song.

That poem/song of whatever antiquity, and especially the first line “Yaathum Oorey, Yaavarum Kelir,” which I translate as “Everywhere is my home, everyone my kin,” has had an astounding revival in the last hundred years. In what follows, I track this revival by way of multiple readings. Through these readings, I intend not so much a definitive interpretation but rather to suggest how each reading in its own way and to a different degree illustrates the exigencies of the vernacular. To be sure, in one sense, it is oxymoronic to regard the same text as both *vernacular* and *classical*, because of the commonly perceived opposition between the two terms. However, as I have argued at length in *Flesh and Fish Blood*, in another sense *vernacular* is opposed to *transnational* rather than *classical* (2016: 131–2). In contradistinction to *transnational*, *vernacular* signifies rootedness and narrow geographical demarcation. As I also argue in that book, in yet another sense Tamil is a transnational language (found in Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, in addition to India) rather than a vernacular one. It would be good to keep in mind here what I underscore there, that “[a]s a term of cultural critique, *vernacular* finds its greatest resonance in a relational mode that operates along many and sometimes contradictory trajectories” (147). In a literary context, the *vernacular* (as a term for the rooted and the spatially and temporally circumscribed) and the *transnational* (as a term for the traveling and the spatially and temporally expansive) are purely relational terms; that is, meaningful only in the context of the world literary system as historically produced (and as manifested in the idea of world literature). Of course, the conundrums of the vernacular for the world literary system are nonetheless real. Accordingly, this chapter draws on this relational signification of *vernacular* to explore the place of the literary in the contemporary.

Ultimately, my purpose is to underscore the methodological felicities of the formulation *literatures of the world*, a term I have advocated elsewhere (2016: 1405–13; 2013: 135–7); to expand here on those discussions; and to reflect further on a mode of apprehending the relationship between *literature*

and *world* that is looser, theoretically more capacious, than the more common world literature (a term that in all its forms remains hegemonizing). In contrast to world literature, I propose “literatures of the world” as a formulation that resists an overarching universal definition of literature. Rather, my formulation maintains a strong sense of the multiple traditions of thinking aesthetically about the written or spoken word without neglecting their relationship to the world. In what follows, I begin with a review of translation issues in relation to the vernacular. Thence, I move to readings of “Yaathum Oorey.” Where the review underscores the insurmountable challenges translation poses to the construction of a world literature, the readings illustrate the need for a specific kind of comparative method. Building on these translation challenges and provocations to comparatism, the conclusion presents the promised reflections regarding *literatures of the world*.

Translation, the vernacular, and “Yaathum Oorey” in English

How does translation relate to the vernacular in the context of a global literary landscape? Translation, in its narrowest construal, presumes (1) difference as well as (2) commonality on the terrain of (3) the linguistic.

Difference is constitutive of translation. To state the obvious, without difference—the difference of one natural language (as linguists term it) from another—there would be no need for translation. It is true that some philosophers of language—for example, Jacques Derrida—have such an extreme view of difference in relation to language that they consider the translatable as constitutive of language itself.² In their view, all language acts are acts of translation, that is, negotiations over difference. This proposition may very well be true—whether it is, and if so to what extent, is part of the history of literary theory in the past half century—but it is equally true that there can be difference among differences. In other words, the difference that is constitutive of all language as such is not the same as the difference between natural languages.

So much for the difference of and in translation. What about commonality? As is well known, Walter Benjamin referred to the linguistic condition of

² For example in “Des Tours de Babel” (1995), Jacques Derrida writes, “The structure of the original is marked by the requirement to be translated” (184), thus suggesting the presence of the translatable in an “original” text prior to what Roman Jakobson regarded, Derrida notes, as the “proper” act of translation (173).

commonality that makes translation possible, even as it is prior to or outside of translation, as “pure language” (257). From a prelapsarian realm of pure language there came (it would seem) a fall into translation, though his reference to “pure language” need not be understood temporally—it need not be that “pure language” existed before translation in any historical sense. Rather, it would seem from Benjamin’s argument that pure language is immanent in all language. This is surely the implication of his well-known metaphor of the echo cast back from the forest—translation as the echo of pure language in natural language (258–9). Benjamin’s elegant if cryptic recourse to the idea of “pure language” names the commonality that makes translation possible. Translation must presume not only difference but also commonality, for without the ground of commonality where is the bridge of translation to rest? If difference makes translation necessary, commonality makes translation possible, a banal enough observation, though the banality should not blind us to the observation’s fraught nature, that is, the many ethical and political issues that attend the negotiation of difference and commonality.

