

Short Fiction in Indian Literature
Prof. A. Divya
Department of Humanities & Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras

Lecture 23
Conversation Plotting Sundara Ramaswamy's Reflowering Overview

Hello and welcome to this very interesting session and it is going to be a conversation between me and Miss. Arya V.M she is a second year M.A student at Pondicherry university and she is currently intending on this course short fiction and Indian literature, **Professor-Student conversation starts"** hello hello mam, hi. So, what are your thoughts on this particular story actually it is very interesting story like now we are living in a world, we are fully equipped with all the kind of technology.

But it is actually about how people wherein all by seeing just a calculator absolutely so it is like very interesting one and it is also it is not just about technology and the other information that is also about human emotions and how viable we are true. So, how adaptable we are chosen of the inventions that come into our life right and how we kind of master them in some sense to okay.

So, we also need remember that this calculator was a new thing it is a new fangled invention back then. So, this is not a story that set of a contemporary times but probably in the made at 20th century when India saw the calculator for the first time. And that reaction is brought into the picture, so the timeline for this story is somewhere back in the 20th century okay, mam I have a set of questions on this session shall I yeah please.

So, first of all the title was quite indulging for me reflowering it literally offers to flower again or new year. So, in this story metaphorically it may stand for the real of warmth between Rowther and Ambi's father or rejoin of human potential. So, mam according to you how far does the title contribute to the understanding of the story, yeah you are quite right the title does have a lot of significance for the set of meanings that the author wants to communicate through this particular story.

And you are right to point out that there is a rejuvenation of the bond between Rowther and Ambi's father who is the shop owner and there is also blossoming of the spirit of Rowther himself. So all these metaphorical references to getting the spirit back, getting the youth back in some sense is reflected in this particular title reflowering. And it basically centres around the figure of the old man and that in itself is very interesting.

Because he is very old until reflower again to blossom again at that particular stage in life is very very interesting and hot warming to see as well and how this old figure tries to dominate everybody around here. And it is really nice and cheerful to see that message communicated right of the beginning symbolically through the title and see that happening of the end of this story as well.

So, it is a nice slate of hand in some sense on the part of the author Sura, yeah actually like he is into be very energetic at the end yes absolutely. And we can also think about the author himself who wrote until the you know until when he was really very old as well, he continue to write in his 90s and think. So, **so** we can make certain connections between this old man Rowther and the author himself who was a grand old man of letters.

Okay do you think that the writer intentionally made use of a narrator who is other than Rowther or Ambi's father they may actually know the things. So, in order to gift a sense of objectivity to the narration and how do you interpret the reference invalid to describe the narrator and his mother okay. So, we have like this is like a 2 part question there are 2 questions in this set of questions that you have.

So, let me address the first one which is about narration and objectivity, so we need to remember that this story is told from the perspective of a young boy and the son of the shopkeeper. And it does give a certain sense of objectivity when the story is told from a young child's perspective. Because we always have this believe the children are fairer in some sense right, they have they kind of through everything in an even handed manner.

So, that idea is kind of exploited through this narration and he does lend the certain sense of objectivity as well. Because if the father had narrated this story we can clearly you know get a sense of his view on things. So, instead of that the child kind of gives a omniscient under even handed and almost like a third person narration is there.

But at occasions at 1 or 2 moments we can see that the child is getting the kind of communicating the ideas of his father there is a moment in this story when he narrates the events when Rowther picks all the clothes for his family. And he piles the clothes by his side and there is this line we says how dare he do this without getting to permission and that particular line is very interesting.

Because we do not know whether he is interpreting that thought of the father or he is one who is making that mark. So, there is a complication there in terms of narration, it is as if there is a slight free indirect discourse coming in third person discourse coming in. So, it becomes and because in 1 or 2 areas but generally speaking we can see with the boy is even handed is fair.

Because he tells the reader that his father is anger personified when we read those lines we can see with the boy is being very fair there. And the father does have a bad temper. So, we do get a certain sense of objectivity when we get the opinion of the child and about the yeah the second question thank you for the reminder. Second question he talks about the 2 invalents right.

