**A Reader’s Review**

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Dr. C. Rajeswari’s translation of Muththamizh Virumbi’s collection of poems, *The Shade of a Flowering Tree* is a gift to English-speaking readers who are interested in Tamil literature and contemporary poetry. Dr. C. Rajeswari takes care to preserve both the larger feeling and the linguistic structure specific to each poem. Many of the poems are also annotated with short descriptions of the untranslatable place names, Tamil months, and cultural references which are likely to otherwise evade a non-Tamil-speaking reader. As a result, each poem’s meaning is not lost in translation, but will, instead, be found by a wide audience of readers unable to access the original Tamil poems.

Dr. C. Rajeswari has taken care to preserve Muththamizh Virumbi’s tendency to build towards a final powerful image in the ending lines or stanzas of his poems. This is a difficult task since the sentence structure of Tamil differs greatly from English. The poem “Encounter” illustrates this tendency well, as it gradually builds towards a climactic final stanza. In this poem, the early stanzas establish a sensual mood, invoking each of the senses: smell (“Fading smell of the jasmine”); taste (“the cherry fruits shared”); touch (“kisses gathered on red lips”); hearing (“a husky moan”); and sight (“silence of your smile”). The final lines recount the encounter for which the poem is titled:

I, sliding down

from the zenith,

encounter you

Rising up and up

Through the inclusion of rich, often sensorial, details, the poems in this volume offer the reader various slices of life, which are powerfully descriptive of both natural environments and lived experiences. Through the poems, we are transported to the landscapes—both geographic and emotional—which the poet has conjured through verse. The length of the poems presented varies considerably, with even the shortest feeling complete, and even the longest maintaining a certain sense of measured literary restraint. Reading the poems, I got the impression that each one contains only the exact amount of words required to get across the intended mood and meaning. “Stagnation” for example, has only four short lines:

One day rain

Needs one week to drain

Lots of things to write

Letter not yet written

These spare lines contain insights about the wider word, which evoke a whole host of mental pictures. The first two lines include broader observations from the natural world—the powerful downpours of the rainy season in Tamil Nadu, and the built environment—the way that water collects on roads and various places, causing frustration to those who must navigate around it not only during the rainstorm, but for the week following. The second stanza links these external events to a personal, interior world, sure to be relatable to any reader: the uncompleted task of writing a letter, which becomes more daunting day by day, as the list of things to write about never ceases to lengthen. Like the stagnation of the rain is the feeling of stagnation that comes from the unwritten letter. The two realms, the exterior and interior, mirror each other.

In contrast to the contemplative minimalism of “Stagnation,” the titular poem, “The Shade of a Flowering Tree,” the volume’s longest poem, is almost novelistic in its scope, interweaving moving autobiographical recollections with descriptions of the natural landscape and allusions to it historical and cultural significance. The opening stanzas takes care to position the reader in the particular landscape in which the poem is set. Beginning, “In the food affluent Tanjore district, / Of the ancient Chola kingdom,” the extensive description of the landscape and its waterways paints a picture of the district in the mind of the reader, before the remainder of the poem personalizes the landscape by linking each of the localities named in the opening lines with a richly detailed memory that reveals the life of its inhabitants. One such memorable description is of the poet’s childhood dance performance—at the urging of his father—during a Mariyamman Festival along the banks of the Vennaaru river. He describes the accolades received in the aftermath of his star performance:

Parents of the schoolWhose kids are the students of

My father, uncle and aunt,

Hold me and pat me.Circled my faceWith their fingers and knuckled

The gesture –a ritualto drive away the evil eye.

Talcum powder on my face

Wiped off and gone.

Through this single sentimental recollection we learn not only about the poet’s childhood experience, and his family’s position in their community, but also about the people’s beliefs and customs, all beautifully encapsulated in just a few short lines. Throughout the poem, which ultimately memorializes the author’s father and brother-in-law, the poet’s own emotional landscape intertwines with larger historical events, both contemporary (to the time frame of the poem) and very ancient. This is apparent in the following section, in which Muththamizh Virumbi recalls how his father taught him to swim:

“I learnt to swim

With the empty hollow bottle gourds;

As a warrior of Indian army

Took part in the Chinese battle “

In Kollidam and Kuulaiyaaru

During the overwhelming floods;

From this bank to the other

Swam across the river;

Me, the romantic hero Attanathi

Of the twentieth century.’’

In combining these historical and cultural details with intimate recollections, the poem moves easily from the scale of a single moment, richly described, to the passage of generations, and even dynasties. Another notable poem in the collection, “Tsunami [2004],” recounts that tragic disasterby linking it to ancient historical narratives of the flooding of coastal Tamil kingdoms, while remaining bitterly aware of the specificity of the present:

Total demolishing in modernity

Those mangroves that lined the coasts

were destroyed by the shrimp farms.

The river beds beside the oceansNow turned to ditches of the towns.

Strong hands that row the boatsto the coasts on the sunriseNow bloat as unmoved oars.

Yet while “Tsunami [2004]” and “Shade of a Flowering Tree” link the joys and sorrows of the present to a longer historical past, Muththamizh Virumbi’s poems also capture the kind of intimate, everyday experiences which seem to lie outside of history (or at least, never make their way into history books). These poems serve as a window onto various scenes, each of which is made distinctive through rich details unique to their particular time and place, but which also capture emotions and experiences that transcend any single context. For example, “In Sleep” captures the relatable frustration of insomnia, likely to be familiar to readers anywhere in the world.

Though the eyes are closed

Sleep plays hide and seek;

Yet the final stanza reveals a scene unique to Tamil villages:

At a distanceA drumming sound of udukkai with songsNarrating the past and future

Tears this night and the sleep

The notes provided with the poem describe the udukkai(hand drum) and its use, so that even a reader who has never heard one can, through reading the poem, know its purpose and imagine its sound puncturing the peaceful night.   
 *The Shade of a Flowering Tree* invites us into the landscapes—both emotional and geographic—described in the poems it contains. With Dr. C. Rajeswari’s translation from Tamil to English, the invitation is now extended to a new English-speaking audience. I hope that many readers will accept this invitation and enjoy, as I have, a journey through the poems of *The Shade of a Flowering Tree.*