

Modern Indian Writing and Translation
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Lecture 07
Week 2 Lecture 3: The Blue Light (Part - 3)

Length: 35:39

Professor: Hello and welcome to the session on 'The Blue Light'. It is a story written by Vaikom Mohammed Basheer and it was originally titled in Malayalam as Neela Velicham. What is the meaning of that?

Student: Neela Velicham means blue light.

Professor: Yeah, blue light. Velicham means light. But when you talk about the word Velicham, we also have that in Tamil as well. Velicham means light, but we kind of have this association that it is some kind of organic light, light associated with the natural elements as well. But when you kind of talk about light in English, the connotations are, the light associated with electricity, modern equipment and other related technology.

So it is a very interesting, set of association, Velicham and light. Of course in the English language, light would be associated with natural light too. But when it gets transported into this landscape, imported into this landscape through that conduit of colonial, context, things have different connotations and associations.

So, Velicham and light, light is a very interesting concept in this story and I would say that it performs a narrative function in the tale. And how does it perform an act or function is something we will come to shortly, but I want to begin with this issue of translation. What we are reading is a translation from the Malayalam by OV Usha. So as readers, when we read the story, what are all the instances, the points in the story, which kind of jerk us and say, 'Oh, yes, you are reading a translation, not reading in the original.' Can you pick out some of the words or phrases or ideas, which kind of indicate it comes from a particular language in a particular region?

Student: In this text, there is one instance where he talks about, he wants to tell the postman that he has moved on to this place, and he wants to tell him that his address has changed. So he goes and speaks to this postman and the response that he gets, the immediate response that

he gets is that 'Ayyo sir, that place is haunted'. So Ayyo means, it can be translated as 'oops' or like 'ouch', or something like that.

Professor: Yeah.

Student: So, that very instance tells us that definitely this is a text translated from Malayalam. And I think...

Professor: So you are suggesting that Ayyo is a frequently used expression of distress?

Student: Yes, definitely.

Professor: To indicate some kind of misfortune.

Student: Yes, definitely. And not just in Basheer's text you can see that these kind of words are often used by the writers to give that regional flavour to their text.

Professor: Yes.

Student: Yes, that is one. And, and maybe there is explicitly, there is one instance where he says that, when he talks about the records that he has, he says there is nothing in Malayalam. So it is like he is talking to himself, thinking, saying that, all the different languages have such beautiful works, but nothing in Malayalam, like being a Malayali we always yearn to have something from our regional language. So, he does not have, he is not able to find anything in his own mother tongue. So, that dissatisfaction can be seen, so maybe that can also be associated, like you can just pick that context and say that yes.

Professor: Yeah, this is a second indirect association, with the identity of the speaker of the central character. Can we read that? It's on page 71 in my collection.

Student: "As I went along, I wondered with whose song should the new house be inaugurated. I have more than a 100 records in my possession, English, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali, nothing in Malayalam. There are talented singers, they have cut records, but the music direction and finish of all them is poor, but good directors and singers are coming up. Yes, I must buy some Malayalam records."

Professor: Okay, this is kind of a tongue-in-cheek idea that he has a lot of records from other regions and other countries. He even has Arabic records, music records, but his own region does not seem to kind of do something so excellent, which will kind of prompt him to buy

those records. The other interesting thing, I think we have also talked about this in our other sessions of the story. To take a cosmopolitan list of music records, right there are records in English, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali.

So he not only maps the Indian regions, he also is mapping other regions outside of the Indian continent. So he is not only national, in kind of integrating all the different music into his life, but also trying to be a world citizen in some ways, in appreciating music from different spots on the globe. So the regional element is sort of taking a backseat, in this kind of context, in the kind of aesthetic appreciation that this central male character has.

He is kind of connecting himself to aesthetics outside of his own region, primarily. He comes to his own space quite later on, he thinks that he should buy but he has not bought it yet. So he has not come home in that way, he is still a kind of a global citizen. So it is a very interesting story in that regard, the regional element is kind of hidden in moments here and there. And you pointed out, Ayyo, that expression of misfortune, mild distress.

Anything else that you can think about in relation to this idea of regionalism? Okay, let us talk about the name of the house Bhargavi Nilayam. What do you make of that?