The boy Ambi and his mother they are the 2 invalents and that his reference of the beginning of the story and in one of my sessions I said that this is deceptively calm beginning you know it opens in domestic scene with the father is getting ready while the mother and the son are sleeping because they are earn the right because they are sick. In my understanding I kind of tend to compare this particular scene with the house hold of Rowther which is full of women and useless men.

And this old man comes toward the rest of his family are at home or invisible. So, the parallel can be seen in this household too even though the boy sometimes comes into work to do the sums at later point in the day. But we can see the parallels there when the head of the household

the old figure they in Rowther and this shop owner or the once was shouldering responsibility of the entire household.

So, I see that parallel okay mam now we are living in a world of technical like as I said earlier we are equipped with everything. So, in such a world how do you analyse the relevance of a short story like reflowering okay, yeah it you are quite right contextualise this story in this technological age there are plenty of machinery around supreme technology which makes life easier for us and more complicated as well.

And in that context this particular short story gives us a window into how the human spirit is affected by machinery and what are the emotions the impact of the machinery on the human emotions that is given through the life of Rowther especially that paragraph in this story when the grandfather collapses under the weight of the calculator figuratively speaking he hardly says and then he becomes hollow, emaciated, lifeless almost like a walking corpse.

So, that impact of machinery on individuals on individual human beings oh very weak or very vulnerable who are financially in great difficulties is made a parrot in the story. And I think this story kind of sensitiveness ask to such a context, we need to see things in perspective. We cannot only see things from the perspective the human on the perspective of the machinery, we also need to see the impact of the machinery on the human beings, that is where literature comes in I think okay yeah.

Mam actually I found the relationship between the shop owner and Rowther to be very interesting like at one point we can see Ambi's father shouting at him and on the others point he actually seek only paying his deaths and all. So, can you speak on the laugh hate relationship between Rowther and Ambi's mother yeah. You are quite right 2 kind of describe it is a love hate relationship.

Because if you go back to the first crisis and the wife of the shop owner says why do you keep on this ritual of fighting with him and then making of within the next day you know why cannot

you put an end to this you know is Rowther the only person on this earth who can do all these sums so quickly and he simply says shut up and then he sends the sum to bring the old man back.

So, even though he kind of his harsh towards him at certain points, he changes his attitude at some other moments especially in moments of great crisis and especially in the middle of the story the big crisis for Rowther is the fact that he is going loose the house pretty quickly unless someone helps him out. And that someone is Appa the shop owner, you know without having , you know without talking about it there is if you look at the story there is no narration there as to have appa reacted.

He just gets onto the buggy and then both of them drive to lawyer and everything is sorted right. So, that tells you how quickly he has reacted to this big crisis in the life of Rowther and he comes to the rescue he is kind of the knight and shiny armour for this old man. So, there is a back and forth and he does get really offended by Rowther when he goes to work in a rival shop which is probably why when he was it is Bombay.

He gets this calculator this new device which will cut him down to size in some sense. So, again but in the finale despite the fact that Rowther is no longer useful you know the calculator is there anybody can do the sums, but the old man is also there in the store he does not chuck him out you know the very next minute when the calculator has a wrong he does not chuck him out he still keeps him right.

So, that tells you that there is a certain warmth a bond between the 2 okay, mam 1 noteworthy insist in the story is that like Rowther gets know about the existence of calculator like it is something that can replace him. So, how do you analyse his response yeah it is a very human beings are very complex and they do get stressed out, they do buckle under the pressure , they do kind of loose the spirit when a machine has come into the picture, come into the society which may replace quite a lot of human beings.

And do things quite easily and quickly but then human beings have highly evolved brain I suppose. And once Rowther gets a tiny space to realise has he is still is valuable to fights back.

So, that tiny space is given to him by the mistake made by Murugan there that 1 minute and he exploits that and he completely gets the control back very quickly and one after the other.

He immediately his human brain is so supreme that he kind of martial 1 incident after another and all of them they have the shop owner that look these are all the false that I going on in your shop you just pay attention, you just realise how important I yeah. So, human beings have brains highly evolved brains that can react pretty quickly under pressure and that is an example that we get from this particular story.