I have written elsewhere that the vernacular is that which both invites translation and resists it (Shankar 2013: 148). What I mean by this is that the dance between commonality and difference staged by translation, and as choreographed by a skilled translator, is provoked by the latter and enabled by the former. The difference of the vernacular from the global, the standard, and the supralocal provokes the choreography of translation; and the common and shared, even if only apprehended in a shadowy and inconclusive manner, enables a realization of the choreography.

In translation narrowly construed this choreography of difference and commonality is performed on the stage of the linguistic. English translations of Kanian Poongundranar’s Tamil poem/song—to come back to the subject of this chapter—offer an easy illustration of this point. Below are, first, the original in Tamil, and then two of the most well-known translations of the text—if you will, realizations of the choreography of difference and commonality between Tamil and English, two languages as well as literary/cultural traditions.

First, the Tamil:

யாதும் ஊரே; யாவரும் கேளிர் ;
தீதும் நன்றும் பிறர்தர வாரா ;
நோதலும் தணிதலும் அவற்றோ ரன்ன ;
சாதலும் புதுவது அன்றே ; வாழ்தல்
இனிதுஎன மகிழ்ந்தன்றும் இலமே; முனிவின்,

இன்னா தென்றலும் இலமே; 'மின்னொடு
வானம் தண்துளி தலைஇ, ஆனாது
கல்பொருது இரங்கும் மல்லற் பேர்யாற்று
நீர்வழிப் படுஉம் புணைபொல, ஆருயிர்
முறைவழிப் படுஉம்' என்பது திறவோர்
காட்சியின் தெளிந்தனம் ஆகலின், மாட்சியின்
பெரியோரை வியத்தலும் இலமே;
சிறியோரை இகழ்தல் அதனினும் இலமே.³

Next, the translation by George Hart and Hank Heifetz:

Every city is your city. Everyone is your kin.
Failure and prosperity do not come to you because others
have sent them! Nor do suffering and the end of suffering.
There is nothing new in death. Thinking that living
is sweet, we do not rejoice in it. Even less do we say,
if something unwanted happens, that to live is miserable!
Through the vision of those who have understood we know
that a life, with its hardship, makes its way like a raft
riding the water of a huge and powerful river roaring
without pause as it breaks against rocks because the clouds
crowded with bolts of lightning pour down their cold
drops of the rain, and so we are not amazed
at those who are great and even less do we despise the weak! (1993: 122)

And now the translation by A. K. Ramanujan:

Every town our home town,
every man a kinsman.

Good and evil do not come
from others.

Pain and relief of pain
come of themselves.

Dying is nothing new.

We do not rejoice
that life is sweet
nor in anger
call it bitter.

³ A convenient online source for the Tamil text is to be found in the archive of the Tamil Virtual Academy: <http://www.tamilvu.org/library/I1280/html/I12806y6.htm> (accessed March 14, 2021).

Our lives, however dear,
follow their own course,

rafts drifting
in the rapids of a great river
sounding and dashing over rocks
after a downpour
from skies slashed by lightnings—

we know this
from the vision
of men who see.

So,
We are not amazed by the great,
and we do not scorn the little. (1985: 162)

My purpose in sharing these versions is not to adjudicate between them, that is, to suggest which of the choreographies is better. Rather, I offer them to show how consequential what I call the dance of difference and commonality can be in the transference of a text from one (vernacular) language to another (global).

To illustrate my point, I will focus on the first line of the poem/song. Here is my own variant of this first line (“Yaathum Oore, Yaavarum Kelir”), this most famous of lines from the poem/song about which I will have much to say below. I translate this line as “Everywhere is my home, everyone my kin,” in comparison to Hart/Heifetz (“Every city is your city. Everyone is your kin”) and Ramanujan (“Every town our home town,/every man a kinsman”). All three variants try to reproduce in English the line’s form, that is, its alliterative and parallel syntactical structure, which conveys so much of the semantics of that first line by forcing a consideration of the relationship between *oorey* (home/home town/city) and *kelir* (kin/kinsman). They differ in rendering the former, and only two agree on the latter (Ramanujan inexplicably and unnecessarily genders *kelir*). I prefer *home* to render *oorey* because it conforms better with the spirit of universality in the poem/song. While *home* in English has as its main meaning a private residence, it can also indicate a larger space to which one belongs or owes allegiance (as in “she made her home in India”). In this sense, the word nets all space (not just town and city) within its meaning. However, both *town* and *city* are certainly possible cognates for *oorey*, in some

senses even better ones because they are closer to the common use of *ooru* to designate a collective human settlement. Suffice it to say a direct cognate for *oorey* is lacking in English. However, various approximations offer semantic bridges, which are further strengthened by commentary such as the one I am currently engaging in.

