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Translating human experience through literature



Sharon James McGee and Anushiya Ramaswamy.

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Segue/Sharon James McGee with Anushiya Ramaswamy

In this week's segment of Segue, Sharon James McGee, chair of SIUE's Department of English Language and Literature, interviews Anushiya Ramaswamy, a professor in SIUE's Department of English Language and Literature

One of the engaging aspects of reading literature is that the reader can experience the world through a character whose life may differ considerably from the reader's. Like the reader, however, the character's experiences are universal: falling in love, suffering loss, experiencing war, and seeking a new life or the like. Regardless of where on the globe we may be and a story may be from, we share universal human connections with literary characters.

Professor of English Anushiya Ramaswamy translates Tamil literature into English for such a purpose. Ramaswamy's family originates from Tamil Nadu, located in southern India, the country's sixth most populous state. In the 19th Century, her family relocated to Sri Lanka during British colonization. When the Sri Lankan Civil War began in the 1980s, her family was forced to immigrate to India.

A minority group, Tamil people love India and Sri Lanka but have, because of war and other factors, moved into Europe, Australia and Canada, primarily. Tamil culture, while patriarchal, is complex, drawing from a common history, and Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions. The native language of the Tamil people is Tamil, a classical language with many dialects that can mark the speaker with a particular region and cultural identity.

“The language codes within itself, the way that it is spoken, a kind of geographic, as well as cultural, as well as a class notion,” Ramaswamy explained. “The way that one speaks a Tamil would identify them in very clear ways, signaling that they are from a particular region.”

Ramaswamy became a translator of Tamil literature into English quite by accident. “Given that my own history has multiple migrations within it and my own training in rhetoric, it drew me at some point to look at the ways in which this diasporic is describing itself in the new lands,” she said.

The literature, however, had not been widely available until Ramaswamy’s translations. “Because I am able to translate from one to the other, that is how I became a translator,” she said. “It was sheer accident. I found these descriptions so compelling, and I felt that they needed to appear in a larger forum. So I started translating [the writer] Shobasakthi.” Ramaswamy has translated, among other works, his novels *Gorilla* and *Traitor*.

Joining the liberation army at 15, Shobasakthi quickly became disillusioned with the movement. Through a United Nations child refugee camp, he was relocated to France where he lives still today.

“He writes incredible short stories and novels that shift between the home country that he left,” Ramaswamy said. “He describes the 1970s and ‘80s when Sri Lanka entered its destructive phase, and then he also writes about what it is like to live in these refugee communities which are also never represented in any kind of mainstream writing.”

The work of translating a literary text is challenging, because it cannot be a word-for-word translation. Metaphor and other literary language force the translator to be very deliberate and mindful. “My translation has to, on the one hand, indicate that this is a translation, this is not written by an English professor,” Ramaswamy said. “And at the same time, it has to also be readable, so that somebody who is reading this can have the pleasure of reading a story, a narrative, a poem that stands on its own.”

To accompany the translation, Ramaswamy annotates each translation with notes so that the reader understands why she selected one word instead of another or how she interprets a metaphor. She also provides readers with a context for how to approach the text. The process of translating is time consuming, and even an experienced translator will make mistakes, especially in a language with many dialect and regionalisms.

A common theme of diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil writing is war. Ramaswamy was one of three translators for a collection of Tamil poetry called *In Our Translated World: Contemporary Global Tamil Poetry*. She translated the section from Sri Lankan writers.

“The Sri Lankan section is particularly interesting, because it talks about what is like to write during war,” Ramaswamy said. “The metaphors are all about war, the descriptions, the characters, the kind of loss, and terror and pain of war comes across beautifully.”

Regardless of one’s life, loss and pain are human experiences. “This is why translations are so crucial, because to the person who is living it through in a local context it seems as if this is just their experience, that it’s a very local experience,” Ramaswamy explained. “For all these groups that are suffering in local ways, the translation kind of bridges the experience - not just in a liberal way like ‘oh everyone suffers.’ That’s not what it is. It explains what the suffering is like.

“And to those of us who are living in the first world countries, we can only understand this through, say, CNN. For us, it pushes us to think in a very ethical fashion about our choices, what we do, how we read these bodies, refugees. Something happened to make them refugees. Nobody leaves your home by choice. They leave, because there is nothing one can do.”

Such is the power of literature.

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