He kind of exploits that Murugan's fault right yeah absolutely he does it and it is very interesting as I mention in my earliest session says well that he keeps quiet when he knows that the shop has these 3 vesties there, only 7 of them have been sold out 3 of them are there lying in the store and he does not intervene in the conversation between the customer and Murugan and say Oh hang on those vesties are there you can sell them, he keeps quiet.

Then whether that is because of all the pressure that he is going through or he deliberately has lost any interest in the story do not know. But he does keep quiet and he uses that example when the time is right that tells you how fast he reacts that old man reacts okay. So, mam do you think that Rowther has a sense of loyalty to Ambi's father because like at 1 point we can see him working with Chettiyar for paying his debts.

And can we say that his loyalty cannot be substituted by any machine or any other worker okay yeah. It is a interesting question and there is no straight forward answer because we can release speculate on some things. But in my understanding we can see that Rowther is going through tremendous financial stress which is probably why despite the fact that the owner has bailed him out, he has paid about 5000 rupees.

And 5000 rupees in those days quite a big sum of money hit him. So the owner has you know shelter of this big sum of money and rescued him. But the very next day he goes to the Chettiyar shop and does the builds for him you know sometimes it is humorous you know it is antique climatic. Because you expect 1 thing and something totally opposite happens and everybody

shell shocked and that is sometimes brings a element of humour in that mismatch in that inconquor set of events.

So, why does he do that and he says that I have lost my head Ayya and that is the only statement that he may he says that the Chettiyar promise me to clear all my debts. So, you have the financial crisis on one side and the loyalty on another side and he picks the most difficult you know thing between the 2 you know, so he goes to a person who can sort all of his money worries.

So, we kind of tender sympathise with Rowther in that recon because you can see the extent of the damage that financial crisis can due to you, he loses his home very nearly. The entire women of his family are out there on the streets in a bullet car right. So, he has seen the worse and he does not want similar scenarios to happen which is why he goes back to not to use usual go back to the Chettiyar shop even thought that is the rival shop.

Even though he knows that he is going against the grain you know he is breaking his loyalty the pond of loyalty. So, we need to put everything in context and understand the set of circumstances there. So, you can take your pick in that extreme circumstances. Okay mam actually (()) (15:58) he talks a lot interesting things about space.

So, he considers public space, social space and work place of work place of pleasure all these as contrasting spaces. But in this story it is certain a particular Indian context there is a mingling of social space and public space. So, sorry private space, so how do you consider this mingling okay let me respond to the ideas in your question by coping about the speciality the spacial ideas in this particular story.

We have 2 major spaces we have the private space of the homes, we have the home of Rowther we have the home of the shop owner. So, we see those 2 private spaces there and we have the public space of the clothes shop in this particular story , my understanding of a private space is one with there is domesticity there whether is a family there okay and there is more importantly a women who wants the household.

So, that would make a space a private space, but if you look at the public space it is a place where business is carried out. So, we have the shop as the business space or the public space in this particular story. The closest that the private space comes to the public space in this particular story is when the family of Rowther come to the cloth shop especially the women of the household come to the cloth shop.

So, that is where it literally comes closer and the women are there in bullet car and there are curtains on either side of the cart to give privacy to the women. So, that private space migrates to the public space to get protection from the public space there, because the head of the household is there. So, that is the you know a coming together of 2 spaces but otherwise usually the public space is all about profits money making and you know proper behaviour educate and all those sort of things.

And even though there is a bond between Rowther and the shop owner even though there is a bond between Gomathi and the old man even though there is a bond between Ambi and Rowther. And the call on another Thatha and other things, other familiar terms, money is the one thing that connects everybody. So and Rowther is extremely affectionate towards Ambi probably because he is the shop owner's son.

So, there the private even if there is a private familial connection that familial connection is brought about through the idea of business, the element of business. So, we need to keep those things in mind when we think about speciality okay mam mam in literature there are many instances in which blindness is interpreted as the beginning of (()) (19:04) as an example.

So, do you think that Rowther he also has such a real vision problem, so can we consider his vision as real vision and which with which he can see many things that others cannot. Okay it is a very good question the idea of blindness being associated with wisdom that is coming from ED possesses a very good arm you know parallel that we can think about, but in a context of this particular story reflowering it is quite complicated.