I hope this brief detour into possible translations of the first line of “Yaathum Oorey” suggests sufficiently the charged complexities of the translative dance. Translation in all its guises—whether understood as a narrow kind of semantic transfer between natural languages (the translation of a poem/song from Tamil to English) or as a broader kind of semantic transfer focused not on the generation of an analogous text but on the conveyance of implied and associated values (a version of cultural translation)—is an interpretive act. While this interpretive act is always a complex dance of difference and commonality, because of distinctions of power the dance is especially complicated—difficult if you like—when it involves a language positioned as vernacular (Tamil) in the world literary system in comparison to a language positioned as transnational (English).

The text at the heart of my argument—“Yaathum Oorey”—is poem/song #192 of an ancient anthology in Tamil called the *Puranaanuru*. The anthology, part of the Sangam literature referred to above, is generally dated to the first couple of centuries of the Christian era. Sangam literature is so called because of three grand literary assemblies or sangams that were held during this period (or in many accounts before it). These sangams might very well have been mythic in nature; nevertheless, they have lent their name to a historical period and a literary canon. Over time, much has been written about Sangam literature—how it was largely lost to literary memory over the centuries until being “rediscovered” by U. V. Swaminatha Iyer (1855–1942), who painstakingly recovered and commented on the lost poems in the late nineteenth century. This story of loss and recovery too is quite possibly mythic, as A. R. Venkatachalapathy among others has suggested (2006; Ramajunan 1999: 184–96). What is incontestable is that beginning with U. V. Swaminatha Iyer, Sangam literature increasingly attains a central position in the culture and politics of Tamils as a canon of great thematic and aesthetic sophistication. As Venkatachalapathy argues, Iyer’s monumental work in the late nineteenth century “marks the moment of the unmaking of an old canon and the construction of one anew” (2006: 96). In this celebrated new literary canon Kanian Poongundranar’s much translated poem/song is one of the most celebrated.

The readings

I offer five readings below based on discussions, (re)citations, and allusions to “Yaathum Oorey” within the Tamil cultural sphere. Rather than an exhaustive enumeration, these readings are meant to illustrate the wide range of readings—some dominant and well established, others more obscure and nascent—available to Tamil audiences (and not quite so easily available to English-speaking ones).

The philosophical

In the preface to his commentary on *Puranaanooru*, P. K. Sundaram declares “The telling text of Kanian Punkunranar ... ‘Every place is ours; all are our kin’ is the crowning motto of the *Purananuru* culture” (1979: vii). Following this declaration regarding the most famous fragment of “Yaathum Oorey,” Sundaram offers multiple readings of the poem consistent with his interpretation of the whole of the anthology *Purananuru* as moral commentary on life and living. It may be tempting to take his readings as “traditional” in comparison to the readings to follow but, to be sure, such a “traditional” reading is itself a modern phenomenon and should not be taken to be older or more authentic than the other readings.

In Sundaram’s reading, “Yaadhum Oorey” is a philosophical meditation on life’s tribulations. “The intention of the poet-philosophers of the *Puram*,” Sundaram avers, “was to focus the attention of the people, set them reflecting on the basic puzzles and problems of life, and make them seek the enduring realities and values that underlie the passing phenomena” (42). And what are the enduring realities and values? Sundaram draws on the striking image in the poem/song of a boat swept along by a torrent over rapids to note, “Punkunranar bemoans the inexorability of fate. He likens the hapless soul operated by destiny to a tiny boat in a mighty current which rolls away huge rocks” (55). Sundaram’s understanding of this image depends on rendering the word *muraivazhi* as “destiny,” a lead followed neither by Hart/Heifetz nor Ramanujan who render the word “way” and “course,” respectively. Destiny may not appear an unreasonable rendering given the image of a boat driven by a stream; but translating *muraivazhi* thus glosses over the complexity of the word, which is capable of suggesting a right course of action to be followed intentionally rather than simply a predetermined outcome. *Muraivazhi* as a recommended but chosen path of conduct is much more in keeping with the second and third lines of the poem/song (“Failure and

prosperity do not come to you because others have sent them! / Nor do suffering and the end of suffering,” in the Hart/Heifetz translation). These lines, however, do not fit quite so well with a rendering of *muraivazhi* as destiny.