Student: Nilayam means house and Bhargavi is the name of the ghost. So normally, this happens in, especially in Kerala. You tend to name the house after the person, maybe the owner of the house. Sometimes you see that it will be named after the lady.

Professor: Yes, it is very important, isn't it? Yes, because we understand that we know Kerala is a matrilineal society, there is a lot of importance given to the matriarch. The female lineage is more celebrated in some sense. And there is also a kind of passing down of property, houses, to the eldest female. So, the female does seem to have a lot of cultural significance and to kind of have the name of the house associated with the female is also in essence a kind of a signifier for the kind of culture which belongs to Kerala.

So, that kind of, I have been told that, that kind of matriarchal, matrilineal culture is in the transition these days. I'll have to do my research to kind of find out whether that is true or not. But the importance given to the female is something that you can even see in other stories. And I think, we have read, I have taught another story by Kamala Das called 'Summer Vacation', where you have a matriarch running the household, like a ship, completely in control of the house and she is one of the last remaining descendants of that lineage. And the grandmother possesses a lot of importance and you can also sense that her

granddaughter is the one who is going to inherit the house after her. And you can see the servants trying to curry favour with that little girl. So that kind of setup, the cultural setup is something which is also unique to Kerala. So Bhargavi Nilayam, Nilayam means, it's a Malayalam word?

Student: Yes, ma'am.

Professor: Yeah. So Nilayam means house, quarters, space, locality. So we have that local reference in that word for the house by the Nilayam. Anything else? You want to talk about the setting of the house. And pick up on that? Yes, go ahead.

Student: There is an excerpt where he talks about the setting of the kitchen and the well. He says, 'in front of the kitchen, there was an ancient well with the stonewall around it, a small way off in a corner of the walled compound around the house to the toilet, trees in abundance, the public road ran right before the property.' When you read these lines you understand and this is the kind of image that we get whenever we think about typically, we call Tharavad or whatever. So that is the image that one gets, so you will have, definitely you will have a well right in front of your, in your courtyard.

And the mention about this toilet also is important, you have toilets outside the house, outside the house. And I do not know why this public road also gives a nostalgic feeling about the long lost, the rustic life, it gives it gives, it rings a bell with that. So that, maybe you can see all these kind of settings in other regions as well.

Professor: Yes, yes. Yes, correct, but they also belong to that particular region too. The fact that you can kind of connect with it in a nostalgic sense, tells you, yes, it belongs to that particular world too, very very closely. So the thing about the public road, it is a very interesting element. If you go back to the first page of the story, the narrator says that it was a small two-storied building Bhargavi Nilayam, far from the bustle and noise of the town, yet close to the municipality border.

So it is not outside of the precincts of the town, and the public road seems to connect it with the rest of that hustle and bustle, and it is not completely cut off. So even though it is isolated. Far, but not too far, not outside the bounds of that town, a decrepit board at the gate said 'For Rent'. I mean, so it is a very interesting setup and this setup kind of connects it as we talked in other sessions, it kind of connects it with the idea of the Gothic. Because you can't really

have a Gothic, a traditional Gothic in a story, bang in the middle of the city, it would not work.

The rustic, the word rustic is interesting. The rustic contributes, feeds the Gothic narrative. So the rustic, the lonely, the isolated and the rundown are some of the fodder for Gothic narratives. So you since you are from that region, you are able to kind of visualize this and say yes, we have seen houses such as these. But to others, they would be able to connect it with similar housing that they have come across. So what do we understand when we are able to see this uncanny mirrors?

It belongs to you, but not only to you, but to us too. So how do we understand that? We understand that, these kind of accommodation are something which are prevalent across the southern region, in a couple of other states too. So, it is a commonality, there are commonalities, which is what I want to emphasize, when we understand modern Indian writing and translation. The modernity, the shared sense of moving together, on shifts, on big shifts from modernity to postmodernity, or from a tradition to modernity.

So, we kind of seem to travel together. And there we have commonalities. So let us, let's also look for similarities while we are looking for regional differences. So the kind of setup is something that I can relate to as well, the courtyard and the well and the separated toilets outside of the main residential building. This is something I have seen too in Tamil Nadu and I am sure people from other states in the south or even in the north could relate to this kind of setup.

So, these are, these are all part and parcel of the Indian way of life too. We can, we can share in that kind of identity through all these structures. Yeah, so that is something we need to understand when we are kind of looking at these apparently very unique literature. Anything else that you can pick up in relation to...?

