

Tamil poetry in Translationby **Ritika Batabyal**¹***Signature* by Puviyarasu,****Trans. K.S. Subramanian.**

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Signature, published from Sahitya Akademi, is the English translation of the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning Tamil Poetry Collection, *Kaiyoppam* written by the poet Puviyarasu. The translation has been done by K.S. Subramanian who has extensively translated literary works from Tamil to English language over the past few years. *Signature* comprises a translation of approximately seventy nine poems. A reading of the poems clearly displays the unfolding of a medley of ideas encompassing philosophical moorings, ecstasy about nature's beauty, the alluring charm of a child and social insights. The beauty of the poems lies in the fact they engage the readers and rake their minds with issues dealing with contemporary society and human life. The two short poems under the rubric "Untitled" explicitly brings forth philosophical vignettes – "The dot not moving /becomes not a line. / Stagnate not!" (2) The poem exquisitely draws the picture of life itself and emphasises upon the vitality of life. Life implies action hence without movement the line of life becomes inactive. Another poem within this rubric beautifully brings out the authenticity and importance of memories preserved within the heart. The address is not important if the face is secured in the heart. In another short poem the poet asks human beings to be a "sacrifice at the altar" (2) because this is the way to achieve immortality after death and also the way to serve humanity. These short poems with gentle strokes of the brush paint the picture directly and hit the point. They are shorn off embellishments and are direct in their articulation. The

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poem “The Weapon” is apparently very simple and talks about umbrellas and how the poet considers using umbrellas as weapons. But a deeper reading reveals that the umbrellas are symbols for the common man. Just like umbrellas are forgotten and discarded yet their presence is “unavoidable” and they can act as “protective shields” (12). Similarly the common people though considered to be unimportant can wield much power and fight against all odds. The poem tries to corroborate that forgotten things can become important and it depends on the perception of the user.

Many of the poems in this collection discuss issues which are part and parcel of the contemporary society. Sometimes the poems discuss socio political issues that plague the life of the people in the ‘modern’ world and sometimes they present the predicament of the ‘modern’ individual and his responses to these problems. The poem “Inauguration” is reminiscent of the lacuna within our government where we see many bridges, railway tracks and subways being constructed in the city but hardly these works are completed and if completed they wait eternally to be officially inaugurated by the ministers. The poem describes a bridge building process which still awaits formal inauguration. The poem unabashedly says that birds, wind, animals walk across it yet until a minister or the governor opens it the bridge is not inaugurated. The poem subtly mocks both at the system and the ministers who do not have time for the common people although they come to power with the people’s mandate. Poems like “A Picture with Life” draw beautifully the portrait of the monotony of mundane life which is occasionally broken by a furl of activity. There are poems which bring out the despair and dissatisfaction of the individual at not being able to afford costly things. “Weight” is one such poem revealing despair at not being able to afford the weight of costly crystal vase. “Tangle” is another interesting poem which contrasts an easy, free flowing life to that of a stagnant one with the figures of a circle and a square. “The Thorn” beautifully reveals the ignorance of people who considers time to be bound within the limits of the clock. The poet says the clock unmindful of time only ticks on while human beings are pricked by the thorny hands of time. The poem “Load-bearer” is a description of the Sumai Thaangi culture in Tamil Nadu which is disappearing fast. The poet thus feels disturbed and grieves at the disappearance of the load-bearers. “The Continuum” is another mind-boggling poem which reveals how external forces can create havoc and at the end only memory remains. The poem beautifully uses the image of a lighted candle and a dark room to

drive home the point. “No Waiting” is another poem with philosophical musing. It subtly hints at the importance of existence which is the ultimate truth, there is neither any coming nor going. The poem “Loyalty” evinces the desire of a loyal devotee who is trying to alter the relation between god and the devotee by trying to solve the problems of the godhead. The devotee out of love and their long standing relationship desires to know and fix the problems of the god. “Signature” is another important poem revealing how a signature is considered to be all important sometimes even at the cost of the individual. The poet announces that for him poetry is his heartbeat as it could take varied forms unlike a signature. The poem thus criticises ‘modern’ society which meaninglessly has put all importance to mere signatures. “Oh! God!” is another important take on the socio political situation of the country. The poet is shocked to read the newspaper which reports innumerable corruption enveloping the country. The poem “The Clock Tower” draws another picture of the corrupt socio political system which throttles and suffocates the life of the people. “The Royal Court” evinces the condition of people under servility just like the chess pieces locked in a box are moved by the whims of any one playing with them. Their desire to rise above their condition slowly dies down and is synonymous with people who lack the vigour and courage to revolt. “Be Awake” is another poem critiquing the ‘modern’ society where load-shedding and power cuts are common things hence even in the twenty first century candles and match sticks are to be kept in handy. The last poem “Confusion” is a fitting finale, drawing the curtain for this collection. On one hand the poem reveals that confusion is a sign of life and action, otherwise one is benumbed or dead. The last section of the poem on the other hand announces vociferously the blossoming of new poems which will continue until the confusion of the poet ceases. Thus the poet creates a continuum between this collection of poems and his future poems. It is important to reiterate that the poems in this collection encompass myriad emotions and moods. The poems reflecting philosophical introspection are crisp and direct revealing the skill of the poet in driving home philosophical thoughts. Further the poems critiquing important social and political issues evince the deep understanding of the social situation and the poet’s anger and anguish over the corrupt socio political system of contemporary society. Poems like “Erasure” (16) display the charm and innocence of a child who knows that his foot-prints on the sand will get washed away by the waves. Thus the child claps with joy unlike adults who crave for material things and tries to cling to them forgetting that nothing is permanent on earth. Again the poem “Salvation” (82) displays the greater truths hidden in

Nature. A flower knows its duty is to bloom and then fall down on the earth and it never complains for its fate. Human beings on the other hand are always complaining and are never satisfied with their lot.

It would be unfair to overlook the skill of the translator who beautifully and with poetic sensitivity has translated these poems from Tamil to English. The translator needs to be applauded with open arm. In the Foreward to this collection Puviyarasu has said that the translations read like the original poems. The translation is free flowing and lucid therefore commendable.