In his interpretation, Sundaram discovers a feeling of equanimity within the poem/song. After all, “Yaathum Oorey” seems to exhort a kind of stoicism to its readers/listeners: “There is nothing new in death. Thinking that living / is sweet, we do not rejoice in it. Even less do we say, / if something unwanted happens, that to live is miserable!” (Hart/Heifetz). Life is unpredictable, capable of being overtaken by a sudden and dangerous downpour of unforeseen and unforeseeable events. The speaker of the poem/song recommends remaining unperturbed in the face of these events, past or yet-to-come. In the last two lines, the poem/song extends this equanimity to social class distinctions—confronted by the socially great or small, the speaker remains unmoved, unimpressed. All of it—all of life, whether social or natural—is viewed serenely.

Commentators on Sangam literature have noted the distinction made in it between an inner (*aham*) and outer (*puram*) world (Ramanujan 1967: 99, 101; Sundaram 1979: 37, 112). This distinction is evident in the organization of Sangam literature into anthologies of the inner and outer worlds. The *Puranaanooru*, as the name indicates, is an anthology of poems focused on the outer world (*puram*). These outer-world poems concern war, public life, communal values. In contrast, the anthologies concerned with the inner world explore affective life (mainly, romantic love and happiness). But “Yaathum Oorey” makes clear the difficulty of the distinction between inner and outer. The apparent stoicism recommended by the poem/song might have the status of a (outer) public value but the purpose is to generate an understanding of life conducive to (inner) happiness.

Readers of “Yaathum Oorey” have also commonly noted the occurrence of the word *kaatchi* (காட்சி) rendered in both the translations I have provided above as “vision” and glossed by Sundaram as “revelation of objective truth” (104). The content of this *kaatchi*, this vision, is the image of a raft dashing against the rapids of a river swollen by rain. In the poem/song, this vision—that life is nothing but a frail boat—is framed as a quotation from an authoritative source, that is, knowledge given to us by great seers with the capacity, perhaps mystic, to fathom the mysteries of life. Sangam literature invests a great deal in the wisdom of these seers, philosopher-poets, among whom Kanian Poongundranar himself might have belonged. In the philosophical reading of the text of “Yaathum Oorey,” this *kaatchi* as well as the associated appeal to authority acquire tremendous significance.

Language nationalism

Language nationalism has played a central role in the constitution of modern Tamil identity. Sumathi Ramaswamy's *Passions of the Tongue* (1997) is a thorough study of the political force of Tamil people's attachment to their language. Throughout the twentieth century the Tamil language has proven a rallying cry for Tamil identity. The most well-known of the various mobilizations centered on the Tamil language is probably the anti-Hindi agitations of the middle of the twentieth century. In these agitations, large swathes of Tamil society were organized in opposition to the attempt by the postcolonial central government to make north Indian Hindi the national language of India. More generally, though, language nationalism in the Tamil context presents itself as pride in the ancient and unrivalled distinction (or so the language nationalist believes) of Tamil. This language nationalism's link to the idea of a Dravidian Tamil identity, that is, a South Indian identity premised on a distinct cultural and/or racial sphere known as Dravidian in contrast to the North Indian Aryan, is also well-known. The importance of this language nationalism and its links to Dravidian mobilizations cannot be overstated. Tamil politics to this day—dominated by Dravidian parties—continues to be an inheritor of this nationalism and mobilizations around it.

An example of the ideological as well as emotive force of this language nationalism is to be found in the celebrated film song “Thamizhukum Amudhendru Per” (தமிழுக்கும் அமுதென்று பேர்). The title may be translated as “Nectar Is One of the Names for Tamil.” The first three lines of the song are as follows:

Nectar is one of the names for Tamil
 This Tamil—this loving Tamil—
 To us is equal to our very life! (my translation)

The lyrics for the song were composed by the well-known poet Bharathidasan (1891–1974), who was closely associated with the Dravidian movement. The song, which should be viewed on YouTube to understand its full affective force, appeared in the 1965 film *Panchavarna Kili*, directed by A. C. Trilogchander. Twentieth-century texts such as this song convey not only the deep-seated emotional attachment to the Tamil language but the political uses to which this attachment is put. I offer the song as a prime example of language nationalism, and as such as a guide to the less readily visible language nationalist connotations of “Yaathum Oorey.”