Student: Ma'am there is this instance where he talks about he going and playing cards with his friends.

Professor: Yeah, yes, yes. Yes. Talk to me about it. That card again, card, yes.

Student: That is when you, it is even the representation of that can be seen in movies, also. If you want, if you look at the old Malayalam movies, this is a common image that occurs often. But nowadays in the modern movies, you cannot see such things. But earlier that was a form

of recreation too. So this was like a form of recreation for them. And that was a space, that was actually the space where they got to socialize with other people. It was like what to say, people used to look forward to going and playing cards.

Professor: This particular card game, is it not unique to Kerala? It is on page 77, 'I did three rounds of Salaam'— is that is that the way to pronounce it?

Student: Yes, Salaam is correct, but I am not sure, I am not really sure about the card game, the intricacies, the rules and regulations of the card game.

Professor: So but this will tell a reader from the region, from the state that this event happened in those days in 1950s or 60s Kerala.

Student: Even I have seen my folks playing card games and all, so I do very easily relate with this image.

Professor: Let's read that. "So we played cards. My partner and I did three rounds of Salaam, mostly because my mind was on my story and I was distracted while playing, mostly because my mind was on my story and I was distracted while playing. The rain stopped at about 1, I got up and picked up the torch and kerosene bottle."

Okay when we were wondering about the fact that, this card game gives the opportunity for socializing, you can see that this man is outside of it. So even though that is the intention of that game of cards, he is distracted, his mind is on story and he is not concentrating on this kind of socializing. So this account is pretty strange in the sense that he loves his loneliness. He loves his isolation, which is why he kind of takes to the house, which is so far away.

So you can see him fighting against that idea of socialization itself. And I am suddenly reminded of the fact that he assures Bhargavi, the ghost of Bhargavi, that you do not really have to think about harming me because I have been celibate all my life. Again, the idea of sticking to yourself, trying to keep to yourself, not trying to form bonds with anybody be it with a female partner, be it with your male buddy friends. So you can see that strand, the strand of isolation, the alienation in the central character running through the story. Okay, what other...

Student: There is this instance where he talks about this kerosene bottle, kerosene light.

Professor: Yes, yes, yes.

Student: I am not sure about other...

Professor: I have an image, I have an image of that lamp. Maybe we can also show the readers. See, this is the one, the hurricane lamp. Yeah.

Student: This is something that you can see in typical Kerala households.

Professor: Yeah, even in Tamil Nadu I am sure, you can also find this in the rural region it is very common, and even outside, in the West, in other parts of the world they use it. In fact, I was trying to find the definition for this and it is also called Tornado lantern, hurricane lantern, tornado lantern. And they are used on ships as well, in outdoor construction projects. But in India, we associate this object with the rural world, is not it, with country life. We see men carrying this at night or early in the morning and dawn going to the fields to tend to the fields. So it is an idea that that just immediately, evokes images of fields pastoral life as well as poverty and lack of electricity. And which is why when I began this discussion, I said, light is important as a narrative function in the story. The whole story seems to be turning on this idea of having light and not having light, and how it impacts on the central male character.

So the ghost becomes significant because she offers light, the blue light, which will make this writer write. So she is literally giving him spiritual light, to carry on with his task of writing. So this lamp, it kind of goes out for lack of kerosene, and the house does not have electricity, he is supposed to go and come back and find it. So the magic is there, the magic seems to be created by this absence of electricity and the presence of all these very rudimentary kind of lights.

So light is very important and which is, again, we should remember that is 1952, Kerala, this is post independence, immediately post independence period where the entire nation did not have the luxury of electricity. Only a few spots and cities and towns had electricity and the rural life was still in darkness, or had to make do with all these kinds of rudimentary light. So, that is something we need to remember.

What else? Can I also pick up some instances? Let me see, how about Kutti, Bhargavi Kutti? That is a very, very typical, Malayalam word used to refer to children.

Student: It is a term of endearment.

Professor: Endearment, Kutti, so he uses that. The moment he knows that here is a potential female ghost involved, he tries to kind of minimize the damage, the horror that would come potentially come from that ghost by calling her Bhargavi Kutti. So the endearment becomes a strategy. Yeah. So he is kind of plumbing the cultural treasure trove which gives him all these weapons, it arms him, the cultural terms and terminology arms this writer, protects this writer from the ghost of Bhargavi.