We cannot 1 dimensionally apply the idea of wisdom to Rowther the reason being he is a maths wits, he is a genius in that regard he can do sums pretty quickly that no one can do in such a quite time. So, he is a genius in that regard but he is a financial mess in another regard. So, there is no wisdom in the way he runs his household and he probably has good reason why the finances are in disarray.

But it is an indication that he is not able to run his home in a practical manner and again I am reminded of that crisis first crisis where he buys clothes for the entire family right. And we really need to ask is that a good thing to do when his finances are in such a difficult set of circumstances that he buys clothes for each of every member of the household his household is huge right.

So, is he paying over generous, is he not being very smart with this money as some of the questions that come up to our mind. So, he that is what Kolappan also wants us he can be in maths genius but he also be an idiot in certain practical area. So, we cannot 1 dimensionally and the plot wisdom to Rowther but he can be very crafty too he can be crafty in are from other areas especially towards the end of the story we can see how manipulative he becomes need not to show his dominion over the others.

In order to prove his memory mam the opening sentences of the story it depicts a family in which mother and sons they are sleeping heart fully and the father is getting himself ready for his own. So, do you think that reflowering deviates from Indian works in the depiction of a traditional Indian family right okay. So, my question back to you would be what exactly is a typical Indian family that would present in Indian literature that is a massive area, yeah.

Actually like I am not saying it should be like that but usually it is believe that like the man of the house he will be sitting comfortably or he will wake up as he want and the women of the house or the women will be expected to do the daily cause, they will be expected to cook food for her husband and help him in getting ready for the job. So, that is like usual morning scene of an Indian family maybe like that.

I understand where your question is coming from you want to know why the women are resting when the men or the male of the household is kind of getting ready for work all are himself without getting any help from the women for. This story does not give us a window into the activities of the mother of the family there is no space. In fact if you look at many of the fiction when it has a particular theme that it wants to communicate and explore it will try to limit the expenditure of what is on other areas.

So, my assumption is that not a great light is thrown on the mother of the family the Amma who is here and we do not know what exactly are the things that she does on a daily basis to prepare the house, get the house running, because the father usually is such at the shop. So, obviously she has to do something or the other at some other point in the day but we do not get a window into their life because the narrative does not go there okay.

So, we need more light or on her life which the author for some reason of the other does not give us. Because that would take us away from the coherence of the plot which is about Rowther and his predilections and his mood swings okay. And reflowering is actually divided into according to me it is divided into 3 main parts so instances, how do you analyse the need and significance of such addition mam, what is the 3 parts are in this story in your opinion.

First I think it is actually the mention about the problem the issue between Ambi's father and Rowther and second is the instance and which how Ambi manages to bring Rowther back and third I think is the introduction of the calculator okay. So, I would see this story as having a proper introduction in the sense that it introduces Rowther his character and how does the rest of this is IT deal with him.

So, that I would think is the introduction to the story, the first part if I divide this story into 3 parts that will be the first part in my assessment. The second part is the high point or the critical point in the story the rising action would be the auctioning of the house and how that event makes the rest of the society sort them out in some sense and that sorting out is done by the father.

So, that would be the middle section of this story and the last one of the high point or the crisis in the story would be when the calculator comes into the picture and how Rowther and the rest of the society around Rowther deal with both these things, deal with both the calculator and with Rowther, one is gradually becoming redundant in the presence of the machine and how does Rowther kind of you know rescues himself you know through his machinations, how does he do that.

And how do the rest of the society respond to his rescue plan, so that would be the last stage in this story. So that is how I would divide this story, the one being the introduction, the second being the middle when you know we also tend to see the human side of Appa when he rescues Rowther and finally the really complicated part when Rowther is in the hold really in a difficult hold and how he claims out of that hold.

And everything becomes normal when things are resolved at the end of the story okay, mam it is often said that real gems can be found in a beam. So, can we consider Rowther as a genius who could not rise about the status of a shop manager in spite of his greater yeah you quite right. He is a gem, he is a genius, he is a wizard in terms of his calculation abilities in terms of his maths skills.