While “Yaathum Oorey” makes no reference to the Tamil language, the narrative of rediscovery within which it is located in literary history is part and parcel of language nationalism. Within the Tamil context, as I have argued, the literary and the linguistic are unavoidably linked in certain dominant ideas of literary aesthetics (Shankar 2016). Literary greatness is the manifestation of language greatness, understood both as greatness intrinsic to the language and as the willed expression of the writer; but the converse is also true—literary greatness confers greatness on a language. Sangam literature, ancient and widely celebrated, is invaluable to language nationalism in demonstrating a literary greatness that then confers greatness on the language.

“Yaathum Oorey” is one of the pre-eminent texts of the Sangam canon. This status of the poem/song explains the wide use of it in language-nationalist contexts. Thus, the line made a prominent appearance in the theme song composed by Tamil icon A. R. Rahman (primarily associated outside India with the Oscar-winning music for the film *Slumdog Millionaire*) for the 2010 edition of the World Tamil Conference held in Tamil Nadu in India. The lyrics for this song, entitled “Semmozhiyaana Thamizh Mozhiyaam” (செம்மொழியான தமிழ் மொழியாம்) were penned by none other than Dravidianist Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. Karunanidhi, a writer of some note himself. “Semmozhiyaana Thamizh Mozhiyaam,” which may be translated as “The Tamil Language Is a Classical/Refined/Exalted Language,” suggests the directness of the link to language nationalism here.

“Yaathum Oorey” played a role again in the tenth edition of the same conference in 2019, but now the entire poem/song rather than just the first line was invoked, becoming the anthem for the conference. In contrast to 2010, the use of the poem/song in 2019 is less easily identified with language nationalism as practiced within Tamil Nadu and as manifested in the Dravidian parties. Nevertheless, here too the poem/song remains exemplary of the language.⁴

Anti-caste politics

The Dravidian movements mentioned above were simultaneously Tamil nationalist and anti-caste, which is to say they proposed both a deep commitment to a geographical and linguistic identity (Tamil) as well as a social and political

⁴ Both songs are available for viewing on YouTube.

critique (anti-caste politics). Though they were led largely by “middle” castes (rather than the “lowest”), in their most radical articulations they advanced a thoroughgoing critique of the system of caste—or “the varna-jati complex”—as a whole.⁵ Since this anti-caste Dravidian politics is well-known, I will not review it in detail here, focusing instead on the ways in which Sangam literature in general, as well as “Yaathum Oorey” in particular, function in such anti-caste contexts.

Bernard Bate has shown that the Dravidianist movement drew upon a conception of the Sangam period, largely based on its literature, as a pre-Aryan realm (2009: 56). What this conception entails—its politically charged nature—may need elucidation. To be sure, the precise nature of the Sangam Era Tamil world remains a matter of debate. George Hart believed that caste formations were to be found in Sangam society (1993: xxi–xxii). However, others have argued that the Sangam period and the poems proper to it portray a pre-caste society. As long ago as 1929, P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar wrote that the “Tamils of those days [of the Sangam period] were not divided into rigid castes,” explaining away the existence of references to caste in the Sangam anthologies as later interpolations (154–5). It is in this context, where the Sangam age itself was proffered as external to a caste society and thus came to be harnessed for the articulation of anti-caste ideas, that “Everywhere is my home, everyone my kin” must be read as a powerful anti-caste slogan.

Caste is nothing if not a tyrannical policing of space and kinship. Anyone with experience of a caste society will therefore understand why and how “Everywhere is my home, everyone my kin” can become a powerful anti-caste slogan. Considered in the context of a caste society, the line is a profound critique of tyranny. This is not to say that such an anti-caste reading is incontestable. It might be asked: How can a poem originating in a pre-caste society be read as being about or marked by caste? But the very posing of this question is a misunderstanding of the nature of the rhetorical work the line does in a modern, undoubtedly caste-marked, society. In this context, rather than simply performing a marvelous ancient expression of philosophical forbearing, the line harnesses in the interest of a full-throated critique an idealization of a time before the fall of Tamil society into the depravity of caste. No doubt, it is these multiple

⁵ The social system simply rendered “caste” in English is better understood as a complex, articulated system of two related but distinct Indian social categories known as *varna* and *jati*. “Varna-jati complex” is a formulation of V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai (1998: xiii).

resonances—invocation of a golden pre-caste period as well as pointed critique of the tyrannical spatial and kinship arrangements of caste—that made the line beloved to C. V. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, both powerful if controversial Dravidianist leaders who rose to become Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu.