So when, when he says Bhargavi Kutti, he says it softly. “We do not know each other. I have come to stay in the, this house. I believe that I am a good man. I have been celibate all my life. I have heard many rumours about you Bhargavi Kutti.” Look at the repetition, Bhargavi Kutti is repeated in that entire page. Whenever he refers to Bhargavi, the Kutti is used and that is very interesting. That really places the story bang in the middle of the Kerala region, that one reference, Kutti. So what do you think about that? It is a term of endearment, we use it to little children as well as to perhaps girlfriends, to wives, right and we also use the word as names, as proper names?

Student: I do not think Kutti becomes a proper name, like most of the times, mothers will call their daughters Kutti, like, if you are a girl to address you, if they do know your name. If somebody is elderly, they will refer to you as Kutti. Apart from that definitely a term of endearment and sometimes it is used in instead of honey, it is like instead of calling honey, they call Kutti.

Nowadays, I do not think that people call a grown up people Kutti, but sometimes what happens is that like when you are young, along with your name, this Kutti will be added and then it becomes your name. So there are a lot of instances like that.

Professor: Okay, okay. It becomes added and it becomes part of the proper name. So if you look at the references to Bhargavi, sometimes it is just Bhargavi and sometimes it is Bhargavi Kutti. So he just uses both names interchangeably. He says ‘sit down on this Bhargavi Kutti pointing to a chair’. And sometimes he says, ‘I was talking to an idea in abstraction Bhargavi, I have not seen her, I have not seen her, a young woman of 21’. She is supposed to be 21 when she dies, not a child, she is not a child, not a young child but a woman in her 20s deeply in love with the man she dreamt of a life as his wife, and his life partner and so on.

So, I was just wondering what function does this reference to Kutti have? So one is immediately kind of diminish the threat which could potentially arise from her, from this

ghostly figure, what is the other possible function that is there in association with this name Kutti for the writer?

Student: Maybe because when you call, when he uses this term, there is a connection that is established.

Professor: Yes. Absolutely.

Student: We do not go and call strangers Kutta or Kutti, Kutti is for girls and Kutta is for boys, but we definitely will not go and call strangers. So in order to establish that connection he uses that. And when you like someone, it just comes out naturally.

Professor: Yes, yes. Yes.

Student: Maybe that is why he is using that.

Professor: Yeah. It is very interesting, the establishment of a bond. That happens when you use that term of endearment. And, and he also says that let's share the house, you can have the lower floor, the ground floor, I will have the top floor, so that they are kind of, they are partners in that house, sharing the house. So close companions, bond of affection and at the same time, there is a kind of romance brewing as well.

Young folks, he is also in his 20s and she was 21 when she died, and to call her Kutti, playing records for her, inviting her to sit on a chair when he is writing these are like very intimate moments and you kind of invite the, the other sex to come and join you in that kind of space. And all these kind of seem to kind of lead the narrative towards that domain of romance and that is kind of, that comes to a head or comes to a culmination or that is realized at the end of the story, when he feels immense tenderness running through his body, so just read that one.

Page 78, he says 'out of sheer habit, I took out my key and flashed the torch light on the lock, the lock shone like silver. Why, it seemed to smile. I opened the door and went in and now what I saw before me, struck me with full force, and indescribable sensation surged through every atom of my being. No, I did not quake with fright rather I just stood transfixed, my mind was flooded by a tide of tenderness.'

Lots of affection for this sprite of a woman who is offering him light through her magic so that he can carry on his work. So, you can see that reciprocation, that reciprocation of affection and love being displayed there for the readers. So, Bhargavi Kutti is a very

interesting name and the name has several functions. It kind of establishes that the story is from the region of Kerala. It also establishes that the writer, the central male character uses it as a strategy, but he also unwittingly establishes a bond of affection, which is being reciprocated. So, several functions are at play with that, just that use of that word, which is very interesting.

Okay, so, let's look at other words in the story. I have one. Parda. Yeah, so 'I was surprised and delighted. Why have no one snapped up this house yet. A lady of great beauty she was, she should not be seen by anyone, should hide her behind Parda. Such unusual thoughts and feelings that old house evoked in me. I was in happy daze, I was entranced.' So, if you read this out of context, you would think that he is talking, talking about a beautiful girl or beautiful woman and he believes that such beauty should be hidden behind a Parda.

