Enduring Love in the Poetry of Muththamizh Virumbi

By Nicole Berger Berguyen

Dr. C. Rajeswari’s translations of Muththamizh Virumbi’s poems, collected here in the volume ***Speaking With You****,* are part of a fortunate trend towards translating contemporary Tamil literature for non-Tamil-literate audiences. Dr. C. Rajeswari’s English translations render Muththamizh Virumbi’s poems accessible to English speakers, without losing the specificity of their Tamil cultural references.

***Speaking with You***is a collection of love poems; taken together, they reveal the complexity of the seemingly unitary category of the love poem. Capturing longing as much as fulfillment, and recrimination as much as admiration, the poems move beyond saccharine clichés of the love poem genre to reveal the complexity of love itself. For if in one poem Muththamizh Virumbi proclaims, “**still / she is honey sweet**,” [p. 66] in another, **“Words that Play In**,”[p. 65] the flavor profile of love is more complex: it is the salty-spicy-tangy bite of the tamarind sweet that evokes not only the sweetness of memories of youthful togetherness, but also the bitterness of disappointment

In the evening

When you didn’t come.”

While reading these poems I thought of the concept of ***Enduring love***. But I wish to emphasize how the double meaning behind the English verb “to endure” can give this single phrase a dual inflection. The first, and more expected meaning of “to endure” is to last for a long time. The second is more negative, to endure is also to suffer through some misfortune. In ***Speaking with You*** we find examples of both kinds of enduring love—sweet and tender moments of sustained and sustaining love [p.27]

“The water well

You dug

Never gets dry”

—as well as tension, frustration, and ambivalence in moments of intense feelings of an unrequited love—a love which is endured rather than enjoyed. And yet even where love is equated to suffering, it is also endured with dignity, tenderness, and even, at times, a keen sense of humor: **Life is a rainbow, [p.60]**

Life is a rainbow,But the travel partner

Erases few colors

Several times.

What to do?StillLife is a rainbow.

For even if the more difficult aspects of love are acknowledged, perhaps that ambivalence itself may be celebrated. For as Muththamizh Virumbi tells us in another poem, “**Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow”:**

Ambiguous moments

Always

Move us to clarity.

The yesterday’s pond

Stirred by the buffaloes

When will it become clear? [pp.42,43]

Muththamizh Virumbi’s poems may play with the ambiguity of enduring love, but they also offer the pleasure of rich poetic imagery which will endure in the reader’s mind. To put it in his own words, they offer “**The blessing / Of the poem’s theme**.” But here, the complex work of translation is necessary in order to transmit this particular blessing—that is, the poems’ true themes—to an English-speaking reader. One example of the work of both linguistic and cultural translation is provided in the footnote to “**Your Memories**,” a poemin which the narrator rebukes the love interest’s silence as “ambiguous behavior” by qualifying it as “Not as refined and defined in Sangam era.” As the footnote explains, in this poem, through the category of “ambiguous behavior” Muththamizh Virumbi is referencing a particular deep, rich, indeed, *enduring*, Tamil literary tradition of the ***thinai*** which links particular settings— defined by their location, season, time, and natural and social environments—with particular emotionally-inflected scenarios relating to the diverse facets of love.Though the poems in ***Speaking With You*** are contemporary in structure and content, many of them nonetheless draw upon—and thus, carry on—classical Tamil literary forms such as the unique notion of the ***thinai****,* revealing the endurance of Tamil literary traditions themselves.

And yet, such endurance must be understood in a thoroughly dynamic sense, for while Muththamizh Virumbi draws upon a classical past, he often does so in order to call attention to the *non*-correspondence between his own romantic relationships and those described in classical poetry. Far from tracing a straight line from past to present, the poem “**How am I to…”** plays with the gap between the expectations of the classical love poems and the modern reality of the poem’s narrator. The poem’s title is also its final line, a question trailing into uncertain ellipses, it calls attention to the incongruence of classical literary forms (and the experiences of love they describe) and the modern love poem. And yet, by doing so, the poem ironically reinscribes the link between the two.

But while Muththamizh Virumbi at times poetically plays with the contrast between the classical and contemporary vocabularies of love, ultimately, the poems in *Speaking with You*portray love as an enduring human experience which traverses the passage of time, and—through this English translation—the barriers of language. After all, as Muththamizh Virumbi suggests, [p.21]

“In everyone

There is a plant

Seeking the sunlight.”