Ecocriticism

The notion of the Sangam world as pre-Aryan has also been harnessed to render “Yaathum Oorey” ecocritical. Vital to this effort is the *tinai* philosophy expressed in the Sangam poems. *Tinai* is most often taken to refer simply to the landscapes portrayed in the poems—for example, mountain, seashore, desert, pastoral, and riverine—and associated themes and emotions. In this view, *tinai* is an elaborate aesthetic system, a way of organizing literary expression around certain land-based tropes. A. K. Ramanujan’s Afterword to *The Interior Landscape* (1967), his celebrated translations of aham-oriented Sangam poems, is perhaps the most well-known expression of this view.

However, in stronger forms, as seen in contemporary critics like Nirmal Selvamony, *tinai* has been raised to an entire philosophy that is ecological in nature. In contrast to Ramanujan, in *Persona in Tolkappiyam*, an extended essay on a grammatical work belonging to (or prior to) the Sangam period, Selvamony considers *tinai* “one of the most formidable terms that a student encounters ... [A]t first glance, one may find that the term *tinai* is used to mean (a) grammatical class of being ..., (b) a poetic convention that has two components, namely, *akam* and *puram* ..., (c) one of the seven kinds of poetic convention ... and (d) conduct” (1998: 119).

Selvamony proceeds to focus, as the title of his work announces, on *personae* in Sangam poetry. This focus may itself be seen as a response to Ramanujan’s assertion in his Afterword that “little need be said” about *personae* (1967: 98). In Selvamony’s view, usages of the word *tinai* move from grammatical being (that is, ontological manifestation through language rules), through conventions of poetry, to the very behavior of the *personae* (loosely, characters) appearing in the poems. “[T]inai may be understood as what the *personae* speak and show by means of posture,” Selvamony writes. “In short, *tinai* is the conduct—speech and attitude—of the *personae*” (1998: 125). Thus, *tinai* is seen to be at the heart of an extensive ethical code of conduct.

In *Persona in Tolkappiyam*, Selvamony emphasizes the foundational role of the various landscapes, indeed land itself, in the uses of *tinai* in the works of Sangam

literature. He further explicates his thesis regarding the foundational role of land in the essay “Tinai in Primal and Stratified Society”; he notes, “Tinai is a land-based society which includes all organisms including the humans” (2008: 41). He argues that the idea of tinai properly understood reveals a profound consciousness and desire to live in harmony with natural surroundings. Tinai society is an exemplary pre-state pre-industrial non-stratified primal society in which human communities lived, and were exhorted to live, in close harmony with nature. The sacred was crucial to such a society, as was diversity.

In this view, the Sangam poems become instantiations of the ecological philosophy of *tinai* society. Thus, the word *kelir* in the first line of “Yaathum Oorey,” translated as *kin* in most cases, expands to include all beings (trees, shrubs, animals great and small). And the striking comparison of a life to a boat making a dangerous journey over rocks in a rain-swollen river becomes a lesson about human puniness in the face of nature. This reading locates the poem/song within the general values of tinai society, including the sacred, and recommends a harmonization of the human with the non-human world. Accordingly, the other values of the poem—equanimity, refusal to be awed by the great or to look down upon the weak—are not erased but rather derived from this primary invocation of a harmonious and sacred relationship with the ecological environment.

Cosmopolitanism

Three examples will serve to open up one last reading of the poem/song, or at least of the first line. In the 1979 Tamil film *Ninaithaale Inikum*, the first line “Yaathum Oore, Yaavarum Kelir” is appropriated to be the first line of a song. This song is picturized—following the by now globally known Indian popular cinema form of the song-dance sequence—in Singapore, to which the hero and the heroine of the film have traveled from India. In the sequence, the hero and heroine appear at various sites and sights surrounded by Singaporeans of different races, no doubt to convey the glamorous world travel of the hero and the heroine. “Yaathum Oorey, Yaavarum Kelir” was also quoted by former President of India A. P. J. Abdul Kalam in his 1997 address to the European Union. Abdul Kalam translated the line in his address as “I am a world citizen, every citizen is my own kith and kin.”⁶ And these same words were quoted by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi at the United Nations in 2019 to similarly invoke a

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXW5oi0_epg (accessed March 26, 2021).

worldwide community.⁷ These three examples suffice to indicate the wide use of the first line of the poem/song to convey a very worldly and perhaps modern sentiment: cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism is often defined as a form of worldliness commensurate with a commitment to universal humanity. This common notion of cosmopolitanism is articulated in Martha Nussbaum's widely referenced essay "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" (2002). This is not the place to review the limitations of Nussbaum's essay. Rather, I offer it simply as a cogent formulation of a widely held view of cosmopolitanism. In it, Nussbaum vigorously affirms the values of what she terms a "worldwide community of human beings" (4). She proposes that cosmopolitanism should be a call for the creation of "a citizen of the world" (15). She advances enthusiastically the virtues of cosmopolitanism in opposition to patriotism.