So, Parda is very interesting, because it is used without any kind of explanation, but we as readers, as Indian readers and readers who know something about the orient, the east or certain cultures such as Islam or even in Hinduism, we have the idea of veiling, right, women are, used to use this veil so that they can hide the face and body.

So this Parda is an interesting word employed by the writer. It indicates that such usage in Hinduism and in Islam, where women use those veils. So it immediately kind of tells us that there is no need for any kind of translation. So it has become so common to some of us that we do not need any kind of translation to make us understand this word. What are the other significations in relation to this word Parda?

Student: Parda is a term, I think it is used everywhere in India. And so although you have other terms for it, Parda that is that I think everybody knows, we did not, it is self-explanatory.

Professor: Yeah. Yeah. So I was trying to figure out what exactly is the meaning of Parda. Then I was thinking about this word, okay, in terms of translation, we do not need translation because we know what it means, we are aware of the culture. But when you apply it to a house which seems to kind of stand for an attractive female, the things become complex. The house is metaphorically referred to a female.

And ironically speaking, it is done in a story where there are no flesh and blood female characters. So it is as if the female identity itself is in a Parda, you understand? There is a veil, there is a veil, which is kind of preventing her from being seen. So what we have is only

a trace, even in the text. We have a trace of Bhargavi, we do not see her in the story as a flesh and blood woman, just as we have male writer.

So she is entirely invisible as if she is behind a curtain. And even when he asks her, come and have a seat, he says that there is only, he can feel the air but there was nobody occupying it. He says ‘I do not like anyone watching while I write, I turned my head, no one was there. Not sure why but I did not want to write anymore, I drew up another chair in front of me, in front of mine, sit down in this Bhargavi Kutti, the chair stayed empty.’

So this idea of emptiness occupying this identity is really weird. It is a strange feeling to have a woman but that she is represented as an empty signifier. The emptiness that we get where we should have the female figure is connected to this idea of Parda. So we have the curtain but not the woman behind it in the story. So what I am trying to say in a roundabout way, is this, yes, certain ideas, certain words, certain cultural concepts are interesting—Parda, Kutti, Beedi, there is a reference to Beedi, Beedi is something that, the Indianized or indigenous smoke, the cigarette that men use and sometimes women. So these are very interesting. It places the story in a particular cultural context, right. And these are important to us, the hurricane lamp, it kind of evokes many pictures in our memories, in our minds.

But more than that, what are the kinds of identities that structure, the men and women at play in that particular space, is what fascinates me. So yes, we are reading a translation, that is important. Because that voice is being brought to the limelight. That voice from Kerala is being brought to the limelight. That voice of Basheer telling a story is important, it needs to be recorded, it needs to be told, not only to the people from other states across the nation but also globally. Because these are also sophisticated voices, making up very interesting stories that that is important. It is also important, not just to exoticise, is also important not to just appreciate the cultural curiosity, all these kerosene lamps and beedis and Pardas and Nilayam, Velicham, all these exotic sounding words, we shouldn't stop with them. We should just go beyond that, probe beyond that to find out what kind of place such men and women have in society.

What is their function? Why do we have a surviving male but not a surviving female who is also well educated in the story. Bhargavi is a graduate, but she kills herself in that well, which is iconic to you, since you are from that region. So it evokes a lot of nostalgia for the land. But unfortunately that well, that antique well is also associated with tragedy for a female.

So here we have a male who is willing to share space, very, very progressive, he is willing to share space, he is willing to offer a chair in order to make her sit on a chair, give her equal status with him. But unfortunately, we do not have that body occupying that space and why do we have such tragedy? So these are some of the questions, I think, which we need to ask to make real sense of these translations. And not kind of put them in these ghettos or in these categories or in the silos and say 'Oh, this is from Kerala. Oh, this is from Telangana, this is from Andhra, and this is from Kannada.'

They are exciting, they are exotic and stop. I think we need to kind of explore further and see what kind of cultural consciousness emerges from these stories and what kind of consciousness are they, like how was that society structured, how are all these figures placed, what are the kind of hierarchies there. If we probe these and then kind of celebrate them, I think these works will stand the test of time.

Thank you for thoughts, Mrudula. We will carry on our conversation in relation to other stories in the sessions to come. Thank you.