And if you notice his own words about his identity in the story he says that I am no longer a mere adding machine and there is a sudden rise from being a mere adding human machine to the manager you know one who is all powerful his next only to the owner. So that in itself is a massive rise in fact for Rowther because he is very old being constantly need to be member his age because we tend to forget that.

And then he is blind as well and he has not been educated really highly he just went up to third grade of something like that. So despite his lack of education, traditional education systematic education, despite his age and despite his disability he rises to the position of a manager. So that is a big raise in fact and that is an achievement in itself that needs to be recognised in a plodded and that is something not everybody will manage to do yeah okay mam.

Mam do you think that the calculator was introduced intentionally Ambi's father as part of his to cut Rowther down to size yes absolutely I would think that is a deliberate introduction on the part of the author and the figure that he uses to introduce thus thing is the Ambi's father and that is a deliberate authorial decision. Because we need to realise that Appa is terribly offended and he is sick to that about the behaviour of Rowther, he says that you have hurt me deeply because I helped you out, I gave you so much money.

But despite that you do not show any gratitude he says that I even loose trust in women, mother as because they are suppose to be highly trustworthy. But you know your behaviour would make me you know distress even the figure of the mother. So he is really offended and hurt and then he when he was it is Bombay he brings back the machine and he knows that this will really make Rowther realise that he is no longer the most important figure.

And if you notice the narration is very interesting to know that the father does not make any comment about the calculator, his perspective totally absent in the story we get to hear about the mother, we get to hear about the boy and we get to hear about Gomathi. We get the reaction of Rowther about the calculator but the father, the owner is totally silent. Because he knows the effect the calculator is having on this old man and he has deliberately you know wanted that reaction from Rowther.

And he completed succeeded too absolutely to a certain extent until he comes back again to life the old man. Shall we say that the introduction of the calculator actually persuaded Rowther to stress his dispensability and thus made him more competent and is he need can be extended to the society in general yeah absolutely and this relates to the early question that we talking about how human brains constantly evolved when it is faced with the crisis.

And that crisis could come in the figure of a machine, it could come in the figure of a new invention. So when that new invention threatens the value of a human being and the human being kind of tries to work out the best possible escape. So when Rowther is faced with this eudemon of calculator when he realises that he has to think fast he does it when he is given the loophole he really picks himself out.

And he claims out of that difficult situation pretty quickly and that is an indication of the worth and the skill of human beings in general, in society. Because they constantly refashion themselves in order to stay relevant and continue to dominate everything be a technology or be it the planet okay mam. Do you think that the calculator brought a kind of equality there enable servants like Gomathi to do sums like Rowther yes absolutely.

It can a very good question because you can see that you know the almost illustrate Gomathi whose studied only up to fifth standard or the boy who is in the shop doing the sums with the help of the calculator everybody gets power at the end of the story you know be it an adult or a boy educated or not you know so this calculator performs an egalitarian function in some respects.

It makes everybody equal and that idea really worries Rowther he does not like the happening because if that happens his value will be lost. So you are right, the calculator makes everybody equal in terms of the functions it performs for them. Because it can answer to everybody and anybody, it has no masters of the calculators have no masters, you just have to key in and the answers are there for you.

And mam I found the ending remark very interesting actually he remarks that he is no longer a mere adding machine. But the manager of the shop does this instance point of the fact that machines help us to do away with the activities that will waste a lot of time and energy of human beings and thus will help us to spend their potential on achieving higher rings yeah correct yeah absolutely you know they can do the tragedy.

They can do the really hard you know mechanical labour whereas the human beings can focus on the things that can really be valuable to society but in the case of reflowering in the case of Rowther and the shop owner once the calculator comes into the picture we realise just so many other things that are going wrong for the shop you know. So, we also realise that the shop owner really needs help with so many other things which have not been taken care of until this moment.

So, Rowther really comes to the rescue if he think about it he comes to the rescue of the shop owner because he points out so many areas which need attention. And which would not be looked at before them before the advent of the calculator because he will be busy doing all the calculations in the maths. He would not be thinking about the other things which need some kind of assistance to be the sorted out.

So, yes he the calculator makes human beings think about things that really need care when attention you are right. That is all mam, thank you very much for your questions I hope you enjoyed the conversation, I will catch up with you in the next session.

"Professor-Student conversation ends"