The resonances between the three "quotations" of "Yaathum Oorey, Yaavarum Kelir" proffered at the beginning of this subsection (whatever the actual values of the speakers or the texts) and Nussbaum should be readily evident. The sense of a human community of planetary scope; the idea of a citizenship that extends to the whole globe: both find expression in Nussbaum as well as the quotations. The three quotations largely isolate the first sentence and read it in the most global way possible. *Yaathum* and *yaavarum*, everywhere and everyone: these words become the alibi for a cosmopolitan interpretation of the poem/song. Where the song-dance sequence from *Ninaithale Inikum* presents this cosmopolitanism as a lifestyle choice of travel and glamor, Abdul Kalam, a Tamil himself, invokes it for a political statement in an international context, in the process echoing a phrase that appears prominently in Nussbaum's essay (citizen of the world). Thus, we arrive at the end of a series of readings of "Yaathum Oorey" within the Tamil vernacular sphere at a cosmopolitanism that attests to non-vernacular Tamil imagination, that is, the articulation of the non-vernacular within that which is deemed vernacular.

Conclusion

If I have offered five readings without evaluating their merits, it is because my interest here is not in adjudicating among them, that is, deciding the *correct* interpretation. Rather, I aim to illustrate and now, in this conclusion, make

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg8RtOzQZIw> (accessed March 26, 2021).

an argument regarding the challenges this record of varying treatments of the poem/song within the Tamil vernacular sphere in the last one hundred years presents to the idea of a world literature.

In one sense, the accession of the works of Sangam literature, including “Yaathum Oorey,” to a canon of world literature is easily understandable. David Shulman writes in *Tamil: A Biography*:

Since the publication of these great texts [of Sangam literature] and the appearance of partial translations of the anthologies into English, notably by the outstanding poet-translator A. K. Ramanujan, scholarship, sometimes intemperate, on the Sangam works has become a veritable cottage industry; what is more, these poems have to no small degree displaced attention within the Tamil world from the monumental literary works of the past thousand years or so to these more ancient, hence suddenly prestigious, poems.

(2016: 28–9)

The prestige achieved by the Sangam literature within the Tamil vernacular intellectual sphere surely facilitated its integration into the canon of world literature; and, conversely, this very integration drove even further this literature’s prestige within the Tamil vernacular sphere.

In the preceding section, we have reviewed what might be called the modern vernacular record of reading “Yaathum Oorey,” that is, the record of how the poem/song has been read within the Tamil vernacular public sphere. What we have uncovered in pursuing this record is the ability of reading practices to approach a text in a diversity of ways, sometimes basing themselves on the poem/song as a whole and then again having recourse to one part of the poem/song over another. Certainly, sometimes the interpretation produced by one reading practice is in conflict with another. Reading the text as ecocritical, for example, is in tension with a cosmopolitan reading of it. Ecocriticism as articulated through the classical Tamil idea of *tinai* elevates, or at least values, a regionalism in a manner that is difficult to reconcile with cosmopolitanism. Unlike the ecocritical, and like the first “philosophical,” a cosmopolitan reading of the poem/song is perhaps more easily available to readers not familiar with the vernacular cultural context I am laying out in this chapter.

The diversity of readings sketched out above is not unique either to “Yaathum Oorey” or to Tamil literature. Neither the poem/song nor the Tamil vernacular sphere is unique in generating and sustaining a diversity of readings. It is in the nature of literature—indeed, textuality in general—to generate a variety of interpretations, especially over long historical periods (after all, “Yaathum Oorey”

is two thousand years old). Thus, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, to pluck a text from the heart of the anglophone canon, has been read as a metafictional farewell by a great playwright, a meditation on political legitimacy, a fable of colonial ambition, a covertly anticolonial text, a key text in the invention of the human, and more. In this regard "Yaathum Oorey" is no different than *The Tempest*.

Rather than textuality as such, though, my argument is about the aesthetic and political valences of the critical approaches we adopt when confronted by the diversity of literary traditions. It is out of diverse literary traditions that the world literature canon is constructed. But how and to what end? And is it the only, or even best, possible response to the global diversity of literary traditions? Both of the two most widely used multivolume textbooks of world literature in the US—the Longman Anthology and the Norton Anthology—have included Sangam poetry (at least until recently). The examples included, however, are placed within Tamil literature and culture in only the most cursory of ways. The Longman Anthology gives a brief account of the "rediscovery" of Sangam poetry toward the end of the nineteenth century (Damrosch and Pike 2009), while earlier editions of the Norton Anthology leave out even this brief account and proffer them simply as aesthetic objects (Lawall and Mack 2002). The point of course is that these anthologies reveal—make inordinately visible as highly coded objects—the literary assumptions appended to world literature.⁸

Lost in the integration of these poems/songs into a global literary culture via the notion of world literature, then, is the rich intellectual history surrounding the poems/songs. Comparing the framing and presentation of these poems/songs in the anthologies with the readings of them above should be enough to illustrate that their integration into world literature exalts aesthetics over history—that is, an aesthetically reconstructed text over a political and intellectually contested one. Aesthetics is harnessed to produce a seamless global text out of a vernacular text that is fractured and jagged. Furthermore, this is done by imposing a predetermined (Eurocentric) idea of what the aesthetic is. I have written elsewhere about the ways in which ideas of the literary differ between Tamil and Western aesthetic traditions (Shankar 2016). In this context, not only does the absorption of Sangam poems/songs into world literature excise history and politics in the interest of rendering the poems/songs aesthetic objects, but

⁸ For my related discussion of anthologies of "world literature," see *Flesh and Fish Blood* (2016: 128–36). As I show there, I am aware that there is some diversity among critics advocating a World Literature (such as Damrosch and Moretti); however, I am arguing that the very recourse to and desire for a world literature—in all its forms—is problematic.

it does so in ways that do not recognize constructions of the aesthetic within Tamil traditions. Insult is added to injury; the reduction, the diminishment, is multifold.

The relevant question for us as students of “literature” is as follows: Is the idea of world literature necessary and/or sufficient to study, to explore, global literary traditions? The answer must be: no, it is neither necessary nor sufficient. It is not necessary because the relationship of “literature” to “world” can be studied more powerfully in other ways. This relationship can and should be studied comparatively by the juxtaposition of multiple *but limited* linguistic textual traditions—multiple so as to allow comparison, limited so as to allow depth of engagement. The argument in this chapter, drilling deep into one example, is meant to illustrate the problems with *not* adopting such an approach. Rather than a form of comparatism based on a grand and universalistic orientation toward the World as a whole as a planetary object, the comparatism I intend would have a historical view of the world as the accumulation of human activities, never available to us in its entirety. To put it concisely: such a study would abandon the World for the world. Viewed this way, it is—or at least should be—evident that attempting to capture all the diverse “literary” activities of diverse human communities across the globe is a fool’s—or else a colonialist’s—errand. What will remain on the agenda, nevertheless, is an ever-evolving and ever-accumulating insight into human modes of existence in the world. In the kind of comparative study I have in mind, the variety and richness of the relationship of the world to linguistic textual traditions is revealed with depth, in contrast to the superficiality resulting from the canonizing function of the idea of world literature. Indeed, in this light, in addition to not being necessary, the idea of world literature is revealed as not even sufficient for a proper study of the literary in relationship to the world.

A proper understanding of both the vernacular and translation is useful for the approach I am calling “literatures of the world.” The vernacular is one of a handful of terms that resist the blandishments of the global by insisting on the relevance of alternative epistemologies of situatedness. As such, an attention to the vernacular is a disruptive force with regard to world literature. As illustrated in the foregoing readings of the modern adventures of the classical Tamil poet Kavian Poongundranar, the vernacular fosters deep and contextual literary explorations not only impossible but actively discouraged under the rubric of world literature. Similarly, an acute sense of translation—after all, exploring the literary in a global context is impossible without translation, especially when

it comes to teaching in a classroom—as a dance of difference and commonality interrupts the facile reification of a text within world literature. This is not simply a matter of doing things better, more carefully, under the rubric of world literature; it is a fundamental reorientation for which the label world literature can never be adequate. Carefully approached, both the vernacular and translation disrupt the hegemony of world literature in productive ways, thus creating space for the articulation of a study of the literary in a global context as “literatures of the world.” As a text of a literature of the world rather than world literature, “Yaadhum Oorey” can be examined with sufficient attention to its own intellectual context (however one construes that) and simultaneously also regarded comparatively alongside other texts from other traditions and languages in the interests of comprehending some of the dynamics at work in the constitution of what comes to be called the literary in the modern period. This is seemingly a far more modest endeavor than the grand gesture that is world literature, but in the end it might be the more consequential.

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